Beyond the Crisis: Re-energizing Southeast Asian Studies

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Abstract

This article examines the main drivers of the fiscal crisis in Asian/Southeast Asian Studies and considers ways of overcoming or at least ameliorating it. In the Australian context, several leading scholars in Asian Studies have called for various new forms of strategic state financial support to help keep the field alive, including incentives and structural support for Asian languages at both school and university levels and priority in publicly-funded research grant schemes. However, re-energizing Asian Studies in fiscal terms will undoubtedly require efforts to make the field more appealing to prospective students because of the prevalence of higher education funding models in which money follows student enrollments. This will particularly be the case with Southeast Asian Studies, given the weakness of enrollments in this sub-field. In this respect, there may be some value in seeking to create new education pathways in Asian Studies that focus on cross-national issues and problems within the region as an alternative to the traditional country-focused area studies approach.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, fiscal crisis, Asian studies education

Introduction

In recent decades, the field of Asian Studies—and, in particular, the subfield of Southeast Asian Studies—has been in the midst of a widely-acknowledged crisis (Jackson, 2003; King, 2005; Goss & Wesley-Smith, 2010; Acharya, 2014; Beng-Huat et al., 2019). In part, the crisis has been intellectual, reflecting a critique of the field that has called into doubt its scholarly merits, relevance, and ethical or political underpinnings. Scholars associated with cultural studies have argued that Asian Studies are a fundamentally conservative enterprise that has reinforced the subordination of Asian countries and peoples. At the same time, globalization theorists have argued that, as a field characterized by methodological

nationalism and an emphasis on difference, Asian Studies have become largely irrelevant in a context where global processes are reshaping the world and making it more homogenous in a variety of different ways (Jackson, 2003; Jackson, 2019). Asian Studies have also been criticized for lacking 'a defined canon of theories and methods around which scholars can gather' (Beng-Huat et al., 2019) in contrast to the traditional disciplines. In short, as Beng-Huat et al. (2019) have put it, Asian Studies has been criticized for having 'a three-pronged "problem": of weak rules, hard borders, and ancestral sin.'

Nevertheless, the crisis in Asian Studies is also—and arguably primarily—a fiscal crisis. As Kelley (2020) has noted, 'the critiques of area studies, from the 1990s to the present, have made abstract charges about knowledge production against unnamed individuals, when the work of many scholars who write about Asia do not show evidence of the problems these critiques claim to identify'. Moreover, scholars of area studies have thought deeply about the accusations made in these critiques and sought to adjust their approaches accordingly. However, the field's fiscal crisis is very real and posing a severe threat to the field's survival, at least in Western countries where for a variety of historical, political, and economic reasons, the field has been institutionally centred.

With a few notable exceptions, Asian Studies programs in the West have struggled to attract funding, with the result that academic positions have not been renewed and, in some cases, programs have been closed (King, 2015; Beng-Huat et al., 2019; Kelley, 2020; Aspinall & Crouch, 2023). These fiscal difficulties have reflected a marked decline in student enrolments as students flock to programs in international relations, international business, media studies, criminology, or professional disciplines instead. This shift in student choice appears to have severely impacted Southeast Asian Studies (King, 2015; Aspinall & Crouch, 2023). In Australia, for instance, student enrollments in Northeast Asian languages (Japanese, Chinese and Korean) have grown enormously over the past twenty years on the back of increasing international student enrollments. However, enrollments in Southeast Asian languages have suffered a 'dramatic decline', leading to the closure of numerous Southeast Asian language programs (Aspinall & Crouch, 2023). This has mainly been the case with Indonesian, the most widely taught Southeast Asian language. Lesser-taught Southeast Asian languages have virtually disappeared (Aspinall & Crouch, 2023).

This article examines the main drivers of this fiscal crisis and considers ways of overcoming or at least ameliorating it. In the Australian context, several leading scholars in Asian Studies have called for various new forms of strategic state financial support to help keep the field alive, including incentives and structural support for Asian languages at both school and university levels and priority in publicly-funded research grant schemes (Hill, 2012; Hill, 2020; "Australians falling behind", 2012; Aspinall & Crouch, 2023). However, re-energizing Asian Studies in fiscal terms will undoubtedly require efforts to make the field more appealing to prospective students because of the prevalence of higher education funding models in which money follows student enrollments. This will particularly be the case with Southeast Asian Studies, given the weakness of enrollments in this sub-field.

Effecting such change will not be easy but there is possibly some value in seeking to create new education pathways in Asian Studies that focus on cross-national issues and problems within the region as an alternative to the traditional country-focused area studies approach. This is because such pathways speak better to the interests and needs of students who have an interest in Asia but currently pursue this through other programs, especially the ones labelled 'international'. In presenting this argument, the article provides frequent reference to and draw on examples from the Australian context for Asian Studies because this is the context the author knows best, but it is hoped that the comments have wider relevance.

The Drivers of the Fiscal Crisis

Scholars analysing the fiscal crisis in Asian Studies have attributed it, first and foremost, to the intellectual critique of the field by cultural studies and globalisation theorists. Beng-Huat et al. (2019), for instance, have argued that the fiscal crisis is linked to a deeper problem of academic legitimacy. Scholarship on the region, they say, has been questioned at a time when universities remain dominated by traditional disciplines and new, thematically-based, interdisciplinary fields are emerging. This combination of circumstances has triggered declining student interest, withdrawal of resources, and changes in staff disciplinary affiliation: for instance, 'scholars with social science training, including the very best, are being attracted and siphoned off to disciplinary departments and, in the process, often lose their Area Studies identity' (Beng-Huat et al. 2019).

Alternatively, scholars have attributed the fiscal crisis to shifts in opportunities for prospective students brought about by globalization and, in particular, the information technology revolution and the fact that international travel has become easier (Kelley, 2016). Reflecting on the different circumstances he faced as an area studies student in the 1980s and 1990s compared to contemporary students, Kelley (2020), for instance, has argued that:

> Whereas it was the "foreignness" and various degrees of inaccessibility that initially attracted me to the Soviet Union, to Taiwan, to Vietnam, and even to Thailand and Cambodia, in the age of global digital mobility that affective entry point has largely been replaced by either the banal omnipresence of the entire globe on our cellphones or the ease with which people can travel to and work in foreign lands. These two phenomena lead to different outcomes, but both contribute to the decline of the academic study of foreign societies.

It seems likely that declining student interest in Asian Studies has been driven at least partly by changing priorities in Western business communities concerning staff recruitment. In Australia, for instance, there has been a shift in the business community's calculations about the Asia-related skills and expertise that Australian business needs to compete effectively in the region and the communities from which they can recruit these skills and expertise. In the late 1980s-early 1990s, Australian business seemed to support the idea—promoted by the Australian government through reports such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Australia and the Northeast Asian Ascendancy* (Garnaut, 1989)—that the country needed

to invest more in Asian language training and the study of Asian cultures and societies to produce a workforce that could facilitate Australia's economic engagement with the region. More recently (and in the wake of high levels of Asian immigration to Australia over the following decades), it has concluded that it needs staff with knowledge of Asian markets and networks rather than Asian language and cultural skills *per se*. Moreover, it can source such staff from the Australian and Asian-Australian diasporas.

For instance, in a 2012 report, the AsiaLink Taskforce (2012), a grouping largely comprising senior business leaders in Australia, listed 'sophisticated knowledge of Asian markets/environment' and 'extensive experience operating in Asia' as the top two 'individual capabilities' 'critical to business success in and with Asia'. It listed a 'useful level of language proficiency' sixth. More recently, the Asia Taskforce (2021), a grouping of business leaders, consultants and experts, have proposed that Australian business needs to recruit more corporate board members who have Asia experience and harness their networks and market knowledge. It also needs to harness the networks and knowledge of members of the Asian-Australian and Australian diaspora communities who are connected to the region through family, social, and business linkages. In short, Australian business has concluded that it can build an Asia capable workforce without widespread training of Australians in Asian languages, cultures and societies—precisely the sort of training that Asian Studies and Asian language programs provide ("Australians falling behind", 2012).

However, the leading cause of the fiscal crisis in Asian Studies is the emergence of competing ways of learning about Asia. At the same time that Asian Studies has been in fiscal crisis, fields that employ the word 'international' in their name—e.g., International Relations, International Studies, International Development, International Business, and International Management—have proliferated and, in many cases, grown enormously. Such fields do not typically focus on Asia but often offer education on Asia in accordance with what Aspinall and Crouch (2023) have termed 'a post-area studies' approach. It entails embedding area components into programs defined on a disciplinary basis. Often, it entails a concern with how global processes or issues play out within specific areas; these areas are shaping global processes/issues, and cross-national comparative analysis of both sets of dynamics. It does not require students to undertake years of language training and in-country cultural immersion, the hallmarks of an area studies approach but may entail substantial area content of a more region-wide and issue or theory-focused nature than of a country-focused nature.

Of these various internationally-defined programs, it comes to the author's sense that International Relations or International Studies has become the principal competitor to Asian Studies for students who have an interest in Asia. A review of the Australian International Relations scene by Davies and Canfield (2020), for instance, found that 42% of international relations scholars in Australian universities have an Asia-Pacific regional focus. Aspinall and Crouch (2023) suggest that this 'likely makes international relations the most Asia (or Asia-Pacific) focused of all disciplines in Australia, outside of language and Asian Studies programs themselves'.

Enrollment numbers suggest that many students prefer this post-area studies way of learning about Asia. We need to understand better the reasons for this preference.

Anecdotally, the author has heard from the students he teaches that it reflects a combination of beliefs on the part of students: that language study is more challenging than non-language study, that it can lower grade point averages (GPAs) (while the non-language study can boost GPAs); and that language study requires a more significant commitment to in-class time, making it harder to juggle university study with other commitments (particularly work commitments). In this respect, the problem for Asian Studies is not so much that students may have become less interested in studying foreign societies, as Kelley (2022) would have it, but that for a variety of reasons, they prefer broad knowledge about these societies to the in-depth knowledge offered by area studies programs. Suppose Asian Studies are to be fiscally viable in the future. In that case, it will likely have to find ways of recruiting these students and meeting their needs while continuing to meet the needs of traditional Asian Studies students. This will be a challenge given that it is presently geared mainly, if not entirely to the needs of the latter.

The Regional Alternative

It is important to note that the crisis in Asian Studies in the West has gone hand-in-hand with 'dramatic changes in global knowledge production underway as a result of the geopolitical rise of East, South East, and South Asia' (Jackson, 2019). As Asian economies have grown, governments in many Asian countries have increased public investment in higher education, including in academic research; invited foreign universities to establish branch campuses within their borders, or otherwise sought to promote the development of national higher education systems.

One consequence has been a huge increase in humanities and social science (HUMSS) research by scholars based in the region, much of which has been on the region. Some of this output has been produced by scholars in area studies centers such as the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, the Institute of Asian Studies at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, and the Southeast Asia Research Centre at City University of Hong Kong. However, much more has been produced by scholars working in traditional HUMSS disciplines. Moreover, focusing on Southeast Asian Studies, Jackson (2019) notes that HUMSS research from the region has often had an 'anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist' orientation in contrast to the alleged failings of Asian Studies in the West. Grounded in the traditional disciplines, it has possibly been less prone to the problem of weak rules as well. These changes suggest that Asian Studies and Southeast Asian Studies have a bright future within the region.

Some may argue that it is entirely appropriate for Asia to become the locus of knowledge production about Asia and that a shift in this locus is, therefore, a good thing. This article agrees with this sentiment. However, there are at least three reasons why Western countries need to continue producing knowledge and research in the HUMSS about Asia, indeed playing a leading role in producing such knowledge and research. First, academic freedom is, broadly speaking, currently stronger in the West than in Asia, with the result that the former is better placed than the latter to produce independent and critical research on the region.

Second, even though many Asian governments have sought to promote the development of their higher education systems in recent years, these systems remain weak outside a few countries in the region: Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and parts of mainland China. Third, as Asia's importance in economic, geopolitical, and cultural terms continues to grow, it remains imperative for Western countries to understand the region and the implications of changes within it for themselves. In short, Asia continues to matter in various ways to the West. What, then, can be done to re-energize Asian Studies and, in particular, Southeast Asian Studies in the West?

Strategies for Re-energization

In recent years, several scholars have advanced proposals for how to 'reinvent' or 'remake' Asian Studies or Southeast Asian Studies to address the field's crisis in both its intellectual and fiscal aspects. Acharya (2014), for instance, has suggested that Southeast Asian Studies should go comparative, proposing two particular analytical approaches for this purpose. The first he calls 'regional disciplinary studies'. This entails the application of traditional disciplinary frameworks and methodologies to the study of Southeast Asia. It would accordingly see the incorporation of Southeast Asian case material into discussions and debates within traditional disciplines in a more conscious and meaningful way than in the past, making them less Euro and America-centric. The second approach, 'transnational area studies', is grounded in an area studies approach rather than the disciplines. It involves a command of languages, a detailed understanding of specific places, and interpretive forms of analysis. It is less formalistic in terms of research designs and methodologies than fields like political science, particularly its quantitative strands, yet seeks to reach beyond national boundaries to examine issues of global and regional significance. As an example of this approach, Acharya points out Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities*, a landmark work on nationalism that drew on Anderson's command of multiple Asian and European languages and understanding Southeast Asian history and politics.

In another important contribution to this discussion, Jayasuriya (2015) has proposed that Asian Studies should become more centrally concerned with solving problems, particularly problems of a cross-national, global nature. By pursuing this problem-focused approach, he says, a more genuinely global social science can emerge, shed off its Euro- and American biases.

In a third important contribution, Beng-Huat et al. (2019) suggest that area studies scholars should 'adopt four doctrinal positions':

> First, to treat their regions as open – as part of the world, historically and in contemporary terms. Second, to accept that regions are in flux, such that their spatial articulations may alter quite quickly, and quite fundamentally. Third, to be open and responsive to trans-regional comparative engagements (say, Asia–Africa, or Manila–Madrid–Managua). And fourth, to be equally open to the deep inter-disciplinarity that is so needed in today's world.

Another interesting possibility centers on the concept of 'Global Asia'. The precise contours of this concept and what it implies in terms of an Asian Studies education are unclear. However, from what is seen, it entails a focus on understanding how global processes are playing out within Asian contexts and these contexts are contributing to global processes. The 'About Us' section for the East Asia Foundation's magazine, *Global Asia*, for instance, states that: 'Our aim is to give voice to the global dimension of what is happening in Asia………[W]e aim for Asia to speak to the world, and the world to Asia. That is important at a time when this region is playing an ever greater role in world affairs' ("What is Global Asia", n.d.). Monash University has sought to translate this orientation into a teaching program by creating a major in 'Global Asia' as part of its Bachelor of Arts. This major is described as a program that 'examines the global impact of Asian countries, cultures, and economies' (Monash University, 2023). Significantly, this major has components drawn from both the humanities and the social sciences, indicating an intent to maintain the interdisciplinarity of traditional education in Asian Studies.

The article's purpose here is not to argue for or against each of these proposals. It is simply to note that: 1) much thought has already gone into how Asian Studies might be meaningfully reinvented, and 2) much of this thought has sought to move the field beyond the methodological nationalism that has characterized the field towards a more globally-focused or comparative approach. This lays the foundation for potentially fruitful further discussion about how we might create new education pathways in Asian Studies that appeal to students lost to the various 'international' programs mentioned earlier. This is because the various proposals above, or at least some of them, have the potential to be translated into the broad forms of education on the region that many students appear to prefer.

Finally, it is also important to note that there are nowadays many more options for effective intensive, in-country language training available to students than was the case when the traditional area studies approach was developed. This enhances the scope for development of new pathways through an Asian Studies education. The traditional pathway involved starting with language training and then moving on to development of specialized expertise in literature, politics, culture, history and so on. The presence of effective intensive, in-country language training opens up the possibility of an alternative pathway whereby pursuit of a broad approach to learning about Asia is converted to specialized country expertise through language training and cultural immersion at a later point in a student's academic journey than being required at the beginning. Such a trajectory, of course, relies on the availability of adequate supporting funding for in-country study from government, university, or private sources as well as conducive degree structures.

Conclusions

The fiscal crisis in Asian Studies is severe and poses a significant threat to the future viability of the field. Overcoming it will take work. If it can be overcome, the creation of new pathways through an Asian Studies education that widens the field's appeal to a broader range of students will likely be part of the mix. In this argument, this article does not suggest

that we should abandon traditional pathways and replace them with these new ones. Instead, the proposition is that these new pathways operate in parallel to traditional ones, each serving different groups of students. Nevertheless, meeting the needs of students who have a broad interest in Asia rather than a deep interest in a particular part of the region will require a significant change in curricula and pedagogical orientation within the field and hence significant adjustment in how we go about our work.

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