

ASIAN STUDIES IN MALAYSIA: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

Until recent decades, the pattern of life in most parts of Asia remained in a state of 'timelessness', bound to the earth and regulated by the rhythm of the seasons. Change was an alien thought. The end of colonialism after world war II, the dramatic rise of Japan, the emergence of the 'newly-industrialising economies' (NIES), expanding intra-Pacific Asian Economic linkages, the idea of an open China, and the end of the Cold War are among the key events that have brought tremendous changes in Asia. As one of the countries under going rapid development, Malaysia has contributed to these changes. While the physical and economic expressions of change are highly visible, the impact from the political, social or cultural perspectives are less readily gauged. The need to understand Asia in the context of these various changes provides one of the urgent tasks in Asian Studies. In Malaysia, as an active participant and quite often playing a leadership role in Asian economic affairs, Asian Studies has thus taken on a greater sense of relevance than before.

This paper is an overview of the Malaysian experience and endeavour in 'Asian Studies'. It will highlight the main areas of interest, the major institutions and associations involved, and their areas of concern and problems. The terms 'Asian Studies', 'Asia', associations/institutions', and 'disciplines' are used in the broadest sense.

'Asian Studies' is broadly interpreted to be any academic and intellectual enterprise undertaken for the purpose of contributing knowledge about Asia in those disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. 'Institutions/organisations' include 'think tanks', research centres/institutes, scholarly societies/associations, and teaching departments in universities and colleges. A number of associations are connected with the traditional academic disciplines of economics, geography, history, and social science in general. They are primarily engaged in research on Malaysian themes and will not be dealt with in this paper.

The idea of Asia is not as easily grasped as is generally imagined. 'Asia' as geographically defined is a vast continent. The 'Asian' identity is clear in so far as it refers to an origin within this geographical confine. In a non-geographical sense, the idea of the 'Asian' may convey different images to different people.

Attempts to delineate specific regions of Asia have given rise to many secondary terms. Many are based on compass directions (East, South, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, or Central Asia), others are a throw-back to the era of

colonial domination (Asiatic, Near, Middle, and Far East), reflections of natural phenomenon (Monsoon Asia), or drawn along cultural/ethno-linguistic lines (Confusion, Islamic, Malay realms, etc.).

Following the rise of Japan, the NIEs and several Southeast Asian countries, new place names such as 'ASEAN', 'Pacific Asia', 'East Asia' and 'Asia Pacific' have come into vogue since the 1980s, though the last two are rather ambiguous. 'Asia Pacific' lacks geographical precision and it's a real demarcation is often subjective. 'East Asia' means different areas to different people. To most politicians or economists, it refers to that region covering the countries stretching from Indonesia to Korea, and to others especially geographers, 'East Asia' is what politicians and others would recognise as 'Northeast Asia'.

Major Focus In Asian Studies

In Malaysia the systematic study of Asia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Absent is the long and well-established European tradition of specialising on different geographical or cultural regions of Asia other parts of the world. Despite the existence of such long-established organisations as the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic society and teaching and research programmes on Malay, Chinese, Indian and Islamic studies in the University of Malaya (UM) since the late 1950s, 'Asian Studies' as an independent field of study has received little attention. In fact, recent efforts to understand and learn about Asia have been led by the government and business sectors as they seek greater intra-Asian contact and ties in furtherance of political and economic objectives.

The late embarkation on Asian research may be explained by the absence of a university in the country until after World War II. The University of Malaya in Singapore, established in the late 1940s and its sister campus in Kuala Lumpur a decade later, had to undergo a gestation period before the appearance of Malaysian scholars to do research mainly in economics, history, geography and communal studies. Other universities were not created until 1970 and thereafter. The number of graduates committed to serious research on Asia has been limited because there was insufficient demand for expertise on Asia. Up to the late 1970s, Malaysia was a producer of primary commodities for the western industrial economies and had minimal trade and economic ties with other parts of Asia. Domestic politics was characterised by a delicate balance in ethnic relations, compounded by the threat of internal communist insurgency strongly discouraged contact and interest on those parts of Asia under communist rule. Yet Malaysia was not incapable of accomplishment in research as indicated by its renown in scientific research in rubber and oil palm.

Research concerning Asia has witnessed a minor 'boom' in Malaysia in the last few years. This phenomenon is stimulated by the formation of ASEAN, the increase in investment flows and international trade, and the elevation of

contact among the government, corporate and education sectors with countries in East Asia. The response to changes has tended to be more forthcoming outside the universities. The premier 'think tanks' of the country, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and the Malaysian Institute for Economic Research (MIER) were established in 1983 and 1985 respectively. The business sector organised the Malaysia-Japan Business Council and, among Chinese businessmen, the study of the Chinese classics in search of inspirations in business applications was initiated in the early 1980s. In the universities, various organisations involved directly or indirectly in Asian Studies have appeared in recent years. The academic community has also founded various scholarly associations to cater for their own needs and interests.

The identification of fields of research areas by these organisations offer some insights into the manner in which knowledge of Asia is constructed.

Autonomous/Non-profit Organisations

Beginning in the 1980s, a principle player in research touching on Asia are the autonomous organisations most of which are non-profit making. Some may be regarded as 'think tanks' associated with the central or state governments. The principal ones are ISIS, MIER, and Institute of Development Sabah (IDS). The United Nation-sponsored Asia Pacific Development Centre (APDC) may also be mentioned. More recently, the Asian Strategic and Leadership Institute (ASLI) and the Malaysian Strategic Research Studies (MSRC) have been added. Although non-profit seeking, some have responded readily to market-driven considerations in their operations.

These autonomous organisations are primarily concerned with contemporary economic and political affairs with ambitions to play a relevant role in the formulation of decisions and policies by the government or business sectors to meet increasingly complex changes in many spheres of human affairs at the national, regional and international levels. ISIS emphasises the study of 'strategic and policy issues directly relevant to national interests and public welfare'. MIER's competence includes the offer of 'well-founded advice on macroeconomic management, development, and future economic perspectives' and to serve as 'a bridge between government, the private sector and universities'. IDS is a state 'think tank' with a mandate to 'assist the government' in decision-making with regard to 'policy formulation and implementation'. MSRC, whose chairman is an influential member of the cabinet, 'will make recommendations to the government, when appropriate', through its study groups on specific issues, while the aim of ASLI is to help business organisations to 'enhance leadership and strategic capabilities'.

By far the most successful and influential of these autonomous organisations is ISIS. It is dedicated to independent policy research in five major areas of concern on defence, security and foreign affairs; national and

international economic affairs; policies for nation-building; energy natural resources and the environment; and science, technology and industry.

Its research orientation is both national and international in nature and, through its Japan Studies Centre, is recognised as a leading centre for research on Japan. Research undertaken by or on behalf of the institute covers a spectrum of issues within its fields of concern with a considerable number dealing with East and Southeast Asia as well as the APEC region. Its publication list consisting of books and titles under 15 special series is one of its strengths as a research organisations.

Other 'think tanks' do not measure up to the high profile of ISIS. One of the reasons is that their 'brief' is more domestic rather than international. In the field of economic research MIER possesses both the financial and professional resources to perform problem-oriented research on economic and financial issues. Despite its stated interests in a number of fields including resources an energy, science and technology, environment and regional studies, its thrust is on policy-related issues of finance and trade relevant to Malaysian situations. IDS is like a 'state-level MIER' in its research emphasis. The more recent 'think tanks' are much less research-oriented. ASLI, for example, has developed into a 'niche player' in conference and seminar organisation especially to service the needs of the business community.

In the Universities, research on contemporary issues is mainly accomplished through individual efforts in economics, international relations, sociology, history and geography. Associated with UM is the Malaysian Economic Association, a well-organised body formed in 1962 through which economists from the universities, government and corporate sector may organise forums or publications on current economic affairs in Malaysia, ASEAN or other Asian countries. Special research centres have also been created such as the Institut Kajian Malaysia dan Antarabangsa (IKMAS or Institute of Malaysia and International Studies) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM or the National University of Malaysia). Its major concern is on cross-disciplinary research in applied areas and long-term policy, in the fields of Malaysian development and nation-building, and in the analytical study of economic and social processes as well as institutions of broad regional and international significance. Regional concerns extend beyond Asia to comparative considerations of other areas of the world.

Regional Studies

Malaysia has not been known for its enterprise in regional studies. 'Asian Studies' in various guises are embedded into various courses in the teaching programmes in local universities. Prior to the establishment of academic departments on area studies, various courses have been offered in traditional academic disciplines particularly in history, geography and Malay Studies. Overall, by virtue of the international flavour of its research agenda, ISIS is the

leading institution with an extensive Asian and international focus.

Programmes following the 'area studies' tradition are of recent origin. Despite pioneering the teaching of Malay, Chinese and Indian Studies from the late 1950s, UM did not initiate the serious studies on Asia until 1976 when its Southeast Asian Studies Programme was introduced and the first international conference on Southeast Asian Studies organised in 1977 (see Shamsul Bahrin 1981). Research centres dedicated to the study of an Asian country or region appears only in the 1990s in the form of the Japan Studies Centre at ISIS in 1991 and the Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS) at the University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in 1996. Indeed, IEAS claims that it is the 'first of its kind to be set up in an ASEAN country'.

The elevation of the Southeast Asian Studies programme in UM to departmental level (DSEAS) in 1987 was a watershed in the development of multidisciplinary studies of an Asian region in a Malaysian university. Yet this event did not herald the rapid growth of 'area studies' as six years were to elapse, and twelve years after the adoption of the government's 'Look East Policy', before a Japanese Studies Programme was introduced in the university.

The 1990s marks an eventful decade in the development of regional studies in UM. Arising from the suggestion of the Deputy Prime Minister at the opening of the first UM conference on civilisational dialogue between Islam and Confucianism in several months later. Two centres, one on Civilisation Dialogue and the other on Asia-Europe Studies, have been added in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Two more departments on International Relations Studies and South Asian Studies are on the verge of formation.

To maintain its leadership in regional studies, UM plans to launch a Faculty of Regional and International Studies to rationalise the structure of its teaching programmes. To this new faculty may be added Middle Eastern, American, African, and Latin American Studies.

The thrust of Southeast East Studies in UM is based on the regional approach. Except for the mandatory study of a Southeast Asian language, country specialisation is not aimed at. In contrast, the curricular structure of East Asian Studies is deliberately designed to encourage country specialisations on China, Japan and Korea, including compulsory language study, and supplemented by a strong regional component. The country and regional modules are designed to provide a balance of emphasis on both the civilisational and contemporary parameters of East Asian Society and its economic dynamism (Voon 1999).

The almost skeletal staff strength in area studies departments and institutes in the universities frustrates more ambitious intentions in research and publication. Nevertheless DSEAS has accomplished much in terms of staff and post-graduate research. It has produced 16 M.A. theses of which six were completed by candidates from Brunei, Japan and Korea, and launched a journal in 1995. DEAS is in its formative stage and research accomplishment is largely confined to undergraduate theses and individual staff projects on China (regional

development, China-Japan economic relations, and modern intellectual thought), Japan (industrialisation and foreign relations), and Korea (security issues and history).

The establishment of IEAS in 1996 at UNIMAS, a very young organisation in a new university, is an innovative venture into the regional study of East Asia covering the broad sweep of countries from Southeast and Northeast Asia. Its concern is interdisciplinary research and post-graduate training to deepen the understanding of changes in the East Asian and global socioeconomic environments. Priority areas of research include regional development in ASEAN nations within the East Asian Growth Area; analysis of capital and resource flows and information exchange; internal and international migration; sustainable development and resource use. Another aspect of its concern is the promotion of contemporary Bornean studies in ethnography, culture, economics, politics, policy studies, regional studies, the East Asian Growth Area and international relations. Research on priority areas is to be undertaken by appointees to endowed chairs, research associates or fellows, graduate students and affiliated researchers. It also provides consultancy service to clients, issues working papers on research findings, and runs an active seminar series involving speakers from local and foreign universities.

Among Asian countries, it is not at all surprising that Japan has been singled out for special attention. To date, the study and research on Japan are found in two institutions: the Japanese Studies Programme within DEAS, UM and the Japan Study Centre, ISIS.

The rationale for the study of Japan is inseparably tied to the economic clout of this country (see Abu Bakar Hamid and Shahril 1993; Leong, 1998). Equally significant, though rarely mentioned, is the availability of financial sponsorship from Japanese official and corporate sources. Through the Japanese Studies Programme, UM received a 50 million yen cultural grant from the Japanese government in 1995 and the Japan Study Centre, ISIS, is well-endowed with grants from Japan Federation of Economic Organisation (Keideren) and the Japanese Chamber of Trade and Industry Malaysia (JACTIM).

Despite these favourable factors, including the despatch from 1981 of more than 1,000 Malaysian students from a special preparatory school in UM to Japanese Studies beyond the teaching of the language. Compared with other ASEAN countries of Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines where full-fledged Japanese Studies departments have been established in the major universities from the 1960s onwards, Malaysia has yet to see this happen.

Japanese Studies in UM is offered as the principle component of specialisation in East Asian Studies. In keeping with the plan to organise a new Faculty of Regional and International Studies, priority is currently given to the creation of departments covering regions rather than individual countries. In DEAS, country specialisations on Japan, China and Korea maintain their distinct identity yet linked together through a common module on regional courses.

The most recent development in Japanese Studies is the attempt by a

group of interested scholars to form a Malaysia Association of Japanese Studies. This is intended to provide a useful forum for teachers and researchers on Japan in the various universities and other institutions and to encourage seminars, journal publication and related activities.

Ethno-centric Studies

By its very nature, 'ethno-centric studies' are associated with ethnic communities found in specific countries or regions. These studies have been pioneered by UM since the late 1950s. Reflecting the delicate yet explosive mix of race, language and religion in the newly-independent Federation of Malaya, the sister campus of UM in Kuala Lumpur set up three departments in the Faculty of Arts on Malay Studies (established in 1959), Indian Studies (1959) and Chinese Studies (1963). During the past 30-40 years, these Departments have evolved distinctive multidisciplinary curricula to focus on language, linguistics and literature, and socio-cultural studies of each community.

For obvious reasons, the study and research on the Malay community have been most extensively developed. The Malay language is spoken in the Malay world encompassing Malaysia-Polynesia and Magalasy. In 1996, the UM Department of Malay Studies was merged with the research-oriented Academy of Malay Studies to combine the functions of teaching and research. Five departments have been organised on Malay language, Malay arts, Malay literature, Malay linguistics and Malay socio-cultural studies. The mission of this faculty-level Academy is to become a major world centre for research on Malay Studies.

Beside its thrust areas organised under teaching departments, research will also focus on the history of the Malay world, Malay politics and economy, the Malay mind and philosophy, modernisation in Malay society, the Malays in science and technology, religion and beliefs in Malay society, ethnic studies in the Malay world, and mapping of dialects, material culture, and the arts.

Outside UM, Malay Studies is also the concern of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation, UKM. This Institute doubles as a graduate school to develop expertise in project-oriented research on the Malay language, literature, culture and the history of early Malay civilisation in the Malay world.

Until 1998, Chinese Studies has been confined to UM where its approach is that of Sinology dealing with Chinese language, literature, history, philosophy, and the study of selected classical texts. It is the only academic department in Malaysian universities where instruction in selected undergraduate courses is carried out in the Chinese language. However, there is only token interest in topics relating to contemporary Malaysia or China.

Chinese Studies will see further development with the introduction of undergraduate courses in two Chinese community and represent a break through in the expansion of Chinese-language education at the tertiary level. These colleges offer degree programmes through 'twinning' with foreign universities to

produce graduates to meet mounting demands for teachers in Chinese secondary schools and other professions in Malaysia.

Mention must be made of the activities of associations organised by interested groups for the study of Chinese classics particularly the *Yi Jing* (Book of Change), *The Art of War*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and even *Dream of the Red Chamber* (pending registration).

These associations are legally constituted and cater to the interests of members from all walks of life. Most of the members are not conversant with nor interested in the textual contents of these classics and, in the case of the *Yi Jing*, few are able to understand the scientific and philosophical principles embodied in this classic. In general, members may attend seminars and join study groups on the first three classics in the hope of deriving insight on applications in the fields of business strategy and management, and personnel management. The *Yi Jing* is also a relevant source of knowledge on geomancy and medical treatment.

The Association for Research on the Book of Change has been in existence since 1983 and has about 1,000 members. It is affiliated to the International *Yi Jing* Council and has organised the eight and eleventh international conferences of *Yi Jing* Studies in Kuala Lumpur in 1991 and 1994 and published the proceedings (The Research Association of *Yi-Ching* Malaysia, 1991 and 1994).

Other ethno-centric research organisations are those run by the Chinese community. These include the Huazi Resource and Research Centre and the Chinese Cultural Centre. Among their functions are the collection of materials on the Chinese community and the encouragement of research on the history, society, economy, education, and related topics on Malaysian Chinese and marginally on the Overseas Chinese.

Until today Indian Studies is available only in UM. Its undergraduate curriculum indicates affinity to Tamil Studies with concentrations on Tamil literature and language. A recent development in ethno-centric studies is the introduction of Dayak Studies at IEAS, UNIMAS.

Focus on Religions

Asia is the birth-place of the major religions of the world and the study of these religions must be regarded as an integral component of Asian Studies. In Malaysia, by far the largest quantum of efforts is placed on Islamic Studies. This field of study began in UM in the late 1950s in the Department of Islamic Studies and there are now several major research institutions dealing with Islamic thought and Civilisation.

Major Islamic Studies centres are the Academy of Islamic Studies (AIS) at UM; three organisations of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), namely, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization

(ISTAC), the International Institute Islamic Thought Malaysia (IIKM), and the Research Centre IIUM, and other teaching departments devoted to Islamic Studies and civilisation at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and elsewhere. Outside the universities, the principle organisation for the study of Islam is the Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM or Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia).

The UM Academy of Islamic Studies is the final amalgamation in 1996 of the Department of Islamic Studies, established in 1959, and the Islam Academy which was administered by UM since 1981. It now operates as a major institute of Islamic learning offering undergraduate and graduate programmes on *Syariah* (Islamic Law), *Usuluddin* (Islamic beliefs) and Islamic education. Among the academic departments under these broad divisions are *Syariah* and law, *Syariah* and economics, *Syariah* and management, Islamic theology and thought, Islamic history and civilisation.

ISTAC, formed in 1987 as an autonomous institution of IIUM, is led by a well-known Islamic thinker and scholar, Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. This institute is a major research and graduate school for Islamic Studies focusing on all aspects of Islamic thought and civilisation as well as those of other world religions and of the modern, secular world. It sets out an ambitious mission for the study of fundamental issues dealing the conceptualisation and elaboration of Islamic key concepts pertaining to the contemporary cultural, educational, scientific and epistemological problems, formulation of Islamic philosophies of education and science, investigations into the meaning and philosophy of Islamic art and architecture, and the search for Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world and various schools of thought, religion and ideology.

IKIM is a government-sponsored institution for the study of Islam. Besides contributing towards policy formulation at national levels, it also provides training and consultancy services to the government and other clients. Its priority research areas are related to strategic and global issues, modern economic practices, inter-faith relations, development and transfer of technology, mass-media functions and portrayal of Islam, and environmental issues and human rights. Its research orientation is geared towards the analysis of theoretical and conceptual issues, politics, *syariah*, economics, history, science and technology.

The Research Centre, IIUM, has since 1991 co-ordinated research activities of the university centred on efforts towards the development and Islamisation of knowledge. Its other concerns relate to applied and policy research for the benefit of Muslim countries and the development of teaching materials for the promotion of Islam.

Another IIUM institution that has a mission towards the Islamisation of knowledge is the International Institute of Islamic Thought Malaysia (IIITM). It was created in 1993 to combat the intellectual crisis among Muslim individuals and institutions arising from the perceived failure to follow Islamic teachings.

One of the ways to effect this is through studies based on the integration of the physical and social sciences appropriate to Islamic teachings.

Serious research on other religions is rare. One example is the Kairos Research Centre which pursues research on issues relevant to Malaysian Christianity and to contribute towards the intellectual development of Christian leaders and thinkers. Its approach is interdisciplinary and draws from theology, philosophy, science and socio-political theory to formulate an integrated Christian knowledge and to seek Christian strategies for constructive engagement in society and church-state relations in the context of Christianity as a minority religion. Despite its emphasis on Malaysian Christianity, its research may be relevant to other Asian countries with situations similar to that in Malaysia.

Civilisational Studies

UM has taken a lead, not only in Malaysia but perhaps regionally or even globally, in organising an annual international conference on 'civilisational dialogue' since 1995. Through this series of dialogues between Islam and Confucianism (1995), Islam, Japan and the West (1996), and the realities and possibilities of such dialogue (1997) involving renown scholars from around the world, UM has been instrumental in effecting a paradigmatic shift in the studies of Asian societies in which attention is given to civilisations, not in the Huntington sense of the inevitability of civilisational clashes, but with emphasis on the commonalities between major civilisations of the world.

This UM initiative has received strong government blessings and widespread support from the academic community. It has given direct impetus to the establishment of a new department devoted to East Asian Studies in 1996 and a Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (CCD) in 1997.

CCD will institutionalise the idea of civilisational dialogue as one of the pedagogical missions of UM to promote the study and greater understanding of the great civilisations of the world. Among its original concerns will be to organise an annual international conference on inter-civilisation dialogue, to introduce civilisational studies at the post-graduate level, to tap regional and international talents in research by means of a programme of 'International Visitorships', fellowships and scholarships, to publish occasional papers, monographs and conference proceedings relating to civilisational studies, and to seek linkages and staff and post-graduate exchanges with other centres of civilisational studies.

Civilisational studies have received a strong boost from a recent government decision to introduce Malay-Islamic civilisation and Asian civilisation (Chinese, Hindu and Japanese) as required courses for undergraduates in all the public universities. A workshop attended by representative academic staff from all the universities was held to finalise the course manuals to ensure uniformity on the objectives and contents of these courses. By virtue of its

expertise in Islamic and Asian Civilisations, UM has been entrusted to play a pivotal role in this new undertaking. In view of the large numbers of students involved, the need for competent staff and reference materials will have positive implications on the future development of civilisational studies in the country.

Problems and Prospects

Malaysian involvement in Asian Studies shows several characteristics which are also indicative of the problems facing Asian Studies.

One characteristic is that there are many organisations that are associated with 'Asian Studies' but are not directly engaged in this enterprise. The majority are concerned primarily with Malaysia. For example, the century-old Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society is interested in the former British territories of Malaya/Singapore, Brunei, North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak.

Except for the Royal Asiatic Society or Malaysian Economic Associations. Most scholarly associations are affiliated by limited memberships. Even so, ordinary membership of the former has been falling in recent years and several associations are kept alive by the dedication of an inner core of members. Many find it difficult to attract members from outside the university such as teachers or members of the public. They are perceived to indulge in esoteric pursuits with little relevance to the ordinary members. Benefits to be derived from membership in return for annual subscriptions, such as free publications (newsletter, bulletin of journal) or other activities, are not always forthcoming.

In higher education, despite the addition of several new universities since 1970, interests in Asian Studies per se is minimal. Other than UM and UNIMAS the teaching and study of specific regions of Asia is practically absent. While this may be explained by the desire to avoid duplication of identical teaching programmes, it also indicates a lack of commitment to 'area studies'. Efforts to build up a strong reputation and tradition in Asian Studies in the universities will take quite a while yet.

The second characteristic concerns staffing which is crucial to the development of area studies programmes (see Abu Bakar and Shaharil, 1993; Leong, 1998). Highly competent staff in Asian Studies is still a rare 'commodity' in Malaysia. In the universities, management of new area studies departments demands much ingenuity in keeping the new venture going. A heavy workload awaits the 'pioneer' staff. In DEAS, UM, this situation is exacerbated by the need to maintain separate modules on three country specialisations with one to two permanent staff for each. Promises of staff appointment are often unfulfilled and a lot of understanding and goodwill are called for to solicit voluntary contribution by colleagues outside the department. The departure of a teaching staff may mean the suspension of courses in a particular field of specialisation.

At the level of the scholarly associations, the limited number of

'practitioners' hampers their effective functions and operation. The 'critical mass' in expertise in an area of research is often lacking to induce a stimulating atmosphere for intellectual discourse outside the periodic international conferences. For example, seminars or talks on specialised topics are infrequent and poorly attended and the recent effort to establish a Japanese Studies Association attracted only a handful of individuals.

A field of study as broad as Asian Studies will have to depend on a large and continuous infusion of new talents to sustain and to build upon current achievements. To attract promising scholars requires encouragement in various forms-job prospects, research funds, scholarships, and facilities. Attracting talents into Asian Studies has to face competition from developments arising from globalisation and the spread of information technology. Students from the Arts stream are increasingly drawn into new fields of studies providing professional qualifications to meet the needs of the business, financial, information sectors. The flourishing private education sector, while capturing a substantial share of this demand, has offered little to promote interests in Asian Studies.

Another characteristic is that, other than a few of the larger institutions which are well-endowed with funds, personnel and infrastructure, many organisations dealing with Asian Studies face a common problem of inadequate funding. Academic research is becoming increasingly costly, more so if it entails work outside the country. The tradition of public or corporate sponsorship of research is weak. Research in the universities is funded through government 'research and development' funds for major projects and what may be more appropriately considered as 'penny' funds for individuals research in the social sciences and humanities. The bulk of the funding goes into 'strategic' studies on medical, technical, and scientific themes. In UM, research funds are only approved for projects within Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Research dealing with other areas has to rely on external funding. For those working on Japan-or Korea-related topics, funds from government or private foundations from these countries may be available on a competitive basis.

Publication is one of the acclaimed functions of many associations. Some of the autonomous organisations and the larger university research institutes/graduate schools have indeed built up a good record in this difficult area. Many smaller organisations work under pressure in their endeavour to publish. In many cases, the initial commitment becomes less intense with time and publications are issued irregularly or disappear altogether. Furthermore, journals that manage to survive have to face the arduous task of maintaining a minimum international standing.

Another characteristic concerns linkages and collaboration with international organisations. The slow start in research on Asia has been accompanied by weak academic ties among Asian scholars. Most tend to operate independently of others and there is little evidence of interdisciplinary efforts in their research and other activities. Networking and collaborative

efforts with similar organisations in the country or region are not well developed. In the traditional disciplines such as geography, despite the formation in 1992 of a loose association of Southeast Asian geographers from within and outside the region, international ties are still weak and ineffective to promote joint research on Southeast Asia.

This situation is changing among some the autonomous organisations and institutions and a few university departments especially those that are endowed with special funds to sponsor visiting researchers. In the universities, linkages are effected through MOUs supported by private foundations, mainly in the form of exchange of student and staff. The experience of the Japanese Studies Programme, UM, is that the out-going traffic consists of an encouraging number of students, and the occasional staff member, to Japan. The reverse traffic is much lighter and is made up of visiting staff from Japan and Indonesia as well as students. In the case of Korean Studies, visiting staff from Korea are complemented by researchers from Malaysia. In both cases, funding comes from Japan and Korea Foundations (see Voon, 1998).

If the various problems facing Asian Studies are overcome or minimised, prospects for further development of this field of study may be viewed in a favorable light. Admittedly, Malaysia enjoys certain advantage to excel in several areas of research on Asia and these ought to be exploited. These advantages may be listed as follows:

(i) If anything Malaysia should be in an excellent position to lead research on Southeast Asia simply because it is part of this region itself, provided that we are not afflicted by the proverbial attitude of 'familiarity breeds contempt'.

(ii) By the same token, Malaysia should also be a leading centre for research on East Asia by virtue of its direct participation in the dynamic process of rapid development and regionalisation of economic and political activities.

(iii) With Islam as its official religion, Malaysia possesses a pool of expertise on Islam to work on this religion in the cultural, social and economic context. As an Islamic nation with a rapidly developing economy, Malaysia provides a unique model of a vibrant economy that is not found elsewhere in the Islamic world.

(iv) As a multi-ethnic nation with a cultural mix incorporating elements of Malay-Islamic, Chinese-Confucianist and Indian-Hindu civilisations, Malaysia in itself represents a social laboratory which can offer insights into research on the civilisational heritage, cultural dynamics and the mosaic of inter-ethnic relations.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to provide some information on 'Asian Studies' in Malaysia in the broadest sense by highlighting the categories of organisations and their

areas of concern.

The demarcation of research areas in Malaysia reflects the conscious need to take into account the realities of communal politics and ethno-cultural pluralism in the country. The early and heavy emphasis on ethno-centric and Islamic studies could have been taken at the expense of attention on regional studies. The study of Asia and its various regions has increased attention since the 1980s and a number of organisations has been formed to undertake research especially on East and Southeast Asia. Several of these are concerned with policy-oriented or applied research in contemporary matters.

There has been a recent upsurge in civilisational studies in the form of new centres and institutes, international dialogue and teaching programmes. Much hope is placed on these developments to provide the catalyst to promote greater interests in the study of Asia.

Rapid changes and the movement of expertise into and out of Asia are positive factors that encourage a greater awareness of this vast continent. To further encourage Asian Studies among the committed and talented, it is important that their needs for prospects, funds, and infrastructure be met. This will allow a broad base of Asian Studies specialists to emerge to serve the needs of the country in the age of increasing interdependence.

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