

BETWEEN “CONVENTIONS” AND “INSTITUTIONALIZATIONS”: Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, Southeast Asian Studies developed from western scholarship, particularly in the United States (US), where it was conceived as a study of the Southeast Asian region through multi-disciplinary approaches, drawing mainly from social science disciplines such as geography, history, anthropology, sociology, and economics and later on, through the framework of cultural studies, among other areas of academic inquiry. Researches that came out of such approaches became recognized in the context of global discourse in the form of seminars, conferences, and publications in reputable journals and book publications. These approaches and discourses became the conventional model for Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia.

The establishment of Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia, particularly at the University of Malaya (UM) reflected the growing interest on the subject in Malaysia, at the same time that interest on the subject was slowly declining in the west. In Malaysia, and Southeast Asia in general, as well as East Asia, local scholars developed Southeast Asian Studies by putting together the “conventional” approach to Southeast Asian Studies along with its “institutionalization”. Institutionalization refers to UM’s Southeast Asian Studies as an academic program that grants bachelor and postgraduate degrees. A similar initiative is also seen in academic programs such as those at the University of Thammasat