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The Development of Vietnamese Studies in Thailand

The emergence of Vietnamese studies in Thailand was closely linked to national security and foreign policy, and its growth since then has been tethered to the development of Thai-Vietnamese relations. The study of Vietnam began to take shape during the Second Indochina War and expanded as Thailand became embroiled in the conflict. Vietnamese studies in particular and Southeast Asian studies in general have become stronger in Thailand since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile in the United States and other Western countries, these disciplines are challenged by interests in other areas of study like China and the Middle East, and recently the development of global studies.¹

In the post-Cold War period, Southeast Asian studies, which includes Vietnamese studies, grew within local research institutes in Thailand as an endeavor to replace the perspectives of foreign scholars that dominated research on Vietnam with regional experts' voices and analyses.² There has also been a trend to study the larger region, as evident in the growth of Southeast Asian studies programs in major universities in the new millennium; for example, Thammasat University opened a bachelor's of arts program in the field in 2000. Chulalongkorn University has offered a master's program in Southeast Asian studies since 2003, followed by Kasetsart University's bachelor's program founded in 2007.

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However, it is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the scope of research on Vietnam because academic activities can be situated in disparate institutions, disciplines, and collaborative projects. This article begins with an overview of the state of Vietnam studies in Thailand through an examination of historical contexts and conditions of the development of the field. It then surveys research and teaching activities with a focus on Vietnam to show the range of topics covered and forms of knowledge produced that reflect changes in the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam.

The Cambodia Conflict and Beyond

Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations were officially established in 1976, one year after the end of the US-Vietnam War. That same year, Vietnamese language courses began to be taught at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol University.³ However, relations between the two countries were disrupted when Vietnam sent troops to Cambodia in December 1978 to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime and set up the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea. Thailand-Vietnam relations, as well as ASEAN-Vietnam relations, became more hostile, fueled by fear and suspicion that Vietnam posed a threat to the region's security and stability. The Cambodia issue was the main factor hindering regional relations with Vietnam for over a decade. Thus, it is not surprising that many research projects at that time focused on Thai-Vietnamese relations in the context of the Cambodian crisis. Some projects responded directly to the Thai government's concern about the situation, such as its fear of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the problems concerning Vietnamese refugees. Examples are *Vietnamese Refugees* by Kha-jatphai Burutphat in 1978, *Attitudes of Thais from the Northeastern Part of the Country towards Vietnam* by Chalermchai Phiurueangnon in 1981, and *Notable Points about Thai-Vietnamese Rivalry from a Historical Perspective* by Dhavorn Sukhakanya in 1983.⁴ The hostile attitudes toward and suspicions of Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees in these works are obvious. This is because Vietnamese refugees were seen as supporters of the former Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the communist movement in Thailand. For much of the Thai population, communist insurgents were considered a danger to the country and its institutions, including Buddhism

and the monarchy. For instance, Chalermchai Phiurueangnon observed that Vietnamese refugees could not integrate themselves into Thai society because of their patriotism and strong connection with their homeland. Moreover, they showed hostility toward Thailand, in these scholars' view, because Thailand was one of the United States' major allies in Southeast Asia.⁵

Criticism of Vietnam's policy regarding Cambodia is obvious in *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*, published by the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, in 1985.⁶ This volume consists of an introduction to the crisis in Cambodia, notes from consultations, and interviews with former diplomats, scholars in the fields of international relations, and journalists. It also includes information about historical problems between Thailand and Vietnam, and it presents various views from Thai officials and academics on the state of the crisis. The major concern of this book is national and regional security. Another interesting work is *Vietnam and the National Security of Thailand*, published in 1989 by Niphath Bunyaratphan, which is written from a military point of view.⁷ It can be concluded that the majority of the studies conducted on Vietnam during the Cold War were security oriented. The view of Vietnam at this time of fraught relations was strongly influenced by Thailand's anticommunist and anti-Vietnamese policies, which framed Vietnam as a threat to both Thailand's national interests and the broader regional stability of Southeast Asia.

Post-Cold War Relations: From Security to Society

Cooperation between Thailand and Vietnam improved after 1986, when Vietnam initiated the open-door policy and economic reforms known as *Đổi Mới*. In 1988, newly elected Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan adopted the renowned policy of "transforming Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace." This policy brought about a shift in relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and former Indochina from one of confrontation and isolation within the region to one of dialogue and economic cooperation. Following the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989, the so-called Cambodia problem was settled in Paris with the signing of the Peace Agreement, formally titled the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreements in 1991.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam began to develop closer relations with its neighbors in preparation for admission to ASEAN. This association had been established on August 8, 1967, with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration by five founding members, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Subsequently, the number of members increased when Brunei Darussalam joined on January 8, 1984; Vietnam on July 28, 1995; Lao PDR and Myanmar on July 23, 1997; and Cambodia on April 30, 1999. Vietnam's accession to ASEAN in 1995 marked an important transition in Vietnam-ASEAN relations from suspicion and hostility to friendship and cooperation, and it was seen as a major step toward regional integration and cooperation without fear and distrust. This shift also marked a change in the direction of Thai scholarship on Vietnam.

It is not until Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995 that Thai scholars began to focus more intently on researching Vietnamese society. Although it cannot be said that Vietnamese studies was well established, the unfavorable atmosphere of tense diplomatic relations helped Thai scholars pay more attention to Vietnam. Notably, in the late 1990s a group of anthropologists with a focus on Thai ethnic groups expanded their interest to the Tai Dam or Black Thai people in Vietnam. For example, Sumit Pitipat, a professor in anthropology at Thammasat University, conducted his fieldwork in Vietnam before publishing his book, *Religion and Belief of Black Thai in Sip Song Chau Thai, Vietnam* in 2001.⁸

At the same time, efforts were made not only to study Vietnam, but also to collaborate with regional scholars who also were interested in Vietnam. One of the early attempts to establish Vietnamese studies and bring together Thai and Vietnamese scholars with the same focus took place in the Seminar on Vietnamese Studies, organized by the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, in 1997. This collaboration was supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) and *The Nation*, an English-language newspaper. Thirteen scholars from Vietnam received research grants to present their work at the seminar. This unprecedented seminar was an example of the new kinds of academic cooperation that were unfolding between Thai and Vietnamese universities and institutes. Later, in 2003, the volume *Twenty-Five Years of Thai-Vietnamese*

Relationship was coedited by Thanyathip Sripana, Theera Nuchpiam, and Pham Duc Thanh.⁹ It covers a wide range of topics, including Vietnam's foreign policy, evolving Thai-Vietnamese relationships across different periods, and Thai-Vietnamese economic relations. Many of these chapters still focused on government-to-government relations, like "The Development of Thai-Vietnamese Political Relations" by Khien Theeravit, "New Thinking on Vietnamese Foreign Policy towards Thailand after 1986" by Thanyathip Sripana, and "Dung Quat Industrial Zone in Thai-Vietnamese Economic Relations" by Huynh Ngoc Phien. However, the volume also notably includes articles on people-to-people relations, such as "Formation of the Vietnamese Community in Thailand" by Trinh Dieu Thin. This demonstrated a gradual, but nonetheless important, shift in focus from security to society.

Many years later, after Thailand and Vietnam expanded cooperation and announced their "strategic partnership" in 2013, there was increased interest within Thai society to learn about the region, including Vietnam. This can be seen as another huge step for Vietnamese studies in Thailand, when Vietnam became the focus of a considerable amount of attention from academic institutions and media because Vietnam was seen as one of the fastest growing economies in Asia after China and India. Consistent news coverage of Vietnam across different platforms of Thai media, including television, newspapers, and online social media, focused on Vietnam's political stability and development success stories in comparison with Thailand's economic setback due to political crisis and fear of being left behind by neighbors. Vietnam has changed dramatically, and its image as a country of war in Thai perception has been eclipsed by its booming tourism industry. For example, the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand, known as NBT, launched a Vietnamese language teaching program called "Sawadee Vietnam" [Hello Vietnam] on television, Facebook, and its YouTube channel in 2015. At the same time, a number of guidebooks on Vietnam were published to encourage Thai tourism.

Academic exchanges between Thai and Vietnamese institutions started in 1995 and proceeded to increase rapidly during 2012–2015, the preparation period for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). As agreed at the 2007 ASEAN Summit, the year 2015 would mark the establishment of the

AEC with the goal of establishing a single market and production base in ASEAN. Apart from working on the economic restrictions, the Thai government also funded many research projects at that time to gather information and to enhance a better understanding of ASEAN countries. Funding agencies like the Toyota Foundation, which sponsors the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP); the Nippon Foundation, which supports the Asian Public Intellectuals (API); and the Rockefeller Foundation played a vital role in supporting academic collaboration in the region, especially between Thailand and Vietnam. The emerging period of building Southeast Asian studies and Vietnamese studies in Thailand directly benefited from those projects. For example, SEASREP provided numerous language training grants, research fellowships, and workshops on Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Financial support from international organizations helped expand the main focal points for research from politics, security, and international relations to a broader range of interests, including Vietnamese history, linguistics, literature, anthropology, and economics.

It is also interesting to note that the “Hồ Chí Minh factor” played a vital role in the remaking of Thai-Vietnamese scholarly relations in the first decade of the 2000s. At that time, there was a resurgence in historical studies of Vietnam, and a particular interest in Hồ Chí Minh. For example, Hồ Chí Minh’s activities in Thailand are presented in the 2005 book, *Viet Kieu in Thailand in Thai-Vietnamese Relations*, coauthored by Thanyathip Sripana and Trinh Dieu Thi.¹¹ This issue was further explored in the master’s thesis of Nguyen Quoc Toan, “The ‘Ho Chi Minh Factor’ in Thai-Vietnamese Relations” (2007).¹² Similarly, Nguyen Anh Tai’s thesis, “Thai-Vietnamese Relations during the First Indochina War (1946–1954),” underlines the contribution of Thailand to the liberation movements in Vietnam during the First Indochina War.¹³ These works give a balanced view on Thai-Vietnamese history by showing that the Cold War era was marked by collaboration as much as hostility.

As post-Cold War relations between Vietnam and Thailand grew, so too did scholarship opportunities expand. For example, Thai universities like Chulalongkorn University launched scholarship programs with ASEAN countries that attracted Vietnamese students to study in Thailand, especially at the postgraduate level. In my experience, many students from

Vietnam have chosen thesis topics comparing Vietnam with Thailand. The growing number of Vietnamese students in Thai universities has helped to broaden Thailand's academic resources concerning Vietnam, such as providing a fresh look at and insightful information concerning case studies from an insider's perspective. At the same time, it has been difficult to gain an accurate picture of the scope of research on Vietnam in Thailand because such studies can be conducted in any academic discipline and institution, like arts, language, literature, international relations, medical science, anthropology, and engineering. To be more precise, area studies in general and Vietnamese studies in particular are rather new to Thai universities. Research centers for area studies, like Vietnamese or Southeast Asian studies, are loosely formed but mainly used for attracting research grants rather than establishing proper research collaboration. This is a major reason why scholarship on Vietnam is widely dispersed across the major disciplines.

Remarkably, one of the most popular research topics among Thai academics is tourism. This trend is also reflected in the development of Thai-Vietnamese relations in general and people-to-people relationships in particular, as more Thai travel to Vietnam and more Vietnamese travel to Thailand. Both countries pay considerable attention to the tourism sector to boost economic growth. Some interesting examples of research on this topic in the field of tourism including "The Role of Thai Tourism in Promoting Thai-Vietnamese Relations" by Dang Tran Thuc Doan in 2012, "The Study on the Growth of Vietnamese Tourism Sector: The Case of Ha Long Bay" by Tran Viet Thanh in 2014, and "Floating Markets and the Development of Floating Market Tourism in Can Tho City, Vietnam" in the same year by Nguyen Thi Huynh Phuong.¹⁴ The increasing number of tourists has led to growth in travel writing, especially travel blogs, as described in David Moeller's 2011 master's thesis, "Thai Attitude towards Vietnam as Shown in Contemporary Travel Writing." In it, he investigates a number of Thai travel books published after Vietnam implemented economic reforms in 1986, which opened the country to ASEAN countries and welcomed more ASEAN tourists.¹⁵

Another trend is the study of Thai representations of Vietnam and Vietnamese ideas about Thailand by analyzing different sources of data.

Such studies exemplify the two countries' attempts to understand each other across time and space. For example, my 2013 article analyzes Vietnamese perceptions and understandings of Thailand in historical texts.¹⁶ From a reverse perspective, Trần Cẩm Tú's doctoral thesis examines the images of Vietnam in Thai contemporary writings and reveals how Vietnam has changed for the Thai public from a country of war to one of modernity, while facing fierce challenges from capitalist processes of globalization.¹⁷

Apart from research by Thai scholars and graduate students at Thai universities, an attempt to expand Vietnamese studies in Thailand is shown through the translation of Vietnamese books into Thai. For example, Nguyễn Khắc Viện's 2002 book, *Vietnam: A Long History*, was introduced to Thai readers by Petcharee Sumitra.¹⁸ Translation projects like this have aimed to create a more balanced view of Vietnam by providing more Vietnamese references. Historically, Vietnamese studies in Thailand has relied heavily on Western resources and literature, especially in English, because they have been more accessible and have presented less of a language barrier than Vietnamese. In addition to academic scholarship, some Vietnamese literary works have been translated into Thai either by government organizations or private publishers. In 2013, the Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the Vietnamese Writers' Association and the Thai Writers' Association, supported the translation of Vietnamese short stories and poems into Thai and English to introduce Vietnamese literature to Thai readers.¹⁹ These collaborations have expanded Thai scholarship on Vietnam in important ways from politics and economy to the humanities, showing an attempt to build a better cross-cultural understanding between people of both countries, especially among young readers and students.

Major Scholars

These historical changes in Thai-Vietnamese relationships produced a number of key scholars who defined the field. One of the most prominent Thai scholars of Vietnamese studies is the late Professor Pornpen Hantrakul, who taught history at Silpakorn University and published books and articles on Vietnamese ancient history and literature. Hantrakul always emphasized the importance of language and history in building a better understanding of Vietnam in Thai society. In her paper "On the Coordination of Thai Studies

and Viet Studies between Thailand and Vietnam,” she proposed that coordination between Thailand and Vietnam should start with an attempt to understand the wider cultural context of Southeast Asia. Hantrakul highlighted the role that language and literature play in comprehending the “soul” of a nation and its people, and the cultural development of the country. She also encouraged the study of Vietnamese premodern history and the translation of books and texts from Vietnamese into Thai.²⁰

Pornpen Hantrakul’s interest in Vietnam dates from the late 1980s, when relations were starting to thaw, and her work represents a major contribution to the study of Vietnamese history and literature in Thailand. Her contribution can be clearly seen in the volume, *Rising Dragon: Vietnam in the Past and the Present*, consisting of her translations and other pieces on the country.²¹ Her background in Chinese and East Asian history proved useful when she started reading historical and literary texts in the premodern period. Her translations include Vietnam’s classical texts like Nguyễn Trãi’s *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* [The Proclamation of Victory]. This volume also includes comparisons between Thai and Vietnamese literary works, such as “Nguyễn Du and Sunthorn Phu: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Thai Literature in Humanistic Perspective.”²² Apart from Hantrakul, who focused on ancient texts, I seem to be the only scholar in Thailand working on modern Vietnamese literature. My book on postwar Vietnamese literature, *Dynamics and Changes in Post-1975 Vietnamese Literature* was published in 2010.²³ Looking at the corpus of Vietnamese studies in Thailand, little attention has been paid to literature or folklore beyond these scholars.

Thanyathip Sripana is another prominent Thai scholar of Vietnamese studies. A retired researcher from the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, she published many books and articles on the development of Vietnam’s foreign policy and Thai-Vietnamese relations since 1992, reflecting the earlier trend in Vietnamese studies. An outstanding example of her work is *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy since 1986* from 2007.²⁴ She advocated continuously for better Thai-Vietnam relations between both governments and people. Sripana can be regarded one of the first Thai scholars who established strong connections with Vietnamese scholars and institutions. Her work challenged many of the stereotypes of this earlier period that framed Vietnam not as friend but as threat.

Apart from Vietnamese courses taught among the Việt Kiều [overseas Vietnamese] communities, Sophana Srichampa is the pioneer in Vietnamese language instruction at the university level. In 1988, she published *Thai-Vietnamese Conversations*, one of the first textbooks for teaching Vietnamese in Thailand.²⁵ Srichampa also has numerous publications on Vietnamese language and linguistics. Throughout her long period of service at Mahidol University, she supervised a number of graduate theses on Vietnamese linguistics. With the help of Châu Kim Quới or Thawi Sawangpanyakoon, a Việt Kiều in Thailand known for his knowledge of Vietnamese culture and Tai language groups, Srichampa took charge of a Vietnamese-Thai bilingual periodical called *Việt Học* [Vietnamese Studies] first published in 1997, the last issue of which was released in 2008.²⁶ *Việt Học* contained short writings on different aspects of Vietnamese culture, translations of Vietnamese texts from newspapers, and literary excerpts.

Thai scholars associated with Vietnamese studies intensified their study of history after the end of the Cold War. Theera Nuchpiam's 1994 book, *Vietnam after 1975*, is an early attempt to understand Vietnamese modern history.²⁷ Nuchpiam is a retired professor from the history department at Silpakorn University and is now a part-time lecturer in the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University. Another interesting example is Sud Chornchirdsin's historical study published in 2001, entitled *Vietnamese History from the Colonial Period to the Present*.²⁸ Chornchirdsin is a former history professor at Chulalongkorn University and currently a Vietnamese curator at the British Library. It is also worth mentioning an effort to survey French academic works on Vietnam, for instance *Vietnam in French Perspectives: An Analytical Survey of French Academic Works on Vietnam during 1884–2000* by Ananthana Methanond, a lecturer in history at Ubon Ratchathani University, published in 2003.²⁹ These works help broaden the body of knowledge about Vietnamese colonial and postcolonial history in Thai academia, and they have become key sources of references for other researchers interested in Vietnam.

Among scholars in the early period of establishing Vietnamese studies in Thailand, Chornchirdsin is unique because he has had an interest in Vietnam since his work on his doctoral thesis, while the others became interested in Vietnam after starting their academic career. In addition, his

knowledge of Vietnamese also helped him to gain access to Vietnamese primary sources at a time when most Thai scholars were relying heavily on secondary sources in English, French, or Chinese. During the 1990s, language barriers appeared to be a major problem for many Thai researchers in gaining access to Vietnamese sources.

The Role of Language

It was not until the first decade of the 2000s that a new generation of Thai scholars trained in Vietnamese language emerged. This radically changed the kinds of knowledge produced about Vietnam and even pushed scholars to study nondominant languages of ethnic minority groups. Fields of study like anthropology require researchers to take field trips to Vietnam to gain firsthand ethnographic information. Well-known Thai anthropologists focusing on Vietnam include Yukti Mukdawichit and Pichet Saipan from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Thammasat University. They share an academic interest in the ethnic Tai groups in Vietnam. Mukdawichit has knowledge of both Vietnamese and Tai languages and has spent time in different parts of Vietnam. Saipan earned his doctoral degree in Vietnam, as did Silapakit Teekantikul, who now teaches in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khon Kaen University.

There are several Thai scholars who earned their PhDs at Vietnamese universities. This includes, for example, Artha Nanthachak, a lecturer in history at Nakhon Phanom University; Pimsen Buarapha, a lecturer in Vietnamese at Mahasarakham University; Wassana Nampong, a lecturer in Vietnamese at Srinakharinwirot University; Songgot Panchiangwong, a lecturer in Vietnamese at Udon Thani Rajabhat University; Thananan Boonwanna, a lecturer in history from Khon Kaen University; and the late Siriwong Hongsawan (1971–2016), a linguist from Ubon Ratchathani University. Those who did not study in Vietnam—like me, a lecturer in Vietnamese at Chulalongkorn University; Narong Ardsamiti at Mahidol University; and Watcharee Srihkam and Rujiwan Laopairot at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University—spent significant time in Vietnam and devoted years to studying Vietnamese. Younger scholars-in-training are continuing this tradition of language immersion and fieldwork in Vietnam. The use of Vietnamese-language sources has shaped

a body of Thai scholarship on Vietnamese studies with the use of archival records and literary materials, as well as local voices. This work seems to have been less impacted by Western scholarship or the historical tensions between Thailand and Vietnam. Choices for research topics have become more ethnographic as well, from female Hmong street vendors in Sa Pa to Vietnamese migrant workers-turned-spirit mediums in Thailand.³⁰

Interestingly, the majority of scholars in Vietnamese studies work in universities in Isan [อีสาน] or northeast Thailand, where there are many Việt Kiều communities. Some of these scholars are of both Thai and Vietnamese descent. In the early twentieth century, under the French colonial government, a number of Vietnamese fled to Thailand due to wartime hardship, poverty, and political suppression. They crossed the Mekong River from Laos and settled in the northeastern provinces of Thailand. Isan has long been regarded as the gateway to Indochina, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funding development projects in this area of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) since the early 1990s. Connected with this, many universities in the area took the opportunity to open programs relating to the GMS. With the support of and links to these long-established Việt Kiều communities, Vietnamese language courses that had once been prohibited during the anticommunist campaigns of the 1970s were taught again in some of the Mekong riverine provinces of Thailand.

In short, nowadays, although the number of Thai scholars focusing on Vietnam is not large, it is increasing. Importantly, the younger generation is more properly trained and equipped with language competency that helps them gain access to Vietnamese primary sources, moreso than scholars of the older generation. In addition, with the wider attention to ASEAN, research papers on Vietnam are more welcome in most journals of the humanities and social sciences. A well-known platform is the *Journal of Asian Review*, a long-standing publication focusing on Asia run by the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University. Another journal that consistently attracts quality articles on Vietnam is the *Journal of Mekong Societies*, published by the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region (CERP), Khon Kaen University. Articles published in these journals cover a wide range of topics that link the countries—including comparative

linguistics, history of Thai-Vietnamese relations, cultural ecologies, Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, and other issues.

Vietnamese Language Instruction in Thailand

Since the end of the Cold War, the countries of Southeast Asia in particular, including Thailand and Vietnam, have entered a new stage of comprehensive social, political, and economic cooperation. This collaboration takes place at all levels, including among the state and private sectors. This can be illustrated by multidirectional, government-to-government cooperation projects, reciprocal business investments, and the growing number of Thai tourists traveling to Vietnam and Vietnamese traveling to Thailand for work, study, and tourism. Vietnamese language began to play an important role as a means of communication in areas such as trade investment, industry, and tourism. Nowadays, Vietnamese is taught at many nonacademic institutions in Thailand as a part of Thai government policy on teaching and learning the languages of neighboring countries after English and Chinese. This policy of cultural engagement marks a significant change from the previous Cold War practice of cultural detachment.

It is not surprising that the study of Vietnamese language and linguistic differences between Vietnamese and Thai has become popular for graduate students. More Vietnamese language teachers are required because Vietnamese courses are offered more regularly. In some cases, Vietnamese language instruction has even been integrated into secondary education curriculum. Consequently, those with a degree in Vietnamese language, linguistics, or Vietnamese studies, or at least with a Vietnam-related thesis, have a better chance of being recruited as teachers.

A number of Thai businesses expanded their investment in Vietnam shortly after the economic reform policy was introduced in 1986. Interesting examples include C.P. Group (Charoen Pokphand Group) and SCG (Siam Cement Group). C.P. Group, a major industrial, agricultural and food processing company in Thailand, opened its representative office in Vietnam in 1988 and since then has been successful in expanding throughout Vietnam.³¹ SCG considered Vietnam as a strategic hub and has been investing in Vietnam since 1992. In 2017, SCG had twenty-two operations

in Vietnam.³² Due to such success stories, Thai investment in Vietnam is expected to help create job opportunities for students with Vietnamese language competency. Business opportunities are thus another reason some institutions have started offering Vietnamese language courses at the university level. It is undeniable that the growing number of Thai universities offering such courses is mainly to serve the job market demand for Vietnamese language skills. A research paper funded by Thailand's Office of Higher Education Commission indicated that in 2015 there were four universities offering Vietnamese language study as a major subject (advanced level) and eight universities offering it as a minor (intermediate level) or elective subject (elementary level).³³

However, Vietnamese language courses in undergraduate programs have faced some challenges in attracting a sufficient number of students, who tend to choose English, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean rather than ASEAN languages. This can be seen in the fact that Vietnamese programs in many universities have had to be closed down, modified, or combined with other foreign languages or disciplines to survive. For instance, in 2017 Srinakharinwirot University closed down its undergraduate program in Vietnamese and combined it with a bachelor of arts program in language for communication. Students can choose Vietnamese among other foreign languages like French, German, Cambodian, and English. A similar situation is found in the case of Vietnamese studies programs that merged into a division of Southeast Asian studies, ASEAN studies, or area studies. As of the start of 2020, it appears that there are more institutions holding Vietnam-related courses now than in 2015, but they are mainly offered as minor or elective subjects. For example, the College of Music at Mahidol University offers Vietnamese music as an elective.

Challenges

Since the start of the AEC in 2015, academic programs have tended to focus on issue-based problems in the region rather than on each nation individually. Thus, the regional transformation in Southeast Asia after the Cold War and the growth of ASEAN spurred a quick rise in the popularity of Vietnamese studies in Thailand's educational institutions. At the same time, the dominance of ASEAN as a regional organization has contributed

to reducing the role of area studies to being just a unit of Southeast Asian studies. Thus, studies of Vietnam are now covered as part of an emerging field of ASEAN studies. Research topics have changed from country-based studies to a focus on regional development. While knowledge and understanding of individual Southeast Asian countries is still required, it mostly serves the purpose of regional cooperation and sustainable development. As a result, research grants are awarded to interregional projects that cover cases from several different ASEAN countries, putting single-country proposals at a disadvantage. Some popular research issues include border trade, transborder migration, labor mobility, and human trafficking, but all are expected to look across borders rather than within the borders of one country specifically.

In the past few decades, while Thai scholarship in Vietnamese studies has been increasing, it is still sporadic and limited compared to studies by scholars in some Western countries. Even worse, apart from being overshadowed by the umbrella of Southeast Asian studies, ASEAN studies, or global studies, research topics about Vietnam have been determined and trapped within the framework of national interest. That is to say, given the legacy of the Cold War, Vietnam has been viewed as a rival or competitive partner rather than a collaborating neighbor until recently. Consequently, many Thai granting agencies still expect that knowledge drawn from studies of Vietnam should enable Thailand to develop to stay ahead of its neighbor. There remains a palpable fear that Thailand will be surpassed by its neighbors. To this effect, it is still generally held that knowledge should be produced not because of a researcher's interest (or for the sake of knowledge), but to respond to government policy and enhance national interests in development.

Unsurprisingly, Sun Tzu's famous quote, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles . . ." is often referred to when discussing the benefits and research outcomes of area studies in Thailand. Only recently have scholars begun to approach Vietnam as a country with a culture and history that Thai people in general need to learn about to expand their horizons. Research on Vietnam-related studies in Thailand would be richer and more diverse if Thai-centrism were less intense and the focus on regional economic collaboration and development less rigid.

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ABSTRACT

Vietnamese studies first emerged in Thailand during the Cold War period and developed into a vibrant field after the establishment of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations and the end of the Cambodian conflict. Vietnam's accession to ASEAN in 1995 and preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community prior to 2015 also provided favorable conditions for the expansion of Vietnamese studies in Thai research and scholarship. However, the study of Vietnam in Thailand is often seen as a part of Southeast Asian studies and ASEAN studies. Research on Vietnam is typically carried out comparatively within a regional context, especially in comparison with Thailand, rather than for its own sake.

KEYWORDS: *Vietnamese studies, Vietnam, Thailand, ASEAN, Southeast Asian studies*

Notes

1. Shintaro Fukutake, "A Historical Review of Japanese Area Studies and the Emergence of Global Studies," *Suvannabhumi* 7, no. 1 (June 2015): 78, <https://suvannabhumi.buufs.ac.kr/suvannabhumi/index.php?pCode=MN200005&CgCode=v13&mode=view&idx=60254> (accessed December 15, 2019).
2. Victor T. King, *The Construction of Southeast Asia as an Academic Field of Study: Personages, Programmes, and Problems*, Working Paper no. 49 (Institute of Asian Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam, 2019): 3, http://ias.ubd.edu.bn/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/working_paper_series_49.pdf (accessed December 25, 2019).
3. According to its official website, RILCA was established under the name Research Center for Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia in 1974, to produce researchers with a special focus on languages and cultures. In 1981, it was changed to Research Institute for Languages and Cultures for Rural

- Development and then to Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia in 2009. See the About Us page, <https://lc.mahidol.ac.th/en/AboutUs/History.htm> (accessed December 20, 2019).
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