Is the development of Japanese Studies with a Southeast-Asian perspective possible?

Leng Leng THANG
National University of Singapore

Southeast Asia as a region is characterized by its diversity among, as well as within each country. Such diversity is manifested in the development of Japanese Studies in the region as well. In this presentation examining the current situations and prospects of Japanese Studies in the region, we keep in mind that despite the diversities and disparities, Japanese Studies in Southeast Asian countries are equally affected by larger geopolitical and economic impetus, reflected through some common trends and characteristics they share in the process of development.

The presentation will first provide a brief overview showing how Japanese Studies are varyingly structured in Southeast Asia, followed by a discussion of the trends observed in recent developments. To what extent do these trends, such as the deepening of intra- and inter-regional linkages in Japanese Studies networks, and expanding scholarship on Japan-Southeast Asian relations and interactions suggest insights to the possibility of a multicultural regional approach that Southeast Asia could offer to Japanese Studies? Apart from the question of Eurocentric nature in Japanese Studies, do Japanese and respective local languages-only scholarship produced in the region succumb to the traps of essentialism and the like? As we perceive a “crisis” in Japanese Studies, reflecting on the one hand the critique on area studies of which Japanese Studies belongs; and on the other hand, the economic downturn of Japan since the 1990s, how could a polycentric production of knowledge and the diverse spatial and cultural settings that characterize Southeast Asia contribute to the remaking of Japanese Studies? Is the development of Japanese Studies with a Southeast-Asian perspective possible?