

ECHOS DE LA RECHERCHE

Southeast Asian Studies in South China (Guangzhou, October 28-31, 1990)

During the last decade contacts between South China – especially the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian – and various Southeast Asian countries have increased. This process is also reflected in the field of Southeast Asian Studies in South China, where important changes have taken place. The conference *The Status Quo and Prospects of China's Southeast Asian Research*, which was held in Guangzhou (Canton) from October 28-31, 1990 illustrated these changes in several aspects.

The conference was organized by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISAS) of Jinan University in order to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the institute. The meeting was financially supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and attended by 140 participants.

The core of the participants consisted of staff members of the five major institutes of Southeast Asian Studies in South China : The Nanyang Research Center of Xiamen University (Xiamen), the Southeast Asia Institute of Zhongshan University (Guangzhou), the Institutes of Southeast Asian Studies of the Provincial Academies of Sciences of Yunnan (in Kunming) and Guangxi (in Nanning), and the ISAS of Jinan University (Guangzhou). The rest of the participants represented other academic institutions in China, but guests from abroad were invited as well.

What made this conference very interesting was that for the very first time the five Southeast Asia institutes from South China came together in order to discuss the problems and plans they have in common, while at the same time an exchange of ideas took place between Chinese scholars and foreign guests from Taiwan, Hongkong, Macau, Laos, Thailand, Singapore (ISEAS), the USA (Ford Foundation, Luce Foundation, and the Social Science

Researche Council), France (CNRS), and Holland (CASA).

The conference was officially opened on Saturday morning with an elaborate brunch during which the speaker of Guangzhou station (« the most beautiful voice of Guangzhou ») announced a series of speeches and performances, while on Saturday evening a formal dinner was organized in honour of the American guests.

During the next three days the development of Southeast Asian Studies during the last 12 years in China was reviewed in a series of papers, while foreign guests were asked to inform the audience of developments abroad. Since most papers overlapped, I will not give a complete list of all the papers which were presented. Instead I refer to two papers in which the major developments and most important problems are comprehensively summarized : Chen Qiaozhi (ISAS, Jinan University, Guangzhou), An understanding of Southeast Asian Studies in mainland China; and Zhu Zhenming (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Kunming), The Southeast Asian studies in China : Current situation and expansion.

Both papers illustrate the growth of Southeast Asian studies in China since 1978 in terms of numbers of publications, staffmembers, students, etc. Besides this quantitative aspect, important changes have also taken place in the field of research subjects. Until recently the study of Southeast Asia consisted mainly in the History of Overseas Chinese. This is no longer the case. Although historical research on Chinese activities in Southeast Asia is still conducted by a large groupe of scholars, the study of modern Southeast Asia has become a new field of research. Research in this field is primarily focused on recent economic developments in the ASEAN countries and what is called International Relationships. The study of ASEAN economies is focused on economic growth in Southeast Asia, and to a large extent based on an analysis of official government statistics, while International Relationships covers the recent history of diplomatic relationships of modern Southeast Asia and China.

The emphasis on modern developments seems to suggest that a fundamental change has taken place in Chinese studies of Southeast Asia. However, the papers which were presented at the conference also illustrate a strong continuity in the Chinese perspective on Southeast Asia. No one showed for instance any substantial interest in the study of Southeast Asian cultures, nor was the validity of the concept of « Overseas Chinese » seriously questioned. Instead, the study of Southeast Asia is dominated by Chinese political and economic interests. This biased approach of Southeast Asia can partly be explained if we look at the isolated position of Chinese scholars in the past. Lack of international contacts, and the horror of the cultural revolution during which most of the institutes were closed and many lives were ruined, did not provide ideal conditions for research. Gradually however, Chinese scholars get the opportunity to visit Southeast Asia, while others are allowed to study abroad.

What most participants of the conference stressed was the need for international contacts in the form of exchange relationships between libraries and research institutes in order to catch up with recent developments in Southeast

Asian Studies elsewhere in the world (1). If current political and economic developments will lead South China more and more in the direction of Southeast Asia it will become imperative in the future to include South China in the field of Southeast Asian Studies. That might be another reason to promote further cooperation between research centers in China and abroad.

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1. Examples of international contacts are the Fourth International Conference on Thai Studies which was held in Kunming in May 1990, the Round Table conferences of participants from the ASEAN with the recently established Center for Asian and Pacific Studies of Beijing University, but also the cooperation between the Centre of Asian Studies Amsterdam and Leiden University with the universities of Xiamen and Beijing.