

**A WORLD
WAITING TO BE MADE:
LITERARY ALIGNMENTS AND ASSOCIATIONS
BETWEEN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND AUSTRALIA
BEFORE 1972¹**

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*The West's concern with Third World development
long preceded its interest in the idea after World
War II.*

- Anthony Low²

"But first, we must remember."

- F. Sionil Jose³

The concept of Southeast Asia as a political entity emerged almost by accident from World War II when at the Quebec Conference in August 1943, the Western Allies decided to establish a separate South East Asia Command (SEAC).⁴ At the outbreak of the Pacific War, apart from Thailand, Southeast Asia comprised a collection of colonies and protectorates under the tutelage of Western imperial powers. Even then, Thailand's sovereignty and freedom of action were limited⁵. Consequently, for Wang Gungwu, the region is a "post-colonial" ("from the colonial experience") phenomenon, a creation of Western colonial powers to distinguish and protect the region from the social, political, economic or cultural hegemony of India and Communist China at the height of the Cold War.⁶ With North Vietnam having fallen under communist control, the United States moved to shore up the rest of Southeast Asia. The South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was the

organization that gave effect to security cooperation under the Manila Treaty (1954)".⁷ The treaty area was designated as "the general area of Southeast Asia" and a protocol specifically extended the provisions of the treaty to Indochina.⁸

In 1959, Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman formally proposed that an Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) should be set up with the Philippines and Thailand.⁹ And then, an association of Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia known as *Maphilindo* was proclaimed and established by the foreign ministers of the three states on August 1963.¹⁰ While Joseph Chinyong Liow (2005) describes *Maphilindo* as "nothing more than an exercise in grandiose public relations,"¹¹ the concept of a Southeast Asian region was enhanced even further when the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, through the Bangkok Declaration in August 1967, created The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)¹². ASEAN officially replaced ASA (and in effect, *Maphilindo*) which continued to exist in name until 1966¹³.

As an imagined community, Anthony Reid (1997) reiterates that there are profound commonalities in Southeast Asia, essentially arising from a similar environment, a long history of maritime interaction between these Southeast Asian nations, along with a somewhat similar pattern of influences from the neighboring civilizations of China, India, and Japan.¹⁴ Reid also argues that influences from these neighboring civilizations have been manifested in terms of material culture, including agricultural and maritime technology, diet, dress and house styles, as well as popular religion, music, games and past times. In addition, Edwin Thumboo equally asserts that "there's a great deal of connection within Southeast Asia even before the arrival of the Western colonizers."¹⁵

Southeast Asia really is something more than just a geography and it is something more than a series of countries in the atlas...and if you look at Southeast Asia...there's really much we share in common...mythology...in the various cultural

overlays: shadow plays, puppet plays, kinship structures, linguistic links, mythological links and so on. Southeast Asia really is less of a transparency and there are things that define it. So I always felt we are all Southeast Asians....¹⁶

Meanwhile, Shaharil Talib identifies Lauriston Sharp as the pioneering spirit behind the need to develop the study of Southeast Asia "and acted on that conviction, providing the leadership for the establishment of a program dedicated to that goal at Cornell and directing it during the first critical decade of its growth. Without him, there would have been no Southeast Asian Program at Cornell, nor would the study of Southeast Asia have advanced nearly so far in this country (US) as it has."¹⁷ A grant made available by the Rockefeller Foundation enabled the initiation of Cornell's Southeast Asian Program in 1950. Since then, increased government funding for Southeast Asian Studies between the late 1950s and the early 1970s led to the Southeast Asian Studies was also made available elsewhere: Hull (1962), Monash (1965), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore(1971), Malaya (1976), Kent (1978), and The National University of Singapore (1993). There is a huge concentration of Southeast Asian specialists at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra.¹⁸

Australia has never been a colonial administrator of Southeast Asia. However, as a result of frequent Southeast Asian migrations to Australia, Australia now finds itself skirting around that role to a certain extent. Since 1972, Southeast Asian diaspora writers in Australia have been elucidating increasingly the ramifications of that experience by way of poetry, fiction and non-fiction narratives. But very little has been written on or about these writers and their literary texts and productions.

Even more sadly, some Chinese-Australian academics, artists and cultural workers like Jacqueline Lo, Tseen Khoo and Melissa Chu do have the propensity to be extremely territorial about works and studies involving Asians in Australia. These