



# Academic Publishing in Southeast Asia

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University and other academic publishers are found across Asia, and account for a significant output of books each year. Most major universities support a publishing programme as part of their educational function. Some of the universities that support academic presses in Southeast Asia are shown in the accompanying table. Other universities have at least small publishing programmes, but the institutions on this list account for the majority of academic titles published in the region (see table 1). In addition, a significant number of private publishers and research institutes publish academic material (see table 2).

Most university presses in Southeast Asia publish between 20 and 40 titles

per year, although Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City puts out around 280 new titles annually. The large number of students attending universities across the region create a large potential market for academic books (VNU-HCM, for example, has 57,000 full- and part-time students), but students rely heavily on photocopying to acquire course reading materials, and efforts to encourage the purchase of books in connection with courses have had only limited success.

A majority of the publications issued by university presses in the region are in national languages. Singapore University Press publishes exclusively in English, and the university presses in the Philippines produce a substantial number of English titles. University presses in Malaysia also publish in English, but the greater part of their output is in the

national language. The markets for books in English and books in vernacular languages are quite different, with the latter relying heavily on a domestic market, while books in English sell to local English-speaking elites, and to an international audience. Catering to these two distinct markets is a major challenge for publishers.

Although University presses receive support from their parent institutions, the resources set aside for this purpose are always limited, and finances are an ongoing problem. Moreover, books published in Western countries are often given greater weight in promotion and tenure exercises than those published locally, making it difficult for regional presses to attract top-class manuscripts. Some university presses rely on textbook sales to bolster their income, and some offer a significant range of trade publications, semi-academic works that appeal to the general reading public. But all university presses see the academic monograph as the basis of their publishing endeavors, and in Asia as elsewhere the monograph is facing a crisis.

The market for academic works is limited. Although some countries within Southeast Asia have very high rates of literacy (for instance, around 94% of adult Filipinos are literate and 68% of the population reports reading non-school books), the region lacks a tradition of book buying, and relatively few people establish home libraries.

Publication costs for academic books are rising. As recently as 30 years ago, major academic publishers in the United States accepted almost any manuscript deemed to be of good quality, and could count on selling 8-900 copies to libraries. Print runs averaged around 2000-2500 copies. Today, library sales are limited to 150-200 copies. University presses in Southeast Asia have never had the luxury of library sales on this level within the region. English-language books sometimes are sold to institutions outside the region, but the costs associated with worldwide marketing are high, and the returns limited.

Historically, the number of retail outlets for serious books was very small in Southeast Asia, and there were major cities where it was difficult to locate

table 1  
Southeast Asian universities that support academic presses

Country	University
Brunei	Universiti Brunei Darussalam
Indonesia	Gadjah Mada University Universitas Indonesia
Malaysia	University of Malaya Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Philippines	University of the Philippines Ateneo de Manila University De La Salle University University of Santa Tomas
Singapore	National University of Singapore
Thailand	Chulalongkorn University Thammasat University
Vietnam	Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City

table 2  
Academic publishers that are not university based

Country	Publisher
Brunei	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Brunei)
Indonesia	LP3ES Gramedia Gunung Agung KITLV Press
Malaysia	Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Pelandok
Myanmar	Ministry of Education (Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science, Myanmar Historical Commission, Myanmar Historical Research Centre, SEAMEO-CHAT/Centre for History and Tradition)
Philippines	Institute of Philippine Culture (Ateneo de Manila) New Day Third World Studies Center (University of the Philippines)
Singapore	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Thailand	Silkworm White Lotus
Vietnam	The Gioi Publishers EFEO

bookshops selling anything other than school textbooks. Conventional wisdom held that bookshops could not be successful because the market for books was too small. Over the past decade retailers such as Borders and Kinokuniya have enjoyed considerable success in the region with huge bookshops stocking tens of thousands of titles, and local retailers such as MPH in Malaysia, Gunung Agung and Gramedia in Indonesia, and National Bookstore in the Philippines, have followed the same model. To the extent that these bookshops have promoted a reading culture, the development has been positive, but the near monopolies enjoyed by these retailers have allowed them to squeeze

the profit margins of small publishers, including university presses.

The future for academic publishing in Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the world, almost certainly includes increased use of electronic resources. There are advantages to this arrangement, as an e-press is able to offer materials such as video clips or color photographs that could not be included in printed books. Singapore University Press, for example, has made available as an online open access resource Geoff Wade's translation of *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu*, a massive work that would have been prohibitively expensive to publish in conventional book form (available at [www.epress.nus.edu.sg/mssl/](http://www.epress.nus.edu.sg/mssl/)). However, universities continue to depend on print monographs as a key element in their credentialing process for academic staff in a number of academic disciplines, and many readers still prefer to read conventional books rather than text presented on a computer screen. The challenge for university presses is to find the financial resources to meet this demand. ■

## Sources

Information in this article is drawn primarily from submissions made at a symposium on academic publishing in Southeast Asia held in Manila in July 2004, sponsored by SEASREP with support from the Toyota Foundation, and from the Presidential Panel on University Press Publishing at the 2005 meeting of the US Association for Asian Studies held in Chicago. The Manila meeting was attended by representatives from university publishers at the following institutions: Universiti Brunei Darussalam, the University of the Philippines, Gadjah Mada University, Universitas Indonesia, the National University of Singapore, the University of Malaya, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The Chicago panel included presentations from the University of California Press, Columbia University Press, the University of Chicago Press, and the University of Washington Press.