

# ACTIVITIES REPORT

## 2019



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# ABOUT

Asia Centre is a not-for-profit organisation that seeks to create social impact in the region. It serves as a think-tank, meeting space, project partner and social enterprise. Asia Centre was first established in 2015 in Bangkok, Thailand and in 2018, a second branch was registered in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.



## THINK-TANK



Asia Centre undertakes independent, evidence-based participatory research on significant issues affecting the region. The Centre convenes conferences, roundtables and seminars to discuss these issues and communicates policy advice through publications and workshops.

## MEETING SPACE



Asia Centre manages a boutique meeting space in central Bangkok well connected by public transport. It offers a one-stop service that includes catering, accommodation, and administrative support for all types of meetings.

## PROJECT PARTNER



Asia Centre works with partners to develop programs, implement projects, and convene activities that serve to, inter alia, extend the partner's reach across the region.



## SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Asia Centre's generates resources for its work through the provision of services as well as receiving support through donations, grants and sponsorship.

# ACHIEVEMENTS OF 2019

Having centered its activities in Bangkok the last 4 years, Asia Centre entered 2019 with the intention to reach out and connect globally while initiating renovation plans for the second Centre in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

Under its flagship International Human Rights Programme (IHRP), the Centre launched the Freedom of Expression Project (2019-2022) to assess the impact of legal restrictions on human rights in Southeast Asia and the wider region. This project reviews the impact of fake news, hate speech and disinformation operations in the region through research outputs, dissemination activities and advocacy.



Asia Centre continued its Intellectual Exchange Programme (IEP), with several key activities. The 4th Benedict Anderson Roundtable analyzed Chinese nationalism and its impact on Southeast Asia. The Centre also held its 5th International Faculty Club to foster dialogue between policymakers, academics and civil society about the impact of disinformation on the region. In June 2019, the Centre celebrated its 4th anniversary with Nite for Rights, discussing disinformation and human rights abuses in conflict-ridden areas.



Working to pivot externally, Asia Centre worked with several external organizations to co-host events in 2019. In Malaysia, The Fake News Industry: Developments in SEA & Malaysia was convened to examine efforts to combat fake news and introduce plans for the second Centre in Johor Bahru.

Through partnerships, the ASEAN Community Leadership & Partnership Forum brought more than 100 participants together to discuss future challenges that ASEAN will face. The 2nd Japan-ASEAN Roundtable focused on Japan's engagement with SEA in the backdrop of a rising China. Co-hosted with Oxfam, the Journalism for an Equitable Asia Award Ceremony was launched in Thailand and Malaysia to acknowledge journalists who shed light on the situation of poverty and discrimination.

External engagements have broadened Asia Centre's network in the region and beyond. The Centre engaged with 10 different Bangkok-based diplomatic missions and signed 16 MOUs with universities, research and human rights centres from around the world.





# ACHIEVEMENTS OF 2019



In late 2019, Asia Centre initiated renovation plans for its second branch in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. The new branch will complement and extend the reach of programmes currently organized by Asia Centre Thailand in Bangkok and plans are in the pipeline for a soft launch in the second half of 2020.

In terms of advocacy, the Centre presented its findings on fake news legislations at the invitation of UNESCO in Yangon, the Public Relations Department, Prime Minister's Office of Thailand, EXCOM of CALD in Taiwan and the National Diet of Japan. The Centre also briefed participants at the International Conference on Protection of Rohingya Survivors and Accountability for Genocide in South Korea on ASEAN's restricted response to the matter. Through media engagements, the Centre advocated on issues of security concerns in the South China Sea, the Rohingya refugee crisis, political developments in Thailand and fake news legislation in Singapore.



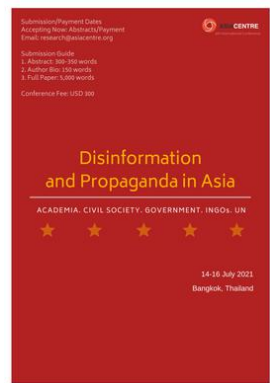
Asia Centre welcomed academic staff and students from Indonesia, Singapore and Taiwan this year and discussed possible collaborations regarding research, teaching and events.



Internships at Asia Centre were popular in 2019 with 11 interns from Australia, Bangladesh, China, Singapore, Slovakia, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam undertaking integrated tasks related to communications, partnerships and research for the Centre ongoing projects.

Social Media following continued to grow, helping to promote the activities of the Centre. Asia Centre's primary communications channels are its Facebook Page, which increased from 4437 in the previous year to more than 7500 likes and the mailing list which grew to 4000 contacts.

# HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAMME



## 4 YEAR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION PROJECT

The Freedom of Expression Project assesses the impact of legal restrictions on human rights in Southeast Asia and the wider region. Spanning from 2019 to 2022, the project examines developments in disinformation, fake news, hate speech and propaganda; and the challenges this poses to academia, civil society, independent media, INGOs and the UN agencies in the region and beyond. The project components include baseline studies, reports and books; national seminars; regional roundtables; and international conferences.

## 4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE: FAKE NEWS AND ELECTIONS IN ASIA

Asia Centre convened its 4th International Conference on Fake News and Elections in Asia, starting from 10 July till 12 July 2019. It was the Centre’s largest conference to date, convening together 12 partners, 13 panels, 46 presentations and over 80 participants. The crux of the debate centered around the effectiveness of fake news legislations and how political incumbents wield it as a tool to silence political dissent.



# INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

Asia Centre continued its Intellectual Exchange Programme (IEP) in 2019, creating a platform for ideas to be freely exchanged, problems to be identified, and possible solutions to be implemented. Thus far, the Centre has chiefly explored geopolitical issues impacting Southeast Asia through the IEP. Moving forward, Asia Centre will continue this tradition and theme with a new suite of programmes from 2020.

## 4TH BENEDICT ANDERSON ROUNDTABLE: CHINESE NATIONALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SOUTHEAST ASIA



Asia Centre started the year by hosting its 4th Benedict Anderson Roundtable on 18 January 2019. Continuing in the tradition of the late Professor, the Centre discussed of nationalism, focusing on Chinese nationalism and its corresponding effects on Southeast Asia in 2019. Its interaction with the contemporary political landscape of information and disinformation were the key talking points during the discussion this year.

## 5TH INTERNATIONAL FACULTY CLUB: SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION

Asia Center also co-hosted the 5th International Faculty Club with Stenden University Thailand. This edition pivoted on the age of disinformation and its corollary effects on Southeast Asia. The International Faculty Club brings together a wide range of perspectives from around the world and fosters dialogue between policymakers, academics and civil society.



## NITE FOR RIGHTS: DISINFORMATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

On 19 June, Asia Centre celebrated its 4th anniversary with the Nite for Rights. Continuing with the theme, discussions centred around disinformation and human rights abuses in conflict situations.





# PARTNERSHIPS

In line with Asia Centre's aim to broaden its global network in 2019, the Centre collaborated with 7 organizations to co-host events in Thailand and in the region. The collaborations allow non-Thailand based partners to convene activities in Thailand and also enables Asia Centre to co-organise activities in countries other than Thailand.

## THE FAKE NEWS INDUSTRY: DEVELOPMENTS IN SEA & MALAYSIA

As part of its strategy to raise awareness in the run up to opening its second Centre in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, Asia Centre, Gerakbudaya Bookshop and the School of Communications, Nottingham University Malaysia jointly organised a roundtable on Fake News Industry: Developments in SEA & Malaysia to examine efforts to combat fake news.



## ASEAN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP & PARTNERSHIP FORUM

Asia Centre co-hosted the ASEAN Community Leadership & Partnership Forum with the Malaysia-based Kingsley Strategic Institute together with other co-hosts, Nation Building Institute, the Federation of Thai Industries and the ASEAN Studies Centre. The event allowed the Centre to network with over 100 participants from academia, business, civil society and government in Southeast Asia.



## JAPAN-ASEAN ROUNDTABLE: COMPETING FOR INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

2019 also saw Asia Centre co-host with Japan Foundation the second Japan-ASEAN Roundtable: Competing for Influence in Southeast Asia. The event deliberated Japan's engagement with the region in the context of a rising China. The partnership with Japan-Foundation is part of Asia Centre's engagement with Japanese institutions.



## THAILAND LAUNCH: JOURNALISM FOR AN EQUITABLE ASIA AWARD

Asia Centre collaborated with Oxfam International to organize the Journalism for an Equitable Asia Award Ceremony. The ceremony celebrates and recognizes journalists that shed light and give voice to those who face inequality and poverty. The award kicked-off with a launch event at Asia Centre's Bangkok office on 8 November 2019 and another on 18 December 2019 in Kuala Lumpur with a series of other on-site and online launch events.



# EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

In 2019, Asia Centre continued to extend its network within the region and beyond. The Centre embarked on 4 partnership-building trips overseas, engaging with 10 different Bangkok-based diplomatic missions and signing 16 MOUs with universities, research and human rights centres from around the world.

## OVERSEAS TRIPS

This year, Asia Centre undertook overseas trips to build relations with our new and existing global partners. The Centre visited South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Taiwan in 2019. The partnership-building trip to the United States was a first, while it was the second year running that Asia Centre had been to South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Meetings, public lectures, courses and MOU signings were undertaken during these trips and helped to broaden the Centre's network of global partners.

## DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS

The Centre also officially engaged with the diplomatic missions of Canada, Indonesia, Luxembourg, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Taiwan, United Kingdom and the United States by attending their National Day celebrations. Asia Centre representatives have also met bilaterally with ambassadors on occasions and hosted embassy officials at the Centre.

## MOUs

Asia Centre's MOUs with partners in Thailand and beyond include: Australian Human Rights Institute, University of New South Wales (Australia); Calcutta University (India); Centre for Enterprise and Society, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (Bangladesh); Chang Fo Chuan, Centre for the Study of Human Rights, Soochow University (Taiwan); Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (Taiwan); Faculty of Communication Science and Media Business, Ciputra University (Indonesia); Faculty of Law, Thammasat University (Thailand); Faculty of Sharia State Islamic Institute Jember (Indonesia); Kyoto University (Japan); Never Again Association (Poland); NSHM Knowledge Campus (India); Observer Research Foundation (India); Osaka Jogakuin University (Japan); Satya Wacana Christian University (Indonesia); Thai Media Fund (Thailand); and Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages (Taiwan).





# ADVOCACY

## SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

On World Press Day in Myanmar, Centre representatives delivered a keynote on fake news at a UNESCO-hosted conference titled: Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation.

The Centre met with the Public Relations Department, Prime Minister's Office of Thailand to discuss Asia Centre's role as facilitator for a regional meeting of ASEAN Journalists. The meeting examined the impact of fake news on the credibility and citizens' trust of media institutions in the region.

During the Japan outreach, Centre representatives briefed Japanese parliamentarians of the Liberal Democratic Party at its HQ on issues of Hate Speech in Southeast Asia and its impact on human rights.

The Centre also attended the International Conference on Protection of Rohingya Survivors and Accountability for Genocide, South Korea. The keynote focused on a base-line study on hate speech in Southeast Asia and the possible repercussions for Myanmar during the upcoming general elections in 2020.

The Centre presented its research on disinformation and fake news legislations in Southeast Asia at the Executive Committee Meeting of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) in Taipei. The legislations have shown to run contrary to international standards on freedom of expression, but are instead used by political leaders to silence dissent.

The Centre attended a media workshop organized by the Observer Research Foundation on Re-imagining BIMSTEC in Kolkata, India.

## MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

In 2019, Asia Centre spoke to media outlets on issues related to security concerns on the South China Sea, the Rohingya refugee crisis, political developments in Thailand and Singapore and on fake news legislation. The Centre has been interviewed by various media outlets such as Al Jazeera Channel, Los Angeles Times, South China Morning Post, ABC News, Kompas.com, Philippine News Agency, Thời sự VTV, Mizzima and many others.



# ASIA CENTRE MALAYSIA

Asia Centre aims to enhance the collaborative experience of its partners and users at its second Centre in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Asia Centre Centre is a multifunctional facility designed for seamless co-working, meetings, networking and project administration. The design was finalised following discussion with several local interior renovation firms and feedback from advisors and partners, since plans for a second Centre were announced in 2018.



## SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE



7500+  
followers



This year, the Centre's social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Mailing List has seen higher volumes of likes and followers across ASEAN countries, Asia Pacific and worldwide. Through more extensive outreach on social media platforms, Asia Centre has been able to better promote its projects, bring up-to-date news and upcoming events with its followers.



# INTERNSHIPS

In 2019, Asia Centre welcomed eleven interns enrolled in graduate schools from Australia, Bangladesh, China, Singapore, Slovakia, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam. Interns contribute to the Centre through the three integrated streams of Communications, Research and Partnerships. The internship program lasts for a minimum of three months to six months. The program aims to expose interns to the day-to-day operations and projects of Asia Centre, promoting a better understanding of the multidimensional nature of challenges in Asia.



# STUDY VISITS

Asia Centre welcomed staff and students from Satya Wacana Christian University (Indonesia), Singapore Management University (Singapore), Universitas Ciputra (Indonesia), and Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages (Taiwan) in 2019. The Centre hosted delegations from these four universities and discussed possible collaborations regarding research, teaching and events. The study visits are part of the Centre's engagement with universities in ASEAN, through which Asia Centre can share its core projects and research findings with academics.

