

# Hot, Humid, Hectic: Scoping in Southeast Asia on ANU SEAI Student Travel Grant 2026

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Leaving Australia's chilly winter, I stepped out of my flight into the wet and hot weather of Singapore to begin my scoping trip in Southeast Asia – specifically Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia. With the help of the ANU SEAI Student Travel Grant 2026, I was able to cover my accommodation and flights for what would be a hectic intellectual trip across four Southeast Asian cities. The trip was meant to ground myself in the region and navigate avenues for fieldwork by connecting with local academics, engaging with their institutions, locating data sources, and presenting my research to diverse audiences more established in the region. To that end, the trip was productive in that it had both challenged and affirmed the value of my research.



*Starting the conference*



*Presenting my research*

Singapore was the first leg of the trip. Wading through a heat familiar to me from early professional years there, I settled into my place of stay and made my way westward to Nanyang Technological University to begin the three-day 6<sup>th</sup> SEASIA Biennial Conference 2026. The conference was an opportunity to clarify the structure of an intended empirical chapter. The academics I'd met there had given useful ideas to incorporate into my writings and process. Old acquaintances and friends were also there, to my surprise, with whom catching up over *kopi o kosong* had been a most

pleasant experience. Meanwhile, emails from Canberra continue to come to remind me that I am here as a researcher with obligations to my research and ANU – a thread of continuity throughout the trip not just in Singapore.



*Fulbright University of Vietnam*



*A display plaque in the Independence Palace in Ho Chi Minh City*

Moving away from the omnipresent air conditioning of Singapore, I'd returned to my own country, Vietnam – not to my home in the northern capital, but to Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon. The Vietnam leg was intended to be a transition back to mainland Southeast Asia where I did not expect the same ease of navigation in both traffic and research – an expectation I would later partly revise. I paid my first visit to Fulbright University of Vietnam, their first liberal arts university, where I met with a diplomatic historian based there. I unexpectedly arrived right after their research meeting on accounting for missing Vietnamese soldiers in the war, which I was glad to know to be steady forward despite difficulties in research funding. Their experience of navigating academia was quite different from another historian I'd meet later in the trip from a more local university to get a sense of academic life in Vietnam.

One subject I sought their advice for was on accessing the materials at the Vietnam National Archives II in the city. Following up on their conversations, I paid my first visit to the Archives II later in the trip and was delighted to know that the materials I needed – relating to the bygone regime in South Vietnam – had been digitised. A helpful librarian had advised me that a simple registration (with a local phone number) should allow me to request remote access. For that reason, I then had some extra free time as I no longer had to make the anticipated trek to the archive. That time was spent visiting the Independence Palace in the city, where I had not been since I was five years old (and gorging on Vietnamese food that I would scarcely permit myself in Australia).



*Engaging young Cambodian researchers at Future Forum*



The next stay in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, would prove to be the busiest, and perhaps most intriguing, leg of the trip. I had two main engagements, or two presentations, on Vietnam's foreign policy and national identity in the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and Future Forum, a local NGO for policy research. As it was the first time I engaged in talks in Cambodia – perhaps an uncommon occasion for a Vietnamese researcher to speak here – the audience was expectedly small, but there was noticeable interest in Vietnam, one of the cases of my research. It had given me thoughts of trying to reach a



*Engaging Cambodian academics in the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh*



larger, more public audience the next opportunity I go to Phnom Penh. It is their thoughts on neighbourly relations and Cambodia that I hope to elicit through these discussions.



*The logo and symbol on the Documentation Center of Cambodia*

I was also able to connect better with locally based researchers and academics, who then helped me reach out to the Documentation Center of Cambodia, one of the more interesting places I've managed to visit in the trip. Visiting the Center and meeting their Director were a pleasant and enlightening experience, as I came to understand the arduous documentation of the Khmer Rouge genocide and their victims. This was my second time visiting Phnom Penh, but the first time I glimpsed into, to quote one of the archivists, the “never-ending” process of recording their grim history – hundreds of thousands of documents and counting. For me, the Center holds a smaller collection donated by Julio A. Jeldres, the Chilean Australian personal secretary to one of Cambodia's most exciting figures,

King Norodom Sihanouk. Again, I was heartened to learn that the collection is digitised, and remote access is available upon request.



*Public art on the Thai-Cambodia war, placed near the Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship Monument*

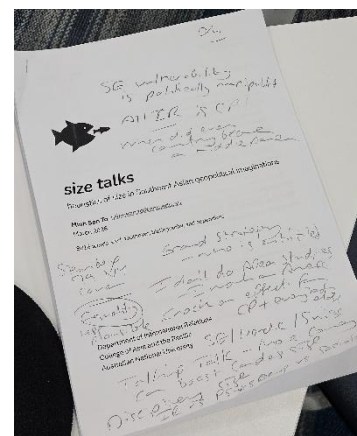


*A popular patriotic sticker on a bike, saying "I am with my homeland" & "Cambodia needs peace"*

Phnom Penh further stood out for me as I'd visited the city amid Cambodia's war with their neighbour, Thailand. The fact of war permeates, not forcefully but visibly, in my conversations with academics and daily observations of the Phnom Penh streetscape. My visit came about as the country marked its one year into the war, and its implications in both national sentiment and economic circulations had come to the front of my learning experience. It was invaluable to sense firsthand

the feelings and shifts in Cambodia after the war with a politically and economically important neighbour to their west.

Intellectually enriched (but physically quite battered), I travelled to my final destination, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to present my doctoral project at the ASEAS International PhD Workshop 2026. This leg is the shortest but the most intensive and packed in the trip. My presentation, by this point, had been through several rounds of comments and types of audiences, and so was relatively polished piece and garnered a degree of appreciation for the prose. I was heartened to see the project resonate with peer researchers and senior advisers in the Workshop, which was much needed after increasingly frequent bouts of self-doubts. As expected, the presentation got its share of constructive – and appreciated – set of criticisms and comments (as pictured).



*A well-commented project. Draft given by an NTU-based discussant*

Wrapping up the trip and returning to Canberra, the experience has given me much to ponder – about the life of my research and my personal investment in it. The trip would not have been possible with the Travel Grant provided by ANU SEAI and I have much to thank the Institute for making it available.