

Area Studies and Beyond – Abstracts

22nd Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA)

3 - 5 July 2018



Pasoot Lasuka

Traveling Routes, Literary Narrative, and Modernity in King Chulalongkorn's 'Far From Home'

Far from Home (Klai Ban, 1907), the compilation of the letters written by King Chulalongkorn while on his second voyage to Europe, has been viewed as a historical and literary master piece which shows the wit and wisdom of the king. However, little attention has been paid to his intention to record his journey so poetically while on the journey. This paper re-examines Far From Home through the frameworks of travel writing and the historical development of Asian-European transport routes. It focuses on the relationship between the physical elements that materialise the routes and the narrative styles used in the book to narrate the king's traveling experiences. Drawing on the ontological theories of literary narrative, in this paper, I show that Far From Home was the king's attempt to map and contain the development of modern Siam within the already established network of global modernisation.

Wednesday 4 July, 15:30 - 16:50 Room: 2040

Lisa Law and Mercy Rampengan

Surviving Well with Karangetang Volcano: Nutmeg Etiquette and Community Economies in Siau Island

On Siau Island, North Sulawesi, smallholder farmers rely on a unique system for harvesting nutmeg that has enabled them to survive well together in their island ecosystem. Nutmeg trees are particularly well suited to Siau's ecology, where an active volcano produces rich soils for tree growth and gaseous emissions form a natural pesticide. This paper outlines harvesting arrangements which simultaneously stimulate a good harvest and redistribute wealth in the community. In the absence of an official land titling system, mudalolose involves the rotation of tree harvesting rights between different families over time. Mandusi is a practice of ground fruit gleaning which enables non-harvesting family members to collect fallen nutmeg. This paper positions the nutmeg tree and its harvest in diverse economic transactions, illustrating different ways the tree is enmeshed with social and environmental care. It also positions mudalolose and mandusi as practices of surviving well under Karangetang volcano.

Thursday 5 July, 09:00 - 10:20 Room: 2280

Stephane Le Queux and Anne Cox

Labour Politics in East and Southeast Asia

In East and Southeast Asia, trade unions find themselves in very different relationships with the state, from full incorporation (Singapore) to pluralist competition (Indonesia), marginalisation and exclusion (Malaysia and Thailand). In this paper we will outline the political role organised labour has taken on a range of policy issues including the minimum wage (Indonesia); migrant workers and productivity (Malaysia, Singapore); precarious employment (The Philippines); labour struggles and social movements (Thailand); industrial disputes and the role of unofficial worker representatives in challenging established communist institutions (Vietnam); and claims for distributive justice (Taiwan). We argue that this cross-examination confirms that industrial democracy and development remain a useful heuristic for the study of labour in the region and supports the view that states play a dominant role of 'pacification', with capitalist 'accumulation' being the primary motive and labour conditions subordinated to that agenda.

Wednesday 4 July, 15:30 - 16:50 Room: 2250

Michael Leadbetter

Disruptive Materiality: Testing Southeast Asian Historical Narrative and Cultural Assumption with Archaeology

How did the first cities and settlements in Southeast Asia form? Since the 1970s, the go-to explanation has been that maritime trade between China and India led to the emergence of cities and a flourishing of social complexity across Southeast Asia. This paper uses material culture to critique, rethink and ultimately subvert historical narratives on Asia's early development. This paper reports three critical findings from a material-driven approach. First, sites of pan-Asian trade in early Southeast Asia do not necessarily correspond to archaeological settlement sites. Second, communities marginalised as minor and peripheral such as hill tribes and sea nomads must be re-centred and placed at the heart of historical causality in Southeast Asia. Finally, ritual and exchange are far more significant as connective factors across Southeast Asia than commerce. The research presented here will demonstrate how new sources and critical approaches change our understanding of Asia and historical causality.

Thursday 5 July, 10:30 - 11:50 Room: 2070