

ARI news

Main Story

ASIAN GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM 2017: A CONVERSATION ABOUT ACADEMIC MENTORSHIP

Special Feature

JOEL S. KAHN AND THE COMPREHENSION OF MODERNITY: A TRIBUTE

Outreach Event

ICAS 10, CHIANG MAI, 2017

WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

PROF JONATHAN RIGG



In July we welcomed a new cluster to the ARI 'stable': Identities. This is the first new cluster to be established since Science, Technology, and Society (STS) took root in 2009 under Greg Clancey's leadership.

The Identities Cluster is led by Professor Ted Hopf from the Department of Political Science and is devoted to advancing broadly conceived conceptual, theoretical, and methodological approaches to identities in Asia. The Cluster will expand in size as appointments are made over the course of the next nine months or so, but Ted has already won one of the first round of Social Science Research Council (SSRC) grants for a three-year project (2017-2020) on 'Making Identity Count in Asia: Identity Relations in Singapore and its Neighbourhood', so the winds are already set fair.

Another piece of good news was the winning of a second SSRC grant on the 'Sustainable Governance of Transboundary Environmental Commons in Southeast Asia', led by Professor David Taylor from the Department of Geography, under the auspices of the Inter-Asia Engagement Cluster. This project involves research on transboundary environmental

commons in Southeast Asia, with collaborating partners in Canada, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand—and Singapore. It seeks to identify the drivers and impacts associated with biomass burning and hydropower development in the region, with a view to improving the governance of transboundary environmental commons. Both this grant and Ted Hopf's will enable us to expand our activities and move into new areas of research and scholarship.

Last month saw the completion of another very successful *Asian Graduate Student Forum*—the 12th to date. Under Michiel Baas' leadership the programme has evolved as the higher education sector in the region has progressed. This year saw two departures: first, the division of the fellowship programme into three 'streams' of different duration so that we can gear it better to students' needs; and second, the expansion of the Forum from three to five days, which enabled us to provide two days

of skills-based sessions. My sense was that the latter sessions were particularly appreciated by the graduate students. A three-year grant from the Henry Luce Foundation in New York enabled us to fly in three senior scholars from the US for the duration of the programme—Mariam Lam from UC Riverside, Philip Rozario from Adelphi University, and Pheng Cheah from Berkeley—who contributed greatly to its success.

Of course we regularly mount conferences and workshops, but one forthcoming is worth highlighting. On 5-6 October ARI is hosting a 'cross-cluster' conference with the title *An Asian Turn? Researching and Theorising from Asia*. This is designed to bring all of our clusters together to reflect on the contributions of ARI over the 16 years since Tony Reid became the Institute's first Director in 2001. We are welcoming back a number of scholars who have contributed to ARI's progress over those years, including Tony.

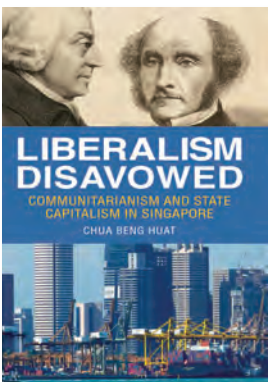
Dr Arunima Datta gave a keynote speech on 'Gender, Sexuality and the Making of "Coolie" Identities: Indian Plantation Communities in Malaysian History,' at the Annual Public Lecture for Malaysian Branch of Asiatic Society (Annual Meeting in Singapore), 30 September 2017. She also won the Don Provencher Award conferred by the Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore Board of the Association for Asian Studies, 2017, for her paper 'Entangled Colonial Histories: Colonial Law and "Coolie" Intimacies in Twentieth Century Malaya and Ceylon' presented at AAS-Toronto, 2017.

Miss Khoo Choon Yen was appointed to the National Library Board's Library Consultative Panel, for the period of 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2019.

Professor Jonathan Rigg gave two keynote speeches: 'Rethinking Asian Poverty in a Time of Asian Prosperity', at the seminar *Rethinking Development Pedagogy and Practice: New Visions for Global Development*, Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia, 23-25 June 2017; and 'In the Shadows of Prosperity', at the *Third Annual Workshop on Urban Climate Resilience in Southeast Asia*, Battambang, Cambodia, 6-7 May 2017.

Dr Fiona Williamson was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (UK) in July 2017.

Professor Brenda Yeoh gave an invited special speech on 'Transnational Migration and Cosmopolitan Sensibilities in a "Multiracial" City: The Case of Singapore', at the Institute of Social Science Research Center, Daegu Catholic University, South Korea, 17 May 2017.



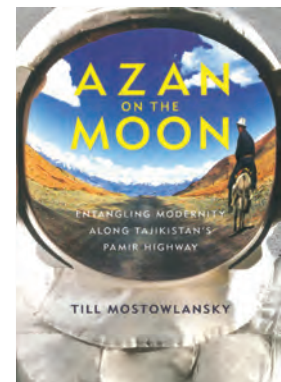
Chua Beng Huat
Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore
NUS Press, 2017



Felicia Chan
Cosmopolitan Cinema: Cross-Cultural Encounters in East Asian Film
I. B. Tauris, London, 2017



Maria Platt
Marriage, Gender and Islam in Indonesia: Women Negotiating Informal Marriage, Divorce and Desire
Routledge, 2017



Till Mostowlansky
Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017



Field trip to Singapore Maritime Trail, 26-28 July 2017

ASIAN GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM 2017: A CONVERSATION ABOUT ACADEMIC MENTORSHIP

DR LAVANYA BALACHANDRAN

ARI News spoke to Professor Pheng Cheah (PC), Assoc Prof Mariam Lam (ML) and Prof Philip Rozario (PR), the three Visiting Senior Research Fellows, about their mentorship experience at this year's Asian Graduate Student Forum (AGSF). The conversation kick-started by discussing how each of them structured their mentorship programme given that the 28 students who were selected into AGSF came from different universities and had diverse research topics, methodologies and disciplinary training. The mentors shared the challenges students had to overcome and how AGSF and its location within National University of Singapore (NUS) helped graduate students hone their respective research projects and prepare them to be career-ready!

PC: The 28 students were divided amongst the three of us. We had about two weeks to work with them till their main presentation. I divided the group of students I was mentoring into three smaller groups. I asked each of them to circulate a condensed version of their paper of about two pages. Someone else in their group would be responsible for presenting the paper and another group member would be responsible for offering critical comments. The student whose paper was being presented would then be given time to respond or clarify his or her arguments based on the comments. This was followed by my own feedback on the paper's content and organisation. Students from outside

that group would then offer their constructive criticisms or pose questions. Being Asian and working on Asia means that they have the vernacular languages and the cultural know-how to navigate their field but the challenge for many of these students was in articulating their ideas clearly in scholarly discourse, especially given the fact that English wasn't their first language. These students were fortunate to be part of such a formal mentoring programme. It helped them develop their dissertation alongside honing other skills including English language proficiency and effective presentation techniques.

ML: My group had a mix of Masters as well as Phd students who were at different stages; some were just fresh out of writing their research proposals and there were others who were nearing the end of their dissertation and were soon to be going on the job market and so, they had different needs. When I first met them, I focused on aspects that would help all of them. I got them to redo the introductions that they had earlier presented at ARI and helped them formulate a more professional, memorable, brief introduction including picking out interesting aspects of their research topic. In the second session we looked at how to present good research or conference papers. A lot of students could describe their research topics or themes but had difficulty explaining the key arguments. The next few sessions were focused on how students should package their materials for the next stage in their research career whether it was for a post-doctoral fellowship or a Phd.

PR: A bulk of the students I mentored were Masters level students. A major issue that a number of them faced was their anxiety in trying to convert a 20,000-word thesis into the paper that they were to present at AGSF. So, the discussions were really about getting them to focus on a particular area in their research or preliminary analysis as a work-in-progress that they could build upon later instead of having them present an entire thesis. I also wanted them to recognise the presentation as a kind of dialogue and not something they had to have complete knowledge about. We also talked about fielding questions during paper presentations, about how one can be respectful and yet show that you don't have to have answers to all the questions within that research domain. Part of the issue we were seeing at AGSF was that these students were coming from differently resourced universities. I had one student who was not going to be writing a dissertation in English so his biggest challenge at this AGSF was to translate what he had already begun writing in his native language into English within the short timeframe they were here. Students from some of these smaller universities may not have had an opportunity to meet other scholars or attend conferences and exchange ideas so this forum gave them a platform to get that exposure and training they would otherwise not get. I had some students in my group who were presenting for the very first time to an audience.

PC: But despite being in different stages of their research, students broadly tended to work on topics that were quite similar and particular to this region. A lot of them worked on migration; some others worked on cultural heritage, cosmopolitanism and diaspora etc. And it also turns out to be an advantage at a forum like this if they are working in similar areas because they can share secondary literature.

PR: A lot of the students saw AGSF also as an opportunity to get the data they couldn't get back home. I saw students using the library resources, collecting archival data or downloading journal articles and photocopying book chapters.

ML: Yes that is true especially for students from countries like Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam where there is a great deal of censorship at the Universities, so the library resources here at NUS were very helpful for their data collection. Students were also getting access to area studies scholarship that even we don't necessarily get in our home universities in the US.

PR: And this was something that even I benefitted from in my own research about ageing in Singapore society. I wanted to do some archival work. And the NUS library already had topically organised newspaper articles from the Straits Times and Business Times in the years I was particularly interested in which was the 1990s and that was fantastic because the alternative would have been going to the National Library and individually scouring through pages of newspaper articles.

PC: Many of the students at AGSF also had a Singapore component to their research. So it was not just historical or archival data but they also collected ethnographic data by going out to the 'field' here in Singapore, in particular those students who were working on topics such as foreign domestic labour.

ML: The forum offered the space for students to create professional networks with other graduate students like themselves and junior and senior scholars. So I kept encouraging the students to build a cohort for future conference panels which they can do together. In another instance, I introduced a student whom I was mentoring to a postdoctoral fellow here at ARI and also gave her the contact of another doctoral student of mine who was working on a similar topic. In that one day, the student made connections with two people who were probably going to be more useful to her in the long run than I would be!

DR MICHIEL BAAS

This year marked the 12th year that the Asia Research Institute hosted the Asian Graduate Student Fellowship Programme and organised the concluding Graduate Student Forum on Southeast Asian Studies.

For the first time since the programme's inception we worked with two different fellowship streams, one of six weeks and the other of four weeks. The first group of graduate



students (15 in total) comprised of those that the selection committee chose based on their academic potential but who might benefit from a two-week intensive English Academic Writing Programme. The second group (10) was more specifically selected based on their interest in doing research in Singapore, for instance, because they desired to access specific sources in the library or conduct archival research.

In total 28 graduate students from the Southeast Asian region joined the fellowship programme. In addition three US-based graduate students were welcomed to the programme as well. They were then joined by 44 students from around the world, all working on Southeast Asia related topics, for the concluding Forum.

This year the Forum was not three but five days long. Taking inspiration from a roundtable discussion the previous year which brought to light the concerns of early career researchers, two days of skilled based sessions were added to help them prepare for their academic careers. Sessions were delivered on academic writing, various research techniques, and also how to deal with mixed reviews, or how to apply for a PhD scholarship.

The two days of Skilled Based Sessions kicked off with three researchers at various stages of their careers reflecting on how they ended up in academia in the first place. A roundtable which focused on the question of how to flourish as an early career academic then finalised the two days. The organisers would like to specifically thank all those who so graciously volunteered to hold workshops on various topics.

The three days of Forum presentations offered a platform for 72 students to present their ongoing research work in and on Southeast Asia. Keynotes were delivered by Sunil Amrith (Harvard University), Tom Boellstorff (UC Irvine) and Lily Kong (SMU). The overall programme was furthermore strengthened by three visiting senior research fellows: Pheng Cheah (UC Berkeley), Philip Rosario (Adelphi University) and Mariam Lam (UC Riverside). Again a warm thank you to all those involved, especially the chairpersons of the different sessions who also acted as discussants and made important comments on the graduate students' papers.

The Programme as well as Forum were made possible by generous funding from the Henry Luce Foundation.



Welcome address by Dr Michiel Baas

GOD, GOLD AND INVISIBLE ROUTES TO A COSMOPOLITAN SOCIETY IN MALABAR

DR NISHA MATHEW

Amidst the financial meltdown of 2008 and the panic it triggered, a curious phenomenon taking place in a remote corner of India took observers across the world by storm. To the west still reeling under the effects of the global meltdown, the accidental discovery of gold in a secret temple vault in Trivandrum, a small town situated on the southernmost tip of the peninsula in Kerala, was nothing short of remarkable.

Stashed away for centuries and guarded fiercely from the public eye by the descendants of the ruling family of *Travancore* who remain its legal custodians to this day, the treasure at the Shri Padmanabhaswamy Temple amounts to trillions of dollars—the largest hoard of gold and precious metals to be documented so far in history.

Stories carried by international media outlets like *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker* on the finds implied much more than the West's historical interest in Oriental rulers and their clandestine modes of primitive accumulation. The world had changed drastically in the wake of the crisis, and so did the terms on which it had begun to engage with gold. No longer was it the 'barbarous relic' condemned by the economic theorists and architects of the post war international monetary order. Bankers, speculators, financial institutions and governments had begun, in a near return to the pre-war practices of the early 20th century, to augment their reserves of gold, even denominate their transactions in it. Retrieving its legitimate place among currencies and becoming a commodity in its own right, the demand for gold in the global market soared, sending prices through the roof. By such logic, the Shri Padmanabhaswamy Temple finds were

a potential game changer for India in the world of international finance and a panacea for the ailing global economy. While economies like China had to prospect for gold in the depths of Africa to gain a competitive edge, India could achieve the same with practically very little effort. All the state needed was to transfer off-the-rack the gold buried in temples, palaces and private homes, to its own reserves, selling it or using it as collateral in international transactions.

Logic took matters nowhere, let alone to the market. Religion, history and the culture of a people that spoke Malayalam and laid claims to the world's wealthiest god, raised insurmountable challenges to the state and its ambitions for an increased market share in the global gold trade. Neither were they willing to let the state take over the temple and its wealth from the ruling family, nor could they trust the latter to prevent the pilfering from the vaults that had sparked the controversy in the first place.¹ There was something about gold and their obsessive relationship with it that seemed almost impossible to make sense of.

Lawyers, archaeologists, historians and statesmen all began to be drawn into a protracted debate on who the gold belongs to and what should ideally

be done with it once a settlement was reached on the question. An amicable resolution, however still remains a distant reality. With the matter in court for close to a decade now, the battle continues in the public sphere as a scuffle between two rival camps in Kerala. One camp consisting of certain branches of the royal family and their supporters as well as some cliques of Hindu nationalists believes that the gold in the temple is divine while the other sees it exclusively as money and therefore the property of the state. Riveted to two diametrically opposed, if not clearly articulated positions, they have both continued to feed into seemingly relentless debates on democracy, the nature and function of the modern state, the significance of royalty in contemporary Malayali society and most of all, the cultural rights of Hindus vis-a-vis their political and economic rights as citizens.

A series of publications both in English and Malayalam have emerged in the past few years seeking answers to such questions in

¹ It was a lawsuit accusing the royal family and the temple management committee of periodic episodes of theft that brought the world's attention to the gold in the temple vaults. For more details on the case see, Jake Helpburn, 'The Secret of the Temple,' *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/30/the-secret-of-the-temple>.



the past. The turn to history however, has invariably meant turning the spotlight on the royal household itself and inadvertently or otherwise strengthening the argument on either side of the fence. Of these Manu S. Pillai's *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* (2016), a Harper Collins India publication, remains the most notable. Clearly espousing an anti-royalist stand in the matter, it charts the family's transition to modernity following independence, celebrating it as reflective of the progressive nature of Malayali society as a whole.

Despite so much time and effort going into these debates, a simple yet fundamental question remains unanswered—how did the gold get to the temple, to begin with? If not for the Arabs, the Romans, the Jews, the Christians and later the Portuguese, Dutch and the British who came seeking pepper and spices, there would have been literally no gold anywhere in Malabar, let alone the temple of Travancore. The gloss in much contemporary writing on the origins of Malabar's gold in pre-modern histories of Indian Ocean commerce may be attributed to two different yet interrelated problems—one of looking at gold, and the other of writing history. Crediting Martanda Varma—the ruler who unified Travancore in the 18th century—with acquiring the temple treasure, these narratives have made gold, not unlike history itself, an adjunct to the power of the state. Leaving little room for discussion on times before Varma's Travancore and outside his political and religious adventures of state-making,

they remain trapped in the debate on the same terms as the other stake-holders in the temple's gold. On the one end is a god, and on the other, the global market—each kept at a respectable distance from the other in theory, if not in practice. Virtually none except the state negotiates between the two on behalf of a homogenous society of Malayalis it represents, regardless of whether such society is constituted by devotees of the god or citizens themselves.

A *longue durée* perspective of developments, particularly in terms of migration, commerce and religion reveals that society in Malabar has been anything but homogenous.² Central to such diversity and cosmopolitanism has been gold, the circulation and accumulation of which created an interesting dynamics of power shared between different native Hindu principalities and wealthy mercantile communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims across the length and breadth of Malabar. The descendants of these communities evolving through waves of migration, trade and creolisation make up the different chips in the social mosaic of present day Kerala. And, as in days of yore, they continue to link Malabar with the world as diasporas, migrants and most of all as global corporate businesses in gold—a picture that emerges clearly when seen from places like Dubai, or even Singapore for that matter.

It is in the commercial spaces that these communities operate—stretching in pockets from Malabar across the Indian Ocean and all the way to the Atlantic—that

the real action whether of exchange or social transactions defining the Malayali and whatever it means takes place. Not in the temple at Travancore or the bureaucratic corridors of the state in India. No legal progress can be made on the Shri Padmanabhaswamy Temple case without taking into account the unmistakable presence and influence wielded by these spaces on the everyday lives of Malayalis, regardless of whether they live in Kerala or as diasporas across the globe. Periodic episodes of gold disappearing from the temple make no sense without the possibility of its assimilation into these spaces, and the material traces of its association with the temple lost forever. Likewise, the symbolic significance claimed by the temple and royalty mean little without gold flowing from these spaces into the vaults of the God himself in the form of charity and gifts.

The flows in and out of gold between these different spheres have ensured a certain balance of power between different power groups and religious communities in Malayali society through the ages, making it remarkably diverse and cosmopolitan. While everybody, including the state, the royal family and the temple management, recognises this in practice, hardly any effort has been made to integrate such recognition as part of the prevailing discourse. The one thing that seems certain however is that the royal family does not want to repeat its own history—the history of Martanda Varma who plundered kings, ruthlessly taxed merchants and claimed their gold for his own. Except that the terms on which it may repeat itself have been reversed—with the state in India secular or otherwise as the new Martanda Varma, and his descendants as the powers it will replace.

² Before the consolidation of Kerala as a state in the Indian Union in 1956, the term Malabar was often used to cover its entire geography, including the region ruled by Travancore in the south. After 1956, and in its contemporary sense it refers to the districts north of Cochin. I have however used the term 'Malabar' in its pre-1956 sense to refer to contemporary Kerala for political reasons that this piece offers no scope to explain.

JOEL S. KAHN AND THE COMPREHENSION OF MODERNITY: A TRIBUTE

ASSOC PROF GOH BENG LAN

Professor Joel Simmons Kahn passed away on 1 May 2017 after a gallant battle with cancer. He was 71.

Joel was a respected scholar and friend to many colleagues at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore. His last visit was as a Visiting Professor at the Department of Sociology & William Lim Siew Wai Fellow in Cultural Studies in 2010. Prior to that, he was the NUS-Stanford Lee Kong Chian Distinguished Fellow in Southeast Asian Studies in 2008 and a Professorial Fellow at ARI in 2004.

Joel was also my PhD supervisor and friend. As I grieve his loss along with his family, friends and students, I hold a memory of a great man, strong in spirit and intelligence, who was commanding and rigorous, yet kind and generous. I will never forget his simple human decency. But above all, it was how Joel empowered his students, by always treating us with respect and on par with him, which gains him a special place in our hearts. The unique relationship Joel had with his students explains why many of us never lost touch with him and why he remains an inspirational figure even in death.

In Joel's death, we have lost a trailblazing anthropologist of Southeast Asia with an abiding commitment to bring Southeast Asian and Western narratives of modernity into critical comparison so as to produce genuinely intercultural brands of knowledge to bear on the many challenges and crises of contemporary global modernity in the 21st century. In what follows, I shall provide an interpretation of Joel's intellectual trajectory with the hope that

it can serve as a tribute to the exemplary openness and richness of his scholarship.

More than an Anthropologist of Southeast Asia

Joel conducted anthropological research in Southeast Asia for over four decades. His fieldwork focused on Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. However, as part of his newer research in the new millennium, Joel also did brief fieldwork among the Chams in Vietnam. Joel's initial research was on peasant economy in Indonesia and Malaysia in the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, he expanded his interests to colonial and postcolonial modernity in Indonesia and Malaysia studying the interconnections between political-economic modernisation, nationalism and ethno-religious and identity transformations. Joel's enduring quest was to critically compare Southeast Asian and Western experiences of modernity alongside writing against the limits of radical thinking in anthropology, in particular, and critical, cultural and postcolonial theories, in general. In hindsight, it seems inevitable that this preoccupation would lead Joel to examine Euro-American modernism, which he did in the late 1990s, before returning to the Southeast Asian region in the first decade of the new millennium to research Malay cosmopolitanism and Asian religiosity.

From his research, Joel produced a distinctive body of intercultural scholarship that is marked by an

insistence on the inseparability and coeval standing of Western and Southeast Asian modern thought and experiences and the necessity to explore fissures, contradictions, continuities and discontinuities within and across each so as to reinstate elided narratives as no less constitutive of the modern. It is impossible to do justice to Joel's comprehensive and sophisticated conceptualisations. My aim is only to outline some of the ethico-political contexts and sensibilities that engendered and directed his intellectual inquiry by examining his contributions to three strands of scholarship central to anthropological debates over modernity, that is, the relationship of peasant economy to modern social formations, the constitutive role of cultural difference in the making of modernity, and modern religiosity. Joel's engagement with these debates also mark the development and consolidation of his thinking on modernity.

Formative Years: Encounters with Peasant Economy

Joel's initial anthropological research was among the Minangkabau peasantry, first in Sumatra, Indonesia, during the early 1970s, and subsequently, in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, during the mid-1970s. For the first decade or so of his career, Joel was best recognised for critiques of world system and Marxist/capital-centric approaches to the understanding of peasant economic modernisation in Southeast Asia.



Joel's thinking was in part energised and shaped by the intellectual climate of the time. His early career coincided with a time when the scientific status of anthropology, particularly currents associated with structural functionalism, was increasingly called into question. Based in London after completing his PhD at the London School of Economics, Joel was then part of a collective of young anthropologists who were deeply engaged in a critical engagement with a Marxist revival in thought, critiquing mainstream anthropology for its a-historicity and rootedness in structural functionalism. This collective, which included his partner, fellow anthropologist Maila Stivens, a key influence, and Josep Llobera, established the journal, *Critique of Anthropology* (which still runs today), to serve as a forum for critical discussions. Joel and Josep Llobera subsequently co-edited an influential volume *The Anthropology of Pre Capitalist Societies* (Macmillan, 1980s) which took stock of debates generated by this journal. This was only the first of a series of collaborations which marked Joel's editorial work.

Joel's early writings on Minangkabau peasantry paved the way for concrete understandings of capitalist modernisation in societies in the 'periphery'. These writings comprised his first book, *Minangkabau Social Formations: Indonesian Peasants and the World Economy* (1980), based on his doctoral work, as well as articles in: *Critique of Anthropology*, *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land en Volkenkunde*; *Man, NS*; *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*; and *Labour, Capital and Society*. These works show that despite significant capitalist transformations in Indonesian and Malaysian rural economies, productivity and social economic relations at the household and village levels could not be fully characterised as capitalist, nor could the dynamics of economic change be understood in terms of categories derived either from Western economic theory or Marxist mode of production theories. Generic critical anthropological

categories such as 'peasantry', 'the domestic mode of production', 'pre-capitalist relations of production' are all unhelpful in explicating Minangkabau peasant economic formations. Instead, the peculiar nature of Minangkabau productivity is better explained by tracing how economic rationality is shaped by the processes of social differentiation as well the relationship between peasants and the national economy. In light of these discoveries, Joel argued that anthropological and economic concepts must be understood in concrete historical contexts. These findings led Joel to challenge the limits of Marxist analysis on three major grounds: firstly, a failure to recognise historical processes; secondly, a totalising tendency to define 'difference' through a predetermined narrative of capitalist development that relegates all alternative formations as somehow falling short; and finally, an untenable economic reductionism given that economic, social-cultural and political processes are functionally analogous to each other. By writing against sweeping generalisations of capitalist transformations that fail to account for differences in developing societies, Joel's work on Minangkabau peasantry enriches understandings of concrete historical experiences of peasant economic modernisation.

Joel's critical foresight and ability to go straight to the heart of theoretical matters already evident in his early career, remained a hallmark of his later scholarship. So, too, did the theoretical scepticism displayed in his formative years. This ethic to bring into critical review anthropology and critical theory would continue to strengthen in the next stage of Joel's scholarship that moved to explore the wider problematic of non-Western and Western social-cultural narratives of modernity.

Southeast Asian and Western Modernity: Theoretical Formulation

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Joel was compelled to conceive his ethnographic project in Indonesia and Malaysia as an anthropology of modernity as these societies

experienced rapid modernisation. This phase of engagement with regional modern narratives marks the most productive and innovative period of Joel's career. His writings from this period exert enormous influence on our understanding of the structural and discursive global interlinkages since the 16th century that integrated and transformed Southeast Asian and Western experiences of modernity. Joel's first task was to dis-embed Southeast Asian modern narratives from this integrated historical matrix. This was followed by a juxtaposition of Southeast Asian narratives against dominant (Western) conceptions of modernity so as to reinstate their supposed specificities as no less constitutive of the modern, hence complicating and diversifying conceptions of modernity.

Joel began by examining Minangkabau colonial modernity; he later shifted to study postcolonial modernity in Malaysia and wider Southeast Asia. Joel's arguments on Southeast Asian modernity are explicated in the following works: *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia* (1993), a co-edited volume with Francis Loh Kok Wah, *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (1992) and an edited volume, *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand* (1998). Altogether, these writings argue that 'Western' and local meanings and experiences of the modern are implicated in the formation of each other. In other words, Southeast Asian modern formations and meanings are fundamentally intercultural in nature. His archival and ethnographic findings point to how modern cognitive, economic, social-cultural formations in Southeast Asia are products of complex sometimes contentious responses to colonial/Western ideas, policies and practices at the formal and everyday levels that implicate both European/colonial and local actors ranging from scholars, government agents, bureaucrats, elites and ordinary citizens. By revealing the intercultural nature of Southeast Asian

modern narratives, Joel's work dispels unidirectional and hierarchical methods of comparisons. Instead, Southeast Asian specificities throw into relief shortcomings as well as the biased nature of normative Western conceptual foundations of modernity.

Southeast Asian experiences constitute only one end of the spectrum of local modern histories and Joel soon turned to examine the missing end, that of Western modernity in two subsequent books: *Culture, Multiculture, Postculture* (1995) and *Modernity and Its Exclusion* (2001). Focusing on Euro-American modernism at the turn of the 20th century, these works are remarkably interdisciplinary and draw on theories and methods from disciplines such as literary studies, philosophy, sociology, art history as well as postcolonial and cultural studies. Indeed, Joel wrote about how much he enjoyed this phase of experimentation in what he considered to be 'time-out' from his anthropological career. These books trace the persistence of a suppressed expressivist yearning for alterity and diversity in Euro-American modernism. Joel discerned an expressivist vein in a wide variety of discourses: post-Enlightenment liberal ideals; European textual accounts of 'other' cultures; multiculturalism in major American cities; and popular notions of cultural difference in global culture. Findings point to the inherently multicultural nature of Western modernity, constituted by tensions between techno-instrumental rationality and what he calls, expressivism (a term he borrowed from Charles Taylor). Joel shows how by the turn of the 20th century, expressivist ideals, particularly those on human emancipation and the temporal anteriority of 'others' had replaced earlier 19th century civilisation discourses in much of Western Europe and urban America. Interestingly, expressivist ideas were found among both advocates and opponents of the empire. This impulse for alterity continues on into the early 20th century and the interwar years shaping a deeply multicultural character of urban life, artistic practices and popular culture in metropolitan centres of Western Europe and America. Joel argues that an expressivist impulse remains in the

form of identity and cultural politics of difference in contemporary global culture. That Western modernity is always accompanied by an underside suggests that alterity is also found within the West and not merely outside the West.

Joel's combined explorations of Southeast Asian and Western modernity lend to his theorisation of modernity as a single continuous historical process that is plural and global from its onset in the 16th century. Inevitably such a conclusion casts doubt on the proposals made by cultural and postcolonial theorists to escape from the shackles of Western modernity and knowledge in the search for cultural authenticity/alterity. Joel would belabour on this problematic of escaping from modern Western knowledge categories in much of his writings. According to Joel's arguments, as modernity is a coeval and irreducibly diverse process, all modern formations and ideas would inevitably be entwined and coeval with each other. Furthermore, Joel points out that philosophically speaking, an escape from our knowledge categories is impossible as we can only fathom the unknown by contrasting it with the world we know. Hence, rather than seeking to escape from Western knowledge, the project of cultural authenticity/alterity should instead bring different knowledges into conversation in order to open up possibilities to change the very terms and logics upon which we categorise the world. Joel would push this train of thought to its logical conclusion in his eventual project on modern religiosity. However, before that, Joel would first respond to the rise of conservative nationalism in Southeast Asia.

As Joel returned to Southeast Asian research in the first decade of the new millennium, Malaysian society appeared to be in the grip of ethno-religious tensions and narrow racialised nationalist discourses. Joel's next work, *The Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (2006), represents an attempt to provide an account of the emergence and embedding of a particular nationalist narrative of Malay peoplehood from an earlier transient,

migratory era in the 19th century at the frontier regions of a much wider Malay world, stretching from insular Southeast Asia to the Mekong Delta in mainland Southeast Asia. Combining historical, ethnographic and textual methodologies, this work traces the conjoint development of narrow as well as open/cosmopolitan narratives of cultural difference from the 19th to the early 20th centuries at the frontiers of the Malay world. It shows how a narrow Islamic reformism which had reared its head in the Malay world at the turn of the 20th century was effectively held back by cosmopolitan outlooks on life, religion, community, and cultural difference shaped by an open ecumenism of *Jawi Watan* whereby the Jawi/Malay people saw themselves as simultaneous members of a worldwide community of Muslim ummah. Joel's crafting of a cosmopolitan past is an attempt at reinstating this inclusive narrative as part and parcel of a Malay sense of peoplehood. While the recovery of a harmonious past risks criticisms of nostalgia and impracticability, it is however clear that Joel's intention in this work lies less in offering a solution than in providing political and epistemological resources for engaging with present forces of conservatism.

We next turn to Joel's last work on religiosity where he seeks to bring secular-rational and sacred/'irrational' viewpoints together in order to expand social-scientific theory and methodology.

Understanding Modern Religiosity: Post-Secular Humanism

Joel's last book, *Asia, Modernity and the Pursuit of the Sacred: Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics and Reformers* (2015), is perhaps the most radical of his writings as it confronts the heart of ethical and methodological questions on the understanding of irreducible or unmediated forms of modern religious difference. Taking the persistence of religious fervour and the willingness of people to die and kill for religion as grounds to take modern religiosity seriously beyond mere

social-political constructions, this book forces a consideration of experiential and contemplative methodologies beyond circumscribed social scientific epistemologies as means to engage directly with claims of religious otherness outside secular-critical-rationality.

In line with Joel's interdisciplinary and intercultural commitments, this work brings interwar Western Gnostic and Indonesian Sufi ideas and methodologies into conversation with debates on the 'sacred' in the natural and social sciences. The comparisons reveal that both the 'theological' and scientific intellectual projects share a striking similarity in aspiring after universality: that is, both these projects seek to build a knowledge of the world and an understanding of humans' place in it that transcends history. Nonetheless, they differ sharply in terms of their methodologies.

The natural and social sciences share a common inability to engage directly with supernatural claims in and on their own terms. There is a tendency to 'bracket' out these aspects by explaining them in either social-political, cultural, linguistic, psychological, performative, bodily or even neurological terms. Joel argues that such analyses are, however, problematic on at least three grounds: First, they merely render rational meanings to the 'irrational' leaving the difference at stake unknown; second, they put into question the democratic nature of our scientific projects as the knowledge produced is only meaningful to the researcher but not to the practitioners; finally, the rational-critical knowledge categories applied to understanding religious otherness are themselves steeped in (Western) theological meanings making the refusal to engage seriously with the religiosity of others ironical if not hypocritical.

Given such limitations, Joel suggests that it may benefit social scientists to open themselves to other ways of engaging otherness beyond the boundaries of secular-critical-rational frameworks. In other words, that secular/rational and sacred/'irrational'

epistemologies can be brought into conversation. It is in this spirit that Joel turns to interwar Gnosticism as an available Western intellectual and cultural resource for understanding Indonesian Sufi beliefs and practices. For Joel, interwar Gnosticism provides an example of an inter-religious project that is situated in both Western worldviews as well as Asian ones whereby the knowledge produced speaks of and to both the worlds of the researcher and the studied. Joel argues that the experiential and contemplative methodologies adopted by both Gnostics and Sufis are promising in facilitating cross-religious understanding and embracement. In contrast to abstract reasoning in the social sciences, Gnostic and Sufi ways of knowing are at once ideational and practical. Central to their knowing is also living where there is an intentional impulse to seek openings into 'unseen' or even 'impossible' worlds in order to bring about encounters and understandings of the 'sacred' from within the self or for the self to become at one with these unseen worlds. Such grounded encounters with religious otherness better facilitate stepping into other religious worlds as well as arriving at a renewed universalism of coexistence and interconnections of religious differences.

While religious modes of knowing are often treated with disdain for their esoteric and a-political nature, Joel shows otherwise. The experiential and contemplative orders of knowing provide us with grounded direct engagements with totally alien forms of metaphysical and ontological claims. They provide us with an alternative logic of the complementarity of differences whereby different ideational and ontological worlds are seen to be mutually constitutive and interrelated, offering us with a completely contrasting logic to narrow dualistic Western Enlightenment thinking. Far from apolitical, Joel shows that these sacred forms of knowledge are characterised by the quest for openness, responsibility for others, non-violence, and respect of the natural world—ideas which are much needed in the contemporary

world. Indeed, as pointed out by Joel, Gnostic encounters with religious otherness during the interwar years laid the groundwork for the counter-cultural waves of the 1960s and 1970s. They can also be seen as antecedents of today's seekers of New Age religion/spirituality, a liberal religious counter-current to the forces of religious fundamentalism.

While it is too early to gauge the impact of this book, there is no doubt that it has planted a seed for radical change in the way social scientists approach religion. Joel had intended to write another book from ethnographic materials collected in this study on Indonesian Sufism. Unfortunately this project is now lost apart from a blog that he started some six months before his death (<https://conversationswithsufis.wordpress.com>).

Closing

The picture of Joel's trajectory of thought suggests a gradual evolution of a subject-formation in his writings from a secular-humanist to post-secular humanist orientation. Joel's distinctive set of critical strategies stands apart from others in his insistence on always bringing Southeast Asian and Western thought and experiential worlds into critical comparisons in order to build knowledge that speaks of and to both worlds. By doing so, his brand of intercultural scholarship provides a way out of relativism. In particular, his last work on modern religiosity opens up a logic of the complementarity of differences as well as experiential and contemplative methodologies to help build multi-directional human knowledge in a decentred world. The body of works left behind by Joel challenges us to bring converging and contrasting critical outlooks together for mutual competition and enrichment of intercultural understandings of modern cultural diversity and human fulfilment without having to reinvent the place of power either in the West, Asia or anywhere else.

Joel will be forever missed. He is survived by his partner, Maila Stevens, their daughters, Sophie and Jessica, and granddaughters Zoe and Eva.



Prof Ted Hopf has commenced a 3-year joint appointment as Cluster Leader of the Identities Cluster in ARI and Department of Political Science with effect from 1 July 2017. He is the Provost Chair Professor of Political Science at NUS. His main fields of interest are international relations theory, qualitative research methods, and identity, with special reference to the Soviet Union and the former Soviet space.



Dr Hong Sookyeong has commenced a 2-year appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Science, Technology, and Society Cluster with effect from 28 July 2017. Her research interests include food, health, and environment in modern East Asia; medicine and colonialism; transnational history of total war. At ARI she will be undertaking a research project on how the claims on dietary health based on 'natural' regimens played a central role in formulating and spreading medical holism in modern Japan.



Dr Lavanya Balachandran has commenced a 2-year appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Changing Family in Asia Cluster with effect from 3 July 2017. Her research interests include race and ethnicity, multiculturalism, family, education, social inequality and qualitative methods. At ARI, she hopes to explore the relationship dynamics within 'blended families' in Singapore and specifically examine how parenting practices and values are reconfigured and how children in these families adapt and cope with the struggles of a changing family structure.



Dr Chiara Formichi has commenced a 3-month appointment as Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster with effect from 15 August 2017. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University. Her research focuses on Islam as a lived religion and as a political ideology in 20th century Indonesia and Southeast Asia more broadly. At ARI, she will work on her book manuscript *Islam and Asian History: A Cross-regional Study*, which explores the history of Asia between the 17th and 20th centuries through the lenses of the region's Islamisation and its networks.



Dr Meghan Downes has commenced a 6-month appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Asian Urbanisms Cluster with effect from 18 July 2017. She researches on contemporary Indonesian film, literature, media, and the politics of popular culture. She will be working on a project that examines urban youth engagement with the natural environment and how everyday environmental problems and solutions are represented in Indonesian popular culture.



Dr Liberty Chee has commenced a 1-year appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Identities Cluster with effect from 4 September 2017. Her research empirically investigates the migration industry, particularly recruitment agencies which deploy migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asia. At ARI, she will work on Philippine identity reports, assist in the project 'Making Identities Count in Asia' and turn her dissertation into a book manuscript.



Dr Ravinder Sidhu has commenced a 3-month appointment as Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Asian Migration Cluster with effect from 25 July 2017. She is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. At ARI, she will be collaborating with Prof Brenda Yeoh and Assoc Prof Ho Kong Chong on a book project, *Student Mobility and Regional Solidarity in East Asia*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

INTER-ASIA ENGAGEMENTS

PROF JONATHAN RIGG

The Inter-Asia Engagements (IAE) Cluster and ARI will host a five-year, S\$2.6 million Singapore Social Science Research Council-funded grant on 'Sustainable Governance of Transboundary Environmental Commons in Southeast Asia'. As a small, island city-state, Singapore is closely interconnected, economically, environmentally and politically, with its regional neighbours. The resilience and reliability of these interconnections have facilitated economic growth, regional stability and cordial diplomatic relations. Development benefits in the region have not come without costs, however; rising living standards are associated with increasing rates of resource extraction, reduced environmental quality and impoverishment of biodiversity that have negative ramifications for exposed population groups. Often the negative environmental impacts are transboundary, impacting populations, activities and environments great distances and in different jurisdictions from the locations of resource extraction. The project will involve research on transboundary environmental commons in Southeast Asia, with collaborating partners in Singapore, Canada, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos and Indonesia. The project is being led by David Taylor (PI, IAE Research Associate) and Jonathan Rigg (Co-PI) and will support one Senior Research Fellow, two Postdoctoral Fellows and fund the scholarships of two PhD students to be registered in FASS, NUS.

Along with some 95 current and former ARI staff and visitors, Jonathan Rigg took part in the 10th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 20) in July in Chiang Mai. He will also be hosting an inter-cluster conference on 5-6 Oct 2017 entitled *An Asian Turn? Researching and Theorising from Asia*. On 2-4 August, Stefan Huebner co-hosted a conference with Harry Liebersohn (University of Illinois) and Kira Thurman (University of Michigan) at the University of Michigan on *Global Cultural Encounters—Between the Material and Immaterial, 1750-1950*. Teresita Cruz-del Rosario formally left the Cluster in June, although she is very much still around, and attending our regular meetings. While in the Cluster, she published a book, *Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa: Lost in Transition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). In June, Mariam Beevi Lam (University of California, Riverside) joined the Cluster for six weeks as a Luce-funded Visiting Senior Research Fellow working on two monograph projects, *Channeling Southeast Asia: Minor Regionalisms and New Circulations of Cold War Culture*, and *Pacific Standard Time: Southeast Asian Arts Activism and Global Capital*.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY

DR KAREN MCNAMARA

The Science, Technology, and Society (STS) Cluster has hosted three international conferences so far this year. Shekhar Krishnan organised *The Smart Cities/Nations Symposium* at ARI on February 9, 2017. Eric Kerr, Margaret Tan, and Greg Clancey also participated in the symposium. This special event, held in conjunction with the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation (CSI) des Ecole des Mines-Paris, was the culmination of the visit of five researchers and nine graduate students from CSI. They visited Singapore to conduct research on the local Smart Nation initiative.

The next conference, *Global Science 'Scapes: Dimensions of Transnationalism*, took place on April 21, 2017. The Leverhulme International Network on Global Science 'Scapes (<https://www.globalsciencespaces.org/>) and University College London jointly organised this one-day event at Tembusu College, NUS. This conference, inspired by Arjun Appadurai's ideas in *Modernity at Large* (1996), focused on the creation of distinctive science landscapes across the world. Dave Valler from Oxford Brookes University chaired the workshop and Eric Kerr, Catelijne Coopmans, and Margaret Tan were some of the presenters.

Cateljine and Margaret's revised conference paper, "'Asian' Distinctiveness and Race as a Variable: The Case of Ophthalmic Epidemiology in Singapore,' will be published soon in the journal *Science, Technology and Society*.

Karen McNamara and Catelijne Coopmans organised the most recent event, *Framing Technology and Care in Asian Contexts*, on May 18-19, 2017. This 2-day ARI workshop put a spotlight on the various ways that questions of care emerge in relation to technological interventions and socio-technical arrangements to deliver medical services. Scholars from the fields of anthropology, STS, medical ethics and history presented their research done in seven different countries in Asia and engaged in lively conversations about multidisciplinary approaches to the questions and methods of research.

In addition, the Cluster hosted many fascinating talks through its STS Speaker Series and some cluster members continue their collaborative work with the International Atomic Energy Federation and the Fukushima Medical University.

ASIAN URBANISMS

MR MARCEL BANDUR

The members of Asian Urbanisms (AUC) Cluster, Minna Valjakka and Fiona Williamson, together with Ho Kong Chong (PI, Department of Sociology) and Cho Im Sik (Co-PI, Department of Architecture, School of Design and Environment) have been awarded HSS Seed Funding 2/2017 (\$20,000) for the project: 'Urban Gardening in East and Southeast Asia: Transformations in Perspective and Practice.'

In ICAS 10, Minna Valjakka was the convener and chair for the panel 'Taking the Right to Engage: Alternative Artistic and Creative Practices for Urban Public Space in Hong Kong,' which also included her presentation 'Urban Hacking as Creative Resilience for Hong Kong'. Furthermore, she gave a book presentation on the co-edited volume *Representations and Urban Interventions: Visual Arts in Contemporary China*, edited by Minna Valjakka and Meiqin Wang, Asian Cities Series, Amsterdam University Press (in preparation).

ARI FELLOWS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE GATHER AT ICAS 10, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND, 20-23 JULY, 2017

DR CREIGHTON CONNOLLY



19 current ARI staff members, and a number of associate and former fellows met at the 10th International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) meeting in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This is one of the flagship conferences for ARI fellows, given its goal to 'bring fresh knowledge and perspectives' to research on Asia, which echoes ARI's own mission. This, combined with the fact that this edition of the conference (which alternates between the Asia-Pacific and Europe) was held in Southeast Asia, ensured a high participation rate amongst ARI fellows and it was easy to see the clear impact and engagement that ARI has had on and with the field of Asian studies. Indeed, even one of the keynote speakers, Aihwa Ong of UC Berkeley who gave a timely presentation on China's One Belt One Road initiative, was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ARI in 2010. Taking advantage of the number of ARI staff and 'alumni' at the

Conference, Valerie Yeo organised a gathering of current and former ARI members at the Welcoming Reception, which offered a great opportunity to meet other members of the ARI community.

While there were some 'institutional panels' comprising of exclusively ARI fellows, there were also a number of panels that were organised by ARI members in collaboration with other scholars, which provide an opportunity to further extend the vast and growing ARI network. Some of these included 'Migration Industries in Asia: Brokerage and Employment Agencies', organised by Tina Shrestha, including both current and former postdoctoral fellows from the ARI Asian Migration Cluster. An innovative set of panels on 'The Migrant's Body: Exploring the Physicality of the Migration Experience', organised by Michiel Baas, also featured a presentation

by former Asian Migration Cluster postdoctoral fellow Francis Collins.

The Asian Migration Cluster was especially active in the conference, organising an additional two panels on migration and labour dynamics in Asia. Former Senior Research Fellow Rita Padawangi also co-organised a Roundtable on a new research project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation (USA), called the Southeast Asia Neighbourhoods Network (SEANNET), involving former postdoctoral fellow Marie Gibert of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster. The neighbourhoods theme was also explored by Creighton Connolly and Michael Douglass of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster in a set of panels on Lanes and Neighbourhoods in Southeast Asian cities, involving research fellow Minna Valjakka and postdoctoral fellows Desmond Sham and Mei Feng Mok (Religion and Globalisation Cluster).