

WORKSHOP

RURAL-URBAN LIVES, LOCATIONS, & (DIS)CONNECTIONS DURING COVID & BEYOND

3 NOV 2023



Rachel
Carson
Center

ARI
ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE
National University of Singapore

© Roger Norum

ari.nus.edu.sg/events/rural-urban-lives/

This workshop is organised by Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, with support from Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. The event is funded through a research grant entitled, 'Where infrastructure fails them: Tracking development change and COVID-19's consequences in Southeast Asia's periphery' by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Cities across Southeast Asia and beyond depend upon the lives and livelihoods of rural-urban migrants for affordable and informal labour. Likewise, rural-urban migrants often depend upon work in cities to support urban and rural living. However, we know little about how these rural-urban connections have coped with the mobility restrictions and market closures caused by COVID-19. Taking work and labour in late capitalism as a general frame of reference, this workshop seeks to explore how those living already vulnerable lives have managed the interrelated effects of economic downturn, health concerns, supply chain disruption, and social barriers due to the coronavirus restrictions and their after-effects. While we know that those living in precarity often depend upon multiple connections to rural and/or urban places for work, family, or land, we know relatively little about how these connections may have altered during and post-pandemic.

This workshop aims to deepen our understanding of the pandemic's interrelated and indirect effects on those lesser-heard voices and lesser-studied locations in the Southeast Asia region and beyond. The workshop also aims to discuss the potential longer-term ramifications of the pandemic and economic downturn on rural-urban mobilities, livelihoods, and work. This is an important area of attention as most media and research on the pandemic focuses on cities and people of the global North, with relatively little focus on those already living in precarious positions.

For any inquiries, please contact Dr Jessica Clendenning at jessica.clendenning@u.nus.edu.

CONVENORS

Dr Jessica N. Clendenning

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Prof Tim Bunnell

Asia Research Institute & Department of Geography
National University of Singapore

SECRETARIAT

Ms Valerie Yeo

Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore

PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

DATE	TIME (SGT)	PANEL SESSION
3 Nov 2023 (Friday)	09:00 – 09:30	WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
	09:30 – 12:00	PANEL 1 – EXTENDING PRECARITY
	13:00 – 14:30	PANEL 2 – INFRASTRUCTURE AND MUTUAL AID
	15:00 – 17:00	PANEL 3 – MOBILITY, TRADE AND TOURISM
	17:15 – 18:00	SUMMARY & CLOSING REMARKS
	18:30 – 20:30	WORKSHOP DINNER (<i>For Presenters, Discussants and Invited Guests</i>)

3 NOVEMBER 2023 • FRIDAY

08:45 – 09:00	ARRIVAL & REGISTRATION
09:00 – 09:30	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS Tim Bunnell <i>National University of Singapore</i> Jessica N. Clendenning <i>Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich</i>
09:30 – 12:00	PANEL 1 – EXTENDING PRECARITY <i>Discussant</i> Miles Kenney-Lazar <i>National University of Singapore</i> The Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Young People’s Livelihood Struggles and Opportunities, South Sulawesi, Indonesia Andi Vika Faradiba Muin <i>Hasanuddin University</i> Pamula Mita Andary <i>Hasanuddin University</i> Christina Griffin <i>University of Melbourne</i> Locked Down in the City and the Countryside: Livelihoods and Food Security Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic in the Rural and Urban Philippines Marvin Joseph F. Montefrio <i>Yale-NUS College</i> Anacorita O. Abasolo <i>University of the Philippines Los Baños</i>
10:30 – 11:00	TEA BREAK ‘Covid Times Seemed Easier’: Reflections on the COVID Past amidst Current Livelihood Problems in Eastern Indonesia Jessica N. Clendenning <i>Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich</i> Elisabeth H. Dinan <i>Sunspirit for Justice and Peace</i> Intensifying Translocal Precarity? The Impact of COVID-19 on Smallholder Farmers' Commodity Production and Social Reproduction in Cambodia Rosa Yi <i>National University of Singapore</i> W. Nathan Green <i>National University of Singapore</i>
12:00 – 13:00	LUNCH

13:00 – 14:30	PANEL 2 – INFRASTRUCTURE AND MUTUAL AID
<i>Discussant</i>	Timothy S. Oakes <i>University of Colorado Boulder</i>
	Splintered Forests and Agricultural Figures: Thoughts on Research after COVID-19 Huiying Ng <i>Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich</i>
	Repoliticizing Rural – Urban Relational Urbanization in Java, Indonesia Isnu Putra Pratama <i>Institut Teknologi Bandung</i>
	Home as a Precarious Space during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Urban Laos and Vietnam Yang Yang <i>National University of Singapore</i>
14:30 – 15:00	TEA BREAK
15:00 – 17:00	PANEL 3 – MOBILITY, TRADE AND TOURISM
<i>Discussant</i>	Tim Bunnell <i>National University of Singapore</i>
	Moving Men: Cabdrivers, Masculinities, and Shock Mobilities in Hyderabad, India Sneha Annavarapu <i>National University of Singapore</i>
	Adaptive Capacity and the Impact of COVID-19 in Semporna, Sabah Malaysia Keng-Khoon Ng <i>National University of Singapore</i>
	Trading in Troubled Times: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Military Coup, and Chinese Border Closure on the Kachin Amber Industry Dan Seng Lawn <i>Kachinland Research Centre</i> Alessandro Rippa <i>University of Oslo</i>
	The Immobilization of a Boomtown: Mapping Mobilities in Sihanoukville across Migration, Tourism and Beyond Roger Norum <i>Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich</i>
17:00 – 17:15	BREAK
17:15 – 18:00	SUMMARY & CLOSING REMARKS
	Jessica N. Clendenning <i>Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich</i> Tim Bunnell <i>National University of Singapore</i>
18:00	END OF WORKSHOP
18:30 – 20:30	WORKSHOP DINNER (For Presenters, Chairpersons and Invited Guests)

The Impact of COVID-19 on Rural Young People's Livelihood Struggles and Opportunities, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Andi Vika Faradiba Muin

Hasanuddin University
vikafaradiba@gmail.com

Pamula Mita Andary

Hasanuddin University
mitandary@gmail.com

Christina Griffin

University of Melbourne
christina.griffin@unimelb.edu.au

Indonesia's young people renegotiate the constraints on rural-based livelihood opportunities by participating in a diverse array of off-farm activities, circular migration, and rural-to-urban mobility flows. While these strategies work to overcome the insecurity of farm-based work, they can also introduce new forms of precarity, which are further exacerbated by global processes such as the economic and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a period of in-depth qualitative research across three rural villages in the Maros District of South Sulawesi, we describe how young people renegotiate their livelihood opportunities during times of uncertainty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that young people contended with new livelihood issues such as prolonged immobility, fluctuating commodity prices, the temporary loss of visitors to local tourist destinations, disrupted educational achievements, and significant wage cuts for those commuting to work for companies and factories in urban areas. While these findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic introduced an additional layer of precarity to rural livelihoods, the immediate impacts of the pandemic are not necessarily viewed as the most significant issue affecting rural young people. Instead, in the context of broadscale landscape changes, declining rural opportunities and precarious work contracts in urban areas and on plantations, the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic became just one of the many livelihood issues that rural young people both struggle with and overcome, on a daily basis.

Vika Faradiba is a lecturer with the Faculty of Forestry, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar. Vika has extensive research-based and NGO experience working on issues of gender and access to livelihoods in rural Sulawesi.

Pamula Mita Andary is a researcher with the Forest and Society group, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar. Mita's research interests lie in studying precarity and gender issues in rural South Sulawesi.

Christina Griffin is a Research Fellow in Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Melbourne. She is a social researcher with a keen interest in understanding how agrarian transformations interact with conditions of vulnerability. She holds a PhD from the Australian National University, which examined vulnerability, livelihoods and disaster knowledge in the highlands of Central Java, Indonesia. Christina's research primarily focuses on how communities understand, mitigate and adapt to processes of environmental change, particularly in agricultural settings.

**Locked Down in the City and the Countryside:
Livelihoods and Food Security Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic
in the Rural and Urban Philippines**

Marvin Joseph F. Montefrio
Yale-NUS College
marvin.montefrio@yale-nus.edu.sg

Anacorita O. Abasolo
University of the Philippines Los Baños
aoabasolo@up.edu.ph

The COVID-19 crisis in the Philippines significantly impacted the urban and rural poor who were most dependent on daily livelihood activities for food. This paper compares the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food security of rural and urban precariats in the province of Capiz and Metro Manila. Our analysis draws from qualitative in-depth interviews with precariats residing in rural and urban coastal communities in Capiz, as well as secondary sources documenting the pandemic experiences of the urban poor in Metro Manila. We argue that while the pandemic has disrupted livelihoods and incomes and increased food insecurity across rural and urban geographies, there is variation in its effects. These differences, we argue, could be explained not just by the differentiated enforcement of the lockdowns, but also more importantly the nature of precarities and their connections among the rural, provincial city, and metropolitan areas. This paper emphasizes the merits of comparing precarities in rural and urban geographies and the connections across these spaces in understanding the impacts of global crises on the livelihoods and food security of the vulnerable and marginalized.

Marvin Joseph F. Montefrio is Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. He specializes in the political ecology and cultural politics of food sustainability and food security in Southeast Asia.

Anacorita O. Abasolo is a doctoral candidate in Environmental Science at the University of the Philippines Los Baños. Her research is on climate change, food security, and disaster resilience in the Philippines.

**‘Covid Times Seemed Easier’:
Reflections on the COVID Past amidst Current Livelihood Problems
in Eastern Indonesia**

Jessica N. Clendenning
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich
jessica.clendenning@u.nus.edu

Elisabeth H. Dinan
Sunspirit for Justice and Peace
hennydinan3@gmail.com

At present, we know remarkably little about the longer-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic on rural people and places, and particularly those in more remote areas. This is a significant research gap as many rural smallholders are not only linked to cities via people, markets and mobility, but are in varying ways, dependent on these forms of off-farm work to make a rural living. Considering these circumstances and the fact that rural places often take longer to recover from an economic recession, how have rural people managed the longer-term social and economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic when their ways of making off-farm income seemingly came to a halt? This research examines the lesser known livelihood directions of rural farmers on Flores Island in East Indonesia. We ask how rural families – many of whom sell farm products and cloth weavings via local markets, and are connected to cities via family members engaged in off-farm work – adapted their livelihoods during market closures and mobility restrictions. We draw on semi-structured interviews with rural families and women weavers in particular to examine how fluctuating commodity prices, the inability to sell products, and loss of jobs in cities created new dynamics within the household and for ways of making a rural living.

Jessica N. Clendenning is Research Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. Her research interests include agrarian change and young people, social reproduction and (non)migration, and aspirations and the future.

Elisabeth H. Dinan is Director at Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, a community based and advocacy oriented NGO based in Flores, Indonesia. She earned her Master’s Degree in Tourism from Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia.

Intensifying Translocal Precarity? The Impact of COVID-19 on Smallholder Farmers' Commodity Production and Social Reproduction in Cambodia

Rosa Yi

National University of Singapore
yrosa@u.nus.edu

W. Nathan Green

National University of Singapore
geowng@nus.edu.sg

Against a broader backdrop of agrarian transformation, Covid-19 intensified translocal precarity among migrants across Asia and around the world. As scholars of economic geography and agrarian studies have shown, smallholder farmers are now intimately integrated into capitalist markets, struggling with livelihood vulnerability due to high production cost, commodity price volatility, and rising ecological distresses. Coupled with limited structural support for agriculture and general social welfare, many smallholder households have managed their social reproduction through labor migration to urban centers both domestic and foreign. In this paper, we build on this scholarship about translocal precarity by examining the experiences of rice smallholders in northwestern Cambodia, where we carried out household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation between 2019 and 2023 in individual and collaborative research projects. We argue that COVID-19 deepened farmers' vulnerability of commodity production and uncertainty of labor migration. Specifically, pandemic restrictions on the cross-border trade of agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers, drove up the costs of production, pushing many smallholders into debt traps following poor harvests. Many smallholders decided to migrate again by borrowing more to process documents. However, they found that not only had documentation fees to migration recruiters increased substantially, they were not allowed to move due to pandemic travel restrictions, thus losing all the money they paid to migration recruitment agencies. Ultimately, we conclude that COVID-19 intensified translocal precarity among migrants given the predatory, for-profit migration sub-sector in neoliberal Cambodia and the precarious conditions of urban and rural work under contemporary capitalism.

Rosa Yi is a PhD candidate in human geography at the National University of Singapore. His dissertation research entitled "Political ecologies of agrarian commodification and labor migration in Cambodia" examines how capitalist development of agriculture transforms agrarian socio-natural landscapes, shapes rural livelihood trajectories, and produces different geographies of labor migration. Using a multi-sited ethnographic approach, the research explores, through the experiences of smallholder farmers, how commodity production and labor migration under contemporary capitalism intersect and transform socio-natural relations.

W. Nathan Green is Assistant Professor of Geography at the National University of Singapore. His research advances a critical political ecology of development finance in Southeast Asia. Based on long-term ethnographic research in Cambodia, he has analyzed how a for-profit microfinance industry has contributed to indebtedness, precarity, and agro-ecological change in farming communities. He has also researched the impacts and contentious politics of large-scale water infrastructure in the Lower Mekong Basin. His work has been published in top disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals, and has received awards from specialty groups of the American Association of Geographers.

Splintered Forests and Agricultural Figures: Thoughts on Research after COVID-19

Huiying Ng

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

huiying.ng@rcc.lmu.de

Quantitative figures on informal, undocumented labourers and the agricultural work they perform in Thailand are hard to come by. Tracking agricultural productivity from assemblages of smallholder farmers in highland areas—landless, mobile, or with insecure land tenure—is made harder after the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19's impact on work adds to the patchiness of reliable data. This paper places agricultural work in a highland village in Chiang Rai, Thailand's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) established in 2003 for food manufacturing, tourism, agriproducts and logistics to southern China (Mekong Institute, 2018), within the context of border zones' flows of mobility, commodities, and non-transparent land use governance.

From the physical place of a female Akha highland smallholder's COVID-time garden in Chiang Rai, and the undocumented Dara'ang workers from Myanmar she and other smallholders employ, this paper seeks to understand who the precariat is in highland villages, and what that implies for discussions on agricultural labour, sustainable forest use, and production networks in highland Southeast Asia. The agricultural precariat provides an entry point to understanding how SEZs' indirect or direct suspension of rule of law exacerbates perceptions of land tenure insecurity, weakens ties to households, place and kin, and undermines communities' chosen strategies of food production for diversified livelihoods and personal health.

Huiying Ng received her BSocSci at the University Scholars Programme, a multi-disciplinary program at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she graduated with a major in Psychology and minor in English Literature. Her work since graduation has explored participatory action research and knowledge co-production around agriculture as an interconnected rural-urban phenomenon. She explored these in an MSocSci thesis (2016-2018) at the Department of Geography, NUS, titled "Re-earthing: A Social Semiotics of Agroecological Futures". She joined the RCC in September 2020 as a doctoral researcher on the "Environing Infrastructure: Communities, Ecologies, and China's 'Green' Development in Contemporary Southeast Asia" project (2020-2025), where she will continue her research on agroecological practices and narratives in Southeast Asia. In her previous academic work, she has been a research assistant on the Urban Aspirations ("Aspirations, Urban Governance and the Remaking of Asian Cities"; 2013-2016) research project based at the National University of Singapore, and the Southeast Asia Neighborhood Network (SEANNET; 2017-2020), a project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and based at the International Institute for Asian Studies. In shared collaborative practice, since 2019, she has been developing the city-wide Soil Regeneration Project, a community-led action research process, and has been part of several Singapore-based groups (Foodscape Collective, TANAH, and soft/WALL/studs) since 2015. She tweets @fuiin.

Repoliticizing Rural – Urban Relational Urbanization in Java, Indonesia

Isnu Putra Pratama

Institut Teknologi Bandung
putraisnu@itb.ac.id

Delik Hudalah

Institut Teknologi Bandung
d.hudalah@itb.ac.id

Haryo Winarso

Institut Teknologi Bandung
hwinarso@itb.ac.id

Tim Bunnell

National University of Singapore
geotgb@nus.edu.sg

This research aims to explore the interdependent socio-spatial transformations between urban and rural spaces in Java Island, Indonesia. Our analysis is focused on two distinct yet interrelated locations, approximately 600 km apart: a coastal infrastructure development in North Jakarta and a cement extractive industry in North Kendeng Mountains, Central Java. We found that the initial contentious relationship between these two spaces, which arose from cement distribution and threatened the well-being of local communities while creating contested spaces, has evolved into a mutually supportive connection through grassroots movements of rice distribution during the COVID-19 crisis. We argue that the seemingly disconnected infrastructure development issues facing urban coastal communities in Jakarta and rural livelihoods in the North Kendeng Mountains are intertwined in intellectually as well as politically significant ways. Our research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on extended urban development and connectivity beyond their traditional boundaries.

Isnu Putra Pratama is a junior lecturer and research fellow at the School of Architecture, Planning and Policy Development (SAPPD), Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Indonesia. His research interests include rural-urban linkages, regional urbanization, megaproject development, and critical urban theory.

Delik Hudalah is a professor of metropolitan planning at the School of Architecture, Planning and Policy Development (SAPPD), Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), Indonesia. Delik is an urban planner and geographer focusing on new town, peri-urban, suburban, and metropolitan development in Asia, with particular attention to Indonesia. He is particularly interested in the interfaces, interactions, and conflicts between socio-economic and spatial transformation and between global forces and local aspirations in the reproduction, planning, politics, and governance of the urban regional frontiers.

Haryo Winarso is a professor at the School of Architecture, Planning and Policy Development, Institut Teknologi Bandung (SAPPD-ITB), and Head of Urban Planning and Design Research Group, Institut Teknologi Bandung. Haryo Winarso has more than 30 years of experience in undertaking research, consultancy, teaching, and training assignment national as well as international, including assignments to USA, Singapore, Thailand, and Nepal, on urban land and housing-related issues. Undertaking several joins research funded by the World Bank, DFID and Government Agencies of Indonesia, Asian Development Bank, contributing papers in International and national seminars.

Tim Bunnell is Professor in the Department of Geography and Director of the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, where he is also Leader of the Asian Urbanisms cluster. The primary focus of his research is urbanisation in Southeast Asia, examining both the transformation of cities in that region and urban connections with other parts of the world. Tim's publications include *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool through Malay Lives* (Wiley, 2016) and *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Jovis, 2018; co-edited with Daniel P.S. Goh). His interest in the nexus of new technology and urban development began with doctoral research on the high-tech Multimedia Super Corridor in Malaysia in the 1990s.

Home as a Precarious Space during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Urban Laos and Vietnam

Yang Yang

National University of Singapore

yang-yang@nus.edu.sg

This paper examines the changing meanings and spatial configurations of home in urban Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it explores how the changing geographies of home, including people's relationships to their home spaces and extended families, contribute to the precarity of urban dwellers during traumatic times. Drawing on textual and visual data from the archive "Living with COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Personal and Visual Experiences of Crisis, Control, and Community," this paper shows the pandemic's implications for urban residents in Laos and Vietnam, ranging from medical doctors to service staff in the food and beverage industry. The paper highlights how significant changes in employment, household support, and family connections caused by restrictions on travel between towns, provinces, and countries, as well as the shift to home-based work arrangements are linked to feelings of precarity.

Notably, individuals' experiences of precarity are closely linked to the changing roles that "home" plays in their daily lives. This is particularly true for individuals who must choose between staying in cities for potential job opportunities and returning to rural areas to support their families. For many, home is a priority in terms of securing employment opportunities, but at the same time, it has become more distant as moving back to rural areas implies fewer job opportunities. Therefore, this paper emphasizes that individuals' precarity is manifested in their changing spatial and temporal relationships to their home spaces and families.

Yang Yang is a lecturer at the College of Humanities and Sciences at the National University of Singapore. She received her PhD in Human Geography from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on transnational religious networks and the politics of ethno-religious identity in northwestern China. Her dissertation adopted an ethnographic approach to analysing the impacts of Hui Muslims' grass-roots connections to non-Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the Hui's everyday lives in Xi'an, China. Her current research examines transnational cultural heritage-based diplomacy between China and Southeast Asia under the discourses of the Silk Road.

Moving Men: Cabdrivers, Masculinities, and Shock Mobilities in Hyderabad, India

Sneha Annavarapu

National University of Singapore

snehanna@nus.edu.sg

In popular imaginations around driving in the Indian city, the figure of the cabdriver appears as an ambivalent one. Cabdrivers are perceived as unruly and rule-breaking as well as possessing certain navigational expertise in their own right – nobody knows the city like a cabdriver does. Yet, we know little about how cabdrivers themselves understand and even resist this characterization and the nuances within this broader stereotyping. Drawing on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city, I focus on the mobility trajectories of four non-migrant drivers and four migrant drivers to argue that amongst cabdrivers, the experiences of driving around in the southern Indian metropolis of Hyderabad are shaped by migration – and ideas around rurality and urbanity – *and* that these relations between migrant cabdrivers and non-migrant cabdrivers have undergone a shift during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

I first show how cabdrivers imagined and narrated how the rural/urban dichotomy shaped driving habits and attitudes towards driving as work. In particular, I illustrate how and why cabdrivers who articulate a claim to being authentically urban claim to be better drivers than their rural counterparts who have migrated to the big city to find economic mobility in driving work. I then tease out how the pandemic resulted in a reverse-migration pattern with migrant cabdrivers going back to rural locations and how that shifted the relations – material and symbolic – between migrant and non-migrant cabdrivers. I find that the precarity caused by the suspension of mobility and movement was experienced dissimilarly depending on the status of a cabdriver as being a migrant or otherwise and this dissimilarity caused a sense of resentment within the cabdriving community. At the same time, I show how through mutual aid networks, there was also a collective articulation of a cabdriver identity that has endured the internal fissures within the cabdriving community. I conclude with a call to recognize how temporal ruptures – like the national lockdown in India – manifest in reworking spatially-mediated (rural/urban) relations within the category of “cabdrivers”.

Sneha Annavarapu is an urban sociologist. Her wide-ranging research interests centre around the politics of transportation, infrastructure, class relations, and gender in contemporary Indian cities. She has published articles in academic journals such as *Social Problems*, *Social Change*, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, and *Journal of Consumer Culture* and has also written for media outlets like *Public Books* and *Economic and Political Weekly*. Asst Prof Annavarapu is a regular host on the New Books Network podcast and co-founder of ‘Ethnographic Marginalia’.

Adaptive Capacity and the Impact of COVID-19 in Semporna, Sabah Malaysia

Keng-Khoon Ng

National University of Singapore
keng.ng@nus.edu.sg

Edbert Wartono

National University of Singapore
e0389116@u.nus.edu

Sabah's tourism revenue is among the highest of all Malaysian states with a record of 4.19 million domestic and international arrivals in 2019. Given the trend of mass tourism continues to drive its strong demand in North Borneo, the state aims to boost more rural villages and products as they progressively transform to a world-class rural tourism destination by 2030. This paper employs tourism as a lens to investigate Sabah's evolving rural-urban dynamics in terms of community resilience and livelihood adaptability, by focusing on a selected site in Semporna. Located in the eastern coast of Sabah, Semporna serves as the gateway to Borneo's world-famous diving archipelago.

From 2015 up until the pandemic, Semporna has experienced a tourism boom, with approximately eighty percent of the international tourists coming from China. COVID-19 brought a sharp tourist decline in 2020, and the stateless Bajau Laut communities were severely affected. My study seeks to understand how differing social actors such as local interest groups, NGOs and self-help groups have come together to re-work notions of rural-urban livelihoods and strategies of reciprocity among these communities. Furthermore, the study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the operational landscape of 'PRC- dominant tourism', in relation to adaptive capability of the stateless workforce. Hence this study opens new pathways for researching the entanglements of mainstream and marginalised social groups from the lesser studied Semporna region.

Keng-Khoon Ng received his PhD in Architecture from the National University of Singapore (NUS). His research areas include architecture, urbanism, state-society-space relations, the politics of urban change in Southeast Asian cities. His latest edited book, *Bajautopia: Tales of Borneo's Sea Nomads*, advocates the rights and futures of stateless indigenous Bajau Laut people in Sabah Malaysia. Keng-Khoon is currently a lecturer at NUS College – the honours college of NUS, he focuses on teaching and supervising NUSC's capstone 'Impact Experience Projects' in Sabah.

Edbert Wartono is an undergraduate student at the National University of Singapore (NUS) pursuing a Bachelor's in Philosophy, Politics, Economics (PPE) and Cultural Studies. His research areas concern nationalism, identity politics, and migration, with a focus on Southeast Asia.

Trading in Troubled Times: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Military Coup, and Chinese Border Closure on the Kachin Amber Industry

Dan Seng Lawn

Kachinland Research Centre
dansenglawn@gmail.com

Alessandro Rippa

University of Oslo
alessandro.rippa@rcc.lmu.de

The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup have dramatically affected the lives and livelihoods of communities across Myanmar. Border areas in the north of the country also suffered from the prolonged closure of the Chinese border due to PRC Covid containment measures. The city of Ruili, the main trading hub between the two countries, witnessed one of China's strictest series of lockdowns, and its border with Myanmar remained largely closed for over 1000 days. This impacted not only cross-border businesses, but also the lives of thousands of temporary migrants in China (many of whom, in fact, return to Myanmar during the pandemic). To address the impacts of those multiple and overlapping crises, this paper investigates the case of Kachin amber: a gemstone extracted in Kachin State's Hukawng valley which generated a significant business with China starting in the early 2010s. Over the past decade, many in Kachin State became involved in the amber business: from mining to polishing and trading, and a large market place had been set up in the outskirts of Myitkyina to facilitate the trade with China. Based on interviews with miners and traders conducted in 2021-2022, in both Myitkyina and the Hukawng valley, this paper provides an initial assessment of the impact of Covid-19, the coup, and border closure on the amber industry in Kachin State.

Dan Seng Lawn is Director of the Kachinland Research Institute. A political analyst, researcher and lecturer who gained his Master's Degree in Politics from Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, Dan Seng has expert knowledge of Myanmar and Kachin State politics, and has participated in the negotiation processes between ethnic armed organisations and successive governments in the country. He is also editor of the political section of the Kachin Times newspaper.

Alessandro Rippa is Associate Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, and Project Director at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich. His research concerns infrastructure, global circulations, and the environment. He is the author of *Borderland Infrastructure: Trade, Development and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), and the PI of the ERC Starting Grant project "Amber Worlds: A Geological Anthropology for the Anthropocene (AMBER)".

The Immobilization of a Boomtown: Mapping Mobilities in Sihanoukville across Migration, Tourism and Beyond

Roger Norum

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich
roger.norum@rcc.lmu.de

This paper presents an overview of the multiple forms and scales of Chinese and Chinese-enabled mobility present in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. In doing so, it seeks to balance quantitative or policy-focused local and regional analyses of BRI with qualitative research on the everyday practices of how BRI exists on the ground, contributing to emerging calls for grounded research of global China (DiCarlo 2023; Lee 2017). As an outpost of multiple forms of mobility that has made Sihanoukville emblematic of the various after-effects of the global development projects umbrellaed under China's so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Cambodia, and Sihanoukville in particular, are spaces where the seeming benefits of phenomena of rampant growth can, in a matter of weeks, evaporate. The article seeks to present various forms of mobilities present in Sihanoukville, show how they engage with one another and may in fact be predicated on each other, and finally discuss the interconnected mobilities and immobilities of downturn, and the role these play in how settlements like Sihanoukville must navigate the vagaries and vicissitudes of boom, stagnation, bust, and what must inevitably come after.

Roger Norum is Research Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oulu, Finland. His disciplinary experience spans human geography, media studies, the environmental humanities, and social anthropology. His transdisciplinary research considers links between infrastructure, mobility and the environment, with a focus on the comparative and praxeological dimensions of media, migration and tourism. He is currently involved in carrying out research on silence and empathy in nature spaces, the social lives of mosquitoes, and the socialities among migrants working in the development and humanitarian industries in Kathmandu, Nepal. He is the founding editor of the Palgrave book series *Arctic Encounters*.

ABOUT THE DISCUSSANTS

Miles Kenney-Lazar is Assistant Professor at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore. He is interested in the changing political ecologies of land and property in the Mekong Region, especially how the capitalization and commodification of land produce unequal agrarian and environmental geographies with significant livelihood ramifications. He has long been captivated by the possibility of resistance by the rural poor to the dispossession of their lands and their capacity to influence governance processes. Empirically, his research has examined land contestation related to the expansion of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Burmese agro-industrial plantations and special economic zones in Laos and Myanmar. His broader theoretical interests are in the intersections of value and nature under capitalism, the transformation of late socialist political economies, and the relational construction of sovereignty over land and resources. Beyond political ecology, his scholarship contributes to political geography, development geography, agrarian studies, and Southeast Asian area studies.
E | geokmr@nus.edu.sg

Tim Bunnell is Professor in the Department of Geography and Director of the Asia Research Institute (ARI), where he is also leader of the Asian Urbanisms cluster. The primary focus of his research is urbanisation in Southeast Asia, examining both the transformation of cities in that region and urban connections with other parts of the world. Tim's publications include *From World City to the World in One City: Liverpool through Malay Lives* (Wiley, 2016) and *Urban Asias: Essays on Futurity Past and Present* (Jovis, 2018; co-edited with Daniel P.S. Goh). His interest in the nexus of new technology and urban development began with doctoral research on the high-tech Multimedia Super Corridor in Malaysia in the 1990s.
E | geotgb@nus.edu.sg

Timothy S. Oakes is Professor of Geography and Director of the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. He also holds visiting professor positions at Wageningen University, Netherlands, and Guizhou Minzu University, China. His work focuses on the uses of culture and heritage as governance and development strategies in both rural and urban China. Recent publications include articles in *Modern China*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, as well as the co-edited volumes *Faiths on Display and Real Tourism*.
E | toakes@colorado.edu