

A WORKSHOP BY THE MUHAMMAD ALAGIL
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSORSHIP IN ARABIA ASIA STUDIES

CONNECTING IMAGINARIES

30-31
JULY
2025

MAPPING INTERCONNECTEDNESS
IN A TIME OF THE RESCRIPTING OF
NATION-STATES



This workshop is organised by the Muhammad Alagil Distinguished Professorship in Arabia Asia Studies at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

This workshop includes short discussion papers across disciplines that focus on any scale or multiple scales – from the transregional to the local – and consider interconnectedness beyond national and regional boundaries in Arabia-Asia-Africa. Contributors ask historical and contemporary questions on a broad range of topics, including gender, ethnicity, class, migration, politics, economics, laws, ideas, faiths, heritage, organisations, infrastructures, cities, and the environment. While interconnectedness is the shared concept of the workshop, the rescripting of nation-states is its shared problem.

Arabia-Asia-Africa serves as a huge scale that allows for meaningful interaction between scholars working on different areas as well as the challenge of coming up with insights on a planetary scale. Contributors consider how their work helps us better understand transregional interconnectedness and its architectures. The purpose is to map the state of research on the topic and contribute to the larger conversation on global and planetary interdependence.

The workshop aims to expand the existing concepts, models and vocabularies in the social sciences and humanities inspired by ambitious scholarship across disciplines, including Ayşe Zarakol (2022) who draws on a long history of world orders to broaden the range of options for the future. In this regard, the workshop proposes to identify the major themes, processes and networks in Arabia-Asia-Africa. The desired outcome is an understanding of planetary interdependence built on ground up research and, in this instance, driven largely by scholars based at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Problem

To speak of interconnectedness in the humanities and social sciences is not, as it is often assumed, to focus on mobility, diaspora, or cosmopolitanism alone, but also to engage difference and contention. The workshop thus pursues interconnectedness to contribute to the strengthening of the conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding the planet as a shared space in cultural, social, political and biological terms. Of course, this approach cannot be adopted without also taking into consideration disruptions.

The exploration of the planet as a shared space is imperative in the face of the contemporary rescripting of nation-states. In the twentieth century, the dominant concern of nation-states – especially the newly independent countries of Arabia-Asia-Africa – was social integration or cohesion, often at the exclusion and marginalisation of particular groups. In recent decades, national histories have been rewritten through forms of reterritorialisation based more firmly on ethno-religious claims to space. From India to Israel, the reach of territorial claims has deepened – frequently with devastating outcomes – and draw on novel reifications of the past (Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian: 2021). Deeply contested perspectives on histories and hardened national boundaries are central to the contemporary crisis.

Approach and Concept

The workshop proposes to map interconnectedness through contributions on a variety of themes and processes on different scales – from particular localities to broad geographies. It rests on the premise that there is a need to forge greater collaborative work across area studies and disciplines to advance empirically driven research, thinking, and terminology that connects imaginaries and scales (Chua Beng Huat, etal: 2018). Collaboration is perhaps the only means by which we can grasp the massive scale of Arabia-Asia-Africa. At the same time, research on a particular context is strengthened by locating it in relation to others, whether on one or multiple scales (Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith: 2014).

There is a body of scholarship today that has expanded our conceptual and empirical scope beyond nations and regions. Sanjay Subrahmanyam coined the term “connected histories” in 1997 and could be viewed as one of the initiators of the scholarly turn. “Inter-Asia” and “transregional”, respectively as method and perspective, have been added to the conceptual and empirical knowledge by others, who include Engseng Ho (2017) and Tim Winter (2022). The work of Indrani Chatterjee (2018) offers a substantial case of the limits of these approaches, especially for writing “connected histories across spaces shaped by war and the partitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”.

Workshop and Publication Plans

This iteration of “Connecting Imaginaries” is the second of three workshops that builds on inter-disciplinary research on Arabia-Asia-Africa and draws primarily but not exclusively on the community of scholars at NUS. The mission of the workshop series is to advance sustained, interdisciplinary conversations on transregional studies and publish significant work. Building on the open-ended nature of the initial workshop, this iteration focuses on a shared concept and problem includes previous and new contributors. A third workshop with draft papers for publication is planned for 2026.

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

DATE	TIME (SGT)	PANEL SESSION
30 Jul 2025 (Wed)	09:45 – 10:00	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
	10:00 – 11:00	PANEL 1 – THEORISING INTERCONNECTEDNESS
	11:30 – 12:30	PANEL 2 – POLICY, MARKET AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURES
	13:30 – 14:30	PANEL 3 – LITERARY AND TEXTUAL INFRASTRUCTURES
	14:45 – 15:45	PANEL 4 – KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURES
	16:15 – 17:45	PANEL 5 – RECONSIDERING THE SCOPE AND OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE
	18:30 – 20:00	WORKSHOP DINNER (<i>For speakers, discussants and invited guests</i>)
31 Jul 2025 (Thu)	11:00 – 12:00	PANEL 6 – NEGOTIATING LARGER POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS
	13:00 – 14:00	PANEL 7 – SOLIDARITIES THROUGH DISRUPTIONS AND INEQUALITIES
	14:30 – 15:30	CLOSING DISCUSSION AND PUBLICATION PLANS

30 JULY 2025 • WEDNESDAY

09:45 – 10:00	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS SUMIT MANDAL <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
10:00 – 11:00	PANEL 1 – THEORISING INTERCONNECTEDNESS
10:00	Words across Worlds: Translation as a Vehicle for Islamic Feminist Knowledge Transmission in Indonesia NOR ISMAH <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
10:10	Arabness, Southeast Asia, and Islam: Racialization from South-South Connections to South-South Hierarchies ALI KASSEM <i>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, NUS</i>
10:20	DISCUSSANT SUMIT MANDAL <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
10:40	QUESTION & ANSWER
11:00 – 11:30	MORNING TEA BREAK
11:30 – 12:30	PANEL 2 – POLICY, MARKET AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURES
11:30	Connected Civilisations and Competing Imaginaries RANI SINGH <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
11:40	Spymasters and the Supply Chain: The Container Revolution in Shenzhen, China's First Special Economic Zone TAOMO ZHOU <i>Department of Chinese Studies, NUS</i>
11:50	DISCUSSANT TIM BUNNELL <i>Asia Research Institute & Department of Geography, NUS</i>
12:10	QUESTION & ANSWER
12:30 – 13:30	LUNCH BREAK
13:30 – 14:30	PANEL 3 – LITERARY AND TEXTUAL INFRASTRUCTURES
13:30	Listening to the Ocean Speak: Traces of Women in the Archives of the Malay World MYRA MENTARI ABUBAKAR <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
13:40	Arabia-Asia Connections from the Perspective of Its Literatures KHAIRILLAH IRWAN <i>Department of English, Linguistics and Theatre Studies, NUS</i>
13:50	DISCUSSANT NOR ISMAH <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
14:10	QUESTION & ANSWER
14:30 – 14:45	BREAK

14:45 – 15:45	PANEL 4 – KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURES
14:45	The Fruit and the Wine: Cashew, Colonialism, and the Circulation of Knowledge across Early Modern Oceans KATHLEEN BURKE <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS (Online)</i>
14:55	Where is the Future? An Anthropology of Astrology BHOOMIKA JOSHI <i>South Asian Studies Programme, NUS</i>
15:05	<i>DISCUSSANT</i> FAIZAH ZAKARIA <i>Departments of Southeast Asian Studies & Malay Studies, NUS</i>
15:25	QUESTION & ANSWER
15:45 – 16:15	AFTERNOON TEA BREAK
16:15 – 17:45	PANEL 5 – RECONSIDERING THE SCOPE AND OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE
16:15	Connecting Geocultural Imaginaries of the Past in our Geopolitical Present TIM WINTER <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
16:25	<i>Bumantara: The Emergence of Multiple Geological Bodies in Decolonizing Southeast Asia</i> FATHUN KARIB <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
16:35	Familiar Strangers: Imagining Nepal in China ZEZHOU YANG <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
16:45	<i>DISCUSSANT</i> PETER SCHOPPERT <i>NUS Press</i>
17:05	QUESTION & ANSWER
17:45	END OF DAY 1
18:30 – 20:00	WORKSHOP DINNER (<i>For speakers, discussants and invited guests</i>)

31 JULY 2025 • THURSDAY

11:00 – 12:00	PANEL 6 – NEGOTIATING LARGER POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS
11:00	An Exploration of “Foreignness” and “Nativeness” among Minority Communities in Post-Colonial South Bombay During and After the Formation of the Indian State VARIGONDA KESAVA CHANDRA <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
11:10	Telling the Stories of Chinese Muslims through the Eyes of Overseas Hui Muslim Influencers YANG YANG <i>Department of Chinese Studies, NUS</i>
11:20	<i>DISCUSSANT</i> YANNIS-ADAM ALLOUACHE <i>Department of Geography, NUS</i>
11:40	QUESTION & ANSWER
12:00 – 13:00	LUNCH
13:00 – 14:00	PANEL 7 – SOLIDARITIES THROUGH DISRUPTIONS AND INEQUALITIES
13:00	Between Tides: Labour Migration and Political Currents across Maritime Asia, c. 1920s–1940s KELVIN NG <i>Department of History, Yale University</i>
13:10	Contesting Agreements: Unequal Development, Labour Migration, and Transregional Publics across Arabia-Asia-Africa SAHANA GHOSH <i>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, NUS</i> JACOB RINCK <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS (Online)</i>
13:20	<i>DISCUSSANT</i> TAOMO ZHOU <i>Department of Chinese Studies, NUS</i>
13:40	QUESTION & ANSWER
14:00 – 14:30	AFTERNOON TEA BREAK
14:30 – 15:30	CLOSING DISCUSSION AND PUBLICATION PLANS SUMIT MANDAL <i>Asia Research Institute, NUS</i>
15:30	END OF WORKSHOP

Words across Worlds: Translation as a Vehicle for Islamic Feminist Knowledge Transmission in Indonesia

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This paper explores the role of translation as both a medium and a methodology for transmitting Islamic feminist knowledge in Indonesia. Drawing on Min Dongchao's critique of Edward Said's "travelling theory" (Said 1984; Min 2024), the study interrogates how feminist ideas—often originating in Euro-American contexts—are translated, adapted, and indigenised within Indonesian Islamic thought and practice. Min's call for an "alternative travelling theory" (6-7) that attends to discursive, material, and power-laden dimensions of theory transfer, underpins the framework for this research.

The research is guided by three questions: (1) How do Indonesian women *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and activists translate global feminist discourses into Islamic frameworks? (2) In what ways does translation serve as a site of epistemic negotiation, tension, and authority? (3) How does the visibility and agency of translators shape the local reception and transformation of feminist knowledge?

Methodologically, the study combines textual analysis, semi-structured interviews with women *ulama* and translators, and discourse analysis. It examines translated works and Islamic feminist publications—books, fatwas, and magazines—to trace how concepts like feminism, gender justice, and human dignity are rearticulated in Islamic terms such as *kesalingan* (reciprocity) and *maslahat* (common good), while navigating cultural and theological boundaries.

This paper positions Indonesia as a generative site of feminist theorising and argues against the idea that feminist theory is merely exported from the West. Translation emerges not as passive linguistic transfer but as a form of ethical and epistemological labour central to feminist knowledge-making in the Muslim world.

Keywords: translation, Islamic feminism, Indonesia, women ulama, feminist knowledge production

Nor Ismah is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore. She also serves as Director of the Center for Islamic Law and Ethics of Mubadalah (CILEM), Siber Syekh Nurjati State Islamic University, Cirebon, Indonesia. Her research explores the intersection of gender studies, women's knowledge production, media, and Islam in the Indonesian context. Her book, *Women Issuing Fatwas: Female Islamic Scholars and Community-Based Authority in Java, Indonesia* is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press and is anticipated to make a significant contribution to the field. At ARI, she is developing a research project titled "Religious Networks and Gender Dynamics: A Study of Female Islamic Authority in Southeast Asia," which builds on her doctoral work.

Arabness, Southeast Asia, and Islam: Racialization from South-South Connections to South-South Hierarchies

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This paper examines 'Arabness' as a contemporary form of valorizing racialization by drawing on auto-ethnographic fieldwork, participant observations, and in-depth qualitative interviews across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and foregrounding historical and ongoing connections between the Arab region and Muslim Southeast Asia. Situating this phenomenon within intersecting historical trajectories of precolonial trade, Islam, European colonialism, and postcolonial nation-building, I examine its contemporary workings and entanglements with class, gender, and globalised modernity/coloniality as well as the ways in which Southeast Asians negotiate and remaster it. By centering South-South hierarchised and hierarchizing power-laden interconnectedness, the paper challenges dominant frameworks that reduce contemporary racialization solely to Eurocentric legacies (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Mills 1997) and connected sociologies (Bhambra 2014) to the connections made between European empires and the global south. Instead, I suggest a prismatic approach that accounts for the polycentric and contested nature of racial formations that persist, albeit remade, under modernity/coloniality.

Keywords: racialization, Arab, Southeast Asia, connected sociologies

Ali Kassem is a lecturer in Sociology at the National University of Singapore. Ali was previously postdoctoral research fellow in Decoloniality and Contemporary Islam at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Edinburgh, UK where he also taught at the School of Social and Political Science. His book *Islamophobia and Lebanon: Visibly Muslim Women and Global Coloniality* was published in 2023 by I.B. Tauris-Bloomsbury Academic. He is currently editing a book titled *Colonial Legacies and Arab-Majority Region(s): From Contemporary Conditions to Alternative Futures* forthcoming with Bristol University Press.

Connected Civilisations and Competing Imaginaries

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In an era when countries are increasingly both competing and collaborating to establish connectivity and influence, global affairs are undergoing a significant shift. This is evidenced by the emergence of a decentralised and multi-civilisational world order, with many arguing that we are witnessing a decline of the Western-led liberal world order. The rise of China and India, coupled with the increasing economic and political prominence of other Asian countries, has led to the emergence of new powers and alliances that influence the agenda of ideas.

International relations theory and political geography scholars have noted that such shifts are giving rise to a new civilisational politics. This paper engages with these developments by focusing on the emergence of new forms of cultural infrastructure in Asia and Africa, now being constructed along the themes of shared heritage and connected histories, particularly by China and India. The two countries position themselves as civilisational states within competing expressions of geocultural power. The paper develops a conceptual framework of *infrastructuring* to interpret what is at stake in key trends in heritage, culture, and religion today. To provide both empirical focus and conceptual depth, these themes are primarily examined in relation to the foreign policy architectures and geopolitical ambitions of China and India, thereby contributing new knowledge to the literature on India-China relations. In broad terms, the paper seeks to contribute to scholarship on cultural infrastructures as an attribute of contemporary appropriations of connected history, shared heritage, and religion.

Keywords: cultural infrastructure, civilisational politics, India-China, Asia-Africa, shared heritage

Rani Singh is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, working with the Inter-Asia Engagements and Asian Urbanisms Clusters. She holds a PhD in Sociology and Anthropology from the University of Western Australia (2024) and an M.Phil. in Chinese Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research explores transnational cultural infrastructure in relation to regional connectivity initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Project Mausam. At ARI, she is working on her book that focuses on the rise of civilisational politics in world affairs and the emerging forms of cultural infrastructure centred on connected histories and shared heritage.

Spymasters and the Supply Chain: The Container Revolution in Shenzhen, China's First Special Economic Zone

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Containers—those “soulless aluminum or steel boxes”—may be one of the most consequential innovations of the late twentieth century. As mundane and unromantic as they appear, these metal tins drastically reduced the cost of international shipping, expanded the scale of global trade, and ushered in an era of neoliberalism marked by globalised manufacturing, weakened labour protections, and the persistent tension of trade imbalances. Containers not only transported made-in-China goods across the globe; the supply chain infrastructure became a profit-generating industry in itself and now constitutes an increasingly significant sector of the Chinese economy.

This paper traces the origins of that transformation to Shenzhen, China's first Special Economic Zone, located just north of Hong Kong. It tells the story of how China International Marine Containers (CIMC)—which would become the world's largest container manufacturer—was established through a joint venture with Denmark; how Shenzhen's first container port emerged through the infusion of oil capital and managerial expertise from Singapore; and how Yantian Port—now the world's fourth-busiest port of call—was developed based on Japanese surveys and financed through low-interest loans from Japan. These transnational business networks were, in fact, repurposed from earlier intelligence networks dating back to World War II and the early Cold War. Key figures leveraged the social capital they had accumulated through clandestine operations in those earlier eras to attract investment and expertise during China's reform period.

Keywords: shipping, market reform in contemporary China, logistics, China Merchants Group

Taomo Zhou is Associate Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies and Dean's Chair in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore. Her first book, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia and the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2019) was named by Foreign Affairs as one of the “Best Books of 2020” and received Honourable Mention for the 2021 Harry J Benda Prize awarded by the Association for Asian Studies. She is currently working on her second book, *Made in Shenzhen: A Global History of China's First Special Economic Zone*, which is under advance contract with Stanford University Press. She is also doing research on motherhood during the Cold War.

Listening to the Ocean Speak: Traces of Women in the Archives of the Malay World

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This paper explores the underexamined role of Jawi script as a vessel of gendered memory and vernacular Islamic transmission across the Indian Ocean's Islamic ecumene. Drawing inspiration from the *Oceans That Speak* exhibition held in 2024-2025 at the Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia and grounded in materials from Aceh, Sumatra, and comparative maritime sites, the paper rethinks what constitutes an archive in the Malay world by analyzing two everyday objects: a brass grain measure (*Gantang*) used in domestic Islamic rituals and a nineteenth-century Jawi letter sent from Mecca by a Kelantanese scholar to the Sultan of Pontianak. While Jawi is often approached as a linguistic or calligraphic system, this paper reframes it as an affective and archival technology shaped by affect, ritual, and transregional transmission. It highlights how women's presences surface in marginalia, dedications, and embodied acts of care that remain materially central yet marginal in terms of narrative. In doing so, this paper responds to the call to map transregional interconnectedness by proposing a framework of vernacular archiving that listens for memory where it hides. Rather than treating interconnectedness as movement alone, it explores how memory, gender, and writing sediment along the maritime peripheries of the Malay world. The paper proposes a method of reading with and through silence to access alternative imaginaries of belonging, authorship, and cultural continuity across the Arabia-Asia-Africa axis.

Keywords: Jawi, gendered memory, manuscript culture, Indian Ocean, vernacular archives

Myra Mentari Abubakar is Academic Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Her research bridges gender, cultural memory, and postcolonial historiography in Southeast Asia, with a focus on commemorative politics, Islamic manuscripts, and visual/material culture. She received her PhD in Gender, Media and Cultural Studies from the Australian National University, where she examined the memorialisation of female heroes in Indonesia. Her current work expands into transregional approaches to memory, religion, and representation across the Indian Ocean world. She has held fellowships at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the University of Cambridge, and the Leibniz Institute.

Arabia-Asia Connections from the Perspective of Its Literatures

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This paper explores Arabia-Asia interconnectedness through the lens of literature. Contemporary literary studies has witnessed the emerging popularity of world literature as a theoretical concern, with its focus on mapping literary movements across larger scale intellectual and geopolitical currents in which they can be better understood. I explore this mode of thinking in relation to the literatures of the Arab world and maritime Southeast Asia.

In doing so, I draw inspiration from literary comparativists, who have formulated modes of understanding literary and cultural connection across the regions in question, whether in Ronit Ricci's idea of the Arabic cosmopolis, or more recently, in Annette Lienau's notion of the Arabophone. I want to take these terms onboard to consider literary and cultural connections across newly independent postcolonial nations across the Arabia-Asia region. I ask: how does a shared cultural terrain—shaped by the predominance of Islam—interact with the experience of postcolonialism? How can we be attentive to the influence of this shared cultural terrain on the way we read literary texts from across these regions?

This paper pairs two texts of the Arabia-Asia axis to speculate on their shared political and cultural world: *Beauty is a Wound* by the Indonesian author Eka Kurniawan and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by the Iraqi author Ahmad Sa'adawi. As texts attempting to represent the political traumas of the late twentieth century through corporeal ghosts, these texts offer one mode of theorising Arabia-Asia connections.

Keywords: Arabophone, Arabic, postcolonial comparison, ghostliness

Khairillah Irwan (he/him) is a literary scholar interested in comparative paradigms that bring together the Malay-Indonesian and Arab worlds. His work is guided by an attentiveness to the lively traffic between literary and cultural production and contemporary politico-intellectual currents. His master's thesis at the National University of Singapore brings together contemporary Indonesian and Iraqi literature through the figure of the corporeal ghost. He is an incoming PhD student in New York University's Comparative Literature program.

The Fruit and the Wine: Cashew, Colonialism, and the Circulation of Knowledge across Early Modern Oceans

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Plants tell their own stories. The movement of plants across early modern oceanic spaces reveals knowledge systems that transcend boundaries and challenge linear narratives of exchange. While Atlantic plant trajectories have received significant scholarly attention, Pacific and Indian Ocean circuits remain underexplored, despite their crucial role in reshaping global botanical knowledge. This paper argues that tracing plant mobilities across multiple oceanic spaces—movements that were multi-directional, non-linear, and often unpredictable—fundamentally disrupts conventional area studies frameworks and nation-state boundaries by revealing the complex webs of human-plant relationships that connected distant worlds.

Through the case study of the cashew tree (*Anacardium occidentale*), this paper demonstrates how botanical knowledge was produced, transformed, and circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beginning with the Tupi peoples of tropical America, who cultivated cashews and fermented their fruit into spiritually and socially significant wine, the paper traces the plant's journey through the Pacific and Indian Ocean Worlds. It examines how cashew production and processing techniques evolved as the plant moved from the Malabar coast to the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos, revealing the diverse contributions of Indigenous cultivators, lower-class soldiers and sailors, and Christian missionaries to botanical knowledge production. By analysing the transformation of cashew from Tupi ceremonial wine to Indian Ocean distilled beverages called *femi*, this study illuminates how plants became vehicles for cultural exchange, technological innovation, and the creation of new knowledge that connected the Americas, Indian Ocean, and maritime Southeast Asia. This trans-oceanic perspective reveals early modern botanical networks as sites of creative adaptation rather than simple transplantation, offering new insights into how global knowledge emerged through the intersection of human mobility and plant agency.

Keywords: plants, Indigenous, knowledge, subaltern, food

Kathleen Burke is a historian of food, gender, and maritime empires in the Indian Ocean World. Her first book project, "Hearth of Empire: A History of Indian Ocean Cuisine", shows how colonial kitchens were important, but overlooked, spaces of power, knowledge production, and cultural exchange in the Dutch East India Company's empire in the Indian Ocean. Her current project, "Cultivating Connections" focuses on how Indigenous growers in the Indian Ocean were adapters and transformers of knowledge about American plants. Her latest publication, "Recultivating Connections in the Indian Ocean", came out in late 2024 in *Slavery and Abolition*.

Where is the Future? An Anthropology of Astrology

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Across the world, there has been a rise in the popularity of astrology, especially over the last decade. At the same time, there has also been a rise in the popularity of ‘alternative sciences’ and the sources that people seek for information and meaning about global and intimate events. The use of astrology across societies in Asia is both traditional and every day, and finds diverse ways and means. Situated in a broad understanding of knowledge infrastructures, my new project, “Where is the Future: An Anthropology of Astrology” will examine the circulation of astrology practices in Southeast and South Asia. Given the increasing and ever-present popularity of astrological knowledge through a wide range of practices and applications across Southeast and South Asia, I propose to study its circulation as a cosmopolitan practice of the future in the urban centres of Delhi, Colombo, Jakarta and Singapore. The domain and practice of astrology today present a confluence of interests and a broader cultural assertion of astrology as a ‘science for its time’, which is not merely driven by faith but by an interest in the questions of secular life at large. The postmodern-postcolonial impetus to alternative sciences as a path to decolonization has also provided an impetus to astrology. This is equally an impetus for the welding of Western science within scriptural scientific knowledge as a sign of religious nationalist pride around the world. Situated in the context of the widespread emergence and popularity of ‘alternative science’, and religious nationalism, the proposed project seeks to understand what makes such knowledge desirable.

Keywords: astrology, future, South Asia, Southeast Asia, science

Bhoomika Joshi is Assistant Professor of Contemporary South Asia at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She is currently working on her book manuscript, *Attachments to Hurt*, which examines the claims to ‘hurt’ and its social, economic, political, and cultural life in India. It analyses the cultural production of majoritarian solidarity through a politics of grievance enrolled in the service of a new economic activity and transformation. She has published her work in the *American Anthropologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* among others. Her debut novella is *Lachchi: The Newness of Nostalgia*, published by Vani Prakashan in 2020.

Connecting Geocultural Imaginaries of the Past in our Geopolitical Present

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East and West pivot on odd and politically consequential imaginaries of connected pasts. America is not in the Bible. Confucius was born just 35 years after the destruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE.

And yet in the past 150 years or so we have seen the West, not the East, emerge as an idea that increasingly relies on a connecting imaginary of history that links the Middle East to geopolitical affairs, and ideas of US exceptionalism. Trump 2.0 significantly amplifies this, shifting ideas about the West away from a Greco-Roman heritage in favour of an eschatological commitment towards a Holy Land that binds Judaism to Zionism and Christian Nationalism. This geocultural, geopolitical fix that constitutes 'the West' has no equivalence in 'the East'.

As we know, ideas about the West and Western civilisation have undergirded the projects of imperialism and liberalism, which together ordered international and world affairs in the modern era. Geopolitical power has come from geocultural power. By implication, the rest are invariably defined in relational terms, and in the absence of any simple notion of an East, the struggle for identification, value sharing and geopolitical alignment goes on.

Today we see this in China's Belt and Road Initiative and its co-opting of the Silk Road as an imaginary of a connected Eurasian landmass and oceanic pre-modern world, and in the BRICS' Dialogue of Civilisations.

In considering such themes, my concern here then is how imaginaries of connection in the past become the connecting imaginaries of the present for those with world ordering ambitions.

Keywords: civilisation, geocultural power, China, East-West

Tim Winter is Research Leader of the Inter-Asia Engagements Research Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is the Lead Investigator of the project "Heritage Diplomacy: Connecting Histories and Futures, (2026-2030)". Tim has led the development of heritage diplomacy as a cross-disciplinary concept and introduced geocultural power to the analysis of international affairs. Recent articles on these topics appear in *Geopolitics*, *International Affairs*, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, and *Environment and Planning D*. His most recent books are *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty First Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2019) and *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories and Futures* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Bumantara:
The Emergence of Multiple Geological Bodies in Decolonizing Southeast Asia

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This paper explores the disassemblage process, which entails dismantling the components of previous socio-ecological arrangements, including knowledge, in the formation of Southeast Asia as a regional entity. It highlights the role of geological materials and geological knowledge in the American empire's construction of the regional category of "Southeast Asia" (Karib and Listiana, forthcoming). The paper poses the question: How do we decolonise the post-1945 naturalised regional category of "Southeast Asia"? It examines two concepts from Southeast Asian thinkers: Thongchai Winichakul's "geo-body" and Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's concept of *Bumantara*. *Firstly*, the aim is to revisit Winichakul's concept of a geo-body, which refers to the Thai nation, by transforming a geographical understanding to a geological one. Furthermore, the geological body is not limited to a single nation-state but encompasses a broader scope than the Southeast Asian regional geological body. *Secondly*, as we start to acknowledge Southeast Asia as a geological entity, we adopt Alisjahbana's idea of *Bumantara* as an alternative regional concept. The term *Bumantara* comes from the words *Bumi* (earth) and *Antara* (in between) and signifies the area between two oceans and continents. In this context, our decolonial strategy further evolves so that *Bumi* can be interpreted similarly to "geo" both representing the "earth." Consequently, *Bumantara* emerged as the new geological identity of Southeast Asia, decolonizing our understanding from the dominant narrative of the American Empire's colonial image of the region.

Keywords: geological assemblage, geo-body, geological body, Bumantara, American empire, decolonial Southeast Asia

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Familiar Strangers: Imagining Nepal in China

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This working paper seeks to reconsider Nepal–China interconnectedness by interrogating the varied and fluid imaginaries of Nepal within Chinese historical and contemporary contexts. Through the notion of familiar strangers, the paper foregrounds both the intimacy and estrangement that characterise Nepal–China relations—marked by mobility and connection, but also by ambiguity, rupture, and obstruction.

Conceptualising the trans-Himalayan dynamics as familiar strangers enables an alternative historiographical configuration that allows for histories of Nepal and China to be told in relation to each other and goes beyond Eurocentric paradigms. At the same time, it cautions against overly romanticised notions of inter-Asian connectedness by foregrounding the multiplicity of actors, worldviews, and agencies, as well as the uneven effects of colonial, national, and global forces that have selectively enabled or disrupted certain connections.

Rather than taking the modern nation-state as a privileged analytical unit, the paper proposes three clusters of trajectories in Chinese imaginations of Nepal: (1) premodern imaginaries shaped by monks, military encounters, and worldviews such as Buddhism and the Sinocentric *tianxia* (all-under-the-heaven); (2) modern narratives intertwined with Pan-Asianism and nation-building; and (3) contemporary perceptions shaped by capitalism, globalisation, and internal orientalism. Arguing that China–Nepal connectedness can serve as a critical lens for unsettling disciplinary assumptions, the paper aims to initiate broader reflections on the creativity, limits, and complexities of inter-Asian engagements.

Keywords: Inter-Asia referencing, trans-Himalayan history, Nepal-China relations, knowledge production

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An Exploration of “Foreignness” and “Nativeness” among Minority Communities in Post-Colonial South Bombay During and After the Formation of the Indian State

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South Bombay, a region in Mumbai, is exceptionally diverse: its population comprises Muslims and Christians, as well as Jews and Parsis. This paper uses two devices to explore how these minority Indian communities straddle “foreignness” and “nativeness” in Hindu-majority India. The first device is a walkabout through South Bombay (by the author in 2013). The second device is an analysis of minority Indian literature set/ written in South Bombay, through various time periods during and after the formation of the Indian state. The paper uses these two devices to paint a complex picture of attempts by these minority communities—often portrayed as not fully Indian by Hindutva ideologues—to constantly emphasise their “nativeness”, while also preserving elements of “foreignness” in their identities. By doing so, the paper argues that these communities constantly redefine the contours of Indianness.

Keywords: India, South Bombay, minority communities, foreignness, nativeness, Indianness

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Telling the Stories of Chinese Muslims through the Eyes of Overseas Hui Muslim Influencers

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In this paper, I approach interconnectedness by focusing on marginalised groups and their roles in forging transnational connections between nation-states. I analyze Etai (@eatai_halalfoodie), a Malaysia-based Chinese Hui influencer, and his content on Instagram as examples of overseas Hui Muslim influencers' practices and narratives of telling stories of Chinese Muslims on social media. In doing so, I intend to understand geographies of interconnectedness through storytelling. Particularly, how are stories of Chinese Muslims in vlogs by Etai told and performed at the intersections of religion, gender, class, and geopolitical imaginations? In Etai's account, his most popular vlogs feature banquets with mouthwatering local delicacies in spacious mansions owned by elite middle- and upper-class Muslims. Followers of his account tend to comment on the delicious food and the devotion of Chinese Muslims and families featured in these videos. While Etai's social media content emphasises the shared Islamic faith between Chinese Muslims and the global Muslim community, incidentally, his focus on the peaceful lives of Muslims in China aligns well with the Chinese state's diplomacy towards Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This overlap tends to focus less on domestic issues such as the Chinese state's surveillance of Muslim minorities. In this light, overseas Hui Muslim vloggers like Etai connect with the global Muslim community over social media by presenting particular versions of China that are seen as more appealing to their audience.

Keywords: social media, Hui Muslims, China, storytelling

Yang Yang is a lecturer in the Department of Chinese Studies 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 networks based on Islam and Muslim communities between China and Southeast Asia, feminist geopolitics, heritage diplomacy, and urban studies. Her research also looks into the gendered geographies of Muslim identities in northwestern China, especially the expression of Muslim womanhood through fashion in the Hui community.

**Between Tides:
Labour Migration and Political Currents across Maritime Asia, c. 1920s–1940s**

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This paper maps interconnectedness through conflictual disruption rather than cosmopolitan flows, examining how Tamil and Chinese migrant workers in colonial Malaya became racialised figures of global economic disruption while simultaneously forging transnational political imaginaries that challenged both colonial governance and emergent nationalism. Occupying an indeterminate structural position—neither settler nor native—these workers experienced interconnectedness precisely through contention: labour strikes, racial violence, economic crisis, and political repression that paradoxically generated new solidarities across ethnic boundaries.

The paper traces two interconnected cases: Tamil workers' vernacular poetry and underground publications circulating between South and Southeast Asia, and Chinese engagements with Indian political thought across British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. These ideas traveled not through elite networks but through circuits of labour migration, colonial surveillance, and underground organizing. This vernacular intellectual history reveals how difference and contention were not obstacles to interconnectedness but its very foundation: market-mediated social relations in plural colonial societies generated both fractures and solidarities, as workers developed what I term "improvised internationalism"—political solidarities forged through shared experiences of racialised targeting and economic dispossession rather than abstract cosmopolitan ideals.

Building on inter-Asian methods and scalar approaches to transregional studies, this research demonstrates how migrant workers became active theorists of global capitalism precisely through experiences of disruption and displacement. Following Anna Tsing's concept of "friction," I show how global connections worked through rather than despite difference, while oceanic thinking reveals the Indian Ocean as both material infrastructure and political imaginary. Their vernacular archives reveal interconnectedness as a contentious, uneven process where solidarity emerged through rather than despite difference, offering frameworks for understanding social interdependence that foreground conflict, crisis, and improvisation over smooth flows and cosmopolitan mobility.

Keywords: labour migration, vernacular intellectual history, inter-Asian methods, colonial capitalism

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**Contesting Agreements:
Unequal Development, Labour Migration, and
Transregional Publics across Arabia-Asia-Africa**

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How is global interconnectedness being imagined and enacted at the current historical juncture through transnational labour migration across Arabia-Asia-Africa? We examine this question by taking labour migration and its governance as a key site for recognizing and contesting transregional dynamics of unequal development. Our starting point is the growing prominence of Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLA) and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between countries sending temporary labour migrants and countries receiving them. Over the past two decades, such agreements have become a central pillar of migration governance across Arabia-Asia-Africa. By design, they reflect and reproduce deepening inequalities within this transregional space, as migrant workers from some countries become crucial to others' efforts to ascend global value chains. We treat such agreements as transnational assemblages: ongoing processes that bring together a broad range of actors, publics, contestations, and debates. Our analytical wager is that labour agreements offer a powerful lens onto understanding how inequalities across Arabia-Asia-Africa are being recognised, contested, and legitimised: implicating ethics, rights, histories, and new categories of citizenship and cooperation. They are transregional in scope yet simultaneously nested in global and regional hierarchies and postcolonial legacies. By examining these fraught and contested transregional interdependencies we aim to contribute to more grounded yet expansive planetary imaginaries of solidarity and care.

Keywords: labour migration, regional inequalities, uneven development, transnational publics

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Jacob Rinck is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is a sociocultural anthropologist focusing on international migration, agrarian change and developmental visions in Nepal. The broader questions he thereby examines are how racialised global inequality is experienced, contested, and legitimised. His new research, developed together with Sahana Ghosh, examines bilateral labour agreements in Asia.

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