



CONFERENCE

INFRASTRUCTURES, IN COMPARISON

Thinking across Cases and Contexts

30 September – 2 October 2026

National University of Singapore

Seminar Room AS8-04-04, Block AS8, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260

For more information, please visit: <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/infrastructures-in-comparison/>

This conference is jointly organized by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle, University of Heidelberg, and National University of Singapore. This event is funded by the German Research Council (DFG) through the Shaping Asia Initiative.

Asia is seeing the implementation of infrastructural forms that appear strikingly similar across sites, from roads over seawalls or plantations to digital surveillance technology. As dis/similar forms, these and other infrastructures not only appear to shape local or national politics, they also play a critical role in scaffolding contemporary Asia as a whole, likely shaping its emergent futures. Against this background, this conference explores the use of comparison for grappling with infrastructures. Based on ethnographic research on infrastructures spread across Asia, we aim at exploring the use of comparison for analyzing *actual making of infrastructures*, for theorizing the *development of infrastructural forms* and for *rethinking Asia*.

1. This conference aims at shedding new light on the *actual making of infrastructures* by discussing how specific infrastructures fare in different contexts. What kinds of negotiations or improvisations do we see across localized efforts of implementing, say, border infrastructures? To what degree is the way infrastructures work in given localities shaped by national or supranational 'sociotechnological imaginaries' (Jasanoff and Kim 2013)? How does the implementation of complex and porous infrastructures impact what Asia is becoming as differently situated actors navigate economic restructuring and ecological crises?
2. Zooming in on how infrastructures fare as they hit the ground also allows vistas into the ongoing *development of new infrastructural forms*. What do we learn about the creation of newness as we think across sites of implementation of dis/similar infrastructures? What does ethnographic attention to the ways by which concrete infrastructures spread across sites, regions or nations allow us to say about visions of incremental improvement and ruination, about leapfrogging and recursive experiences of failing and learning?
3. Exploring infrastructures spread across Asia allows unique vantage points for *rethinking Asia*. What kind of visions of Asia do particular infrastructures entail? How do infrastructural interventions contribute to experiences that might or might not count as Asian? To what extent do infrastructures scaffold Asia's futures, and refract it differently in scattered locations and contexts?

For more information on the Shaping Asia Initiative, please visit <http://shapingasia.net/>.

CONFERENCE CONVENORS

Prof Ursula Rao | Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle

Dr Arne Harms | Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle

Prof Anja Senz | University of Heidelberg

Assoc Prof Jiat-Hwee Chang | National University of Singapore

PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

CONFERENCE

30 SEPTEMBER - 2 OCTOBER 2026 | NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

DATE	TIME	PANEL SESSION
30 SEP 2026 (Wed)	12:30 – 13:15	WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS (AS8-04-04)
	13:15 – 15:30	PANEL 1 – URBANISM (AS8-04-04)
	16:00 – 17:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS 1 (AS8-04-04)
Seminar Room AS8-04-04 AS8, Level 4	18:15 – 20:00	CONFERENCE DINNER (For speakers and chairpersons only)
1 OCT 2026 (Thu)	09:30 – 10:30	PANEL 2A TRANSNATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS (SDE3-LT427)
		PANEL 3A EMBODIMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURES (SDE4-Forum-05-07)
	10:45 – 12:15	PANEL 2B TRANSNATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS (SDE3-LT427)
		PANEL 3B EMBODIMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURES (SDE4-Forum-05-07)
	13:15 – 15:45	PANEL 4 – SURVEILLANCE AND THE LIFE OF THE DIGITAL (SDE3-LT427)
SDE3 - Lecture Theatre 427 SDE3, Level 4	16:30 – 18:00	FIELD TRIP ACTIVITY – MARINA BARRAGE
2 OCT 2026 (Fri)	09:00 – 10:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS 2 (AS8-04-04)
	11:00 – 13:15	PANEL 5 – FINANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE (AS8-04-04)
	14:15 – 16:30	PANEL 6 – ECOLOGIES (AS8-04-04)
	16:30 – 16:45	CLOSING REMARKS (AS8-04-04)
Seminar Room AS8-04-04 AS8, Level 4		

CLOSED DOOR WORKSHOP

3 OCTOBER 2026 | VILLAGE HOTEL ALBERT COURT

DATE	TIME	PANEL SESSION
3 OCT 2026 (Sat)	09:30 – 10:30	PANEL 1
	10:30 – 11:30	PANEL 2
	12:00 – 13:00	PANEL 3
	14:00 – 15:00	PANEL 4
	15:15 – 16:45	PANEL 5

CONFERENCE VENUES

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

Seminar Room AS8-04-04

AS8, Level 4, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, 119260

SDE3 - Lecture Theatre 42

SDE3, Level 4, 4 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117566

SDE4 - Forum (05-07)

SDE4, Level 5, 8 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117356

[Campus Map](#) (Link to [PDF](#) – full version)



30 SEPTEMBER 2026 • WEDNESDAY

Venue: Asia Research Institute

11:15	BUS TRANSFER Hotel – NUS
12:00 – 12:30	REGISTRATION
12:30 – 13:15	WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS (AS8-04-04) VINEETA SINHA National University of Singapore JIAT-HWEE CHANG National University of Singapore URSULA RAO Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle ARNE HARMS Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle ANJA SENZ University of Heidelberg
13:15 – 15:30	PANEL 1 – URBANISM (AS8-04-04) Chairperson: TANIA LI University of Toronto
13:15	Predominantly Grey? Exploring the Durability of Impermeable Infrastructures NIKHIL ANAND University of Pennsylvania
13:45	Infrastructural Genealogies: Thai Concrete’s Forms of Relatedness ELI ELINOFF Te Herenga Waka–Victoria University of Wellington
14:15 – 14:30	TEA BREAK
14:30	Trajectories of Speculative Urbanism: Artificial Islands and New Infrastructural Forms in Pacific Asia CREIGHTON PAUL CONOLLY/MEHER BHAGIA University of Hong Kong
15:00	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
15:30 – 16:00	TEA BREAK
16:00 – 17:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS 1 (AS8-04-04) Chairperson: ARNE HARMS Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle
16:00	Globalizing China through Comparative Ethnography MIKKEL BUNKENBORG University of Copenhagen Commentator VINEETA SINHA National University of Singapore
17:00	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
17:30	END OF DAY 1
17:45	BUS TRANSFER NUS - Dinner
18:15 – 20:00	CONFERENCE DINNER (For speakers and chairpersons only) Permata Restaurant – 3 Sultan Gate, Singapore 198497
20:00	BUS TRANSFER Dinner – Hotel

1 OCTOBER 2026 • THURSDAY

Venue: Department of Architecture

08:45	BUS TRANSFER Hotel – NUS
09:30 – 12:15	PANEL 2 – TRANSNATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS (SDE3-LT427)
	Chairperson: MIKKEL BUNKENBORG University of Copenhagen
9:30	Assembling Connectivity: Asian Media Infrastructures and the Materiality of China-Africa Cross-Cultural Mediation FANG WAN Yanshan University
10:00	Urban Life Quality amid Transnational Infrastructural Configurations: Emerging Points of Comparison across Asia REBEKAH PLUECKHAHN The University of Melbourne
10:30 – 10:45	TEA BREAK
10:45	Urban Space in Singapore and Tokyo Postimperial Pipes: Japanese Clean Water Infrastructure across Southeast Asia TSUGUTA YAMASHITA University of Tokyo
11:15	Overpromising Social Welfare? Electoral Competition and Welfare Politics in Taiwan and South Korea JAEMIN SHIM Heidelberg University
11:45	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
9:30 – 12:15	PANEL 3 – EMBODIMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE (SDE4-Forum-05-07)
	Chairperson: CANAY OZDEN-SCHILLING National University of Singapore
09:30	Caring Infrastructures and the (Re)Making of Ageing-in-Place in Singapore LUCAS PUAH JIA RONG National University of Singapore
10:00	Parents as Infrastructure: Making “Deafnesses” Across Jordan and Singapore TIMOTHY LOH Princeton University
10:30 – 10:45	TEA BREAK
10:45	On Air Networks: The Sensory Life of Wires in an Indian Urban Slum Settlement KHADEEJA AMENDA National University of Singapore
11:15	Automation, Aging, and Inequality Anxiety in South Korea and Japan JAO K KWON Heidelberg University
11:45	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

12:15 – 13:15	LUNCH BREAK
13:15 – 15:30	PANEL 4 – SURVEILLANCE AND THE LIFE OF THE DIGITAL (SDE3-LT427)
	<i>Chairperson: SANDRA BÄRNREUTHER University of Lucerne</i>
13:15	Infrastructuring Vitality: Digital Agriculture and the Selective Governance of Life in Contemporary China JIAYANG CHEN Nankai University
13:45	Repaired Legibility: Digital Farmland Planning and the Infrastructure of Statecraft in China ZHIYU WANG Zhejiang University
14:15 – 14:30	TEA BREAK
14:30	Digital Logistics and the Reconfiguration of Urban Space in Singapore and Tokyo NAOMI HANAKATA National University of Singapore
15:00	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
15:45	BUS TRANSFER NUS – MARINA BARRAGE
16:30 – 18:00	FIELD TRIP ACTIVITY – MARINA BARRAGE
	The Marina Barrage is a multifunctional facility that provides three key benefits: a source of water supply, flood control, and a venue for recreational and lifestyle activities. Officially opened in 2008, it is Singapore's 15th freshwater reservoir and features a gallery with interactive exhibits focused on sustainability.
18:00	END OF DAY 2

2 OCTOBER 2026 • FRIDAY

Venue: Asia Research Institute

08:15	BUS TRANSFER Hotel – NUS
09:00 – 10:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS 2 (AS8-04-04)
	Chairperson: URSULA RAO Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle
09:00	Phenomenological Comparison MICHEAL SCHNEGG University of Hamburg
09:45	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
10:30 – 11:00	TEA BREAK
11:00 – 13:15	PANEL 5 – FINANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE (AS8-04-04)
	Chairperson: URSULA RAO Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
11:00	The Cash of Civilizations: Digital Payment Infrastructures in Singapore and India JAMES ROSENBERG University of Wisconsin-Madison/WZB Berlin Social Science Center
11:30	The Motley Infrastructure of Financial Hubs in an Age of Blockchain Technologies: A Comparative Case Study of Singapore and the U.S. EMILY CHUA National University of Singapore
12:00 – 12:15	TEA BREAK
12:15	State Power, Homegrown Tech Giants, and Inequality in China's Digital Infrastructure ZHU YI Heidelberg University
12:45	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
13:15 – 14:15	LUNCH BREAK
14:15 – 16:30	PANEL 6 – ECOLOGIES (AS8-04-04)
	Chairperson: ARNE HARMS Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology
14:15	From Kashima to Thailand's Eastern Seaboard: Comparing Coastal Mega Infrastructure, Expertise, and Environmental Consequences in Asia TAKUYA MAEDA University of Tokyo
14:45	Sylvan Infrastructures, in Comparison: Four Modalities of the Forest-to-Come in South Korea SUMIN MYUNG Te Herenga Waka–Victoria University of Wellington
15:15 – 15:30	TEA BREAK

15:30	Metabolic Commoning: Comparing Waste Composting as Infrastructural Activism in China and India YIMENG YANG <i>Northeastern University</i>
16:00	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
16:30 – 16:45	CLOSING REMARKS (AS8-04-04) JIAT-HWEE CHANG <i>National University of Singapore</i> URSULA RAO <i>Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle</i> ARNE HARMS <i>Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle</i> ANJA SENZ <i>University of Heidelberg</i>
16:45	END OF DAY 3
17:00	BUS TRANSFER NUS – Hotel

CLOSED-DOOR WORKSHOP

3 OCTOBER 2026 • SATURDAY

Venue: Village Hotel Albert Court – Meeting Room 1

09:30 – 10:30	PANEL 1
	NOAH THERIAULT <i>Carnegie Mellon University</i> ALYSSA PAREDES <i>University of Michigan</i>
10:30 – 11:30	PANEL 2
	URSULA RAO <i>Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle</i> SANDRA BÄRNREUTHER <i>University of Lucerne</i>
11:30 – 12:00	MORNING TEA BREAK
12:00 – 13:00	PANEL 3
	TANYA JAKIMOW <i>Australian National University</i>
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH BREAK
14:00 – 15:00	PANEL 4
	ARNE HARMS <i>Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle</i> MATT BARLOW <i>Technical University of Munich</i>
15:00 – 15:15	AFTERNOON TEA BREAK
15:15 – 16:15	PANEL 5
	LALITHA KAMATH <i>Tata Institute of Social Sciences</i> LUKAS LEY <i>Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology – Halle</i>
16:45	END OF WORKSHOP

KEYNOTE ADDRESS 1

Globalizing China through Comparative Ethnography

MIKKEL BUNKENBORG

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China's ascendancy on the world stage has excited a great deal of political commentary in recent decades, but how does Chinese globalization actually work on the ground? Drawing on comparative and collaborative fieldwork in Mongolia and Mozambique, this talk relates the nitty-gritty details of globalizing China as it was experienced by Chinese miners posted to compounds in the Gobi desert, by Mongolian herders with an oil company next door, by Mozambican workers constructing a road, and by three Danish ethnographers trying to make sense of it all. Infrastructure would seem to lend coherence to Chinese globalization, but the roads and walls integral to Chinese operations in Mongolia and Mozambique do not connect and divide Chinese and locals in straightforward ways. Selectively cutting and connecting, these emerging infrastructures go hand in hand with social relations characterized by new combinations of intimacy and distance, friendship and mutual incomprehension. The fraught relations between Chinese and locals eventually came to be mirrored in the collaboration between the three ethnographers whose plans for controlled comparison and common understanding unraveled as they became part of the "collaborative damage" of globalizing China. Stitching together disagreements and incommensurabilities, the talk shows that comparative ethnography may well be impossible, but also that it is a method uniquely suited to studying phenomena as large and complex as Chinese globalization.

Mikkel Bunkenborg is Associate Professor in China Studies at the University of Copenhagen. From a background in Chinese studies and anthropology, his research revolves around contemporary Chinese society and the anthropology of the sinophone world with a focus on bodies and medicine, on popular religion and politics in rural China, on Chinese globalization as it unfolds in Africa and Central Asia, and on food and morality in China. He is co-author of *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization* (Cornell 2022).

KEYNOTE ADDRESS 2

Phenomenological Comparison

MICHAEL SCHNEGG

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This talk proposes *phenomenological comparison* as a method for the comparative study of affective life. Moving beyond third-person approaches that have often informed comparative studies, the talk inquires how social phenomena are affectively experienced. Phenomenological comparison unfolds in four steps: describing affective variation; clarifying whether seemingly similar affective responses are in fact instances of the same experience and developing a theoretical account of that experience; identifying the configurations under which such responses emerge; and finally tracing their effects. To illustrate this approach, I draw on our comparative research into climate emotions in Namibia, Kenya, and Germany. I demonstrate how climate hope emerges in specific contexts, resulting from social embeddedness and an enacted relationship with the environment. The comparative perspective also reveals how hope can transform situations, selves and atmospheres, and the conditions under which this occurs. In doing so, I show how phenomenological comparison offers a novel framework for linking lived experience, concept formation, causal explanation, and comparative analysis.

Michael Schnegg is Professor of anthropology at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg, where he conducts research at the CLICCS (Climate, Climatic Change and Society) Cluster of Excellence. He specialises in the social and emotional dimensions of climate change, phenomenological anthropology, and environmental relations in Namibia, where he has conducted ethnographic fieldwork for many years. He is co-editor of the volume *Comparing Cultures: Innovations in Comparative Ethnography* (Cambridge University Press), and has published numerous articles in leading international anthropological journals.

**Trajectories of Speculative Urbanism:
Artificial Islands and New Infrastructural Forms in Pacific Asia**

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Across Asia, artificial islands are proliferating in number and scale and increasingly positioned as exemplary models of sustainable urban development, combining low-carbon infrastructure, smart technologies, and climate-responsive design (Connolly, 2022; Shin and Gimm, 2025). Such new and extended infrastructural forms offer a useful empirical basis to engage with recent debates in urban political ecology, particularly those concerned with how urbanisation unfolds beyond the city and how urban infrastructures are developed to navigate economic restructuring and ecological crises. This paper examines how and why these projects are mapped onto sustainability frameworks and what is actually sustainable about them. It also considers the challenges involved in the realisation of such ambitious and speculative infrastructure projects and why are they pursued despite the substantial economic and environmental risks.

This study focuses on three prominent cases at different stages of development including Kau Yi Chau Artificial Islands in Hong Kong (proposed and contingent), Silicon Island in Malaysia (land reclamation underway), and Songdo International Business District in South Korea (nearly completed) to shed new light on the making of new urban infrastructures at different temporal stages. Using discursive analysis of a variety of documentary sources such as policy documents, planning reports, and newspaper databases, we analyse the three cases as distinct moments within an infrastructural life cycle: from planning and consultation to development, implementation and operation; allowing for analysis of how development objectives evolve from aspirational visions to material realities. This comparison enables the study to move beyond site-specific analysis and offer three unique vantage points for understanding and rethinking (contested) visions of Pacific Asia's urban futures across different contexts.

Creighton Connolly is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urban Planning and Design, University of Hong Kong. He has held faculty positions in the School of Graduate Studies at Lingnan University, Hong Kong and the University of Lincoln, UK. He also worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore and obtained his PhD in Human Geography from the University of Manchester. Trained as an urban political ecologist, his work examines processes of urban and environmental governance, planning and development, focusing on the Southeast Asian region. He is the author of *Political Ecologies of Landscape: Governing Urban Transformations in Penang* (Bristol University Press, 2022) and *Pandemic Urbanism: Infectious Diseases on a Planet of Cities* (Polity Press, 2022). Creighton also has a number of articles in journals such as *Environment and Planning A*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (IJURR)* and *Urban Studies*. His current research spans a range of topics, including political ecologies of land reclamation, large-scale infrastructure projects, participatory governance and planning, heritage management, and the relationships between urbanisation and infectious disease.

Meher Bhagia is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the University of Hong Kong, where she examines the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and the development of large-scale land reclamation projects in Asia-Pacific region. Her current research interests include urban political ecology, environmental governance, and landscape conservation. Prior to joining HKU, she served as an urban planning intern at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme in Nairobi, Kenya, where she contributed to normative and technical documents on urban regeneration, spatial inclusion, and nature-based solutions in cities.

**Infrastructural Genealogies:
Thai Concrete's Forms of Relatedness**

ELI ELINOFF

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Infrastructures are relational. They are composed of relations and produce them. What does a genealogical approach bring to our understanding of infrastructural relations? Taking the example of Thai concrete, I consider how contemporary theories of genealogy and relatedness might change our understanding of that material and its fate in a time of environmental crisis. In this brief paper I take genealogy in three directions: First, I take up Thai concrete's political histories, demonstrating how the relations undergirding the expansion of the industry reveals important contours central to Thailand's contemporary urban political ecologies. Second, I consider concrete's material genealogies, revealing how seemingly singular infrastructures produce dispersed ecological transformations. Finally, I consider how attention to concrete relatedness might enable us to ask different questions about the material's futures. I suggest that these approaches are useful for not only making sense of the structures of power animating the built environment and its ecologies, but also exposing hidden sites of resistance and transformation that occur far beyond the infrastructural interventions that tend to be focal points of ethnographic analysis. By exploring infrastructure's genealogies in these three senses, I speculate that we might not only better place them in their proper relation to their own histories but also transform our sense of future responsibility to these crucial systems.

Eli Elinoff is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. His research focuses on the intersection of political and environmental change in urbanizing Southeast Asia. He is the author of the book *Citizen Designs: City-Making and Democracy in Northeastern Thailand* (University of Hawaii Press, 2021), the co-editor (with Dr Tyson Vaughan) of *Disastrous Times: Beyond Environmental Crisis in Urbanizing Asia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), and, most recently (with Dr Kali Rubaii), *The Social Properties of Concrete* (punctum books, 2025). He has published work in a range of outlets including *American Ethnologist*, *the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Roadsides*, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *CITY*, and *The New Mandala*. His ongoing ethnographic project, "A Kingdom in Concrete: Urban Thailand in the Anthropocene", was awarded a Marsden Fast Start from the Royal Society of New Zealand in 2017.

Predominantly Grey?
Exploring the durability of impermeable infrastructures

NIKHIL ANAND

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In this paper I explore why engineers and urban administrators continue to insist on extending and expanding grey infrastructures (storm water drains, embankments etc), even as they acknowledge these are neither permanent nor are they effective at preventing flooding in urban areas. Why do they refuse to experiment with green or blue infrastructures in their efforts to address urban flooding? Dwelling in the work of Mumbai's urban experts, this paper argues that the lower costs of green infrastructure, the ways in which they resist calculability and also their flexible and situated designs render difficult their widespread adoption in Mumbai, and other Asian cities.

Nikhil Anand is the Silvers Family Presidential Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on cities, infrastructure, state power and climate change. He addresses these questions by studying the political ecology of cities, read through the different lives of water. His award-winning first book, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Politics in Mumbai* (Duke University Press 2017), examines the everyday ways in which cities and citizens are made through the everyday management of water infrastructure. Following his interest in infrastructure studies in political anthropology, geography, and science and technology studies, Anand co-edited (with Hannah Appel and Akhil Gupta) *The Promise of Infrastructure* (Duke University Press 2018). His new book project, *Amphibious City*, the book decenters the grounds of urban planning by drawing attention to the ways in which climate-changed seas are remaking coastal cities today.

**Assembling Connectivity:
Asian Media Infrastructures and the Materiality of
China-Africa Cross-Cultural Mediation**

FANG WAN

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In the contemporary era, the conceptual boundaries of “Asia” are increasingly shaped by its outward infrastructural expansion. This paper argues that cross-cultural communication in the Global South should be understood as an infrastructural process driven by Asian technological imaginaries, whose materialization is uneven, negotiated, and contingent.

Focusing on StarTimes, a Chinese digital television provider operating across sub-Saharan Africa, the study examines how Asian media infrastructures function as active mediators that reconfigure regional connectivity and refract Asian modernity through Global South encounters. Methodologically, it adopts an “Infrastructures in Comparison” approach to contrast the infrastructure-led model associated with Asian actors with the content-centric paradigm dominant in Euro-American-led global media systems, while attending to frictions and asymmetries across localized implementations.

The analysis unfolds in three dimensions. First, it demonstrates how the distribution of low-cost hardware enables what I term “visual justice,” grounded in a logic of affordability and digital parity tailored to resource-constrained environments, while also generating new forms of uneven access.

Second, it investigates the territorialization of rural African spaces through physical infrastructures such as satellite dishes, which function as material imprints of Asian presence but are also embedded in local negotiations and spatial reconfigurations. Third, it examines maintenance practices and shows how Asian-African human-technical assemblages sustain connectivity amid conditions of breakdown and partial failure. This process reflects a form of recursive learning that is central to infrastructure-making.

By thinking across these sites of implementation, the paper offers a new perspective on how Asia is constituted through its outward engagements. Rather than a unidirectional projection, these processes involve leapfrogging, asymmetrical interdependence, and recursive recalibration, through which Asian modernities are tested and sometimes destabilized in situated encounters. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarship on how infrastructures both enable and complicate Asia’s global influence, redefining its spatial and symbolic agency.

Fang Wan is an Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities and Law at Yanshan University, China. She received her PhD in Languages and Cultures from SOAS University of London in 2023. Her research focuses on cultural exchanges between China and sub-Saharan Africa since the mid-twentieth century, digital youth culture from a Global South perspective, and the intersections of digital technology, gender, and critical theory. Her work is grounded in long-term, multi-sited field research across sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Senegal. Through ethnographic engagement, she examines media infrastructures, community-based cultural networks, and the historical trajectories of Afro-Asian cultural exchanges since the mid-twentieth century. Her recent research explores Global South posthumanism, infrastructural media, and digital youth culture. She has published in journals including *SEXTANT* (Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles), *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, *World Literature Studies*, *ПРОБЛЕМЫ ЛИТЕРАТУР ДАЛЬНЕГО ВОСТОКА*, and *Contemporary Writers Review*. She has presented her research at international conferences hosted by institutions such as Harvard University, King’s College London, and the Africa-Asia ConFest in Dakar. Her current project investigates Asian media infrastructures in Africa and their implications for rethinking Global South connectivity and knowledge production.

Urban Life Quality Amid Transnational Infrastructural Configurations Emerging Points of Comparison across Asia

REBEKAH PLUECKHAHN

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This paper combines a consideration of layered infrastructural connections across Asia in the making of urban environments, alongside a cross-city comparison of the types of perspectives on life quality emerging as a result. Drawing from ethnography conducted in Ulaanbaatar Mongolia, across 2015-2017 and 2023-2024, this paper discusses how an increase in foreign direct investment in Ulaanbaatar, including investment from South Korea and China, saw a rise in urban construction. This growth in atomised apartment construction was also partly fuelled by a newly launched system of mortgage financialisation in 2013 that had been modelled off a similar system in Malaysia (Plueckhahn 2020). These cross-Asia flows of money and financial infrastructural models added to an existing palimpsest of infrastructural frictions (Tsing 2005), which included heating infrastructure that was installed in the 1950s with technical advice and design from the former USSR. However, the atomised construction of residential apartments that emerged in Ulaanbaatar in the mid-2010s gave rise to unevenly provided public infrastructures and unfinished environments. This included inadequate drainage and insufficient car or walking access. Emerging here have been resident-driven attempts to rebuild the surrounding environments into what they believe public spaces and infrastructures *should* be.

Residents in these areas draw from assessments of material and life quality (*chanar*) in incrementally building, adapting and reshaping public infrastructures in response to this transformed environment. This paper asks how this aesthetic detection of material quality (Simone and Nielsen 2020) compares with other reflections on ‘the good life’ in urban Asia (Zhang 2024). Drawing from recent co-authored work conducted by the author on comparative urbanism (Plueckhahn and Smith 2026), this paper will advocate for a ‘ground up’ comparison of similar social amalgamations emerging out of infrastructural configurations across Asia.

Rebekah Plueckhahn is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines the lived experiences of urban transformation and expansion. She has published on anthropologies of environmental stigma, capitalism and infrastructural inequalities, the politics of heat production, cynicism, urban relations of power and dynamic ownership within sites of urban transformation. Primarily drawing from ethnographic research conducted in Mongolia, this research examines the socialities, relationships, moralities and ethics that emerge through urban inhabitation. Rebekah has published in *Cultural Anthropology*, *Urban Studies*, and *Transactions*. Her first book *Shaping Urban Futures in Mongolia – Ulaanbaatar, Dynamic Ownership and Economic Flux* was published with UCL Press (2020).

**Postimperial Pipes:
Japanese Clean Water Infrastructure across Southeast Asia**

TSUGUTA YAMASHITA

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This paper traces the *actual making* of clean water infrastructure by the Japanese iron pipe industry and hydraulic engineers, moving from Dutch colonial Surabaya and Japanese colonial Dalian to postcolonial Vientiane, Phnom Penh, and Jakarta, to offer a connected comparison of Japan's expansionist aspirations. Japanese engineers framed clean water provision as the most direct contribution to improving people's everyday lives, but this rhetoric of welfare obscured ambitions for economic and technological expansion. As late-colonial regimes adopted ostensibly benevolent welfare reforms, Japanese pipes found markets across Asia. After World War II, engineers repatriated from "Manchukuo"—imperial Japan's industrial center—sought to secure markets in Southeast Asia by channeling Japan's postwar reparations funds.

I examine the *development of new infrastructural forms* by analyzing how the notion of newness and progress, embodied by modern waterworks, was bolstered by imperial logics of racial and civilizational difference. To justify these technological interventions, Japanese engineers cast Asian people's everyday practices as "obsolete" and "uncivilized." This rhetoric persisted after the demise of the Japanese empire, as imperial networks and expertise in hydraulic engineering were actively mobilized to secure overseas projects. In Laos and Cambodia, state leaders' visions of social stabilization through welfare improvement aligned with Japan's strategy of communist containment through infrastructure development, which materialized in waterworks projects. By contrast, Indonesia's President Sukarno argued that social stabilization should be achieved through monumental buildings to foster national pride, rather than through welfare improvements, and rejected Japan's proposal. This paper thus contributes to *rethinking Asia* by comparing how Japan's infrastructural vision resonated and dissonated across the region.

Tsuguta Yamashita is a scholar of East and Southeast Asia, working at the intersection of history, urbanism and architecture, diplomacy, and STS. He is a doctoral research fellow at the Institute of Industrial Science, University of Tokyo, and an incoming postdoctoral fellow in the Science, Technology and Society Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is now revising his dissertation, "Architecture of Reparations: Jakarta–Tokyo Interurban Relations, 1951–1974," submitted to Cornell University in 2026, into a book manuscript.

**Building and Maintaining Welfare:
Democratic Deepening and Electoral Competition in South Korea and Taiwan**

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This project examines welfare institutions as a form of governance infrastructure—arrangements through which states organize social protection, distribute resources, and structure citizens’ expectations. Focusing on East Asia’s two developed democracies, South Korea and Taiwan, it asks how electoral competition shapes the expansion and durability of welfare states. The comparison highlights a central tension: democratization and competitive elections can broaden welfare agendas by increasing politicians’ incentives to respond to neglected social demands and encouraging more inclusive provision. Yet, the same electoral pressures can generate short time horizons, symbolic commitments, and politically attractive promises that are difficult to enact, finance, or sustain. Drawing on a mixed-methods analysis of legislative, media, and elite interview data, the project traces how these competing incentives operate across the two democracies. Rather than treating welfare states as fixed institutional outcomes, it conceptualizes them as infrastructures that must be continually built, maintained, adapted, and politically reproduced. Ultimately, the project contributes to comparative research on Asia by showing how social welfare infrastructures are directly shaped by the electoral environments in which they are constructed and maintained.

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**Infrastructuring Vitality:
Caring Infrastructures and the (Re)Making of Ageing-in-Place in Singapore**

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Singapore's rapidly ageing society has prompted national mandates towards ageing-in-place – a policy oriented towards having older adults remain in their homes and communities, maintaining social ties and reducing dependence on long-term care facilities. Yet state-led approaches may overlook the relational dimensions of eldercare which are built and sustained by communities on the ground. We propose that this relational quality is sustained by caring infrastructures – assemblages of material, social, and affective conditions through which meaningful relationships between older adults and their communities are maintained and continuously renewed.

Using participatory community asset mapping across three sites in Singapore – a ground-up community group in Queenstown, a permaculture garden in Mountbatten, and the heritage district of Chinatown – and drawing on Duff's theory of enabling places, we examine how caring infrastructures (re)make ageing-in-place. We argue that these infrastructures sustain relationships that negotiate between what is being lost and what can still be kept, and this negotiation shapes the distinct ways each community empowers older adults to contribute and be valued.

Across all three sites, older adults navigate the erosion of place familiarity, financial security, third places for socialisation, and kampong-style reciprocity. These losses are compounded by state-led development priorities that are favoured over established anchors of senior wellbeing. It is within and against this context that caring infrastructures cultivate relationships with older adults, surfacing what has been lost and what remains to be valued. This informs how older adults are repositioned from care recipients to community contributors: Queenstown mobilises existing senior strengths of older adults, Mountbatten fosters reciprocity through shared gardening, and Chinatown activates cultural identity and heritage stewardship as a basis for elder contribution. This relational work – the ongoing negotiation between loss and preservation, enacted through caring relationships – makes caring infrastructures continuously in the process of being (re)made.

Lucas Puah Jia Rong is a PhD student at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, where his research explores how participatory approaches can inform programme design for ageing populations. As an anthropology graduate from Yale-NUS College, he brings a rich background spanning medical anthropology, and the intersections of gender, politics, and religion. Lucas is currently a researcher on the SAGE (Seniors Action for Greater Empowerment) project, a three-year participatory action research initiative examining ageing-in-place in Singapore. His methodological repertoire is strongly qualitative, encompassing established approaches such as photovoice and participatory learning and action (PLA), as well as novel methods developed in response to the needs of his research communities. Prior to his doctoral studies, Lucas worked in programme and policy evaluation across diverse public health domains, including antimicrobial resistance, intellectual disabilities, and health movements. This work sharpened his commitment to applied, community-centred research that bridges evidence and practice. At the heart of his work is a belief that meaningful research should be co-created with communities and those with lived experiences – particularly older adults navigating the challenges and opportunities of ageing in urban environments.

**Parents as Infrastructure:
Making “Deafnesses” across Jordan and Singapore**

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This paper examines the infrastructural politics of deafness across continental Asia writ large, drawing on ongoing ethnographic research in Jordan (e.g. Loh 2024) and Singapore (e.g. Loh 2025). Across the globe, the infrastructural factors that make up “deafnesses” (Mills 2015) include the availability of medical and rehabilitative technologies, the various educational philosophies and pathways for deaf people, the signed and spoken languages that constitute the language ecology of a site, and more. In my fieldsites, central to the enactment of these infrastructures was the often overlooked and hidden labour of parents to make these infrastructures work for their children; here, I build on Simone’s (2004) conceptualisation of “people as infrastructure” to theorise “parents as infrastructure,” drawing insight also from Elyachar’s (2010) “phatic labor” to call attention to this work. For instance, in Jordan’s cochlear implantation programme, while deaf children across the country are eligible for cochlear implantation, the medical services required to make them efficacious are concentrated in the urban center of Amman, and parents are the ones responsible for getting children to their appointments and keeping their devices in serviceable condition. In Singapore, the Enabling Masterplan 2030, a national roadmap guiding efforts to create a more inclusive society, is housed within the Ministry of Social and Family Development, with one of its core pillars being the development of a “person-and family-centered planning framework to support persons with disabilities and their caregivers.” Deaf Singaporeans’ relationships to their parents and siblings remain significant to how they situate themselves within the national imaginary. This paper puts people (and parents) at the forefront of how infrastructures are made, developed, and maintained, and argues for a more expansive vision of “Asia as method” (Chen 2010) by foregrounding the family as a shared infrastructure between (South)East Asia (Quah 2008) and Southwest Asia (Joseph 2018).

Timothy Y. Loh is a Singaporean anthropologist of science and technology, and a Cotsen Fellow in the Princeton Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts. At Princeton University, he is also a Lecturer in Anthropology and an Associate Research Scholar in the Council of the Humanities. Drawing upon science and technology studies, medical anthropology, and linguistic anthropology, his ethnographic research examines sociality, language, and religion in deaf and signing worlds spanning Jordan, Singapore, and the United States. He is working on his first book, provisionally entitled *Assistive Modernity: Deafness and Technology in Contemporary Jordan*, which explores how “assistive” technologies for deaf people in Jordan, like cochlear implants and sign language-centered mobile applications, have shaped and continue to shape disability’s contours and manifestations in the Arabic-speaking Middle East/Southwest Asia and North Africa. Recently, he has begun a new project on the disenfranchisement of sign language and deaf people in ostensibly multilingual and multicultural Singapore, supported by grants from the Social Science Research Council (Singapore). His scholarship has appeared in *American Anthropologist*, *Medical Anthropology*, the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, and SAPIENS – Anthropology Magazine, and has won awards from the American Anthropological Association and the Society for East Asian Anthropology, among others. <https://www.timothyloh.com>.

**On Air Networks:
The Sensory Life of Wires in An Indian Urban Slum Settlement**

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What does the visible presence of thick, black cables, carrying everything from electricity to internet connectivity, reveal about urban life in Asia, and larger Global South? How do these wires shape the sensory and everyday experiences of the city's residents?

I situate these questions within the networked infrastructures of wires in a South Indian urban settlement, B.S. Maqta, located in the city of Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana. In underdeveloped urban areas of the global South, the visible presence of cobbled together wires is a marker of marginality and infrastructural precarity. Cities often showcase curated images of development, glossy skyscrapers and metro lines, while leaving aside the ethical questions of inclusive development. Marginalised communities are systematically excluded from these representations.

The wires of Maqta, primarily carrying electricity, television, and internet, entangle in dense overhead networks, connecting the locality to broader human and non-human systems. Encased in black plastic, these wires are fundamental carriers of sound and energy, yet they remain largely invisible in discussions of sonic technologies, which often focus on radios, loudspeakers, or televisions. Through one year of qualitative ethnography involving semi-structured interviews, sensory walks, and participant observation, I explore how the wires of Maqta shape the sensory and social lives of its residents. Exploring the wires of Maqta compels a reconsideration of urban life through its built environment and sensory dimensions. I argue that paying attention to these infrastructures allows a reconsideration of urban life as a complex lifeworld, one where caste, class, and other social hierarchy intersect with material and sensory infrastructures, revealing both exclusion and shared presence. This also provides a compelling case of newer ways of inter-Asian connection through material and sensory ways as well.

Khadeeja Amenda is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication and New Media, National University of Singapore. Her dissertation *Sonic Erasures: Listening to the Left-Behind in Hyderabad, India*, explores the questions of urban marginality through a sound and sensory studies framework. She has published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *Sound Studies* and other public platforms like *Economic and Political Weekly*. She is also a podcast host with the New Books Network.

Automation, Aging, and Inequality Anxiety in South Korea and Japan

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Although android robotics technologies remain far from full market maturity, in aging societies such as Japan and South Korea, robotics and AI are increasingly positioned as solutions to care deficits and labour shortages, (particularly in hazardous sectors such as shipbuilding). While public discourse often frames these technologies as necessary and innovative, they also provoke ambivalence: concerns over labour displacement, the unequal distribution of technological benefits, and the broader social consequences of automation.

Ja Ok Kwon is a research associate at the Centre for East Asian Studies at Heidelberg University. Her research interests include development, labor, and gender sociology in East Asia, as well as transnational labor migration. She is the author of the monograph, *State, Rural Women, and Domestication in Korea: The Aspiring Middle Class*, London and New York: Routledge (2024).

Digital Agriculture and the Selective Governance of Life in Contemporary China

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This paper contributes to emerging debates on infrastructures by examining how digital agriculture operates as a socio-technical system that reorganizes life processes into governable objects. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in dairy farms and greenhouse vegetable production in North China, the study asks how vitality -- understood as the generative capacity of living organisms -- is identified, stabilized, and differentially managed within digital infrastructures. Rather than treating digital agriculture as a tool for efficiency gains, the paper conceptualizes it as an infrastructural formation that translates biological processes into computable parameters through sensors, data platforms, and algorithmic thresholds. These infrastructures do not simply represent life; they actively produce selective visibilities of life by privileging certain states (e.g., lactation performance, reproductive cycles, environmental conditions) while marginalizing others. Through this process, vitality becomes an operational category embedded in systems of monitoring, intervention, and evaluation. Empirically, the paper compares two modes of infrastructural intervention: individual-centered monitoring in dairy farming and environment-centered control in greenhouse cultivation. This comparison reveals how infrastructures differently scale, mediate, and distribute attention across life forms. The analysis further shows that digital agriculture relies on a layered configuration of human labor and technical systems, where continuous care is reorganized rather than eliminated. Crucially, infrastructural arrangements also underpin a governance logic that differentiates between life processes to be maintained, repaired, or discarded, reflecting cost-benefit calculations and production goals. By bringing together insights from science and technology studies (STS), infrastructure studies, and economic sociology, the paper argues that digital agriculture exemplifies a broader shift in which infrastructures do not merely support production but actively constitute what counts as productive life. This case from China contributes to comparative discussions on infrastructures by foregrounding how life itself becomes an infrastructural concern under conditions of digitalization.

Jiayang Chen is currently a PhD student in Sociology at Nankai University. His research lies at the intersection of science and technology studies (STS), economic sociology, and multi-species ethnography, with a particular focus on digital agriculture, infrastructures, and the reconfiguration of life processes. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in China, his work examines how digital technologies (such as sensors, data platforms, and algorithmic systems) transform biological processes into measurable and governable forms of “vitality,” and how these processes reshape relations between humans, nonhuman organisms, and production systems. Jiayang holds an MSc in Social Anthropology from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA in Sociology from Huazhong University of Science and Technology. Her previous research has explored topics including state power, cooperative movements in modern China, and infrastructure development in border regions. Her ongoing projects investigate digital fisheries, data-driven agricultural production, and the role of state and capital in shaping digital infrastructures in China. Jiayang’s work combines qualitative methods such as ethnography, participant observation and interviews with theoretical engagement across STS and sociology. She aims to contribute to comparative discussions on infrastructures by foregrounding how life, labor, and value are reorganized under digitalization.

**Repaired Legibility:
Digital Farmland Planning and the Infrastructure of Statecraft in China**

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This paper examines digital farmland planning in contemporary China as an infrastructure of statecraft. Drawing on workplace ethnography in southwest China, it follows the everyday operation of digital spatial governance: integrated land databases, satellite and drone surveillance, cloud-based platforms for land-use violations, and the on-the-ground bureaucratic labor of documenting, negotiating, and rectifying recurring mismatches between planning categories and material land use.

Engaging Scott's classic account of state simplification, the paper shows that digital planning infrastructures do not produce a seamless correspondence between territory and map. Their heightened precision instead makes visible the unavoidable incompleteness of legibility: the gap between standardized planning categories and the messy realities of farming, construction, local aspirations for economic development, and organizational conflicts within the bureaucracy. Yet the ethnographic material also moves beyond a linear account of high-modernist planning and failure. In China's digital spatial governance, mismatch does not necessarily signal breakdown; it becomes an ordinary condition of governance.

Building on anthropological and STS work on infrastructure, maintenance, and repair, this paper introduces the concept of repaired legibility. It shifts the analytical focus from how states make territory legible to how the mismatches generated by legibility are continuously made governable. What is maintained is not merely a mapping system, but the authority of the digital map as a basis for governance. The paper traces two forms of repair. The first is material repair: the "digital holes" exposed by digital maps are filled through concrete labor, as frontline officials search for replacement farmland, restore land, coordinate with villagers, upload photographic evidence, and work with technicians to update digital records. The second is categorical repair: unresolved mismatches are made administratively manageable through audit bargaining, reclassification, written guarantees, and delayed evidence. Through these practices, officials convert political-economic contradictions into technical errors, incorrect planning, auditable adjustments, or future obligations.

Zhiyu Wang is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Zhejiang University and a visiting PhD student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. His research lies at the intersection of political sociology, urban studies, and the anthropology of the state, with particular interests in spatial planning, local governance, technocracy, and state-led urban development in contemporary China. Between 2023 and 2025, he conducted fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the planning department of a local government in southwest China, where he examined the everyday work of planning officials, the operation of digital spatial governance, and the role of contracted planners and invited experts in urban and rural development. His current dissertation explores how Chinese local governments navigate the tensions between development, regulation, and accountability under increasingly technical and digitalized planning regimes. His article on urban investment and development companies and local state capitalism in China is forthcoming in *The China Journal*.

**Platform Infrastructures in Comparison:
Digital Logistics and the Reconfiguration of Urban Space in Singapore and Tokyo**

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Digital platform economies are generating new infrastructural landscapes that challenge conventional distinctions between logistics, urban services, and everyday built environments. Building on recent work on platform urbanisation and infrastructure comparison, this paper examines how digital platform infrastructures – particularly e-commerce, and last-mile delivery systems – are reshaping urban space and practices in Singapore and Tokyo through emergent spatial forms such as dark stores, urban micro-fulfilment facilities, platform factories, parcel lockers, pick-up/drop-off nodes, and hybridised domestic spaces that have been modified to serve logistical functions.

Rather than treating these as isolated technological innovations, the paper conceptualises them as components of evolving platform infrastructures that extend across local and regional scales and become integrated into existing urban fabric in uneven ways. In both Singapore and Tokyo, these infrastructures involve not only the insertion of new logistical spaces into dense urban environments, but also the retrofitting of existing infrastructures (from housing estates and convenience stores to transport nodes and industrial spaces) and systems (of transportation, logistics, and deliveries) to accommodate the operational requirements of platform economies. Such transformations have generated new interfaces between digital systems and material urban environments, while producing novel forms of infrastructural adaptation, spatial intensification, and everyday urban reorganisation.

Through a comparative approach, the paper asks how different urban-regulatory contexts, land regimes, and infrastructural histories, and everyday practices shape the territorialisation of digital platform in each case, and what comparison reveals about emerging forms of “platform infrastructure” as a broader urban condition in Asia. It argues that comparing Singapore and Tokyo makes visible how digital platforms operate not simply through overlaying new infrastructures onto cities, but through modifying and recombining existing urban spaces into hybrid infrastructural arrangements and practices. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on infrastructures in comparison by foregrounding platform urbanisation as a lens for understanding contemporary transformations of urban space, logistics, and governance.

Naomi C. Hanakata is Assistant Professor of Urban Design and Planning at the National University of Singapore, where she leads the Urban Transitions Lab and serves as Deputy Director of the Urban Planning Programme. She is also a founding partner of a research and planning practice committed to holistic and sustainable urban development. Dr Hanakata earned her doctoral degree from ETH Zurich and studied at ETH Zurich, the University of Tokyo, and the London School of Economics. Her research sits at the intersection of spatial planning and critical urban studies, with a geographic emphasis on Asia. She investigates the forces and consequences of urban transitions in a planetary context, particularly socio-technical transformations and their influence on the physical fabric of cities. Her recent work explores the expanding role of digital technologies and platformisation in urban governance, planning, and lived experience, highlighting the spatially uneven impacts of digital transformation. She also examines the socio-spatial dimensions of the energy transition, focusing on the implications of renewable energy production and decarbonisation. Central to her research are questions of resource distribution, access and control, adaptation, and systemic uncertainty—aimed at generating insights to support sustainable transitions and foster equitable urban development.

The Cash of Civilizations: Digital Payment Infrastructures in Singapore and India

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As part of their national digitalization efforts, both Singapore and India have invested in high-tech infrastructure projects linking digital identity and digital payment systems.

Singapore has been developing its Smart Nation digital government initiative for several decades; particularly important to this program is the “Singpass” mobile application, which links digital identity and digital payments. We find a similar linkage in India, where the Aadhaar biometric identity program has been integrated with digital payments as part of India Stack, a “digital public infrastructure” project. Both governments have also forged transnational connections: with one another, by linking their digital payment infrastructures; and throughout the region, by exporting their digital initiatives to other Asian countries.

This paper aims to consider these developments in two related ways. First, to provide better analytic leverage on emerging digital infrastructural forms, it seeks to map the institutional shifts associated with the development and linkage of these digital payment infrastructures. This is an important task because, while digitalization is a global phenomenon, its modular logic enables varied organizational arrangements. Thus, institutional design will have important consequences for the degrees of centralization, privacy, transparency, and control these digital infrastructures afford.

Moreover, while these infrastructural projects seek to harness technology for the common good, the visions of “the Good” to which they aspire vary. Scholars have noted a recent global shift from nationalist to “civilizationalist” imaginaries (Coker 2019; Hale and Laruelle 2021), and both India and Singapore articulate and justify their digital initiatives in civilizational terms. As “civilizationalism” exists in tension with the European vision of modernity (Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023), the second contribution of this paper is to ask: What vision(s) of Asian modernity do these digital infrastructures and their associated civilizational imaginaries portend?

James Rosenberg is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and, since October 2024, a visiting researcher at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. His research seeks to understand computation's increasingly central role as a principle of social organization and the consequences thereof for social institutions, action, and thought. He has pursued this research agenda in three related streams, dealing respectively with states (the topic of his dissertation), markets (published in *Sociological Theory*), and political ideologies (published in *Theory, Culture & Society*).

The Motley Infrastructure of Financial Hubs in An Age of Blockchain Technologies: A Comparative Case Study of Singapore and the US

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Anticipating the continued global rise of blockchain-based currencies, payment networks, and investment platforms, Singapore's central bank – known as the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) – is pursuing policies and programs that are intended to turn the small island-state into a leading hub of blockchain-based finance and fintech development. These programs include new regulations and licensing requirements; numerous communication channels with blockchain-based fintech companies; public-private collaborations on blockchain prototypes; and a large annual fintech conference that in 2025 attracted over 70,00 attendees from 142 countries.

I analyze this heterogeneous array of things as a new kind of infrastructure that is emerging; namely, the infrastructure of a global financial hub in an age of blockchain technologies. This infrastructure is motley and expanding. In Singapore's case, it includes not only digital hardware and software but also regulatory laws, intersectoral social networks, nation branding expertise, and the means to create certain "vibes".

I compare this infrastructure which MAS has developed to its equivalent in the United States, where the federal government and Federal Reserve System take a different approach to blockchain-based finance, but similarly aim to make their country a key center and beneficiary of the new technology's rise.

The comparison reveals the competing geo-financial strategies of a small and tightly governed Asian nation, on the one hand, and the unparalleled hegemon of global financial capitalism, on the other; as they each strive to position themselves for the future of decentralized, immutable, and near-instant financial transfers they see on the horizon.

My paper shows how a comparative study of financial infrastructures can illuminate key aspects of contemporary capitalism; in particular, the intricate ways in which novel financial technologies weave the competitive, risky, and survival-focused logics of international relations under a regime of digital financial capitalism, into citizens' socio-economic and cultural lives.

Emily Chua is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the National University of Singapore. Her research examines competing constructions of value, money, and truth, that are emerging at the intersections of digital technology, global capital and politics in Asia. Her current project, *Money Island*, explores the novel financial technologies that people are creating and living with in Singapore, from trading apps to pension platforms to blockchain-based versions of the Singapore dollar. It asks what notions and forms of the good are created in and by these future-focused forms of value. Her first book, *The Currency of Truth: Newsmaking and the Late-Socialist Imaginaries of China's Digital Era* (Michigan University Press, 2023) explores the moral and professional aspirations of journalists in a post-truth milieu. She has published articles in journals that include the *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Asian Studies Review* and *China Quarterly*. Emily earned her PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research has been funded by the Mellon American Council of Learned Societies, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the UC Berkeley Institute of East Asian Studies, among others.

State Power, Homegrown Tech Giants, and Inequality in China's Digital Infrastructure

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Since the advent of the Internet era, the Chinese state has acted as both a powerful promoter and a stringent regulator of digital infrastructures. This presentation examines the evolving relationship between Chinese state and domestic technology firms, highlighting how data governance has become central to state power, social control, and geopolitical competition. It explores how China's pursuit of technological leadership in cutting-edge sectors not only expands opportunities for economic growth and innovation, but also intensifies existing inequalities and unequal wealth distribution.

Zhu Yi obtained a degree in German and Media studies at Trier University and successfully completed her doctoral dissertation on agenda building processes in authoritarian political structures at Free University Berlin. Her areas of research are media and perception analyses, socio-economic dynamics in China and the global effects thereof, as well as Europe-China relations. She is currently co-editor at the Echowall project and works for the EU project ChiNature.

**From Kashima to Thailand's Eastern Seaboard:
Comparing Coastal Mega-Infrastructure, Expertise, and
Environmental Consequences in Asia**

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This paper compares two emblematic coastal industrial projects in Asia: the Kashima Coastal Industrial Zone in Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan, and the Eastern Seaboard Development Program in Thailand, spanning the provinces of Chonburi, Chachoengsao, and Rayong. It approaches these cases through the concept of mega-infrastructure, referring to capital-intensive projects such as industrial zones, ports, and transportation networks that reorganize human communities and natural environments while generating migration, displacement, and ecological change. Developed during Japan's high-growth period, Kashima transformed an agricultural coastline into a major petrochemical and steel production hub, reshaping local communities and coastal ecologies. In the 1980s, the Eastern Seaboard Development Program (ESDP), supported by Japanese financing and technical assistance, sought to develop a 200-kilometer industrial corridor anchored by deep-sea ports and petrochemical complexes. In doing so, it set Thailand on a development path modeled in part on Japanese industrialization, with far-reaching social and environmental consequences, including displacement and long-term environmental degradation. Taken together, these projects highlight intra-Asian circuits of capital, expertise, and development practice, in which Japan functioned as a key node and reference point.

The paper examines how these projects were directly linked through the movement of people and expertise and through practices of comparison carried out by development officials, policymakers, and engineers. Thai technocrats studied Kashima as a model, including through site visits, while Japanese engineers and development experts were dispatched to Thailand to participate in planning and implementation. These interactions unfolded within unequal relations of capital and power and were shaped by how development was defined and assessed by planners, engineers, and officials. Japanese actors presented their approach as grounded and practical, yet relied on forms of expertise that treated projects as comparable across sites, flattening differences in social and environmental context.

Drawing on archival research, development memoirs, as well as site visits and interviews with environmental activists and local community members, the paper traces how infrastructural knowledge was produced, circulated, and translated across sites. These materials show how coastal regions were represented as underutilized and available for transformation, even where established communities and livelihoods already existed. By placing these cases in historical relation, the paper demonstrates how such projects produced enduring environmental consequences, including long-term industrial pollution and public health impacts in Rayong and across the Eastern Seaboard. Examining how these projects were compared shows how environmental experience from Kashima informed later development in Thailand unevenly, without preventing similar patterns of harm.

Takuya Maeda is a Japan Foundation-Global Japan Studies Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo. He was previously a Mellon Sawyer Postdoctoral Fellow in Transpacific Thought at New York University and received his PhD in History from Brown University in 2024. His research examines the social, environmental, and political dimensions of large-scale infrastructure, with a focus on Japan's engagements with Asia and the Pacific. Bringing together approaches from history, science and technology studies, and environmental humanities, Maeda analyzes how mega-infrastructure reshapes landscapes, mobilizes populations, and produces uneven ecological and social outcomes. His current book project, *The Closing of the Japanese Frontier: Settler Technocracy and Global Japanese Mega-Infrastructures*, traces the historical connections between postwar development in Japan and the expansion of Japanese infrastructure projects across Asia. His work has appeared in *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*. He is actively involved in academic organizations including the Association for Asian Studies, the Association for Asian American Studies, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, and SHAFR-in-Asia.

**Sylvan Infrastructures, in Comparison:
Four Modalities of the Forest-to-Come in South Korea**

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This paper examines the modalities through which future forests are infrastructurally configured in South Korea. Forests in South Korea—like those in other postcolonial Asian countries—have served as iconic sites of postcolonial reconstruction and ecological promise. Once notorious for centuries of deforestation exacerbated by Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, South Korea undertook massive-scale reforestation projects that replenished forest cover to over 60% of its territory, celebrated as a redress of past violence and a foundation for sustainable futures. Forest scientists have served as critical architects of this work, and the resulting anthropogenic forests can be read as infrastructures of natureculture whose compositions encode decades of scientific and state intervention. However, rapid climate change, intensifying wildfires, and disease outbreaks now unsettle these legacies, prompting scientists to experiment with new infrastructures to address the forest’s uncertain futures.

Drawing on 36 months of fieldwork (2017–2023) with forest scientists, the paper compares four such infrastructures and the modalities of future-making through which each reconfigures the forest-to-come. The Baekdudaegan Global Seed Vault—the world’s first vault for wild plant species rather than crops—operates in an *apocalyptic* modality, securing botanical viability against ecological collapse. A long-term drought experiment site rehearses an *anticipatory* modality, domesticating chronic climatic stress so that ecological crises become legible and governable. A post-clearcut reforestation experiment site unfolds through a *regenerative* modality, promising continued forest use under climatic duress. A small plot named “Forest of the Future,” a former farmland reclaimed by succession, embeds a *speculative* modality by letting ecological time compose a forest without human presence. Thinking comparatively across these sites, I argue that these modalities together scaffold what forest futures mean for an Asian postcolonial nation-state whose green landscape is itself an expression of historical violence and ongoing disturbance, and illuminate how differential infra-temporal projects reconfigure ecological futures.

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Metabolic Commoning: Comparing Waste Composting as Infrastructural Activism in China and India

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Rapid fossil-fuel-based urbanization across Asia is generating an accelerated, linear metabolic regime of extraction, consumption, discard, treatment, and emission in which waste has become a critical ecological contradiction. Capital-intensive waste infrastructures, particularly landfilling (in the US) and incineration (in Europe), further intensify this crisis, amplifying carbon emissions and toxic residues, burdening urban hinterlands as sacrifice zones, and deepening inequality.

Against this backdrop, I turn to an emerging form of waste infrastructural activism in urbanizing Asia: community-based composting. Through comparative ethnographic research in India and China, I ask: Why and how is community composting emerging in Asia as both an alternative waste solution and a new socio-ecological imaginary? What possibilities and limits does it hold across different situated contexts?

The research finds that a shared feature of urbanization in Asia is the predominance of organic waste in municipal waste streams, making it a strategic site for social mobilization and alternative infrastructural experimentation. In both India and China, a form of infrastructural activism I term **metabolic commoning** is emerging, through which communities, via collective and decentralized infrastructural practices such as community gardens, urban farms, neighborhood compost hubs, and local fertilizer markets, reclaim organic waste from state- and capital-dominated disposal systems, reframing it from a residual management problem into a medium for ecological regeneration, social participation, and urban-rural coordination.

Yet under divergent political-economic conditions, these experiments face distinct limits. In Bangalore, community composting has been partly institutionalized within mainstream waste management as a supplement to municipal sanitation gaps. In China, by contrast, composting is negotiated within strong municipal states and selectively tolerated as ecological pedagogy or community landscape-making, while waste processing remains monopolized by state-capital-led incineration. These cases show how infrastructural activism is differently depoliticized and constrained from becoming scalable metabolic alternatives. This also offers a glimpse into the possibilities and limits of South-South activist collaboration amid global ecological crisis.

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