

# ARI news

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## **ARI'S NEWEST CLUSTER: IDENTITIES**

*Special Feature*

## **SUSTAINABLE TRANSBOUNDARY GOVERNANCE OF THE ECOLOGICAL COMMONS**

*Outreach Event*

## **BEYOND BEDOUIN AND BANIA: ARABIA-SOUTH ASIA RELATIONS**



Mekong River  
Photo credit: Diana Suhardiman



## WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

PROF JONATHAN RIGG

This issue of *ARI News* includes an interview with Mike Douglass, who is stepping down as leader of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster. This has made me reflect on how our clusters operate, regenerate and, sometimes, are retired and replaced. Last year, the Cultural Studies Cluster, led by Chua Beng Huat, was closed and, after a university-wide call for new cluster proposals, the Identities Cluster led by Ted Hopf came into the ARI fold.

Asian Urbanisms, however, will continue under the leadership of Ho Kong Chong. But this does not mean that things will stay the same and, in fact, the history of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster demonstrates that clusters, even when their names stay the same, can regenerate and innovate in novel ways.

The history of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster can be traced back to the very birth of ARI in 2001 when there was an Urban Studies Research Programme with a remit to study housing, urban heritage, urban youth, and the economic competitiveness of cities. In 2005 this programme was formalised as a cluster, and renamed Asian Cities. Under the joint leadership of Chua Beng Huat (Sociology) and Heng Chye Kiang (Architecture), the focus of the cluster's research agenda changed to intersecting questions of urban transformation. In 2008 the cluster went through a further mutation, with a name change to boot: becoming Sustainable Cities. Still under the leadership of Beng Huat and Chye Kiang, the cluster's agenda shifted once more, to a more

critical engagement with matters of urban governance, urban social life, and regeneration, all under the rubric of 'sustainability'.

In 2009, Tim Bunnell (Geography) took over the cluster helm, and changed the name of the cluster to Asian Urbanisms. The cluster's agenda altered too, with attention being paid to urban comparisons, the tropical city, inter-Asian urban emulation, cyber spaces, and decentralisation and urban governance. In 2012, Mike Douglass (Urban Planning) took over the cluster and, while the cluster's name remained the same, we saw a change in direction and focus with his interests in liveable cities and urban flourishing, the vernacular city, and progressive and 'hopeful' city-making.

With, as we are so often reminded, more than half the globe's population now urban, and with some scholars even arguing that urbanisation has become planetary, it is hard to imagine ARI without an urban cluster, however it might be badged. But this abridged

history of ARI's engagement with the urban shows how that single, seemingly innocuous and self-evident word 'urban' encompasses a world of research. Each leader of the cluster has left their mark on the research undertaken by the cluster, excavating the urban in very different ways, theoretically and methodologically as well as thematically. This is partly about disciplinary persuasion. After all, the cluster has been led by two sociologists, a geographer, an architect, and an urban planner. But even more important have been the personal research interests of cluster leaders and the intellectual and regional moments in which they have led the cluster.

I take three things from this: that the cluster tin does not betray its contents; that cluster leaders really do make a difference; and that intellectual eras shape the questions we ask and the themes we chase down.

Having taken the baton on from Mike, Ho Kong Chong is already putting his own mark on the Asian Urbanisms Cluster.

**Dr Lavanya Balachandran** won both the Graduate Students' Teaching Award (GSTA; Semester 2, 2015-2016) and the GSTA (Honour Roll) for winning the GSTA for the third time, awarded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS, on 9 September 2017.

**Assoc Prof Gregory Clancey** was invited as Delegate/ Speaker for the *Hong Kong Collaborative Research Fund (CRF) Plenary Meeting 'Making Modernity in East Asia: Technologies of Everyday Life, 19th-21st Centuries'* (MMEA), Hong Kong University, December 2017.

**Prof Mike Douglass** gave 2 keynote speeches: 'Progressive Cities for Human Flourishing: Globopolis Versus Cosmopolis as Alternative Urban Futures in Asia', *Philosophy of the City Conference 2017*, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, Portugal, 11-13 October 2017; 'Progressive Cities for Human Flourishing: Innovations in Governance for Inclusion, Justice, Conviviality and the Environment in Asia', *2017 Suwon Forum on Asian Human City*, Suwon, South Korea, 25-26 September 2017.

**Dr Amelia Fauzia** gave 2 plenary speeches: 'Culture of Giving: Islam and Inclusivity in Indonesian Philanthropy', *International Conference on Culture and Language in Southeast Asia (ICCLAS)*, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and University of Malaya, Jakarta, 15 November 2017; and 'Waqf for Social Justice? Indonesian Experience and Potential', *5th Global Waqf Conference*, International Centre for Waqf Research of International Islamic University Malaysia and University Tun Abdul Razak, Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, 18 October 2017.

**Prof Ted Hopf** gave a keynote speech on 'Making Identity Count: Multiple Methods and the Study of National Identity', *All Azimuths Conference*, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey, 19 September 2017.

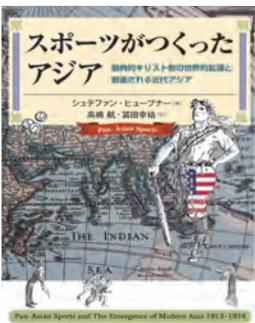
**Dr Stefan Huebner** was a panelist of the plenary roundtable on 'Japan's Pacific: Ocean Histories and the Waters That Define the Archipelago', *Japan Studies Association Annual Conference 2018*, Honolulu, 5 January 2018.

**Dr Eric Kerr** gave a public lecture on 'Reflecting on Oil', *Age of Oil Exhibition*, National Museum of Scotland, 8 November 2017.

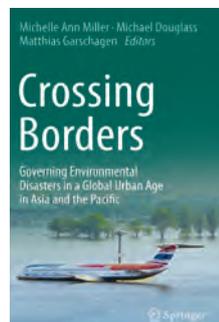
**Prof Jonathan Rigg** gave 2 keynote speeches: 'The Past, Present and Future of the Smallholder in Asia', at the conference on *Greening Agri-food Systems, Ensuring Rural Sustainability and Promoting Healthy Socioeconomic Transformation in Southeast Asia through Social and Sustainability Sciences and Education for Sustainable Agriculture (ESA)*, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, 23 – 25 January 2018; and 'Area Studies and the Crisis of Legitimacy: A Review from Asia', for the roundtable on *The Future of Area Studies: Raising Global Voices*, School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, 25 November 2017. He was also invited to join the Editorial Board of the *Geographical Journal*, for a three-year term, 2018-2020.

**Ms Kellynn Wee** was awarded the Lee Foundation Prize by NUS on 9 September 2017, for being the best Master of Social Sciences student in the Department of Sociology's research programme.

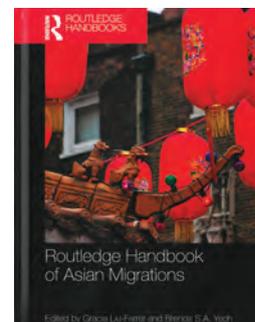
**Prof Brenda Yeoh** gave a plenary speech on 'Families Across Borders: Migration and Gender Politics in Mobile Times', *4th International Conference on Urban Studies: Border and Mobility*, Wyndham Hotel Surabaya, Universitas Airlangga Surabaya, Indonesia, 8 - 9 December 2017; and a keynote speech on 'Negotiating Intimacies across Borders: Time, Temporalities and Transnational Families', at the conference on *Rethinking Transnationalism in the Global World: Contested State, Society, Border, and the People in between*, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK, 7-8 September 2017. She was also awarded the Friends of MSF Award, Ministry of Social and Family Development (Singapore), in November 2017.



**Stefan Huebner**  
*Supōtsu ga tsukutta Ajia* [Asia Constructed through Sport]  
Takashima Kō & Tomita Kōsuke (trans)  
Isshiki Publishing, Tokyo, 2017 (Japanese translation of *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1974* NUS Press, Singapore, 2016)



**Michelle Ann Miller, Michael Douglass, & Matthias Garschagen (eds)**  
*Crossing Borders: Governing Environmental Disasters in a Global Urban Age in Asia and the Pacific*  
Springer, Singapore, 2018



**Gracia Liu-Farrer & Brenda S.A. Yeoh (eds)**  
*Routledge Handbook of Asian Migrations*  
Routledge, London & New York, 2018

# ARI'S NEWEST CLUSTER: IDENTITIES

DR GUSTAV BROWN  
POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW



*Prof Ted Hopf*

Dr Gustav Brown (G) recently spoke to Professor Ted Hopf (TH), leader of ARI's newest cluster, Identities, regarding the idea behind the cluster, its work and how it fits into the overall ecology of ARI.

**G** – Where did the idea for the Identities Cluster come from? How did the cluster emerge?

**TH** – Well, I've been involved in a project called 'Making Identity Count in Asia', where some colleagues and I are trying to create a large N database of national identity for great powers from 1810 to the Present, counted in 10-year intervals. We did 2010 and we got that book out via Oxford University Press in 2016. Then when Singapore created the Social Science Research Council, one of the themes SSRC wanted to highlight was identities. I thought, well, this is the perfect opportunity to expand our research on great powers to the region. Now we've added all of ASEAN plus South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Plus we've made a special provision for Singapore because there are so many methodological puzzles when it comes to doing national identity work here. Our approach is interpretive discourse analysis, but we wanted to see what would happen if we could combine our discourse analysis with focus groups, a national survey and local ethnographies. And so, for the next two years, that's what we'll be doing.

Serendipitously, ARI also opened up a competition for a new cluster. The cluster that was retired was Cultural Studies; I was hoping to create something a bit more narrow than cultural studies, which is a very broad topic, but which remained in the cultural studies framework. I also wanted the cluster to be more eclectic in terms of methodological and theoretical approaches. So the cluster is about identities, but understood from formal models to ethnography and everything in-between, and from sociology, psychology, political science, history and so forth. All are welcome. Our first reading group meeting involved us discussing probably the most cited critique of identity, by Brubaker and Cooper, to ask: why are we even working on identity?

**G** – Allow me, then, to ask a Brubakerian question: 'identity' is an inherently fuzzy and malleable concept, which is often connected to various political projects. How are you framing the term for the purposes of the cluster?

**TH** – We definitely don't define it for the cluster. The individual researchers define it for their own projects. I mean, I've got my own views on identity – I work on social identities, how we understand ourselves in terms of others. I'm a constructivist, so I think of identity as a social achievement and ongoing project. But, for example, psychologists are more comfortable putting people in an experimental situation and evoking a particular identity and then measuring the effect of that identity. I'm fine with that too.

**G** – You mentioned that the cluster builds off a research project you are working on already, but would you say this is the culmination of a long-term research interest or a more recent interest?

**TH** – Well I've been working on identity for more than 20 years now. I'm an international relations scholar, so I'm addressing how it affects international politics through foreign policy and through identity relations among and between states. I should note that the SSRC grant is what I'm working on, but I'm making sure the identity cluster isn't about my grant. I want the cluster to be a place where interdisciplinary conversations can take place, and where we can have a bottom-up generation of research agendas – talks, workshops, conferences and so forth. I do not want to have an identity cluster that looks like me!

**G** – Do you see the cluster working on grant-based research projects, similar to the Luce grant we recently had in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster?

**TH** – Well, it isn't really up to me or ARI. MOE has decided that our budget, increasingly, needs to be externally funded rather than draw exclusively from NUS resources. So all cluster leaders are responsible for raising revenues. You could say my SSRC grant is more or less like a ticket of admission, if you will – but I assume all clusters are headed toward more grant-focused work. Clusters that don't raise at least some revenue externally will be less likely to continue operations. Remember that, under the new regime at ARI, clusters can expire. Up to now, very few clusters have disappeared since 2001, when they were created, so this is a whole new set of norms for everyone.

**G** – At present how many members are in the cluster and, moving forward, how large do you see it becoming?

**TH** – Well, we have a budget each year for hiring postdoctoral fellows and visiting research fellows. Three more postdoctoral fellows will be arriving in July and January. And again, it depends in part on grants – some grants will allow for additional postdoctoral fellows to be attached to the project. We also have a participation list of 30 to 40 people – primarily here at NUS across a number of departments, but also from NTU and SMU – to come to our events, conferences and workshops. For example, there are two sociologists, one from NUS and another at NTU, who are working together with us to create a conference on race in Singapore, so that will be coming up.

**G** – How do you see the cluster fitting into the overall ecology of ARI? There's quite a bit of conceptual overlap between the Identities Cluster and some of the other clusters, for example the Religion and Globalisation Cluster that I'm a part of.

**TH** – Yes, absolutely. Religious identity is, of course, a critical issue. Inter-Asian Exchange is a critical issue. Family, right? Filial piety is an identity concept. And so forth and so on. At the end of the day, identity is a fairly promiscuous topic. That's probably one reason it appealed to the ARI management board and steering committee: they saw that it fits well with the existing clusters – that our concerns crosscut with those of the other clusters. That it would be easy to collaborate across clusters. It's not a hermetic concept.

**G** – What kind of projects have incoming postdoctoral fellows and scholars proposed?

**TH** – One of our incoming postdoctoral fellows is a social psychologist from the Netherlands, who wants to work on a cross-cultural psychology project in Singapore. We have a historian coming who wants to work on gender relations among early 20th century Chinese immigrants in Singapore. And we have someone coming from media and cultural studies in London who wants to work on an ethnography of fear in Singaporean and Southeast Asian cinema. Plus we have Liberty Chee, who is already here – she is a postdoctoral fellow working on two projects: one on Philippine national identity for the 'Making Identity Count in Asia' project, and another on the governance of migratory workers in the region.

**G** – Why is it important to do this kind of interdisciplinary research specifically on identities in Asia? Is it to decentre the theoretical and comparative literatures from biases toward the European and American experiences?

**TH** – Let me tell you a story. One of my interests is cross-cultural psychology, which was born when a University of Michigan graduate student of Japanese descent went to Japan to conduct experiments and came back terrified because he had no results. That is to say, after worrying about measuring errors and sampling, he had to ask himself: "what happens if Japanese undergraduates are just different from the white American males who constitute 90 percent of the participants in all experiments since 1945?" Voila, cross-cultural psychology was born. So, getting out of that bubble is important.

Also, well, I'm kind of anomalous at this institution as I don't really work on Asia – except Siberia and, of course, China in the context of international politics. My interest is to extend our idea of Asia to make it more comparative, rather than making it purely about Asia.

# SUSTAINABLE TRANSBOUNDARY GOVERNANCE OF THE ECOLOGICAL COMMONS

DR MICHELLE MILLER, PROF DAVID TAYLOR & PROF JONATHAN RIGG

ARI has been awarded a major Social Science Research Council (SSRC) grant entitled *Sustainable Governance of the Transboundary Environmental Commons in Southeast Asia*. Led by Professor David Taylor and Professor Jonathan Rigg, the grant is based in ARI's Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster and brings together collaborators from NUS and across Southeast Asia with diverse disciplinary backgrounds ranging from human and physical geography to political science, economics, human ecology and biology.

The grant has enabled ARI to hire two new postdoctoral fellows: Dr Rini Astuti works on peatland governance and the scales of linkages in palm oil supply chains that contribute to transboundary haze, while Dr Thong Tran conducts research on the transboundary implications of hydropower development on common pool resources in Laos, Thailand and China. Dr Michelle Miller, who has re-joined ARI as a Senior Research Fellow on the grant, will conduct new research into how the commodification and conservation of common pool resources is reconstituting social and material constructions of the border via transboundary communities of commoning. In addition, the research project is funding a Research Associate, who will be based in ARI for up to four years, together with two PhD students, both of whom are based in the Department of Geography, NUS. The two PhD students are Tan Zu Dienle and Sumiya Bilegsaikhan. Both joined NUS at the beginning of the current semester. NUS faculty who are also part of the research team, in addition to Profs Rigg and Taylor, comprise Associate Professor Alberto Salvo (Economics), Associate Professor Dan Friess (Geography), Associate Professor Sooyeon Kim (Political Science) and Dr Roman Carrasco (Biology). The research team also includes researchers based in Malaysia, Thailand, Laos and Canada.

The overall goal of this five-year programme of multidisciplinary research is to further our understanding of key issues in the sustainable development of the ecological commons in Southeast Asia from a transboundary governance perspective. Specifically, members of the research team are concerned with the regional governance of two types of common pool resources: air and freshwater.

Such collective resources defy territorial enclosure within individual countries, flowing as they do across administrative borders for use by diverse collectives of users. The open access nature of the transboundary commons renders air and water resources vulnerable to unrestrained exploitation in the absence of enforceable international legal instruments.

The collaborators aim to identify, across a range of spatial scales, the drivers and impacts of governing the atmospheric and freshwater commons that are producing cascading transboundary environmental disruptions and major challenges for sustainable development. Building on previous multidisciplinary environmental research at ARI, the grant brings new attention to environmental problems that cannot be neatly contained within nation-states such as the impacts of climatic instability, seasonal atmospheric pollution (regionally known as 'haze'), biomass fires, droughts, cross-border floods, and the depletion or destruction of riparian ecosystems. Reconceptualising these challenges through the lens of the ecological commons will help to identify relevant examples of best practice in governing shared resources within and beyond the context of ASEAN and Southeast Asia.

The policy orientation of the grant is geared towards providing a firm foundation for decision-making about issues in transboundary environmental governance at the national and regional levels. In linking knowledge to action in this way, the programme is concerned with studying connections between the trends of resource interdependencies, economic integration, urbanisation, population growth, climate change, globalisation, and growing levels of consumption in the region. These



Peatland in Jambi  
Photo credit: David Taylor

trends are bringing the development interests of ASEAN countries and their transnational partners into growing tension with conservation agendas. At the same time, the socioecological impacts of these interconnected processes highlight both the shortcomings of existing transboundary environmental governance regimes and the need to forge more comprehensive and inclusive pathways to planning, managing and implementing policies for sustainable development within and beyond the Southeast Asian region.

Here, we treat governance as intrinsically transboundary because questions of access to common pool resources in the current era of converging megatrends are producing socioecological transformations across multiple scales. What this means is that problems of regional sustainable development need to be viewed more holistically to account for the ways in which ecologically unsustainable behaviours at one scale are triggering perturbations that cascade across a range of scales of human interest. Posing sustainable development as a collective problem of transboundary governance thus involves moving beyond the national-level orientation of sustainable development goals (SDGs) and land use regimes. It also involves taking a deeper look at the informal modes of sustainability that are often overlooked in macro-development agendas, such as intergenerational knowledge systems, acquired cultural strategies and emerging transboundary networks that locate sectoral interests within wider conservation agendas. For this reason, some of the collaborators involved in the research programme are focusing on the politics of transboundary cooperation and economic integration, including how the language of sustainability is being used to pursue

highly differential development objectives even within the same sector.

Just as this programme of research is multi-disciplinary and multi-scalar, it takes a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach to transboundary governance. It is now widely understood that the devastating health and socioeconomic impacts wrought by transboundary pollution of the atmospheric commons of Southeast Asia through seasonal biomass burning require ongoing cooperative efforts between governments, multinational companies, financial institutions, activists and communities if the haze problem is to find any meaningful redress in the longer term. Decisions on hydropower dam developments in the riparian regions of continental Southeast Asia similarly require collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders to stem the degradation of aquatic habitats and protect the complex array of livelihoods that depend upon them within and between countries.

With the transboundary commons emerging as a political space, new and diverse voices are participating in progressive approaches to conservation efforts and innovations in sustainable development. Such transboundary networks of cooperation are bringing people together across jurisdictional divides in Southeast Asia, creating opportunities to build more inclusive and effective environmental governance regimes. To this emerging space, ARI's programme of transboundary environmental research seeks to contribute the richness of empirical research and theoretical insights in the service of promoting more resilient and sustainable regional futures.

# KOPI WITH AUNTIES AND UNCLES: REFLECTIONS ON INTERVIEWING OLDER LEARNERS IN SINGAPORE

DR PEI-CHUN KO  
RESEARCH FELLOW

When I was developing a project in 2016 on productive engagement in later life, I did most of the research from secondary data and existing literature to understand why and how older adults still work, care for their grandchildren, volunteer or learn.



Resource oriented theories based on Western societies highlight that older individuals' human capital is a strong indicator of productive engagement. But I found that perhaps for the elderly in the Asian context, there might be a different explanation because an ideal form of retirement life amongst the old usually involves spending time with the younger generation and with family. And just around this time, news media and social media started to promote

lifelong learning programmes funded by the Singapore government that encouraged older folks to learn various skills and hobbies. I decided to conduct a fieldwork project to interview older learners and understand who gave them support, and more specifically why they were motivated to learn.

In order to recruit older learners for my fieldwork project, I gave out interview flyers at the lifelong learning festival

organised by SkillsFuture SG and the Lifelong Council to older folks who were shopping around to find suitable courses. I also went to a karaoke event and annual food festivals at community centres. Through snowballing, I started to interview at cafés and kopitiam those who participated in the latest lifelong learning programmes. Some of the respondents enrolled themselves in English language classes, some went to computer courses, some chose

business courses and some took up art lessons. It was not until then did I realise that these aunties and uncles had unique life stories that led them to choose and attend a particular course.

Education policies, upbringing and career trajectories often intertwined to influence respondents' attitudes towards learning and motivation to improve their knowledge. A group of Chinese-speaking respondents who attended Chinese schools between the 1950s and 1960s recalled the time that their lessons were suddenly conducted in English due to language policies that aimed to enhance cohesion in a multicultural society at that time. Such an education policy affected their academic performance because they found it difficult to comprehend their study materials in English. In their sharing, they regretted not being able to finish school or to reach a higher level of education. The thoughts that they could not communicate with their English-speaking supervisors and even their grandchildren at home motivated them to improve their English proficiency. When they found out that the government provided subsidies to study English, they seized the opportunity. What I understood from this group of respondents is that the language transition policy had affected their educational attainment and they had developed a longing to speak proper English in order to fit into the mainstream English-speaking environment. Learning English through courses boosted their confidence on one hand, but it was the feeling that they could pick up the lost pieces of knowledge that helped them reconcile with the past.

To my surprise, the relationship with their spouses was mentioned as one important element of learning. Some

aunties shared that older couples are different from young couples because young couples have the same goals – to work for their kids and for financial stability. But older couples have realised most of these goals, so old age is usually the time couples are forced to reexamine what they would like to do for the rest of their lives. Some respondents and their spouses had common goals but some did not. Those who did not receive their spouses' support in pursuing learning revealed their frustrations. A few respondents even decided not to talk to their spouses about new courses they planned to participate in to prevent a possible quarrel. On the other hand, those who had their spouses' encouragement spoke of better satisfaction in their marriage. Listening to the respondents' up-and-down moments with their spouses helped me understand how dynamic a marriage can be over decades.

I also heard voices from middle-aged workers in their 50s who wanted to remain competitive at the workplace. Attending courses was about upgrading themselves as their jobs required them to gain new knowledge and ideas. Employers encouraged them to attend courses too. I understood their concern that employers might hire younger workers to replace them. They mentioned that companies should ideally appreciate experienced workers and use them as mentors for job training of young workers. Their words portrayed the ageism faced by middle-aged workers in the workplace. Retired respondents who wished to return to work shared similar worries as they found it difficult to get employed in old age.

It has been 11 months since I conducted the interviews, but the



conversations with them still come to mind as I begin work on new projects. Their sharing helped me understand the situation and challenges older Singaporeans face. These folks' interests in learning are related to their past, their significant others, their workplaces and societal image of older adults. My fieldwork taught me to relook statistics, as it provided new meanings and paved the way for surprising findings on how Singapore's historical and policy contexts continuously influence older folks' lives. These uncles and aunties are the best examples of the Chinese saying, "Live and Learn" (活到老, 学到老; huó dào lǎo lǎo xué dào lǎo).



# THE IRREPRESSIBLE HUMAN ENGAGEMENT IN MAKING CITIES

DR MINNA VALJAKKA  
RESEARCH FELLOW

In June 2012, the Asia Research Institute (ARI) welcomed Professor Mike Douglass as the Leader of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster. Singapore and the National University of Singapore (NUS) were already very familiar to him from his extensive experiences of working and living in Asia for many years.

Mike is the Emeritus Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Hawai'i (UH) where he served as department chair and as Director of the Globalization Research Center. In Asia he worked for the United Nations in Japan and Indonesia, and was a US Peace Corps Volunteer in Korea. He was also a Visiting Scholar/Professor at Tokyo University and Thammasat University. As an urban planner, he has engaged in numerous planning projects with international organisations and governments in Asia as well. This diverse background has provided him a multisided understanding on the growing challenges of urbanisation in Asia and beyond. Before bidding farewell to ARI, we talked about how these experiences shaped his ARI research and teaching at the LKY School of Public Policy and the Department of Sociology, while also forming a solid basis for the multidisciplinary orientation of the Cluster during recent years.

**The challenges and contingencies of urbanism are especially poignant in 21st century Asia where many of the largest megacities in the world face unseen socio-political circumstances. Because of your previous expertise, what kind of goals did you have in mind when you joined ARI?**

My lifelong goal is to link urban studies with urban policy and urban planning, which is reflected in my background in urban planning and social sciences that has been enriched by many mentors who looked beyond social sciences to philosophy and to humanities – I was very fortunate to have John Friedman as my doctoral and lifelong mentor. Gaps between basic and applied research are evident at universities throughout Asia. While urban studies is a minor programme in some social sciences, urban planning is typically subsumed

under architecture, and urban policy studies are quite rare. In coming to NUS, my goal was to help establish an institute to fill these gaps. We have successfully engaged in multidisciplinary research in AUC, but establishing a long-term capacity to link basic with applied research continues to face severe challenges. However, given that this is the urban century, and that 'urban' is adopted as a field of study in universities, and urban planning is a foundation of many public policy programmes across the globe, I am confident that urban research as a cluster will remain worthy of ARI's support for many years to come.

**How would you crystallise the core issues addressed in the four main research avenues of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster and what is the main element suturing them all together?**

I always encourage critical thinking, multidisciplinary, and human-centred approaches to urban research and action. Two of our themes, vernacular cities and spaces of hope, exemplify this approach by focusing on everyday engagements in the production of urban space, with hope expressed through human agency in social activism for a diversity of city possibilities. A third theme, disaster governance, which has a lineage at ARI from the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, is among the most compelling areas of research in our times. Urbanisation and the advent of the Anthropocene are resulting in increasing risks and vulnerabilities to disasters, particularly in Asia. With the funding by the MOE Tier 2 grant, we were able to bring together people across campus with government and non-government professionals to engage in research and conferences, including several that we collaboratively organised abroad. Compound disasters, urbanisation and governance are the keywords that set our programme apart from others by recognising that disasters often cascade into further disasters, are magnified by Asia's urban transition, and always occur in political space. Together these dynamics underscore the necessity for longitudinal, multi-scalar and multidisciplinary research.

The latest theme, Progressive Cities, launched in 2014 by a USPC-NUS grant, builds around the idea of cities for human flourishing supported by four pillars of participatory urban governance, namely, inclusion, distributive justice, conviviality, and environmental well-being. Our progressive cities framework is directed toward assessing cities today, with the aim of understanding the processes that give rise to them and provide hope for the future in the era of planetary urbanisation. Across all cases, the key factor in the rise of



progressive cities is social mobilisations from the grassroots for participatory governance of cities. In increasing numbers, city governments have responded to residents' claims for the right to the city. In late 2017, mayors from many cities in Asia met in Suwon, South Korea, where they signed the Suwon Declaration on Human City based on our progressive cities framework. This moment raises further possibilities for cities to join together to collaboratively change the discourse on cities that now subordinates human aspirations for a better world to the asserted primacy of endless hyper-competition for global capital.

**After such a long commitment to ARI, would you like to elaborate on your experiences as a Cluster Leader?**

The academy plays a crucial role in linking knowledge to action for a better world. Making this linkage calls for continuously regenerating the normative and evidentiary foundations of knowledge needed to inform choices for action. From this perspective, the opportunity for research at ARI to have an impact on linking urban studies, planning and policy is huge, not only because there is a vacuum of this capacity in Asia, but more importantly because a manifest demand exists for it. To me, ARI is a realisation of the long-held dream of a university that cherishes multidisciplinary, comparative research and real world relevance. Making headway in realising this dream rests on ARI's proven ability to bring together truly remarkable and dedicated scholars and administrative staff, for whom I have deep appreciation and with whom I gratefully have been able to flourish in research and as a person.

*\*This interview was edited for length and clarity*



**Ms Iole Consuelo Soto** joined ARI as Management Assistant Officer on 20 November 2017 and will be assisting in the financial aspects of grant funded projects. Previously, she was the Administrative Executive for Finance and Events in Singtel for 6 years.



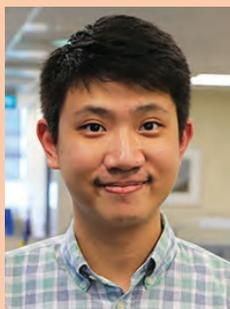
**Dr Thong Anh Tran** has commenced a 2-year appointment as a Research Fellow in the Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster with effect from 8 January 2018. He obtained his PhD from Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University (ANU). His research interests include water governance, human-environment interactions, rural livelihoods, climate change adaptation, and 'state-society' relations in natural resources management in the context of the Mekong region. At ARI, he will be working on a research project examining hydropower development and its transboundary implications associated with the governance of common pool resources in Laos, Thailand and China.



**Dr Fang Lue** has commenced a 1-year appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Asian Migration Cluster with effect from 5 December 2017. She obtained her PhD in Education from Hong Kong University and her research interests are quantitative and qualitative mixed methods, psychometric measurement and children's developmental outcomes. At ARI, she is working collaboratively with an international research team in the Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia (CHAMPSEA): Wave II project.



**Dr Rini Astuti** has commenced a 2-year appointment as Research Fellow in the Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster with effect from 15 January 2018. She obtained her PhD in Geography from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research focuses on the emerging peatland governance apparatuses in the Southeast Asia region (Indonesia in particular) and its implications for the palm oil sector both on large scale and smallholder plantations. At ARI, she will be involved in a research collaboration between ARI and the Department of Geography, NUS, on the sustainable governance of transboundary environmental commons in Southeast Asia.



**Mr Liew Jian An** has commenced a 1-year appointment as Research Assistant in the Asian Migration Cluster with effect from 10 January 2018. He completed his BSoc. Sci. (Hons) in Geography at the National University of Singapore and his MSc. Global Migration at University College London. His research interests focus on the intersections between migrant mobilities, class/skills ('middling'), race/ethnicity ('Chinese') and space/place in the contexts of Singapore and London. At ARI, he is part of the Transnational Relations, Ageing and Care Ethics (TRACE) team that seeks to explore how global care circulations mediate experiences of ageing and what this means for transnational relations and care ethics.



Visitors walk through a photo exhibition on migrant domestic workers' recruitment journeys to Singapore at the ARI Asia Trends public symposium in 2015. One of the unique things about the Migrating out of Poverty Consortium is its commitment to making its research policy-relevant and accessible.



Rista, an Indonesian domestic worker, hugs Charlie goodbye at the airport. She is returning home after having spent ten years in Singapore caring for the young boy and his family. This is a still from the short film 'Ceria', produced in collaboration with a local filmmaker.

## ASIAN MIGRATION MIGRATING OUT OF POVERTY

MS KELLYNN WEE

In 2010, we joined the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium – thereafter affectionately christened as 'MOOP'. The Consortium aims to provide research evidence about the lives and well-being of poor migrants and their communities. Its focus is dual: to centre in terms of research scope migrants who experience precarious circumstances, and to translate research into policy-relevant interventions.

Seven years, several projects, stacks of survey forms and realms of life-story interviews later, our work with the Consortium – which had focused on Southeast Asia and particularly Indonesia and Singapore – has finally come to an end. In mid-2017, we bade farewell to our five core partners in Bangladesh, Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya, as well as the Secretariat, based in the UK.

Through these seven years, ARI's MOOP team has worked on topics relating to the livelihood strategies of Indonesian domestic workers; the costs of migration for Bangladeshi construction workers; the influence of gender on remittance usage; the impact of migration on life choices of young people from migrant communities; the drivers behind migration policy in Singapore; and the migration industry. These projects have yielded extensive publications, including working papers, reports, policy briefs, conference papers and peer-reviewed journal articles.

We have also worked hard to make our research findings accessible and relevant. We conducted closed-door meetings with the government, developed strong

relationships with local migrant worker NGOs, and gave public seminars. We produced three short films about women's, men's and children's experiences of migration – '**Ceria**', '**Gone Home**', and '**Small Town, Big Dreams**' respectively – and a multimedia project on 'maid agents' in Singapore, titled '**The Cost of Care**'. We hosted four major public symposiums under the auspices of the ARI Asia Trends lecture series (with much help and support from our excellent ARI events and administrative team!). We also saw our research published in two Straits Times articles, and started our own series of social media channels on Twitter, Facebook, and Mailchimp.

While our partnership with the Consortium has formally ended, the MOOP team at ARI's Asian Migration Cluster continues to work on this wealth of data, keeping in mind the original goals of the Consortium, which is to make the life and labour of migrant workers in Southeast Asia legible so that we, in turn, may find ways to support them.

Please visit <https://migratingoutofpovertysg.org/> for our publications and films.

# RELIGION AND GLOBALISATION

DR AMELIA FAUZIA

Over the past few months the Religion and Globalisation Cluster hosted five conferences. First, *Temples, Trust and Trade: Chinese Temple Networks in Southeast Asia* hosted by Kenneth Dean on 21-22 November 2017, focused on exploring the role of and interaction between the Chinese temple, family lineage, and native place association networks in Southeast Asia, based on local historical sources. Second was *The Politics of Distribution: Migrant Labour, Development and Religious Aid in Asia* hosted by May Ngo on 16-17 November 2017. It examined topics on contemporary forms of distributive practices in Asia and how religion affects these practices. The third conference, *Civil Islam Revisited: Indonesia and Beyond*, took place on 23 October 2017, hosted by Gustav Brown and Amelia Fauzia. The conference covered the relationship between civil Islam and democratisation and pluralism in Muslim-majority countries at the current time. Two other conferences were organised in collaboration with the USP. One took place in Penang, Malaysia, hosted by Bernardo Brown entitled *Intersecting Mobilities: Southeast Asia from the Perspective of Religious Mobility* and one took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand, hosted by Amelia Fauzia entitled *Muslim Mobilities in Southeast Asia*.

Some articles written by previous and current cluster members are being published in a series on Religion and

NGOs in the blog of Oxford Department of International Development, starting from 21 January 2018. Michael Feener and Philip Fountain, editors of this series, wrote an introduction entitled 'Religion and NGOs: Understanding New Global Configurations of Humanitarian, Development, and "Faith-based" Institutions'. Other writings include articles by Amelia Fauzia on transnational Muslim relief work in Myanmar, Giuseppe Bolotta on a Catholic NGO in the slums of Bangkok, Gustav Brown on inter-faith management of religious NGOs in Indonesia, Catherine Scheer on Protestant Christian missionary engagements with minority cultures in Cambodia, and May Ngo on Christian organisations working with irregular migrants in Morocco.

Furthermore, books and articles were published in the course of 2017 by cluster members. Among them are a book entitled *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore, 1819-1911* (Kenneth Dean), articles 'Islamic Philanthropy in Indonesia: Modernization, Islamization, and Social Justice' (Amelia Fauzia, *Austrian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*), 'The Charitable Activism of Muhammadiyah during the Colonial Period' (Amelia Fauzia, *Journal of South East Asia Research*), and 'Review on Descending Dragon, Rising Tiger: A History of Vietnam by Vu Hong Lien and PD Sharrock' (Mok Mei Feng, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*).

## ASIAN URBANISMS

DR FIONA WILLIAMSON

We may be a small cluster, but we have been busy over the last few months! Congratulations to Creighton Connolly, Sonia Lam, Desmond Sham, Rita Padawangi (SUSS) and Hamzah Muzaini (SEA Studies, NUS; PI) who were awarded \$80,000 from the National Heritage Board for a grant project entitled: 'Mapping the Southern Islands' Heritage Landscapes: Integrating Culture and Nature in Heritage Conservation Approaches'. More on this to come.

Associate Professor Ho Kong Chong (AUC leader incumbent) and Research Fellow Minna Valjakka convened the panel 'Community Farms, Gardens and Ponds in the City' for the 14th International Asian Urbanization Conference: Sustainable Development Goals in Asia, Bangkok, 11-13 January 2018. Minna's paper discussed 'Green Empowerment: Activism, Aesthetics and Engagement in Hong Kong' (<http://www.arch.kmitl.ac.th/auc2018aura/>).

Fiona Williamson presented a paper exploring intersections between climate and health in historic Georgetown, Penang, at the annual History of Medicine in Southeast Asia (HOMSEA) conference held this year in Vientiane, Lao PDR, 15-17 January (<https://www.facebook.com/events/810402899139820/>).

The big news of course is that this semester sees the departure of Prof Mike Douglass from ARI after 5 and half years and, indeed, his departure from Singapore. A workshop was held on 5 January, *The City in Space and Time*, the aim of which was to draw attention to the many areas of research he has been involved with during his time at ARI (<https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Event/Detail/4401fb87-dc50-4487-8124-7ce6ccce4d98>). You can read about Mike's experiences at ARI in full in his interview by Minna Valjakka featured in this issue. Everyone in the AUC wishes Mike the best for all his future endeavours.



## PROFESSOR JOHN MIKSIC WINS THE INAUGURAL SINGAPORE HISTORY PRIZE

Renowned archaeologist and NUS Southeast Asian Studies Professor John Miksic, who is also a former ARI researcher, was awarded the inaugural Singapore History Prize on 11 January 2018 for his book *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800*, which presents the history of Singapore in the context of Asia’s long-distance maritime trade in the years between 1300 and 1800. The Singapore History Prize

is awarded every three years to an outstanding publication that has made a lasting impact on our understanding of the history of Singapore.

Read more here: <http://news.nus.edu.sg/highlights/archaeologist-wins-inaugural-singapore-history-prize>

## LONG SERVICE AWARDS

**Ms Kalaichelvi Krishnan** was awarded the Pingat Bakti Setia by the President of Singapore during the National Day Awards Investiture 2017 for her long service of 25 years in NUS.

**Ms Saharah Abubakar** (10 years) and **Prof Mike Douglass** (5 years) received long service awards from NUS in February 2018.



# BEYOND BEDOUIN AND BANIA: ARABIA-SOUTH ASIA RELATIONS

DR NISHA MATHEW

The Fourth Muhammad Alagil Conference organised by the Muhammad Alagil Chair in Arabia-Asia Studies, in collaboration with the Middle East Institute, NUS, was held on December 7-8, 2017 at ARI.

*Titled Beyond Bedouin and Bania: Arabia-South Asia Relations*, the conference hosted historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, Islamic Studies scholars and archaeologists working on a diverse range of themes defining this wide geographic belt.

Stretching from East Africa at its furthest end in the West to parts of Southeast Asia in the East, the Arabia-South Asia Corridor if one may call it so, is a historic geography that has drawn much less scholarly attention than it deserves. Part of the reason has been the optic of labour migration, a mid-twentieth century phenomenon with which we have generally viewed Arabia-South Asia relations. The sheer numbers of migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka working in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries and their roles in these oil economies have truncated our thinking on this trans-regional geography, reducing it to a mid-20th century development. Such a view has the effect, whether intended or not, of putting the state at the centre of the debate. There is yet another reason why we have not explored the depths of this geography, and that lies in the constitution of History as a discipline with its particular kind of spatial and temporal conceptions. Dividing up the social, cultural and economic constituencies of this belt into individual nation-states and territorially contiguous regions, we have focused on how such manufactured political entities and spatial units evolved through the centuries in a linear march towards the present. Historians captured this evolution of the nation-state in the all too familiar pre-

modern, early modern and modern pasts or the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial periods, with each remaining a distinct specialisation on its own.

The conference was an attempt to bring together scholars who challenge some of these fundamental assumptions in their research and to look at Arabia-South Asia relations in a new light. Day one of the two-day long conference opened with an introduction by Prof Eng seng Ho, the Muhammad Alagil Chair in Arabia-Asia Studies at ARI and Director, Middle East Institute, where he outlined the aims of the conference and the broad intellectual vision of the project. Mr Muhammad Alagil, Chairman of Jarir Investment, Saudi Arabia, meanwhile talked briefly about how Arabia-South Asia have constituted the living histories of people in both regions and need to be engaged with by scholars in those terms.

The first panel on India in Arabia opened with a presentation that addressed how these very histories of the people are now in danger of being rewritten by states, particularly in the Persian Gulf, and how this is done in the vested interests of their nationalist projects. The second panel with its emphasis on the Baluch pointed to certain significant loopholes in the international system of nation states as it prevails in the Persian Gulf where nested sovereignties and flexible citizenship laws continue to define political realities and ensure social stability even in the 21st century.

The presentation by Michael Christopher Low on the panel 'Networks of Imperial Infrastructure' primarily gave an Indian

Ocean context to a modern technology as desalination, illustrating how it emerged as an offshoot of the steamer traffic that connected different ports in British India, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Roy Bar Sadeh's presentation on how Bombay in the late 19th and early 20th centuries became the centre for the evolving hegemony of Arabic as the transnational language of an Islamic modernism ended the first day of the conference.

The second day began with a discussion on syncretic faiths and cultural practices as well as creole scripts defined within the overarching framework of Islam in South Asia. The presenters included Siri Rama, an Indian classical dancer who walked the audience through the various nuances of Hindustani music by pointing to the varied influences from Central Asia and Arabia on a genre identified almost exclusively as Indian.

The two panels that followed focused on intellectual networks across the western Indian Ocean world. Prof John Voll's presentation on Islamic scholarly networks linking South Asia and Arabia in the 10th and 11th centuries emphasised the need to broaden our analytical concepts to reflect the many shades and nuances of this connection as a religio-cultural domain. The conference ended with concluding remarks by Nisha Mathew on how we need to work with new concepts of time to capture the full depth of South Asia-Arabia relations as trans-regional connections.

**Details of upcoming ARI events are available at: <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Event>**