

62. Contested Knowledge and Unsolved Questions of Representation in Authoritarian Southeast Asian Contexts (Workshop)

Oliver Tappe, Universität Heidelberg

Regional Group „Southeast Asia“

Discussant: Rosalie Stolz, Freie Universität Berlin

Authoritarianism comes in different guises in Southeast Asian societies. Having concrete effects on academic projects and biographies, authoritarianism has certainly left its imprint in Southeast Asian anthropology in recent years. This panel explores processes of concealing and contesting knowledge against the backdrop of authoritarian interventions – explicit or implicit – into academic life and research. What are the perceptions and strategies of local and foreign anthropologists within the tightening limits of scientific freedom in Southeast Asia? At the same time, unsolved questions of representing Southeast Asia in (anthropological) research persist. This panel seeks to address these and other themes with the aim in mind of bringing attention to ongoing, less discussed panacea of knowledge generation and dissemination in anthropological research in and on Southeast Asia while also hinting at specificities of Southeast Asia contexts and potential pathways of addressing and, first of all, conceiving, these challenges. Moreover, we try to discuss current anthropological research in the context of academic decolonization and investigate processes of decolonizing knowledge from below and above.

We invite contributions that address, among possible others, the following themes:

- How to address politically sensitive issues with regard to the security of Southeast Asian anthropologists and research partners, and other questions of research ethics
- Instances of self-censorship in research and wording
- Contested knowledge of the past in Southeast Asia and conundrums of historical anthropology
- Local notions of knowledge, the drawbacks of knowing and the politics of ignorance
- Persistent issues of representation and decolonialization of knowledge generation on Southeast Asia.

Anthropology and Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia

Oliver Tappe, Universität Heidelberg

In many Southeast Asian countries, academics are facing increasing challenges concerning scientific freedom and research conditions, ranging from threats to physical integrity to more moderate restrictions and intimidation, at worst resulting in a climate of fear and self-censorship. As anthropologists work within specific social configurations of academic collaboration with local research partners, activists and informants, they have to deal with particular sensitivities, responsibilities, and ethical considerations (including social media activity).

This pattern reflects authoritarian tendencies not only in dictatorships like Myanmar but also in democracies where investments in education dedicated to national development have also fostered international prestige and national soft power. Restrictions to politically sensitive research in Singapore, arbitrarily enforced *lèse-majesté* laws in Thailand, intimidations from nationalist groups in Indonesia – those are only a few examples of how academic freedom and knowledge production are infringed in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, unsolved questions of representing Southeast Asia in anthropological research persist. Limits to academic freedom certainly affect attempts of decolonizing knowledge. As an introduction to this panel, my paper addresses some key issues that will inform our discussion on authoritarian tendencies in Southeast Asia and the implications for anthropological research.

Being Like a Pseudo-Insider: How a Filipino Ethnographer Deals with the Lao State and its Representatives

Floramante S.J. Ponce, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Since the early 1990s, the post-1975 Lao state has demonstrated greater openness not only to new international investors and market players, but also to foreign social scientists. This development has started to churn out studies illuminating the dynamics of Lao society and its complex relationship with the Lao state. It is an arduous task to carry out long-term fieldwork in Laos as in other socialist countries in Asia whose governments try to control its people's economic, political, and social life. This stems from the ways in which the Lao state and its apparatuses conduct surveillance of foreign researchers and the latter's activities in field sites. The obscure process of obtaining research permits – what Sarah Turner (2013) refers to as 'red stamps and gold stars' – also poses another difficulty in doing fieldwork in Laos. Methodological reflections on

various strategies employed by foreign researchers to confront the foregoing fieldwork issues do exist. These reflections have been done mostly by researchers from the Global North, however. As a Filipino social anthropologist, I aim to bridge the gap by throwing new lights on dilemmas of conducting research in and generating knowledge about Laos. I particularly juxtapose Western social scientists' fieldwork experiences in Laos with my encounters with the Lao state and its representatives from different scales as well as with my research techniques. The discussion of how I gained and suffered from my position as a Filipino/ASEAN scholar could also broaden our understanding of how to deal with Lao state actors and decolonize anthropological knowledge production in Laos and in Southeast Asia.

Doing ethnography amidst China's rising academic influence in Northern Thailand: Methodological challenges, ethical dilemmas, knowledge opportunities

Simon Rowedder, University of Passau

Much recent public debate and academic scholarship on China's rising economic and political influence in Southeast Asia has highlighted tirelessly the significance of 'soft power'. While largely focusing on the indeed visible role of the Confucius Institutes, often embedded in local universities, in disseminating Chinese language and culture to foster its image as a benign regional power rich of civilization, a more profound critical analysis of China's broader academic influence is rather missing. In this presentation, I fill this gap by focusing on multifarious forms of Chinese political-cum-academic entanglements at two universities in Northern Thailand (Chiang Mai University and Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai). As these institutions have been important collaboration partners for my ethnographic research in Southeast Asian borderland perceptions of Chinese development, I reflect through various examples on the ethical challenges of navigating China's increasing leverage on drafting curricula, supplying teaching materials, setting up research centres/programmes and, most importantly, designing and funding specific research agendas. While this leads to alarming developments among some Thai scholars increasingly aware of China-sensitive topics, resulting in instances of self-censorship or attempts to censor me as an outside researcher, I also witnessed some promising, genuinely intellectual exchanges between Chinese and Thai scholars. I therefore invite to a discussion on how the latter have the potential of mutually produced new perspectives on and knowledge of Chinese Studies and Southeast Asian/Thai Studies, thereby emancipating from China's authoritarian control of knowledge.