

## **AMSEAS Annual Workshop**

### **China's Presence in Mainland Southeast Asia Today**

Workshop to be held on Friday 21 June 2019

Sydney Southeast Asia Centre (SSEAC), University of Sydney

Organiser: Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars  
Kearrin Sims (Treasurer), Patrick Jory (President)  
and Melissa Crouch (Secretary)



Sponsored by the Asian Studies Association of Australia

### **About the Workshop**

The peoples of the mainland Southeast Asian countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, have a long history of relations with China. These relations covered the areas of trade, migration, religion and culture, and occasionally, conflict. The colonial period and the Cold War significantly disrupted contact between the two regions, but with China's opening up and economic rise in the last 40 years relations have resumed arguably with greater intensity than at any time in recent history. As China seeks to convert its economic power into further regional influence this workshop aims to provide a clearer picture of the current relationship between mainland Southeast Asian countries and China. It will also consider its significance at a time of growing geo-political tension in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Workshop will give particular attention to four broad themes:

- (i) security and shifting geopolitics in mainland Southeast Asia;
- (ii) national politics, in particular how China's authoritarian model is affecting political development in mainland Southeast Asian states;
- (iii) economic and social change in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and
- (iv) Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence operations in mainland Southeast Asian countries.

For more information on AMSEAS, see our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/AMSEASAustralia/>.

## **Workshop Schedule**

### **8:00 - 9:00 Registration**

---

### **9:00 – 9:30 Welcome**

Dr Patrick Jory, President of Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars (AMSEAS) and Senior Lecturer

### **9:30 – 10:30 Panel 1: China’s Presence in Myanmar**

---

Chair: Associate Professor Melissa Crouch, Secretary, AMSEAS

Speakers:

Vo Xuan Vinh, China’s Influence in Myanmar since March 2011: Remaining the Upper Hand

Gillian Fletcher & Myint Zaw, Damming the Tide of Unsustainable Development? Myanmar Civil Society’s Struggle against Chinese Hydropower in Kachin State

### **10:30 – 11:00 Morning Tea**

---

### **11:00– 12:30 Panel 2: China’s Presence in Cambodia**

---

Chair: Dr Kearnin Sims, Treasurer, AMSEAS

Speakers:

Brandais A York, A Marriage of Convenience: The Historical, Political, and Economic Relationship between Cambodia and China

Sreang Chheat, China’s Rising Presence, Contestations, and State Responses: Cheay Areng Dam in Cambodia

Sovinda Po, The Rise of China and the Decline of Democracy in Southeast Asia: The Case of Cambodia

### **12:30 – 1:30 Lunch**

---

### **1:30 – 3:00 Panel 3: The Belt and Road Initiative**

---

Chair: Dr. Huong Le Thu (Australian Strategic Policy Institute)

Speakers:

Amorisa Wiratri, The Role of Chinese in Enhancing Border Development in Southeast Asia

Kearnin Sims, Unpacking China’s ‘Presence’ in Northern Laos

Ruixin Yang, Friendly Neighbours? Chinese Anthropologists’ Imagination of the Mainland Southeast Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative

### **3:00 – 3:30 Afternoon Tea**

---

### **3:30 – 4:30 Panel 4: China’s Soft Power**

---

Chair: Kearnin Sims, AMSEAS

Speakers:

Hari Hong Nguyen, Dynamics of the China Influence in Vietnamese Contemporary Politics

Gregory Raymond, Buddhism and China’s Goals in Mainland Southeast Asia

## Paper Titles, Abstracts and Author Bios

### 8:00 - 8:30 Registration

---

### 9:00 – 9:30 Welcome

---

Patrick Jory, President of Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars

### 9:30 – 10:00 Panel 1: China’s Presence in Myanmar

---

Chair: Melissa Crouch, Secretary, Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars

#### **China’s Influence in Myanmar since March 2011: Remaining the Upper Hand**

Vo Xuan Vinh, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences  
voxvinh@gmail.com

After the event of March 2011 in Myanmar, the semi-civil government’s suspension of China’s big investment projects was considered as evidences for the decline of China’s influence which had been strongly dominant since 1988. It was believed that the influence of Western countries would bolstered in Myanmar. However, regardless of the landslide victory of National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015, China has remained the largest trading and second largest investment partner of Myanmar. The paper argues that besides the dependence on China in terms of economic development through trade and investment relations, Myanmar also needs the supports of China in the negotiations with ethnic armed groups to conclude the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). No less importantly, the pressure posed by United Nations and many countries on Myanmar government and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi regarding the Rohingya issue has forced Myanmar to search for more supports from China.

Dr. Vo Xuan Vinh is the Deputy Director General, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hanoi. He has conducted research on Myanmar for about a decade. He has completed research projects on Myanmar reforms and maritime security in Southeast Asia. He has published a book and for research papers on Myanmar reforms. Dr. Vinh is the author of books, monographs, chapters and research papers on issues of geopolitics, maritime security, politics and international relations in Southeast Asia. He is now leading a two-year research project on Australia-ASEAN relations.



#### **Damming the Tide of Unsustainable Development? Myanmar Civil Society’s Struggle against Chinese Hydropower in Kachin State**

Gillian Fletcher & Myint Zaw, Paung Ku, Myanmar  
gfletcher@ltu.edu.au

In 2006, Myanmar’s military regime signed a US\$3.6 billion deal with China’s state-owned electricity producer the China Power Investment Corporation to build eight dams in Kachin State. The biggest of these—at 152 metres (500 feet) high and 152 metres wide—was to be at Myitsone. Myitsone is both a site of deep cultural significance to the Kachin people, and the start of the Ayeyarwaddy River.

When people from all walks of life and from across the country came together to protest against the scheme, they created what was probably the first mass protest of its kind in Myanmar against inappropriate development.

The dam scheme was suspended; but recent events show clearly that the Chinese government is determined to push ahead with the project. This paper will explore the political, economic and cultural complexities of the long-running battle between civil society and the Chinese and Myanmar governments over the Myitsone hydropower scheme. Further, we will set the case study in the context of an ongoing crackdown on civil society activism by the Myanmar government.

Gillian Fletcher and Myint Zaw both work with Myanmar's leading local civil society networking and capacity strengthening organisation, Paung Ku. Dr Myint Zaw has been closely involved in the Myitsone protest, while Dr Fletcher works with the whole Paung Ku program.



---

### **10:30 – 11:00 Morning Tea**

---

### **11:00– 12:30 Panel 2: China’s Presence in Cambodia**

Chair: Kearnin Sims, Treasurer, AMSEAS

#### **A Marriage of Convenience: The Historical, Political, and Economic Relationship between Cambodia and China**

Brandais A York, University of Western Australia and Indonesia Institute of Sciences  
brandais.york@unimelb.edu.au

Since the 2013 election, the mounting discontent against the Cambodian government has been met with harsh government oppression. Peaceful protests have been met with surprising levels of police brutality, civil rights leaders have been jailed, and a prominent and outspoken political commentator has been murdered. The 2018 election solidified the fears of the development community; the Cambodian government is now officially authoritarian.

Simultaneously, the long running political and financial ties between Cambodia and its neighbour China have recently come to attract escalating attention from both the media and civil society. China has influenced Cambodia’s leaders on and off for decades - the former King Sihanouk’s self-imposed himself to exile in Beijing in the 1970’s – but when Cambodia reportedly took the side of China in the case of the South China Sea dispute in return for millions in aid and loans, it sparked further interest in the relationship between these two powers.

This paper will use the most recent election as a case study to explore this relationship, outlining a history of Cambodian dependence on and great respect for its neighbour, while analysing how this may be impacting diplomatic negotiations between the two.

Brandais York is a PhD Candidate at Melbourne Law School, in affiliation with the Melbourne Social Equity Institute's Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies. Coming from a background of practical experience in development, Brandais' research explores the intersections between law and development, gender and migration, and foreign influence and shifting legal norms. Her doctoral thesis examines Cambodian female marriage migration to China. Brandais holds an MSc in Global Migration from University College London as well as an MA in Public Policy and International Affairs from The American University of Paris.



### **China's Rising Presence, Contestations, and State Responses: Cheay Areng Dam in Cambodia**

Sreang Chheat, School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland  
s.chheat@uqconnect.edu.au

China's rising presence and influence in Cambodia has been felt in Cambodia. Since 2010 China has become the biggest donor in Cambodia. Beijing's aid to Cambodia reached 13.9 percent of the total aid to Cambodia in 2010, surpassing Japan and any other bilateral or multilateral aid. In 2018 Beijing's aid peaked at 20.6 percent of the total aid to Kingdom. Chinese investment in the country has topped any other countries at least since 2012 reaching 29.9 percent of the total investment capital in Cambodia in 2016. China has been the main investor and builder of the seven dams in Cambodia. It is in this sector that socio-political ramifications of Beijing's increasing influence could not have been more prominent especially when one of the dam projects, Cheay Areng dam, to be financed and built by China, has been suspended as a result of popular resistance. While this suspension may be seen as an 'outlier' in the China-supported development landscape in Cambodia, it also reflects the entanglement that results directly from China's rising influence and investment. This paper, that will form part of my PhD thesis, seeks to discuss the nature of this entanglement, contestation and state responses using the Murdoch School's political economy approach.

Sreang Chheat is currently a PhD student at the University of Queensland. Their working thesis title is state responses to contestations over China's rising presence and influence in Cambodia. Before joining this PhD programme, they held a few academic positions in Cambodia, including managing academic and research programs at the Center for Khmer Studies and Cambodia Development Resource Institute, lecturing and providing research consultancy.



### **The Rise of China and the Decline of Democracy in Southeast Asia: The Case of Cambodia**

Sovinda Po, Griffith University and Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace  
sovinda.po@griffithuni.edu.au

Right after Cambodia's crackdown on the opposition party, free press and independent media, civil society in 2017, several dire criticisms and condemnations from the West, including the US, were

aired, demanding the Cambodian government to restore back democracy. In a different light, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed Chinese buttress towards Cambodia, stating that China will stand by the Cambodian side to safeguard its sovereignty, independence, and stability against foreign interference in Cambodia's domestic affairs. The aim of this paper is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Chinese influence on Cambodia's domestic politics. Primarily, this study intends to answer the question why China supports Cambodia's move towards an authoritarian and one single-party state. The study will employ foreign policy analysis framework put forward by J. David Singer; that is, international system and national state. The analysis within this framework is based on my personal interactions with both Cambodian scholars and policy makers as a researcher at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and Chinese academics and policymakers during my stay in China from 2016 to 2018 and the email interviews with other Chinese scholars and the existing secondary sources such as journal articles, online archives, and news reports.

Sovinda Po is a PhD student in International Relations at Griffith University, and a Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.



---

### **12:30 – 1:30 Lunch**

---

### **1:30 – 3:00 Panel 3: The Belt and Road Initiative**

Chair: Patrick Jory

Speakers: Amorisa Wiratri, Kearnin Sims, Ruixin Yang

#### **The Role of Chinese in Enhancing Border Development in Southeast Asia**

Amorisa Wiratri, University of Western Australia and Indonesia Institute of Sciences  
amorisa.wiratri@gmail.com

Belt Road Initiative in Southeast Asia become one of very ambitious projects in the last decade. China tries to accelerate the connectivity among many countries in mainland Southeast Asia. Through infrastructure development projects, China bring their own labours to Southeast Asia. However, the migration among Chinese to Southeast Asian countries has already run for many years. This study examines the role of Chinese migrants, including temporary and diaspora in strengthen the development of border area. This study argue that Chinese migrants have very powerful part in support to the development. Moreover, this study takes qualitative approach through observation, in-depth interviews and review literature. This study tries to answer the following questions: how was BRI impact to the development of Vietnam and Thailand border and what are the role of migrants in the border development. This study aims to obtain how migrants taking part in the development process.

Amorisa Wiratri was born in Yogyakarta, on 7 June 1983. She studied Cultural Anthropology in 2002 for her bachelor. In 2008, she moved to Jakarta and has worked as researcher in Research Centre for Regional Resources (PSDR), Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and engage in



many research on social science, particularly in Southeast Asian studies. In 2010, she got scholarship from Australian Government for Master program in Flinders University, Adelaide and obtained MA degree in Women's Studies in 2012. Now, she is pursuing her PhD degree in University of Western Australia in Anthropology under the Australian Award Scholarship.

### **Unpacking China's 'Presence' in Northern Laos**

Kearrin Sims, James Cook University  
kearrin.sims@jcu.edu.au

China's growing presence in Mainland Southeast Asia is pervasive. Yet, the modalities of Chinese investment flows and Chinese-funded projects often lack transparency or have 'blurred' financial and political boundaries – at least to non-Mandarin speaking observers. As such, 'Chinese' involvement in investment projects is often invoked by academics and media commentators without clarity. In this paper I focus on a Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in northern Laos as a case study for unpacking the different scales and modalities at which China is 'present'. I demonstrate that distinctions between Chinese state and private sector funding are not easy to untangle, and that both forms of investment are enmeshed with Chinese migration and tourism flows, agribusiness ventures, and small-scale entrepreneurialism that extend beyond the boundaries of the SEZ. Whether or not the SEZ can be considered a feature of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 'going out' strategy also remains contestable, as the SEZ simultaneously supports and contests the CCPs geostrategic interests. What this case study demonstrates is that careful nuance is required when examining Chinese engagement with Mainland Southeast Asia and beyond.

Dr Kearrin Sims is a critical development scholar trained in sociology and international relations. Kearrin has a keen interest in China's growing presence in Mainland Southeast Asia, and particularly how the Belt and Road initiative is transforming the livelihoods and wellbeing of impoverished communities. Kearrin coordinates and lectures into James Cook University's (JCU) Master of Global Development.



### **Friendly Neighbours? Chinese Anthropologists' Imagination of the Mainland Southeast Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative**

Ruixin Yang (Alex), Australia National University  
yrxalex@gmail.com

Southeast Asian studies have always been essential to the development of overseas anthropology in China. Being geographically and culturally close, along with the significant overseas Chinese population, Southeast Asian societies continuously provide the unparalleled experimental field for Chinese anthropologists to explore the foreign world and to reflect on the Chinese society. Resonating with the Belt and Road initiative, Chinese anthropologists are aggressively expanding and deepening their research in this region, from the transnational marriages along the borderlines to the shifting politics in Myanmar and Thailand. This study mainly selects all published articles in anthropology from two prominent Chinese journals in Southeast Asian studies, the Southeast Asian Studies and the Southeast Asian Affairs, as well as other relevant influential articles on other

anthropology journals between 2010 to 2018, to showcase how the Chinese academia in anthropology imagines and depicts Southeast Asian societies. The comparison of the anthropologists' holistic understanding of the societies between before and after the Belt and Road initiative may shed light on China's future strategies in mainland Southeast Asia.

Ruixin Yang is a recent ANU graduate, passionate about religious anthropology in mainland Southeast Asia. Benefited from his Chinese background, Alex is currently undertaking research on Chinese scholars' epistemology in the field of Southeast Asian studies.



---

### **3:00 – 3:30 Afternoon Tea**

---

### **3:30 – 4:30 Panel 4: China's Soft Power**

Chair: Kearrin Sims

Speakers: Hari Hong Nguyen, Gregory Raymond

#### **Dynamics of the China Influence in Vietnamese Contemporary Politics**

Hai Hong Nguyen, Queensland University of Technology

haihong.nguyen@qut.edu.au

This paper investigates the influence of China factor in Vietnamese contemporary politics. That said it will not look at the historical connections between the Communist Party of Vietnam and its Chinese comrades, but rather examines how China has attempted to influence the political elites in Hanoi since the two countries normalized their diplomatic relations in early 1990s. Based on its analysis, the paper argues that even though Vietnamese polity is said to be divided into pro-China and pro-Western camps there is no reliable source to confirm this view while in reality China's influence has been diminishing and even is seen by the CPV as a sensitive issue that can threaten its legitimacy. A series of issues and events, including the propagation of the brief but bloody war between the two communist countries in 1979 in recent years will be chronologically reviewed to support the paper's argument. However, the paper also acknowledges that due to the geographic proximity, the ideological similarity, and trade interdependence, for a short term, China still exerts some influence on whoever elected to the top post of the CPV.

Hai Hong Nguyen holds a PhD in political science (UQ 2015). Currently Hai works for Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as an international development officer and researcher. His first book published by Palgrave McMillan in 2016 is on local democratization in Vietnam. At present, Hai is editing another monograph based on papers presented at a symposium on democratization in southeast and east Asia held in Hanoi in 2018. Hai's research focused on democratization, democratic theory, local governance and democracy, state-society relations, the impact of social media on political transformation, international relations in the Indo-Pacific region, and particularly Vietnamese politics.



## **Buddhism and China's Goals in Mainland Southeast Asia**

Greg Raymond, Australian National University  
greg.raymond@anu.edu.au

Shared values and a worldview based on Confucianism were central components in the China-centred tributary system which emerged in Northeast Asia in pre-colonial times. China is now a key player in the increasing integration of mainland Southeast Asia and may well envisage a new tribute system being enacted through forums such as the Lancang Mekong Cooperation forum. But if it is to do this, trade, hard infrastructure, developmentalism and neoliberalism may be insufficient to engender a sense of shared outlook. Does Buddhism offer an alternative cultural resource for this purpose? China has begun to deploy Buddhism as a softpower cultural resource in tandem with its Belt and Road Initiative, including in mainland Southeast Asia as well as South Asia. For example, it is inviting Buddhist leaders from mainland Southeast Asia to conferences, including the Chong Sheng Forum held in Dali, Yunnan. This paper will document this outreach and consider its implications, including its likely effectiveness in mainland Southeast Asia as a softpower adjunct to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Gregory Raymond is a Research Fellow in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University researching Southeast Asian security issues. He is the author of *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (NIAS Press, 2018). He is currently writing a book, with John Blaxland, on Thailand's relations with the United States and China, to be published by Routledge.



## **Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars Committee**

### Event organisers

Dr Kearrin Sims is the Treasurer of AMSEAS. Kearrin is a critical development scholar trained in sociology and international relations. Kearrin has a keen interest in China's growing presence in Mainland Southeast Asia, and particularly how the Belt and Road initiative is transforming the livelihoods and wellbeing of impoverished communities. Kearrin coordinates and lectures into James Cook University's (JCU) Master of Global Development.

Dr Patrick Jory is the President of AMSEAS. He is a senior lecturer in Southeast Asian history at the School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland. Patrick is the author of *Thailand's Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (2016) and has edited several volumes, the most recent being *The Ghosts of the Past in Southern Thailand: Essays on the History and Historiography of Patani* (2013). Patrick has also published widely in a range of peer-review journals, including the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and the *Journal of Asian Studies*.

Associate Professor Melissa Crouch is the Secretary of AMSEAS. She is based at the Law Faculty, the University of New South Wales, Sydney. She teaches and researches on law and religion, law and governance, and comparative constitutional law, with a specialization in Southeast Asia. She has been awarded numerous grants, including the Endeavour Australia Research Fellowship; University of Indonesia Visiting Fellowship; and the University of Melbourne Kathleen Fitzpatrick Visiting Fellowship. She is Chief Investigator on an ARC Discovery Grant on "Constitutional Change in Authoritarian Regimes" (2018-2021). Melissa is the author of *Law and Religion in Indonesia: Conflict and the Courts in West Java* (2014) and *The Constitution of Myanmar* (2019), and editor of several volumes, the most recent being *The Politics of Courts: Judicial Reform and Legal Culture in Indonesia* (CUP 2019); and 'Islam and the State in Myanmar: Muslim-Buddhist Relations and the Politics of Belonging' (OUP 2016). Melissa is also the Secretary of the Asia Studies Association of Australia (ASAA).