

DEPARTMENTAL SEMINARS (2008)

SE6770 GRADUATE RESEARCH SEMINAR 2008

Wednesday, 5 November 2008, 2.30 – 5.00 pm
AS3, Level 6, SEASP Seminar Room (06-20)

ABSTRACT

This module, a Faculty requirement since 2004, is intended to encourage scholarly interactions among the graduate research students. Under a lecturer's guidance, the students have engaged with each other during the past months, and now share their thoughts with the wider community. They hope to attract comments and suggestions for the further development of their thesis projects.

THE SPEAKERS

Part One:

1. Alice Yap Boon Hui (PhD student) - *Vihara Buddhagaya Watugong – created and creating: Of Man, materiality and activities*
2. Waranya Pimsri (MA student) - *A case study of the construction of a rural database in Thailand*
3. Noorul Habib Bin Abdul Guduse (PhD student) - *Malaysia-Singapore relations: Economic interdependence and the question of conflict*

Part Two:

1. Tan Lee Ooi (PhD student) - *Religion in the public sphere: Habermas model vs. Southeast Asian experience*
2. Deborah Lee (MA student) - *Original soundtrack: Hearing Thailand through cinema*
3. Jean Tan Ming (PhD student) - *Indonesia's foreign policy after Suharto: Bringing Leifer in*

PUBLIC DEBATES ON THE MALAYSIAN NATION AND MALAYSIAN HISTORY

Professor Cheah Boon Kheng
Visiting Professor, Department of History, NUS

Wednesday, 22 October 2008, 3.30 - 5.00 pm
AS3, Level 6, SEASP Seminar Room (06-20)

ABSTRACT

Historical discourses and politics are central to intellectual or public debate. In Malaysia the concept of a "Malaysian nation" frequently arouses intense debate among nationalist politicians and ethnic and regional minorities as well as the way history is popularly perceived. When politicians lay superior claim to authority over the past, the competing histories in the public debate and race politics reduce the professional historian to a state of irrelevance. My paper will survey some of the current problems in Malaysian historiography, especially the representation of ethnic and regional minorities and their critique of the concept of 'nation' in the face of nationalist attempts to impose a position of hegemony.

THE SPEAKER

Cheah Boon Kheng is Visiting Professor at the Department of History, National University of Singapore. He is the author of several books including *Red Star Over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941-1946* (1983) and *Malaysia: The Making of a Nationa* (2002).

PEJENG TYPE BRONZE DRUMS AND THEIR POSSIBLE ROLE IN EARLY RICE CULTS IN BALI

Dr Ambra Calo

Wednesday, 15 October 2008, 3.30 - 5.00 pm
AS3, Level 6, SEASP Seminar Room (06-20)

ABSTRACT

In this seminar we inquire whether bronze drums of the 'Pejeng' type played a role in rites associated with rice cultivation in Bali during the early first millenium AD. This would trace to the Metal Age the roots of the subak irrigation system, which is first mentioned in inscriptions dated to the eleventh century AD; the term for irrigated rice fields (*sawah*) appears as early as the ninth century AD. The role of Pejeng drums in early rice cults is suggested by the fact that the drums are mostly found in the vicinity of sources of irrigation water, whether lakes, springs or weirs in rivers. The shape and decoration of Pejeng drums are paralleled in modern representations of female deities associated with rice and irrigation water. The latter arose from a pre-Hindu substratum and were integrated into the Hindu-Balinese pantheon. Rites devoted to such deities are held today at sources of irrigation water, such as where water first enters fields (*bedugul*) and crater lakes, the highest sources.

THE SPEAKER

Ambra Calo lives in Bali. Her mother tongue is Italian. She received her BA in Psychology and Non-Western Art History in 1994 from the University of California San Diego (UCSD). While enrolled there, she studies the language and culture of Indonesia at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. Her MA at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, involved research on Chinese and Southeast Asian bronzes at the British Museum. From 2005 to 2007 she conducted research in Indonesia (Bali, Java, Sulawesi, Tanimbar, and Kei), the northern and central highlands of Vietnam, and Yunna and Guangxi, China. In November 2007 she received her PhD in Archaeology with a dissertation on *Transitions of Feather World - The Distribution of Bronze Drums in Early Southeast Asia* from SOAS. In the past three years she has excavated at Co Loa, north Vietnam, Ban Non Wat, northeast Thailand, and Pulai Ai, Indonesia.

Recently she studies heritage on the south coast of Lombok, Indonesia, for a tourism and mixed-use project. Her article "Heger I Bronze Drums and the Relationships between the Dian and Dong Son Cultures", in *Interpreting Southeast Asia's Past: Monument, Image and Text*, has just been published by NUS Press.

THE POLITICS OF THAI EDUCATION: REFORM AND DECENTRALIZATION

Dr Michelle Tan, Postdoctoral Fellow
Southeast Asian Studies Programme, NUS

Wednesday, 3 September 2008, 3.30 - 5.00 pm
AS3, Level 6, SEASP Seminar Room (06-20)

ABSTRACT

The political and social reform project in Thailand of the 1990s included an attempt to reform the basic education system, which in turn integrated decentralization as one of the major reform components. This presentation explores the politics of policy implementation through the lens of decentralization and is also thus a case study of contemporary Thai bureaucracy. In both the Ministry of Education's 'internal' deconcentration and 'external' decentralization to local bodies, iron triangles involving critical national-local vote bases — permanent bureaucrats, elected politicians, and 'grassroots' vote canvassers — influenced both policy design and implementation. This study thus explores centre-local relations in terms of their legal or administrative, fiscal, and factional political dimensions.

THE SPEAKER

Michelle Tan recently completed her Ph.D. in politics at the University of Leeds in the U.K. Prior to her Ph.D. studies, she was a lecturer at Thammasat University in Thailand and has worked for a variety of non-governmental organizations in the U.S. and Thailand. She completed her undergraduate degree in government and philosophy and post-graduate degree in public policy at the University of Texas at Austin. Born in India, she grew up on the U.S.-Mexican border.

THE TRANSITION FROM BRONZE-IRON AGE TO BUDDHISM IN MYANMAR

Elizabeth Moore & Terence Tan

Wednesday, 27 August 2008, 3.30 - 5.00 pm
AS3, Level 6, SEASP Seminar Room (06-20)

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Moore and Terence Tan in their paper, the Transition from Bronze-Iron Age to Buddhism in Myanmar, compare artefacts from the Samon and Pyu cultures of Upper Myanmar. The Samon sites extend from Halin to Pyinmana with the Samon culture dated to circa 600 BC - 400 CE. The most noteworthy aspect of the Samon finds is their uniqueness: the majorities are not found outside the central zone of Myanmar. The Samon chiefdoms were displaced by 'Pyu' Buddhism kingdoms in the early centuries CE, when the links to Yunnan fade away and new artistic and proto-urban criteria are seen. These include enclosure of sites that include royal and religious areas and a range of terracotta and precious metals used to make ritual and ornamental objects. As with the Samon culture, the most significant aspects of the Pyu assemblages are unique to Myanmar. The contrast between the Samon and Pyu cultures highlights both an intensification of religious and social ranking, but also reflects fluctuating competition in relations between Myanmar, midway between Yunnan and South Asia. The South Asian influences

initiated in the Pyu cultures have been sustained until this day, as has the unique character of Myanmar culture in Southeast Asia. In addition, the unbroken Buddhist sustenance from circa 300 CE to the present gives Myanmar a unique legacy amongst the Theravada cultures of the region.

THE SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Moore is a Reader in the Art & Archaeology of Southeast East Asia and Head of the Department of Art & Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Recent and in press publications include: *Early landscapes of Myanmar*, River Books, Bangkok (2007); 'Astrology in Burmese Buddhist culture, Decoding an illustrated manuscript from the SOAS Archives', *Oriental Art*, October 2007:38/8: 79-85; 2007; 'The Gold Coast: Suvannabhumi? Lower Myanmar Walled Sites of the First Millennium A.D.' With San Win. *Asian Perspectives*. (2007) January 46/1: 202-232; 'Buddhist narratives and the ancient topography of Dawei' *Buddha and the Sacred Mountain* (ed P. Gutman). Bangkok, Silkworm Press (2008); 'Place and space in early Burma: a new look at 'Pyu Culture'' *Journal of the Siam Society* (2009).

Terence Tan lives in Yangon, Myanmar. He received a diploma in 1980 on Aquatic Technology from Yangon University, and a BSc in 1982 on Zoology. Changing disciplines, he then did a diploma in 1987 at the Asia Institute of Gemological Science (AIGS) Diploma, AIGS, Bangkok, which led in turn to another diploma in 2001 in Archaeology from Yangon U. Yet more degrees and diplomas followed: in 2004 he obtained a Master of Public Administration (MPA), Yangon U., in 2006 a diploma from the Gemological Institute of America, New York, and another in 2008 in Anthropology, Yangon U. He is now pursuing further studies on "Ornaments: comparative study of technology, style and meaning in Dvaravati and Pyu art", at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. He will present a paper on "Changing Technology, Ornaments from Prehistory to Proto-History in Thailand and Myanmar" at the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists 12th International Conference (EurASEAA), 1-5 September, Leiden, the Netherlands 2008. His book entitled *Ancient Jewellery of Burma* is in press with Orchid Press, Bangkok. He and Elizabeth Moore have just published "Eyes on the Past: Samon and Pyu Beads in Myanmar" in *Arts of Asia* 38.

UNDERSTANDING THE FANATIC MIND? THE VIET MINH AND RACE HATRED IN THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

Assoc Prof Shawn McHale
George Washington University

Friday, 9 May 2008, 3.00 - 4.30 pm

ABSTRACT

Our understanding of the Vietnamese resistance war against the French (1945-54) is still heavily focused on the themes of revolution, nationalism, and organization. It is a somewhat antiseptic narrative, one which is divorced from the actualities of Vietnamese popular culture. This talk contests the dominant view of the war. It will take a bottom-up approach, focusing on the Mekong delta during the First Indochina War. At the center of the analysis are some fascinating and disturbing Viet Minh texts on cannibalism, race hatred, and race transformation. Why did the Viet Minh circulate such texts, and why did it believe audiences would be swayed by them? This talk

will assess some common arguments used by social scientists to explain the rise of fanaticism (e.g. the role of endemic violence, the breakdown of state control, and the breakdown of social trust). I will argue that many of these arguments are insufficient, reductionistic, and ignore culture. Culture, it turns out, is part of the explanation. But how?

THE SPEAKER

Shawn McHale is Associate Professor of History and International Affairs George Washington University Washington, DC 20052 USA. Currently, he is on leave at Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

MATERIAL RELIGION IN SINGAPORE

SPEAKERS

Assoc Prof John Whalen-Bridge (English Language & Literature, NUS)

Dr Margaret Chan (School of Social Sciences, SMU)

Dr Julius Bautista (Asia Research Institute and Southeast Asian Studies Programme, NUS)

Wednesday, 9 April 2008, 4.00 - 5.30 pm

AS7 Shaw Foundation Building, Level 1, Faculty Lounge

ABSTRACT

1. Assoc Prof John Whalen-Bridge

What is a Relic? The Buddha's Tooth in Singapore (with attention also to eyebrows and general grooming habits)

In July 2007, The Straits Times published stories asserting that the object which the Buddha's Tooth Relic Temple had been built to enshrine was a fake, a cow's tooth rather than a human tooth. The paper received dozens of letters, and the event was debated within the Singapore blogosphere. A web page dedicated to revealing and ridiculing the people fooled by hoaxes picked up the story as well: "My favorite line from the Channel NewsAsia article: Renowned artist Tan Swie Hian says, 'I don't mind praying to a buffalo's tooth provided I'm told it is one. Let me get it right before my prayer.'" Many Singaporeans have taken umbrage with assertions that the authenticity of the tooth should never have been questioned. Channel News Asia quotes Buddhist Studies scholar John Strong (author of Relics of The Buddha) on the matter. Strong's responses are quite apt and were very likely completely misunderstood. The historical question, he said, would be impossible to resolve, but he also said that "Buddhist belief that relics are 'alive' and can multiply: 'I have no doubt that the Singapore relic is religiously authentic.'" Conventional notions of authenticity do not apply here, and for good reasons. My paper will explore dimensions of this event that extend far beyond the simple question of whether or not the temple was scammed. Attention to actual Buddhist practices in Singapore in relation to several centuries of Buddhist discourse about relics and other holy objects lead one to consider the possibility that the question of "authenticity" itself needs to be examined carefully. Finally, this talk will use the occasion of the Buddha's tooth problem to discuss the possibilities of "crossings" between religious belief, everyday secular life, and theories of religion as developed within scholarly communities. The tooth is in the temple, but it also exists within public space, and within the walls of academe. The tooth, we might say, incarnates variously within these diverse spheres.

2. Dr Margaret Chan

The Image as Magical Doorway in Chinese Popular Religion

The worship of images, such as statues of gods, is enshrined in the practice of Chinese popular religion for it is believed that the image is a potent source of transcendental power.

This inherent spirit power of the image is unleashed through the ritual of kai guang (开光 Enlightening ceremony) where the image is marked with blood or red ink. Offerings are made to images and this worship adds to the spirit power of the image itself while enriching the spiritual capital of the being upon which the image was modelled.

Prayers at an image call out the spirit from the image in order to perform the bidding of worshippers. I propose that the worshipped image functions as a magical doorway between mortal and spirit realms. Spirits use these energised images as portals through which to enter into the earthly realm. I argue that this magical quality of images is owing to its metaphysical nature as a “double-nature-being” for the image is at one time both sign and referent. A statue of the Monkey God is either clay or wooden object as it is the representation of the spirit of the Monkey God.

The actor is also a “double-nature-being” as he is both him/herself as well as the portrayed character. In these terms, it is argued that the highly theatricalized performances of the tang-ki Chinese spirit medium is less about audience appeal, than it is about magic ritual that enables a god to enter the earthly realm in order to render help to devotees.

In tang-ki possession, a god takes over the body of a mortal medium. The god moves the medium who might therefore be regarded as abject puppet. However this view derives from secular notions of theatre as entertainment. Traditional Chinese theatre derives from religious origins, and it is the very magic of theatre which stages the image as “double-nature-being” that enables the mortal medium to transmogrify into a god incarnate.

The very emblem of the transformative power of the image is the puppet. Puppets featured in ancient funeral processions and masked actors were also named puppets. The etymology of the character kui (puppet), written as 傀 is indicative of the “double-nature-being” of the puppet being possessed both of anthropomorphic “mortal” form, as it is replete with 鬼 spirit power.

3. Dr Julius Bautista

Icons in Motion: Studying Material Religion Post-Iconography

This paper will comment upon the methodological and theoretical aspects in the study of material religious culture. “Iconography” as a methodological approach has an inheritance in the field of art history. There is a sense, however, that a museological approach alone is insufficient in understanding the whole spectrum of material religious culture. What is the role of objects and things in the lives of the faithful? In this paper I will discuss the extent to which an understanding of material religion can and should draw from a wider range of human experience.

THE SPEAKERS

John Whalen-Bridge teaches courses in American literature in the Department of English Language and Literature and is co-editing a series of books on Buddhism and American culture for SUNY Press. He is also convenor of the Religious Studies Minor Programme at NUS and is active in the Religion Clustre of FASS. Somewhere between the time when Madonna's "Material Girl" peaked as the #2 Billboard hit (1985) and when "Like a Prayer" made it to #1 (1989), Whalen-Bridge officially became a practicing Buddhist. While some would argue that all attempts on the part of Whalen-Bridge to develop equanimity have been futile, to date no one publicly declared him to be a fake Buddhist. Whalen-Bridge is considering a larger project on the continuities and discontinuities between aesthetic experience, religious belief, and "knowledge," a project that will, if luck is with Whalen-Bridge, consider the spiritual potential of interstitial zones between the Real and the Fake. Aspiring salesmen are given the mantra, "Fake it 'til you make it," and it may be useful to consider the ways in which fake and inauthentic experience can be an

essential component of real/authentic experience rather than an opposite value from which the real (or true, or authentic) must be purified. One aim of such a study would be to inquire about the conditions--professional, social/national, personal/psychological--shaping one's engagement with Religious Studies. One aim of such a study would be to liberate listeners from the supposition that "religion" is or should be considered an object of enquiry that has been removed from the field of our own needs and desires or those of the society around us.

Dr Margaret Chan is Practice Asst Professor of Theatre/Performance Studies, School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University. She is the Creative Thinking Coordinator at SMU where she also teaches Ethnography and Post-Modern Theatre Studies. Margaret holds a PhD (Royal Holloway, University of London) and an MA (Distinction) (Central School of Speech and Drama, London) in Performance Studies. She was awarded the Overseas Research Students Award, U.K., 1999-2002 and the Thomas Holloway (Royal Holloway, Founder's Scholarship), 1998-2002. Margaret research interest is in the field of tangki spirit medium worship, a signifying cultural practice of the Hokkien, the major community of the Chinese diaspora in Taiwan and South East Asia. In tangki spirit medium worship it is believed that gods possess mediums who become the gods incarnate. Her book *Ritual is Theatre, Theatre is Ritual: Chinese Spirit Medium Worship* was published in 2006 by the SMU, Wee Kim Centre and Singapore National Printers.

Dr Julius Bautista is Lecturer in Religious Studies and Visiting Fellow at the Southeast Asian Studies Programme and the Asia Research Institute (jointly appointed), NUS. He is an ethnohistorian with degrees from the Australian National University and the University of Sydney. He research interests include Christianity in Asia and the theoretical and methodological issues pertaining to the study of religion more generally.

THAKSIN RETURNS(?) AND POST-ELECTION UNCERTAINTIES: A PANEL ON THAI POLITICS

SPEAKERS

Dr Pattana Kitiarsa (Southeast Asia Studies Programme, NUS)
Dr Pinkaew Laungaramsri (Southeast Asia Studies Programme, NUS)
Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun (ISEAS)
Dr Ora-orn Poocharoen (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy)

Wednesday, 20 February 2008, 4.00 - 5 .30 pm

ABSTRACT

Whether coup or election, it is "politics" as usual in Thailand. Since the military or "royalist" coup ended Thaksin Shinawatra administration in September 2006, Thai politics has remained as cloudy and problematic as during a period toward the end of Thaksin regime. In early 2008, Thailand will soon be run by the new coalition government led by Samak Sundaravej and the People Power Party (the reincarnation of Thai Rak Thai Party). However, the questions remain: where would Thai politics go as a result of the December 23, 2007 election? Will the issues of countryside-Bangkok disparities intensify? What are the roles of monarchy and its influential network in the post-election politics? Will Thai military return to their barracks? What are responses to the return of populist politics from the country's urban middle class, i.e., intellectuals, NGOs, and media? Can Thai politics in Bangkok contain the insurgencies in the Deep South? What are the implications of latest political development in Thailand to ASEAN and neighboring countries? This panel will cover these critical questions and open up a venue for scholarly comment and discussion, anchored by specialists on Thai politics and contemporary affairs.