8TH NUS GEOGRAPHY GRADUATE RESEARCH SEMINAR

An online seminar by the GRS Class of 2020

Head of Department's Welcome Address
David Taylor

Session A: Globalising Landscapes
Production & Global–Local Interaction
Aspiration/Migration

Session B: Tackling Environmental Challenges
Climate Governance
Sustainable Environmental Management
Community-Based Adaptation

Friday, 24 April 2020
Presentations

Monday, 27 April 2020
Live Q&A Session
Welcome to the NUS Geography Graduate Research Workshop 2020.

This is the eighth iteration of the workshop that marks the culmination of the Department of Geography’s Graduate Research Seminar (GRS) module each year. All graduate research students in the Department of Geography are required to complete the GRS during their first year of their candidature. The class includes both Masters and PhD students, some of whom only commenced their studies in January. This year’s class comprises 9 graduate research students from a variety of academic and national backgrounds — from China, India, Indonesia, Sweden, and South Korea, as well as from Singapore. Equally varied is the range of research topics members of the class are engaging with, as is evident from the abstracts included in this programme.

The Workshop showcases students’ individual research projects. Within their fifteen minute-long slot, each student will present some or all of the ‘what?’, ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ of their research, describing their respective projects, placing each in its academic context, outlining the significance of their planned work, and detailing how they aim to tackle the underpinning puzzles and problems. Some of the students may even be in a position to present preliminary findings of their research. Most, however, will focus on research that they propose to carry out during the remainder of their time in the Department. It is not easy to expose ideas to scrutiny when, often, much is unsure and unclear. As in previous years, however, the intention of the workshop is that can students learn from presenting their own research ideas, and from receiving feedback in Q and A sessions.

What is very different about this year’s workshop is its extensive use of technology that facilitates presentation and discussion without physical co-presence. That was not part of class members’ original plans, but has of course been necessitated by COVID-19. My thanks to all concerned for having reacted so positively and stoically to several rounds of reformatting of the event as new layers of COVID-related precautions and protocols have been put in place during the semester. Organizing the workshop in this shifting and uncertain context has certainly presented unprecedented challenges. Ultimately, class members decided to upload recorded versions of their presentations for viewing by Friday 24th April, with Q and A sessions to be held separately – through Zoom meetings organized session-by-session on Monday 27th April.

I hope that everyone is able to enjoy the nine presentations from home, and that the remote discussion sessions give rise to the same kind of constructive feedback that has benefitted previous cohorts of GRSers.

Stay safe and well, everyone!

Tim Bunnell
Convener of GRS module, 2020
Session A: Globalising Landscapes

Production & Global-Local Interaction
Huang Kaixuan
Ivan Kurniawan Nasution

Aspiration/Migration
Balawansuk Adreena Lynrah
Sreetama Bhattacharya
Strategic Coupling of the International Hotel Industry in China: A GPN 2.0 Application in Tourism

I intend to explore the geographic complex of the globalization of the international hotel industry and the shifting relationships between transnational hotels and their host regions with the analytical framework of GPN 2.0. The major research question is how a service-based logic of production affects the strategic coupling of global hotel lead firms in China. To be specific, how and why competitive dynamics and risk environments influence modes of strategic coupling of the International Hotel Groups (IHGs) in China. Case studies will be conducted in three Asian IHGs in the Great Bay Area in China, Jinjiang Hotel Group (mainland, China), Shangri-La Hotel Group (Hong Kong SAR, China) and Ascott (Singapore). Qualitative research methods (field investigation, in-depth interview and participant observation) will be used. This research aims to achieve two key objectives: (1) Identifying the general mechanism of the evolution of strategic coupling of transnational service companies and discover new influential factors and evolutionary dynamics from services to refine GPN; (2) Introducing theoretical foundations of GPN into tourism research and enhancing the feasibility of GPN in the studies of service industries.

Huang Kaixuan, PhD Candidate

I am a PhD student in Economic Geography in the Department of Geography, supervised by Professor Neil Coe. Prior to joining NUS, I got my bachelor’s degree in Tourism Management and Planning from Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU), China and my master’s degree in Human Geography and Urban Studies from London School of Economics and Political Science(LSE), UK. I am interested in the globalization of the tourism industry, especially the international hotel industry.
The Production and Circulation of Documents in Assembling Indonesia’s New Capital City Yet to Come

Capital cities have been discussed extensively in the literature. The form of scholarships, however, is often a retrospective thinking of, for example, the built spectacle (e.g. Koch, 2018) or architectural-power relation (e.g. Therborn, 2017), or conducted as a document study around a circulated archive (e.g. Hull, 2012). This research aspires to do otherwise - to closely follow the production of a new capital city and the circulation of the relevant ‘documents’. The ambition of the research to follow mutable and mobile objects in the digital area may reconstitute the notion of ‘documents’, the concept of ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’, as well as the value and belief of the producers (e.g. elites and experts) inscribed in the documents. The inquiry is guided by two main research questions: first, how knowledge is assembled into documents and second, how knowledge travels across different geographies.

Ivan Kurniawan Nasution, PhD Candidate

I am a part-time PhD student under the guidance of Prof Tim Bunnell and a full-time Research Associate at the Centre for Ageing Research in the Environment (CARE), NUS. I obtained a degree in architecture at Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia and a postgraduate training at Berlage Institute Rotterdam, the Netherlands. I worked as a Research Associate at the Centre for Sustainable Cities, NUS (2012-17) and an Architectural Designer at Park+Associates, Singapore (2006-09). My recent publications include “Designing for Resilience in Public Housing: An Architect’s Perspective” in an edited book titled Building Resilient Neighbourhoods in Singapore (Routledge 2019).
Youth Aspiration and Marginalisation in Bodoland, Northeast India

My research focuses on the everyday lives and aspirations of subaltern youth in Bodoland, Northeast India. Bodoland is one of the most violence-ridden areas in this region. It is an ethnically diverse area where the Bodo tribe forms the majority in terms of population. Apart from Bodos, Bodoland has a substantial population of Bengali Muslims, Santals, Rajbongshis, and Adivasis. In post-independence India, these social groups have always been in conflict with each other over the issue of control of the land. The conflict has resulted in the rise of various ethnicity-based 'student unions', which become the de-facto flag bearers of ethnicity-based politics. However, there is a vast population of young men and women in the region who are detached from these politics and for whom life goes on despite all the violence. My research is about the everyday lives and aspirations of these young people, who I call subaltern youth of Bodoland.

Balawansuk Lynrah, PhD Candidate

I am a native of Shillong (India), and hold an M.Phil. in social sciences from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (India) and an MSW from Dibrugarh University (India). In between these two degrees, I have worked as a researcher and social worker in a community based organisation in Chirang district, Bodoland, Assam for seven years. During this period, I travelled widely in Northeast India and beyond, and conducted research, workshops, monitoring and evaluation of projects for various NGOs in the region. I am currently pursuing a PhD in geography at the National University of Singapore under the guidance of A/P Tracey Skelton.
A Gendered View of Cultural Reproduction among Transnational Marriage Migrants

My proposed research takes off from the concept of women as cultural markers/bearers in traditional gender roles. Looking at traditional roles in a transnational context, I will examine how migration affects the normative expectations from women within the family and within the community. Having an inherent interest in what comprises a culture as a discourse, I want to bring men into the picture, and see how we can broaden the understanding of cultural practices to encompass all the different ways that both the spouses are engaged in the practice and reproduction of their culture in their everyday lives. I will try to answer these questions in the context of skilled Indian migrants in Singapore categorised as “foreign talent”. Keeping in mind the changing gender roles as reflected by higher workforce participation of women and their status in Indian as well as Singaporean society, I wish to also explore the difference between different cohorts in their cultural practices as immigrants.

Sreetama Bhattacharya, PhD Candidate

I hold an M.Phil. in Planning and Development from Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and an M.A. in Geography from University of Delhi. I have experience as a senior school educator in Delhi for two years. With a passion for social and cultural geography, and an experience of having lived in Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai at different stages of my life, I am deeply interested in migration and want to explore how migration shapes everyday lives in cities. I am currently pursuing a full time PhD in Geography under the guidance of Shirleena Huang at the National University of Singapore.
Session B: Tackling Environmental Challenges in Southeast Asia

Climate Governance
Melissa Low

Sustainable Environmental Management
Hanna Sundahl
Wong Suyi

Community-Based Adaptation
Ira Martina Drupady
Jeasurk Yang
Transparency of Climate Action and Support: A Study of Southeast Asian Countries

Transparency reporting under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is a key strategy tracking countries’ progress in meeting their climate pledges. Domestically, the preparation of reports help governments and peoples understand their energy systems and needs better, and to find solutions that work under given socio-economic and political circumstances. While there is an important link between international developments and domestic policy making, an existing research gap exists in the social sciences on how climate policy-making can be more effective by measuring the advantages of participation and peer-to-peer exchange in transparency reporting. To understand this, it is important to ask who and what are the key actors and drivers of measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) capacity for transparency reporting? Does participating in transparency reporting lead to greater accountability? In this study, the focus will be on Singapore, with a view to compare climate change governance strategies across other Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam.

Melissa Low, PhD Candidate

I am a part-time PhD candidate under the guidance of Professor David Taylor, and a Research Fellow at the Energy Studies Institute, NUS. I have participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP) for over a decade and am currently the Designated Contact Point for NUS’s accreditation to the UNFCCC. I have a strong interest in building capacity to improve understanding of the implications of the Paris Agreement and countries’ progress in meeting their climate pledges. I hold an LLM in Climate Change Law and Policy (with distinction) from the University of Strathclyde, MSc in Environmental Management from NUS and BSocSci (Hons) in Geography from NUS and am excited to be back for my doctoral studies.
Climate Change Mitigation Through the Sustainable Management of Tropical Peat Swamp Forests in Sumatra

Peatlands are wetland ecosystems with organic-rich soil that cover only about 3% of the Earth’s land surface, yet store 30% of the world’s soil carbon. Emissions from degraded peatlands overall amount to around 6% of overall anthropogenic CO2 emissions, which is almost 25% of emissions from the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry sector. In my project, I will specifically be studying the tropical peat swamp forests (TPSFs) of Sumatra. The inundated state of TPSFs slows down the rate of organic decomposition, creating a carbon-rich ecosystem that functions as a long-term carbon sink. When these ecosystems are degraded, they emit the greatest share of greenhouse gases (GHGs) out of degraded organic soils.

Extensive areas of TPSFs have been replaced with lucrative agriculture such as oil palm and Acacia pulpwood. In order to develop these plantations, canals are dug to drain the water, which removes the anoxic state and speeds up microbial degradation. This releases the stored carbon in the form of GHGs such as methane and CO2 into the atmosphere, as well as in dissolved forms into rivers and oceans. In addition, in this vulnerable state, TPSFs are often set on fire to quickly and cheaply clear the land. Peat fires smolder for a long time, releasing large amounts of GHGs and particles into the air, causing haze like the one experienced across Southeast Asia in 2015. In short, degraded TPSFs shift from serving as a carbon sink to a carbon source.

Clearly, peatland management is a critically important component of climate change mitigation, and I hope to make my small contribution to this growing field of study. I aim to look at what conditions are needed to restore degraded TPSFs, and ascertain ways in which these ecosystems can be used in their naturally wet state (paludiculture) instead.

Hanna Sundahl, PhD Candidate

I am a PhD student in the Tropical Environmental Change group of the Geography Department, supervised by Professor Max Lupascu. Swedish-Norwegian by nature and global citizen by nurture, I am excited to be back in Singapore as this is where my passion for the environment and climate change action was initially cultivated. I have always been a science nerd, addicted to learning about how the world works. These factors together led me to enrol in a Bachelor’s degree in Biological Sciences at the University of Oxford, UK, and later an MSc in Marine Biology at the University of Bergen, Norway (with a field course in Svalbard). In between, I worked for half a year as a PADI Divemaster in the Gili Islands north of Lombok and in the Wakatobi National Park of Sulawesi, Indonesia. I look forward to conducting fieldwork on Sumatra and improving my Bahasa.
Deforestation in Insular Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2020

The forests of insular Southeast Asia are known for their biodiversity and play an important role as one of Earth’s major terrestrial carbon sinks. However, deforestation and forest degradation in the region as a result of land use change brings about serious global consequences such as possible losses in biodiversity due to habitat loss, and diminishing carbon sinks leading to increases in carbon emissions which contribute to carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere. The documentation of forest cover change in insular Southeast Asia is important as it would enable us to observe and highlight deforestation and forest degradation trends. The generated forest cover maps will also support research or policy initiatives in fields such as biodiversity conservation or climate change mitigation. My research will be focused on the use of technology to include regional classifications such as forest timber and pulp plantations, and palm oil estates for a more representative forest cover map of insular Southeast Asia. With the use of satellite images, machine learning techniques and GIS, we will be able to extract, analyse and view forest change data at a spatio-temporal scale which would be challenging through field techniques alone.

Wong Suyi, Masters Candidate

I am a part-time Masters candidate supervised by Dr Lu Xi Xi in the Department of Geography and a full-time staff with the Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing (CRISP) at NUS. I hold a Bachelor of Science in Applied Mathematics from NUS and am interested in the development of technology and machine learning techniques that can be used to facilitate data collection, analysis and management processes across different industries.
Understanding the Role of Women in Urban Energy Poor Communities in Indonesia: from Energy Security to Climate Resilience

Building resilience has become an important policy objective for cities, particularly in the face of climate change. Moreover, urbanisation patterns worldwide seem to indicate that second-tier cities will be experiencing the most dramatic growth and therefore the brunt of climate change disruption. Yet, such cities are studied less often and are under-theorised (Bell & Jayne, 2009).

My research contributes to a small aspect of urban and community resilience theory and practice, focusing on interlinkages with gender and energy access. The unit of analysis in my research are energy poor communities in and around second-tier cities in Indonesia.

As the disproportionate burden of energy poverty on women has been widely acknowledged and its implications well documented (Clancy, Skutsch, & Batchelor, 2003) (Oparaocha & Dutta, 2011) (Mohideen, 2012), my research specifically seeks to identify the formal and informal roles women play in their communities to improve energy access. The rationale being that access to basic energy services plays a central role in alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerabilities; and that bottom-up social innovations are a primary source of resilience (Mehmood, 2015).

I hope to use energy access as a different perspective to theorise on urban and community resilience, as a small contribution toward mainstreaming gender in climate adaptation policy.

Ira Martina Drupady, PhD Candidate

I am a part-time PhD student under the guidance of Professor David Taylor and a full-time Research Associate at the Energy Studies Institute (ESI), NUS. Prior to joining the Department of Geography, I obtained my Bachelor of Arts (Political Science and European Studies) and Master in Public Policy degrees, both also from NUS. Although it may seem like I am completely devoted to NUS, I did manage to have another life. I spent three years consulting for Government of Australia aid programmes in Indonesia on climate change financing, forestry sector governance and the green economy. I also supported Indonesian local government capacity-building efforts in East Java, East and West Nusa Tenggara, Papua and West Papua. My interest in energy access and development was ignited during my two-year research project across ten countries in Asia for the MacArthur Foundation. This resulted in my co-authored book “Energy Access, Poverty, and Development: The Governance of Small-Scale Renewable Energy in Developing Asia“ (Ashgate 2012).
Uneven Collective Action on Climate Change Adaptation of Urban Slum Communities in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Discussion on adaptation of the urban poor is focused on their social capacities to act collectively. This is apparent in literature on slum communities in developing countries where both markets and the government generally fail to provide an increasing slum population with sufficient amenities. There is, however, also a misconception that collective action would evenly work as an alternative solution for adapting to climate change in local communities. This research is to refute this misconception, examining how collective action can be geographically uneven due to (1) exclusiveness, (2) homogeneity, and (3) unsustainability. To sum up, the following question emerges: which socioeconomic and political conditions determine the uneven capacities and results of collective action on adaptation of slum communities? The pathway approaches will be used to illustrate the uneven pathways of adaptation occurring in communities. Slum communities in Jakarta are chosen as cases because of increasing needs for them to adapt collectively considering extreme physical and socioeconomic vulnerability from sea-level rising and neo-liberalization. The question contributes to the current discussion on climate change adaptation by challenging the misconception and providing how to improve bottom-up adaptation in communities of the developing countries.

Jeasurk Yang, PhD Candidate

I am a full-time PhD student under the guidance of Professor Miles and Taylor. Slums spreading throughout the world are what I want to study about, making me read books all night. Specifically, I am interested in how urban slum people can adapt effectively to climate change. I have been to slums in Cambodia, Tanzania, Senegal, South Korea, and Mongolia for projects and a Master program in Seoul National University, witnessing how the slums are extremely vulnerable to climate change. Considering the still increasing number of slum populations, I believe that my research would make a better world by promoting sustainable development and climate change adaptation in the urban poor settlements.