

## Panel Proposal for 10<sup>th</sup> EuroSEAS Conference 2019

**“Already Southern China or still Northern Southeast Asia?”**

**Local Engagements with and Translations of  
Chinese Regional Aspirations in the Upper Mekong Region**

Convener:

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Format: Single Session (1 x 90 minutes, 3-4 presenters)

Like elsewhere in the world, Southeast Asia has been witnessing an ever-growing Chinese geo-economic presence, ranging from large-scale resource extraction, Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to rapidly expanding infrastructure projects, also leading to unprecedented Chinese urban structures of supermarkets, hospitals, clinics, hotels, guesthouses, entertainment venues, restaurants or car repair shops in previously rather rural settings. Within Southeast Asia, it is arguably the borderlands of the Chinese province of Yunnan, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand—the Upper Mekong Region or the Thai-Yunnan Borderland—where these recent dynamics are most visible as well as mostly discussed.

Looking at Chinese ambitions in northern Laos, for instance, there is a burgeoning scholarship on Chinese “enclaves” and “instant cities” (Nyíri 2012, 2017; Tan 2017) which see Laos’ national sovereignty undermined or “commodified” primarily in exceptional spaces such as SEZs (Laungaramsri 2015), indicating China’s “soft extraterritoriality” (Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011). Proceeding from recent research in northern Laos and northern Thailand, this panel seeks to bring together further regional ethnographically informed case studies to reflect a more nuanced and grounded research on everyday encounters—involving a diverse range of both Chinese and local actors—in rather non-exceptional, thus ordinary and mundane, localities and settings. This panel will pay closer attention to ways whereby Chinese newcomers, more established Chinese residents and local dwellers from a multitude of ethnicities—including Chinese descent—imagine, articulate and concretely live this Chinese presence on the ground, which do not necessarily exclusively entail antagonism.

Along the conceptually broad, and thus interdisciplinary, nexus of borders, mobility and (new) infrastructures, this panel is particularly interested in how this broad range of actors, both local and Chinese, engage with and discursively translate larger Chinese ideological vocabularies and visions of modernity, development, globalisation (i.e. “globalisation with Chinese characteristics” *zhongguo tese quanqiuhua*) as well as infrastructural connectivity, recently formulated as the “Belt and Road Initiative”. In doing this, this panel hopes to contribute to a more profound understanding of local quotidian borderland realities variably affected by, and responding to, increasingly influential Chinese regional and global aspirations.