

ABSTRACT

STUDYING SOCIAL SILENCE AND AGENCY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: POLITICS AND STRATEGIES OF THE UNSPOKEN

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This panel reflects on the multifaceted presences of social silence in the face of political exclusion in Southeast Asia. While silence is often associated mainly with the result of oppression or repression, this panel deliberately shifts the focus to the active ways in which people maintain silences to sustain their everyday lives and social worlds. Recent approaches in anthropology theorize silence as a presence rather than an absence. Bringing these insights to bear on the politics of exclusion and “othering” that haunt the public spheres of many Southeast Asian countries, we ask: When, how and why has silence been a strategy for ordinary people, historically and in the present? How do such strategies interact with social and political forces of exclusion? How does the navigation of silence and speech relate to the politics of visibility and transparency? We also reflect on the ethical, epistemological, and methodological conundrums of studying the unspoken in politically sensitive contexts. How do we encounter silences, and to what extent may we interpret them? How do we respect silences in our writing and which silences may better not be probed at all? Aiming to bring together scholars studying different countries in Southeast Asia, who draw on their own research experience in reflecting on the unspoken and unspeakable, this panel contributes to a growing academic attention to the range of relations between silence and politics.

Panel format: Single session