Panel title: **Engaging in Existential Mobility in “Zomia”**

Scholarship on borderland studies in Southeast Asia has distinctively grown over the last 20 years, thanks to the endeavor of many academics in the field. Their efforts have not only made us appreciate the ethnographies of diverse peoples, cultures, political structures and ecological systems, but the new concepts of interpretation and analysis are a departure from the conventional state-centered orientation. These new concepts include “zomia” (by Willem van Schendel and James Scott), “middle ground” (by Patterson Giersch), “friction” (by Anna Tsing), and “process geography” (by Arjun Appadurai). Over the years, they have inspired brilliant explorations and debates. Echoing this exciting trend, we propose to make mobility as a vantage point to examine the dynamics of zomia. Ghassan Hage asserts: “We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better” (2005: 470). In other words, human beings intentionally move from a place to another in order to make life better. This is what Hage calls “existential mobility.” Consequently, it brings human beings into contact with other people(s), diverse ways of life and different political institutions. Through the vantage of mobility, we treat history as a process with ongoing changes, and emphasize the aspects of relationality and adaptability. We emphasize continual movement and circulation of people, goods, capital and ideas, and go beyond the binary constraints of lowland versus highland. Our papers examine the economic, political and cultural trajectories of several communities/groups by focusing on mobility and engage in a dialogue with relevant theories and notions.

Convener:

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Discussant:

Willem van Schendel (Professor in Modern Asian History, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam) [h.w.vanschendel@uva.nl](mailto:h.w.vanschendel@uva.nl)

Presenters:

Gunnel Cederlöf (Professor, Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, Linnaeus University) [gunnel.cederlof@lnu.se](mailto:gunnel.cederlof@lnu.se)

Presented title: Migration and imperial competition for the Shan-Dai territories in late 19th century

Jianxiong Ma (Associate Professor, Division of Humanities, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) [hmjxm@ust.hk](mailto:hmjxm@ust.hk)

Presented title: The dissemination of Big Vehicle Religion and networks of transportation and migrations in the frontiers between Yunnan and Burma from 17th to 18th centuries

Edyta Roszko

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Presented title: Multiple mobilities in and out of the South China Sea

Wen-Chin Chang (Research Fellow, Research Center for Humanities and Social Studies, Academia Sinica) [wencc@gate.sinica.edu.tw](mailto:wencc@gate.sinica.edu.tw)

Presented title: The Yunnanese mule transport commissioned by the British authorities

**Migration and imperial competition for the Shan-Dai territories in late 19th century**

Gunnel Cederlöf

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Years of political turbulence and popular upheaval in the later 19th century framed the transformation of the Shan-Dai polities in the large hill territories bordering on and partially claimed by Burma, Yunnan, and Siam. After British colonial conquest of Burma (1887), British, French and Qing forces moved into these polities, claiming authority and land. As a result, both the systems of tributary relations that upheld the polities’ external relations and the political organisation internal to the Shan-Dai territories changed. The unstable situation in the larger region opened for various large-scale migration flows that integrated into the Shan-Dai polities and changed the demography. Particularly the migration of Jinghpaw (Kachin) from the north into the northern Shan-Dai territories in search of land and opportunity resulted in competition for resources and violent confrontations.

This paper focuses on the first encounters of British forces and Shan-Dai polities from 1887–1893, and studies British methods of securing control of territory and people. It seeks to explain the means by which the British confronted the heads of polities with claims of sovereignty, and British part in violent conflicts. As a mode of operation, it is conceptualised as the integration of armed and bureaucratic violence.

**The dissemination of Big Vehicle Religion and networks of transportation and migrations in the frontiers between Yunnan and Burma from 17th to 18th centuries**

Jianxiong Ma

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

This research aims to study the weaves of immigrants from inner provinces to Yunnan along with the extension of religious network based on Big Vehicle Religion (Da Cheng Jiao), especially during the period when the mining industry developed and became flourishing from the 1680s to the 1820s. The peak of the Big Vehicle Religion movement was from 1720s of Qianlong reign, when the network of believers among immigrants quickly extended along the main transportation routes from western Yunnan and the newly opened waterway for copper metal transportation between Yunnan and neighboring provinces. This route consisted of transportation by mule caravan from Yunnan and Burma frontiers to northwestern Guizhou and then extended to water transportation from the ports along the Yangtze River to Beijing through the Great Cannel. Since the 1740s the penetration of religious teachings was more effective than that of the state institutions, to the regions under the jurisdiction of native chieftains, by maintaining some distance away from county government, Confucian literati and village gentries in a frontier geography. However, as the Qing government declaimed the banning of different branches of Big Vehicle Religion in 1739, as the social response toward the official policy, leaders and actors in the sphere of social mobility on the newly developed economic sections, such as migrants involved in the construction of mining systems, businessmen for long distance trade, and workers for transportation services all tended to hide their religious teaching through secret societies. This was required for the purpose of providing an institutional mechanism for internal connection and mutual protection beyond the realm of governmental bureaucracy. This system extended quickly in the following century, from the transportation centers to the mines in mountain areas in the frontiers, where certain special institutions beyond the jurisdictions of native chieftain and county government existed. In sum, this research focuses on the reconstruction of frontier societies, which was related to the flourishing of mining industry and local militarization during the middle and late Qing dynasty due to the dissemination of religious network and mobility of immigrants in southwest frontiers of China.

**Multiple mobilities in and out of the South China Sea**

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I engage with Chris Hann’s concept of Eurasia and his focus on interconnectedness and commonalities within the ‘supercontinent’, which is conventionally thought of as divided into two continents, Europe and Asia. As Hann and others show, the idea of ‘Europe’ is based on particular Western geographical imaginaries that have only relatively recently become hegemonic on a universal scale. Taking the interconnected singularity of the ocean rather than the Eurasian supercontinent as a starting point for understanding non-Eurocentric connectivities, I propose a new paradigm—Transoceania. Transoceania emerges from the discontinuous and wavering landforms in the great singular ocean, rising in the guise of what Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) poetically calls ‘the repeating island’—of languages, ethnicities and traditions—that gives shape to complex, non-linear and fragmented transoceanic genealogies and connectivities. These transoceanic connectivities and genealogies do not exclude continents; to the contrary, they connect continents but—turning European hegemony on its head—tie them more closely to the rhythms of the sea tides and the monsoons. Following Benítez-Rojo’s the ‘repeating island’ approach, I trace dispersed ethnic networks and circulations taking place across the South China Sea, but geographically, politically, and economically condensed into nodal points of small islands and minor ports throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. I show that in the 21st century, these networks and circulations come to the fore in new configuration beyond the South China Sea. Transoceania thus foregrounds the seafaring peoples who have always been mobile, thereby connecting various continents and ocean basins beyond territorially bounded nation-states and homogeneous national histories. In doing so, I am responding to Hann’s plea for a more thorough engagement with the Indian Ocean world, specifically by focusing on maritime connectivities and mobilities.

**The Yunnanese mule transport commissioned by the British authorities**

Wen-Chin Chang

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This paper examines Yunnanese participation in the mule transport commissioned by the British authorities in Burma during the colonial period. Owing to the border disputes between the Qing court and the British government, the Chinese government banned Yunnanese from engaging in this transport and labelled those breaking the law as “Han traitors,” and punished the ones caught. However, many Yunnanese residents risked their lives in this venture. The issue of the long-distance mule caravan trade between Yunnan and upland Southeast Asia is well known and has been extensively investigated by colonial officers and academics. Relevant research topics include the transport history, the caravan organization, trading routes, transported goods and their volumes and prices. However, the mule transport commissioned by foreign authorities, which was termed *tuo-yang-jiao* (馱洋腳), has unfortunately never been explored. I reconstruct the organization of this (particular) venture based on colonial archives from the British Library and relevant Chinese publications. The main issues I tackle are the dependence of the British on the Yunnanese for the transport and the arrangement of contracts between the two parties. I also explore the nature of the contracts in terms of rental terms and conditions on the needed numbers of mules and muleteers, the service duration, the load carried by the mule, the content of the transported goods, and potential risks during the service. I have sought to interpret the political structure of this expansive borderland which accommodated multiple powers ranging from local and regional to international. Lastly, I have tried to understand the continuation by ordinary Yunnanese of this long history of mobility and engagement in mule conveyance, in the midst of political entanglement.