Panel proposal for EuroSEAS conference 2024

Historicizing Chinese Labour in Southeast Asian Mining: mobilities, networks and practices

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Format: Panel (double session)

We aim at a regionally comparative panel which brings together researchers specialising on both mainland and insular Southeast Asia. This means exploring the specific (pre)colonial legacies and sociocultural particularities of the different mining frontiers involving Chinese actors in Southeast Asia. We offer the floor to historians, archaeologists and anthropologists working on historical and present mining contexts in Southeast Asia. This panel constitutes a transdisciplinary and regional endeavour to investigate the Chinese factors in Southeast Asian mines.

Panel description:

The intensifying Chinese mining investment across contemporary Southeast Asia has stimulated deeper historical inquiries into the interconnections between mining histories and Chinese labour in the region. This cross-border conversation brings in two perspectives: Regional dynamics and community organisation on the ground, with a particular focus on ‘Chinese’ actors, their social networks, mobilities, and practices.

This panel explores the diversity of dynamics of Chinese mining labour in precolonial Southeast Asia as well as under colonial rule. Yunnanese miners in imperial Vietnam, Hakka mining communities in British Malaya, other diverse Chinese migrants in insular Southeast Asia – the patterns of governance and organisation of mining sites, and the inherent sociopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics, deserve closer empirical scrutiny. These case studies would also address broader conceptual questions, such as how extractive activities defined communities’ relations with the environment, and how Chinese mines (re)produced institutional particularities (for example, monetary regulations and miners’ associations).

We invite researchers interested in historical migration routes from ancient mining sites in China to new mining frontiers in Southeast Asia, corresponding transfers of labour capital and technical skills, and the sociocultural dynamics of the emerging, culturally diverse mining communities. We will discuss how these transboundary historical processes entail socio-spatial reconfigurations, and how they inform present-day patterns of mobility and investment in the Southeast Asian mining sector.