**AMSEAS Conference 2021:**

**“Mainland Southeast Asia: Control and Resistance”**

**ABSTRACTS**

**1. Plastic Constellations and Actor Insights in Thailand**

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Thailand’s plastic represents an unfinished juncture between the local and global world which implies a complex embeddedness of different actors. In 2018 there was a public outcry when it was discovered that 500 plastic waste containers amounting to 20 tons from 35 countries such as China, Japan, and the United States, were being stored at the Laem Chabang port. This research views plastics as cultural artefacts that represent different phases of humankind. This paper applies a theoretical perspective from Latour on actors and environmental justice to unveil the insights of a range of actors in Thailand in different roles and contexts.

This research uses a systematic macro-analysis of social meaning and a documentary analysis technique to garner data from newspapers and literature. This objective of the research is to provide a global description of China’s power over plastics in Thailand. The Thai government has postponed a plastics ban due to potential losses to the recycling industry and its inability to reject the imported plastics. In the local community, the collective resistance of civil society remains strong, with calls for ecological modernisation to effect change in the use of plastics, while the Thai government applies selective plastic agendas. This research uses a comprehensive framework to analyse the problem of plastics in Thailand and envisages a future discourse about the use of plastics.

**Keywords**: plastics, actor, environmental justice, Thailand

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**2. Towards the ‘Expanded Field’ of Environmental Activism in Cambodia**

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Through the analysis of the visual and discursive practices and repertoires of – the now banned former NGO – Mother Nature Cambodia (MCN) and the independent think tank Future Forum, my presentation seeks to open up a conversation about contrasted aspects of environmental activism in Cambodia today. I propose to compare the current public forms of control and resistance (‘against the state’, ‘for nature’) of the two organizations by building on the notion of ‘expanded field’, initially an art historical concept redrawing the boundaries of and connections between art and architecture in the context of emergent postmodernism (Krauss, 1979). Using as a starting point for my discussion a diagram similar to the one used in the demonstration at the time, I examine the discourse and action of MCN and Future Forum at the intersection of two conceptual sets: 1) ‘environmental subject’ (Agrawal 2005) and ‘ecological citizenship’ (Dobson 2003, van Steenbergen 1994); 2) (post-)colonial sustainability and decolonial resilience. As hermeneutic device, the ‘expanded field’ will help me investigate the relationships between contentious politics, representational regimes, and the visibility of environmental struggles in Cambodia. It will provide elements for answering the questions – ongoing in the study of activism and collective action in Southeast Asia – whether we now attend the emergence of radically new forms of mobilization, and if so, how we can define them.

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**3. Learning to Transform Bangkok: The Roles of Thai CSOs in Transnational Knowledge Flows**

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Thai civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as essential players in Thai environmental governance. The key strategies they employ include monitoring the environmental impact of state and corporate investments, bridging the gap between local communities and authorities, and circulating knowledge to address practical issues. Several studies have examined their contribution, almost all of which focused on their positive effect. This paper interrogates the scholarly consensus by critically analysing the roles CSOs played in the Tree Care Training Program, a citizen-led initiative that brought tree experts from Singapore to improve municipal workers’ tree-pruning practices in Bangkok. As it demonstrates, the key Thai CSOs had both positive and negative impact on this transnational knowledge flow. On the one hand, they successfully connected the municipal officials with the foreign experts by organising demonstrative workshops, which was critical to the circulation of the arboricultural technique. On the other hand, they privileged the input of these foreign experts, neglecting frontline tree workers’ experiences and Bangkok’s specific urban context, in the process severely undermining participants’ learning outcomes. The paper argues that a more inclusive approach, meshing global expertise and local experience, is imperative if we are to maximise the benefits of transnational knowledge circulation.

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**4. Destroying the Good with the Bad: Farmers’ Attitudes and Beliefs and Pesticide Overuse in Northwest Cambodia**

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Insect pests are a serious problem for rice farmers in Cambodia, threatening livelihoods, and food security. To protect their yields, farmers are dependent on broad-spectrum pesticides, which are often the only available form of pest control. However, pesticides are often used incorrectly – too often, and at high quantities – killing good insects and allowing harmful ones to flourish. This overdependence on pesticide has had severe impacts for human and environmental health. Is pesticide dependency itself creating more problems than it solves? Using survey data from five rice farming communities, this paper explores the contribution farmers’ attitudes and beliefs about insect pests and pest management make to their decisions about pesticide use. As it demonstrates, these attitudes and beliefs tend to perpetuate the overuse of pesticides even in situations where they result in evident harm. As the paper argues, it is necessary to assess these and other reasons behind pesticide dependence in order to identify alternative pest management strategies that are both relevant and acceptable to Cambodian rice farmers.

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**5. Kirin in the Chinthe’s Territory: The Presence of Chinese Films in British Burma, 1925-1927**

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This article examines the presence of Chinese films in Burma in the 1920s through the lens of film censorship. As an initial step I intend to answer some basic and fundamental questions: which kinds of Chinese films were introduced into Burma from 1925 to 1927? Which kinds of Chinese films were banned in Burma and why? Who went to watch Chinese films in Burma? The preliminary argument is that in the 1920s Burma was a rising and special overseas market for Chinese films. Chinese film audiences in Burma were probably not low-class *petty urbanities /小市民* such as shop clerks and workers, as suggested by the scholarly literature. Rather, it was Cantonese and Fukienese working as traders and craftsmen, together with some Burmese, who constituted the main audiences for Chinese films.

A preliminary study on the Chinese film market in Burma in the first half of the twentieth century is yet to come. There is a growing literature on the presence of Chinese films in Nanyang in the first half of the twentieth century, a long-forgotten field in Chinese film studies. In these limited numbers of literature, much spotlight is in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Burma has slipped into oblivion. I hope to draw an academic attention to this long-forgotten country in a long-forgotten domain.

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**6. Rule of Law for Political Gain: Trends in Civil Society in Lao PDR**

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The tendency in Southeast Asia is to use legislation not only as a way to showcase steps towards the increased rule of law, but also as a political tool to control and influence political opponents and government critics. This paper focuses on changes to civil society legislation in Lao PDR, especially the 2010 Decree on International Non-Governmental Organizations and the 2017 Decree on Associations in the Lao PDR. This research uses a qualitative research design that combines cross-regional trends and draws on extensive interviews and legislative review in Lao PDR. I argue that whereas legislative changes across the region are used to increase control and intimidation, the use and enforcement of the law by governments varies significantly, as are the responses and strategies by civil society actors. Whereas some countries use defamation chargers as a means to suppress government critics and intimidate the political opposition, in the Lao PDR the legislation allows for red tape and approval delays that reduce international influence, alongside high-profile disappearances. Key strategies by local actors include the creation of social enterprises and vocational training centres, building relationships, and focusing on wording.

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**7. Old Burmese Weights were not Opium Weights. They were Weights. What Else do we Know about Them?**

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Bronze weights from Myanmar (old Burma) as well as Thailand and Laos, are often identified by dealers, collectors and even museums as “opium weights”. This paper debunks that popular misconception. It then takes on Facebook and the Internet over claims by anonymous online authors that they are the custodians of a hoard of hundreds of weights that allegedly date back to the 11th to 13th century Bagan period. The “angelweights” Facebook pages have more than 47,000 followers. How are academics to deal with a data flood that exists almost entirely outside the bounds of conventional academic discourse and analysis?

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**8. Bridging the Digital Divide: Reducing Digital Inequalities in Vietnam via ICT Access and Usage**

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The ascent of new information and communication technology (ICT) like computers and the Internet has provided great opportunities for Vietnam's socio-economic development. However, issues related to inequalities of access and usage of ICT have emerged and prompted concerns about a rising digital divide between social groups within the country. This paper aims at discussing to what extent Vietnam is trying to bridge the digital divide. Using the digital divide theory, the paper identifies some key factors that are causing the digital divide phenomenon within the country. It outlines and evaluates the role of state and public institutions in reducing digital inequalities, while offering some recommendations to reinforce Vietnam's efforts.

***Keywords*:** digital divide, digital inequalities, Vietnam, ICT

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**9. Power before Education: The Authoritarianism of a Thai University**

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Thai universities, like Thai society in general, are authoritarian and given that there has never been much democratization in Thai universities, there has not been a recent authoritarian turn. This paper presents the authoritarian system, structural and cultural, as lived at a major Thai university. The information comes from some general research and fifteen years of personal experience and thus is a mix of factual data, objective observations, and anecdotal evidence. Although the much of the data comes from personal experience attempts are made to objectively present and analyze the data. The presentation recognizes that some level of authoritarianism exists in all societies. The role of Thai military rule and the monarchy is addressed; as well as the links between authoritarianism, abuse of power, cronyism and general corruption; however, the question is also asked if these concepts are even applicable in Thai culture. This study concludes that authoritarianism is structural and systemic in Thai society and culture.

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**10. Processes and pathways of Vietnamese migration to Australia: a network-based approach**

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As of 2018, Vietnam-born residents represented the sixth largest migrant group in Australia, accounting for 256,000 people. Vietnam has been one of the top ten source countries in Australia’s Migration Programme in the last ten years. In this paper, I draw from qualitative research conducted in Hanoi and Melbourne in 2019-2021 to offer important insights into the various ways in which migrant and commercial brokerage networks structure Vietnamese migration to Australia. In the extant literature, the actors, networks, institutions, and technologies that sustain transnational social ties tend to be treated separately from those mediating migration, but they often overlap in reality. My study shows that migrant networks and commercial brokers are not distinct dimensions of ‘migration infrastructure’ (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), but intertwined, self-perpetuating categories. It highlights the complex and ambiguous relationships between state, market and the migrant subject as well as important gaps between policy and practice in the context of Australia.

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**11. Angstful Aspirants: Ethnic Minority Uplanders in Far-North Laos are Greeting China’s Rise with a Compelling Cocktail of Aspiration, Awe, Angst and Ambivalence**

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Comparatively little is known about the views of China held by ethnic minorities in remote areas of mainland Southeast Asia – this despite the fact that it is they who often live nearest to China and/or on the frontiers of China’s ever-expanding quest for resources, markets and influence.

Drawing on twelve months of immersive ethnographic fieldwork, this paper sheds light on how China’s growing presence is being gauged and engaged in the upland ethnic Khmu community of ‘Sanjing’ in far-north Laos. A series of vignettes shows local perceptions of China’s rise inflected by history, customs, cash crops and, not least, a nearby hydropower dam. Like others in the region (including Australians!), Sanjing’s Khmu find themselves torn between aspirations to harness China’s economic strength and angst over Chinese domination. However, and importantly, these anxieties do not (yet) amount to resistance. Ultimately, Sanjing’s Khmu are engaging China much as they do any other power: as a morally neutral force.

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**12. State Mobilisation and Authoritarian Legitimation: The Case of Cambodia**

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The authoritarianism literature has provided insightful knowledge about the role of ruling party in elite cooptation and cohesion, emphasising politics at the party’s elite institutions. Yet, ruling parties also create and operate auxiliary organisations like youth organisations to organise mass events such as counterdemonstrations and mass performance. How does state mobilisation, defined as the formation of civilian organisations to organise mass events, benefit authoritarian regimes? This is a timely question, as there is increasing evidence that party organisation on the ground is as critical for regime stability as the management of elite conflict. When state mobilisation is analysed, existing research focuses on the repressive role of state mobilisation. This article contributes to this literature by providing an alternative portrayal of state mobilisation as a tool for regime legitimation. Based on the case of Cambodia, I argue that state mobilisation is a vital component of authoritarian survival strategy. State mobilisation facilitates authoritarian stability by making the regime’s legitimacy claim more resonance with citizens through the use of culture and nationalism.

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**13. Challenges in Managing Undocumented Migrant Workers under the New Law on Contract-based Vietnamese Overseas Workers: A Case Study of Runaway Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Japan

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With the expectation of enhancing regular channels for Vietnamese migrant workers and reducing the volume of undocumented ones, on 13th November 2020, Vietnam adopted the newly-revised Law on Contract-based Vietnamese Overseas Workers. This law will come into effect on 1 January 2022. Using documentary analysis, the paper points out that besides making remarkable changes to improve the protection of Vietnamese migrant workers, the new law reflects an exclusionary approach by the goverment to promote a strict legal separation between documented and undocumented migrant workers. By conducting online personal interviews with runaway Vietnamese migrant workers who initially came to Japan legally but subsequently became undocumented, the paper discusses possible challenges that the law might face in terms of managing migrant workers. Based on the views of Asis and Battistella (2018) that the actual boundary between documented and undocumented migrant workers is faint, the paper argues that it is impossible to prevent undocumented migrant workers by merely tightening the control of the documented ones. The study calls for the Vietnamese government to reconsider its conventional strategy in tackling this challenging issue.

**Keywords:** Undocumented migrant workers; Law on Contract-based Vietnamese Overseas Workers; Vietnamese workers in Japan

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**14. Fighting the Pandemic like Fighting the Enemy: Vietnam’s Securitization of COVID-19**

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Since Vietnam recorded the first cases of COVID-19 infection in 2020, the Vietnamese government has used war and military language to frame the pandemic. This paper argues that this is a case of securitization: a process by which an issue is constructed as an existential threat to a community or society in order to legitimize emergency measures outside of conventional political processes. Particularly, Vietnamese leaders have tapped into the historical-linguistic resources of war imagery to portray the pandemic as an invader, mobilizing citizens’ support for its strict COVID-19 related policies. The speech acts used for this purpose are embedded in larger discursive practices concerning Vietnam’s history of resisting and prevailing over powerful foreign invaders, as well as the Vietnam Communist Party’s pivotal leadership in governing the nation. Associating public health messages with these discourses, the government elicits public support through symbols of national unity. Vietnam’s effective securitization of COVID-19 partly explains why it performed relatively better than others in containing the pandemic throughout 2020. By examining Vietnam’s pandemic communication strategy, this paper also contributes to the discussions explaining the factors contributing to success in managing COVID-19 outbreaks.

**KEYWORDS:** securitization, Copenhagen School, COVID-19, Vietnam, pandemic response

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**15. Patriots Abroad: Imperialism, Grand Strategy, and Capitalism in China’s Activities in Mainland Southeast Asia**

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Scholarship on China’s activities in its near abroad struggles to capture what is unfolding. Political economy work emphasises global neoliberalism and China’s capitalist-driven state transformation but downplays strategic goals. IR work focuses on the high politics of small and Great Power relations but ignores sub-state actors. Drawing on concepts of imperialism and the experience of Hawaii in the nineteenth century, this paper will offer a new model. It will take the Shwe Koko SEZ in eastern Myanmar as its primary case study, and the case of forger Wang Hongbin in Thailand as a secondary case. It postulates that China’s business patriots abroad pursue both capitalist and national goals, working on China’s frontiers and with local collaborators. The paper will detail how Chinese companies, linked to China’s central agencies, established partnerships with the Kayin Border Guard Force to pursue lucrative projects that also supported broader national goals. It will also detail how Wang Hong Bin and his firm Taixi Development Group established links with Thai politicians to increase trade opportunities for Chinese officials. The paper argues that there are parallels to United States imperialism in the way in which informal economic dominance is pursued without the need for formal intervention.

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**16. Exclusive Urbanism: Development and Privatisation in Vientiane**

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The modernization of Vientiane is a national development priority for the Government of Laos (GoL). Cities are critical sites for global and regional connectivity, as well as for symbolic displays of modernity and development. To court investment for urban (re)development, the GoL has granted numerous large-scale land concessions to, predominantly foreign, investors. These concessions have resulted in the privatization of public space, and the exclusion of existing residents from their former homes and/or places of business. In this paper we draw on the work of Hall et. al (2011) to interrogate how ‘exclusive urbanism’ in Vientiane has been mobilised through four forces of exclusion: legitimation, regulation, force, and the market. The paper seeks to make two key contributions. First, we seek to demonstrate the usefulness of Hall et. al’s (2011) *powers of exclusion* framework for understanding the multiple, intersecting, forces that state and private sector actors use to make claims over land and land usage in Vientiane. Second, we argue that the GoL’s concessionary model of development is failing in its ambitions to create modernised, ‘exclusive’, spaces of global and regional connectivity. Land is successfully acquired, but many investment projects stall, remain incomplete, or fail to live up to the hype that underpinned initial investment.

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**17. Breaking News Taboos: The Politics of Social News and Thailand’s 2020 Protests**

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The 2020 protest movement in Thailand not only broke the country’s long-standing taboos but the media industry’s as well. The protesters’ critical challenges to the monarchy increasingly became accepted as news discourses. What fuelled this turn of media practices? I argue that analysis must be placed on the political role played by the “social news” companies and journalists producing and distributing content on social media. This paper uses the accounts of five journalists and data taken from published interviews, seminars, and meeting minutes and finds three main factors: *media structure*, *participation*, and *human agency*. First, the digital media ecology shifted the once rigid newsroom organization, editorial routines, and revenue models, and helped digital outlets to distance their relationship to the political big shots. Second, these outlets and the semi-digital movement operated with the same social media logics, such as pop-culture sensibilities and transparent positionality, paving the way for their dynamic interactions. Third, journalists’ grievances after years of working under a repressive regime and a hiatus in lèse-majesté persecutions encouraged their resistance against the status quo. However, royal news can be critically produced most when the movement was strong, while renewed state repression prevented the new journalistic norms and practices from progressing.

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**18. Cambodia-China Relations: From a Critical State Theory Perspective**

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This paper seeks to explain Cambodia’s current policy of band-wagoning with China. The scholarly literature on this topic has two important contributions to offer. Firstly, the scholarship emphasises the role of China as a counterbalance to Cambodia’s traditional powerful neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam. Secondly, many scholars highlight the importance of the economic benefits presented by China’s economic might. What the two strains of scholarship share is their overemphasis on the security aspect and the conception of the state as a neutral arbiter. As a result, the domestic and international political dynamics that affect the Cambodian ruling elite’s political decisions have not received the importance they deserve in explaining this phenomenon. To fill this gap this article utilises critical state theory to argue that recent intensifying economic and diplomatic ties between Phnom Penh and Beijing can be explained by both domestic and international political economy, which provides the ruling CPP with both opportunities for and threats against its rule. The ruling elite in Cambodia seeks to capitalise on economic opportunities provided by China’s BRI and shield itself from threats posted by a rising opposition, and Western countries’ continued pressure on human rights and democratic performance.

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**19. Revisiting *Miscellaneous Notes on the Southern Seas:* A Nineteenth Century Chinese Official Visits Vietnam**

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This presentation considers the *Miscellaneous Notes on the Southern Seas*,an 1835 travel account by Cai Tinglan, a Qing official from Penghu, who was blown off course in the Taiwan Strait and landed with his retinue in central Vietnam. The account, later translated into Russian and French, narrates Cai’s encounter with Nguyen officials, who verified his identity through classical tests and granted him privileges as a learned official. Afterwards, Cai was mostly provided for by Cantonese and Hokkien residents of Vietnam on his journey overland back to China.

Contemporary claims of long-standing friendly relations between peoples often ring hollow when one examines the historical record. Sino-Vietnamese relations, interpreted by China as cultural fraternity, and by Vietnam as principally marked by aggression, are a case in point. Yet Cai’s *Notes* are remarkable not only for their account of Chinese merchants living throughout Vietnam with little friction, but also for the respectful attitude toward the Vietnamese authorities as legitimate and learned, if secondary to the Chinese. These texts contrast with late imperial “Southern Seas” texts on colonial maritime Southeast Asia. They suggest that the term and the imaginary of the “Southern Seas” is not necessarily inherently exoticizing or exploitative.

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**20. Vietnam's Media in the Oil Rig Crisis**

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The HD981 oil rig dispute holds symbolic value to the Vietnamese people. Vietnam's claims over the East Sea have been recounted to domestic and overseas audiences in recent years via the media. The way that Vietnam has utilized the media to cover the stand-off and to shape the image of China has resulted in a territorial controversy which has sparked violent protests, a deterioration of bilateral relations, and has threatened the country’s national image. As a result, the demand to understand how Vietnam's media diplomacy has impacted the crisis and the South China Sea issue has increased.

According to Gilboa (1998, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2009), media diplomacy occurs when a government sends diplomatic messages to target audiences through speeches, press conferences, visits, media events, or even leaks. To succeed, a government needs to have the ability to predict how its message will be consumed by different stakeholders and how its target audiences are likely to respond. This paper uses the theoretical framework of media diplomacy to analyse media reports by the Vietnam News Agency, the Voice of Vietnam, and press conferences by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to analyse Vietnam's media diplomacy in the oil rig crisis.

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**21. Labour and Electoral Politics in Cambodia**

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In 2013, the Cambodian People’s Party faced two major threats: a near loss at the ballot box in the national election and large-scale demonstrations by garment workers dissatisfied with the minimum wage. Unsurprisingly, the government responded by cracking down on the opposition, the independent media and civil society groups. Labour leaders were persecuted and legislation passed that undermined unions’ ability to organise and register. Less predictably, this crackdown was accompanied by an attempt to woo garment workers through policies that delivered tangible benefits to them as individuals. There was a marked shift in the party’s focus from its traditional rural constituency to the urban working class. In this article we examine how labour acts collectively to shape politics within authoritarian regimes. We do this by interrogating labour’s role at a time when the state was clearly shifting towards hegemonic authoritarianism. By re-assessing the 2013 and 2018 national elections through this lens, we demonstrate the bidirectional nature of state-labour relations even in authoritarian regimes. It is concluded that, even where election results are largely a foregone conclusion, they can provide opportunities for workers to strengthen their position by prompting shifts not only in patronage but in policy.

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**22. Uniformity to Resist: Ruptures and Solidarity among Thai Pro-Democracy Protestors**

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While the series of Thai political protests in 2020-2021 have often been characterized simply as a students’ movement, this label hides important nuances. The movement involves many social groups beyond students, including feminists, LGBTQ+, and people from rural Thailand. This paper explores this phenomenon probing what the shared and differing identities among the political protestors in Thailand are, if the different identities have led to fractures from within, and how the protestors maintain solidarity in their resistance against the authoritarian regime.

In-depth interviews with protestors were conducted and analyzed using Della Porta and Diani’s concept of identity and collective actions. Preliminary findings show that protestors’ identities are multiple and fluid – certain identities developed or faded along with their interactions. Ruptures between identities also occurred, such as between feminist and non-feminist pro-democracy protestors. However, solidarity largely remains in place as protestors accept disagreements as part of a democratic process. Furthermore, these different social groups value solidarity and prioritize their shared objective to fight against the authoritarian regime. Protestors have therefore expressed a willingness to understand each other and work towards the shared goals through empathy and education.

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**23. Hegemonic Imaginings: Revisiting Historical Discourse about Chinese Colonialism in Nanyang, 1905-1940**

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It was once well-known among historians of Chinese modern history that Liang Qichao and other Chinese intellectuals caused a ferment in the emerging public space with the debate about the so-called Chinese colonists in Nanyang, today’s Southeast Asia, published in some of the earliest Chinese media outlets. While contemporary scholars ridiculed and criticised the intellectuals’ illusions, very little research pays attention to what these intellectuals actually expressed, and how they perceived relations between China and Southeast Asia. This paper collects fifteen articles from influential newspapers and journals and conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through a detailed examination of the texts, the paper discerns what the imaginings of the dynamism between the colonist Chinese and the colonised Southeast Asian reflected, and the how these scholars constructed an elusive Chinese hegemony in the discourse against the social-political backdrop. We argue that the rise of the discourse of Chinese colonialism in Nanyang in the newly developed public sphere responded to the hegemonic imaginings fuelled by the strong cultural conservatism in Chinese society. This analysis presents a glimpse into a forgotten chapter of how Chinese intellectuals once imagined their relations with the Southeast Asian region.

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**24. Does Regime Matter? Reconsidering Thailand’s Democratic Recession from Below**

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During the past two decades of political turmoil in Thailand, it cannot be denied that the coups in 2006 and 2014, as well as the new reign after the passing of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, have generated Royal-Military cooperation to govern rather than to promote institutional mechanisms that would support civilian government and democratisation. This paper examines the political transition in Thailand under regime changes from a local perspective. First, we question how the transitional regime affected the political structure and landscape. Then, we ask how the new regime has shaped political resources and power relations between national and local forces, and political games at the local level. Moreover, we need to examine other indispensable factors, particularly those at the local level, such as the outcomes of decentralisation that remain and socioeconomic changes that have produced new actors, vast numbers of informed voters, and a raising of citizens' political awareness. Finally, we propose a scenario of a local power map under the current undemocratic challenge.