



Modes of Activism under Authoritarian Governance Regimes in the Asia-Pacific

Macquarie University

14th - 15th November

2019

7 Wally's Walk, Room 149

Welcome to Macquarie University and *Modes of Activism under Authoritarian Governance Regimes in the Asia-Pacific!*

This interdisciplinary workshop brings together scholars with research expertise on activism in the Asia-Pacific to explore how civil society actors navigate diverse authoritarian spaces. Existing research on the role of activism in society tends to privilege “liberal” democracies and the experiences and histories of activism within primarily Western contexts. By exploring social movements’ organising and activism across the Asia-Pacific, we aim to demonstrate the limitations of these dominant theories in accounting for experiences across the range of authoritarian governments, illiberal democracies and hybrid political regimes that exist across the Asia Pacific region.

The workshop will posit alternative theories of civil society organising and activism with a view to building a nuanced and regionally-specific understanding of activism. We seek to locate experiences from Asia within critical theory and “decolonise” knowledge production through approaches such as the “Asia-as-method” framework.

We specifically seek to answer the following questions:

- What types of authoritarian governance regimes are emerging in the Asia-Pacific region and with what consequences for activism?
- How is activism conceptualised and understood in the Asia-Pacific, and how do these conceptualisations challenge dominant theories of civil society and activism?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for activism under such diverse modes of authoritarian governance?

Acknowledgements:

The organisers wish to gratefully acknowledge the Faculty of Arts and the Centre for Agency, Values and Ethics (CAVE) at Macquarie University for their generous support in facilitating this international workshop. We would also like to thank the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Sydney and the Taiwan Film Festival in Sydney for their generous support towards the documentary screening of *Our Youth in Taiwan*.

Workshop Co-convenors

Dr Amy Barrow	Macquarie Law School
Dr Thomas Baudinette	Department of International Studies
Dr Sara Fuller	Department of Geography and Planning

Programme

Wednesday 13th November

5:30-8:45 Film Screening – Our Youth in Taiwan with Director Fu Yue (via Zoom)

Thursday 14th November

9:00-9:30 Registration and arrival

9:30-9:40 Acknowledgment of Country

9:40-10:00 Welcome to the workshop

10:00-11:00 Opening keynote: Law, Authoritarianism, and Social Movements in Asia Lynette Chua, National University Singapore

Chair - Therese MacDermott, Macquarie Law School and CAVE

11:00-11:30 *Coffee break*

11:30-1:00 Panel 1 – Authoritarian Practices and Political Regimes

Chair - Denise Meyerson, Macquarie Law School and CAVE

- The mobilisation of competing civil societies groups in the era of Thailand's colour-coded politics: the paradoxical co-optation
Rawin Leelapatana, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (via videolink)
- Civil society VS democracy in the Asia-Pacific: Mobilizing against populism
Cleve V. Arguelles, Australian National University, Australia
- Hong Kong's Silent Marches: Lawyers Protesting the Erosion of One Country, Two Systems
Amy Barrow, Macquarie University, Australia
- Extrajudicial Killing in India: Negotiating Authoritarian Practices in a Democracy
Surabhi Chopra, Chinese University of Hong Kong

1:00-2:00 *Lunch*

2:00-3:30 Panel 2 – Protest Movements

Chair: Wendy Rogers, Department of Philosophy and CAVE

- Resilient Activism under Emerging Authoritarian Governance: The Case of Anti-extradition Protest in Hong Kong
Eric Yan Ho Lai, School of Oriental and African Studies, UK
- What if you had a revolution and no one came?: Reflections on China’s 2011 Jasmine Revolution
Kevin Carrico, Monash University, Australia
- Diaspora Activism Ahead of Malaysian GE14: Experiences and Insights from Melbourne
Praveen Nagappan, Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia in Australia
Arman Rashid, Monash University, Malaysia

3:30-4:00 *Coffee Break*

4:00-5:30 Panel 3 - Art and Activism

Chair: Justine Lloyd, Department of Sociology

- Flirting with Gender Perspectives: Contemporary women’s activist comics in the Philippines
Kristine Michelle L. Santos, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines
Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines
- Singing as resistance: Power and Women’s Choir Songs
Dyah Pitaloka, University of Sydney, Australia
- Artist-Activists in Protest Hong Kong: Trans/formation of Subjectivity
Kelly Ka Lai Chan, RMIT, Australia
- Investigating the activist potentials of “gay manga” in Japan and the Philippines
Thomas Baudinette, Macquarie University, Australia

5:30-5:45 Day One Closing Reflections

7:00- *Dinner at the Opera Kitchen, Circular Quay (Optional self-funded)*

Friday 15th November

9:30-11:00 Panel 4 – Environmental Activism and Development

Chair: Amy Barrow, Macquarie Law School

- Alternative form of environmental contention in China: the case of Zero Waste Alliance
Natalie W.M. Wong, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
- “When you say activist, it's a scary word”: Situating a politics of climate activism in Singapore
Sara Fuller, Macquarie University, Australia
- Green Protests in the Shadow of Authoritarian Rule: Boundary-spanning Contention in China and Malaysia
Wai Lit Yew, Yale-NUS College, Singapore
- Shifting boundaries of development and activism? The Case of Sombath Somphone
Kearrin Sims, James Cook University, Australia

11:00-11:30 Coffee Break

11:30-1:00 Panel 5 – Modes of Activism – Film and Communication

Chair: Can Yalcinkaya, Macquarie University International College

- Activist Films: How Grassroots Activists Shape the Construction of National Identity
Brenda Danker, Freedom Film Network, Malaysia
- Understanding the culture of communication in shaping values, equality and process of freedom in Vietnam’s community activism
Lien Pham, UTS, Australia
- Activism Trolled: Why Human Rights Groups Are Losing the Social Media Battle in the Philippines
Aim Sinpeng, University of Sydney, Australia

1:00-2:00 Lunch

2:00-3:00 Closing keynote: Inflamed Violence amidst Collective Restraints: Reflections on the Trajectory of Hong Kong's Summer of Dissent

Edmund W. Cheng, City University of Hong Kong

Chair- Jonathan Symons, Department of Modern History, Politics, and International Relations

3:00-4:00 Closing Reflections and Publication Plans

4:00- Informal Drinks, Macquarie University

Keynote Speakers

Opening Keynote

Thursday 14th November, 10am-11am

Law, Authoritarianism, and Social Movements in Asia

Lynette Chua, National University Singapore



Lynette Chua is Associate Professor at National University Singapore (NUS) Law School. She is a socio-legal scholar with research interests in legal mobilization, legal consciousness, rights, and social movements. She is the author of *The Politics of Love in Myanmar: LGBT Mobilization and Human Rights as A Way of Life* (Stanford University Press, 2019) and *Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State* (Temple University Press, 2014). Currently, Lynette is writing a monograph tentatively titled, *The Politics of Rights in Southeast Asia*, under contract with Cambridge University Press.

Closing Keynote

Friday 15th November, 2pm-3pm

Inflamed Violence amidst Collective Restraints: Reflections on the Trajectory of Hong Kong's Summer of Dissent

Edmund W Cheng, City University of Hong Kong

Edmund W. Cheng is Associate Professor at the Department of Public Policy at the City University of Hong Kong. His research interests include contentious politics, political sociology, public opinion survey, Hong Kong politics and Global China. He has published in *China Quarterly*, *China Journal*, *Development and Change*, *Mobilization*, *Political Studies*, and *Social Movement Studies* and co-edited *An Epoch of Social Movements: The Trajectory of Political Activism in Hong Kong* (Chinese University Press, 2019) and *The Umbrella Movement: Civil Resistance and Contentious Space in Hong Kong* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).



Abstracts and Biographies

Civil society VS democracy in the Asia-Pacific: Mobilizing against populism

Cleve V. Arguelles, The Australian National University, Australia

Although Western in conceptual origins, civil society has become important in the Asia-Pacific. While it has existed in the region much earlier, it gained regional prominence following its significant role in democratic transitions (1973 Thailand, 1986 Philippines, 1987 South Korea, 1990 Bangladesh). Celebrated as ‘reliable democrats’, civil society has been idealized in the region. Local, national, and even foreign governments have devoted material and institutional resources to provide opportunities for its growth. Yet contemporary scholarship on civil society has also revealed that its support or cooperation is key to cases of either authoritarian resilience (China, Singapore) or democratic erosion (Mongolia, Turkey). Its support for democracy is not inherent but rather contingent on a range of contextual factors- they are, in short, ‘contingent democrats’. This paper contributes to the conversations on this vacillating character of civil society using controversial cases of civil society mobilizations against the populist rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Joseph Estrada (Philippines), and Thaksin Shinawatra (Thailand). While civil society opposition to Erdogan and Thaksin have chosen the path of an undemocratic military coup, anti-Estrada groups have primarily relied on a people power-style protest. Through a comparison of these cases, this paper teases out the mechanisms that explains why civil society seek undemocratic alternatives in responding to populist mobilizations. This paper argues that when politically marginalized by a highly successful populist mobilization, it is susceptible to abandon democratic means in regaining its societal influence. Using populist moments in Asia-Pacific, this unpacks the democratic credentials of supposedly ‘good’ civil society activism against ‘evil’ populists.

Biography:

Cleve V. Arguelles (@CleveArguelles) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social change, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University. His research focuses on elections, democracy, populism, and youth in Southeast Asia. His doctoral project compares Southeast Asian and Latin American moments of populist collapse and their un/democratic aftermaths.

‘Hong Kong’s Silent Marches: Lawyers Protesting the Erosion of One Country, Two Systems’

Amy Barrow, Macquarie Law School, Australia

This paper examines modes of activism adopted by Hong Kong’s legal community to protest against the erosion of ‘One Country, Two Systems.’ Post-handover to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong is in transition to an uncertain future. In recent years, a number of incidents, including interpretations of law by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, have caused significant concern that the principle of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ is being steadily eroded with grave consequences for civil liberties and human rights. Given Hong Kong’s democratic deficit, the Judiciary has been perceived as an impartial and independent body, a bastion for the rule of law and human rights. This paper focuses on lawyers as activists, and the role that they have played in upholding the rule of law. Through a series of silent marches, Hong Kong’s lawyers have quietly demonstrated their discontent, confronting the Central People’s Government’ perceived encroachment on judicial affairs. The Chief Executive, Carrie Lam’s recent attempt to push through a law, which would allow extradition of criminal suspects to the PRC has led to escalating tensions and increasingly violent protest, which has not dissipated. Instead of marching on the Court of Final Appeal, lawyers dressed in black marched silently on the Legislative Council and bowed their heads. Drawing on personal reflection of the 2016 lawyer’s silent march, I will consider how lawyers’ navigate activism and organising in this changing political landscape.

Biography:

Amy Barrow is a Senior Lecturer at Macquarie Law School (Sydney, Australia). Amy researches law in action by drawing on qualitative research methods to consider how international laws and policies are implemented in practice by multiple actors. Amy is a member of the WILPF Academic Network, a think tank connecting academics and peace activists working on issues of gender, peace and security as well as a founding member of the Everywoman Everywhere Coalition, which grew out of the Initiative on Violence against Women at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. Along with Joy Chia, she co-edited the book *Gender, Violence and the State in Asia* published by Routledge in 2016. Prior to joining Macquarie Law School she held posts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she was a founding member of the Centre for Rights and Justice, and the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. Together with Dr. Sara Fuller, she leads the Activism, Rights and Justice Research Stream in the Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University.

Investigating the activist potentials of “gay manga” in Japan and the Philippines

Thomas Baudinette, Macquarie University, Australia

This presentation explores how queer popular culture texts can operate as a form of artistic activism within heteronormative and homophobic social contexts. Specifically focussing on the manga comics produced by Japanese gay erotic artist Tagame Gengoroh, I reveal the activist potentials of comics in spaces where traditional interventionist LGBT activism and consciousness-raising has often been viewed as either ineffective or too confrontational. Situating Tagame within a broader history of *tōjisha* (directly concerned) gay cultural critics and activists in Japan, I explore how his mainstream work *Otōto no Otto* (My Brother’s Husband, 2015-2017) acts as both a pedagogical tool that confronts homophobia in Japan as well as challenges other heteronormative values such as the nuclear family. Turning my gaze to the Philippines, I then draw upon interviews with social media influencers from the fledgling Pinoy “bear” community to elucidate how Tagame’s erotic and pornographic work is used to educate both broader Filipino society about LGBT concerns as well as address issues of body-shaming in the Philippines’ gay male community. Uniting the two case studies, I argue that Tagame has emerged as an important activist voice concerning LGBT issues globally, charting his rise as a cultural critic in both Japan and abroad.

Biography:

Thomas Baudinette is Lecturer in Japanese Studies in the Department of International Studies, Macquarie University. His research has broadly focussed on Japanese queer media, with recent exploring how Japanese queer popular culture has impacted sexual minority communities in China, the Philippines and Thailand. His first book, *Regimes of Desire: Young gay men, media and masculinity in Japan*, will be published in 2020 by the University of Michigan Press. Thomas currently serves as the Secretary for the Society for Queer Asian Studies, an affiliate of the Association for Asian Studies. He was awarded the 2017 Ian Nish Prize by the British Association for Japanese Studies. Thomas’s personal blog can be found here: <https://thomasbaudinette.wordpress.com/>

What if you had a revolution and no one came?: Reflections on China's 2011 Jasmine Revolution

Kevin Carrico, Monash University, Australia

In 2011 the People's Republic of China was rocked by a series of protests known as the Jasmine Revolution, inspired by the Arab Spring. The protests were small and fleeting by any measure, remaining largely unnoticed by the general populace. The security services' response, by contrast, left a lasting legacy.

The author was a participant/ observer in numerous protests in Guangdong between February and June 2011. After nearly a decade of refraining from discussing these events, I use this paper to develop an analytical framework for understanding the protests and their legacy: why did people risk so much to gather together with a few dozen strangers in an effort destined to fail from the start? How did the CCP emerge from that spring completely unscathed?

Directly counter to the mistrust endemic within post-Tiananmen Chinese society, represented by the omnipresent figure of the "*pianzi* (liar)," wherein one can never really know whether the other can be trusted, at Jasmine protests, where one could never really confirm if others were like-minded protestors, brief moments of eye contact, nods, and conversations built elusive feelings of trust and fleeting moments of an alternate political community.

And yet, as my experience on June 4, 2011 demonstrates, such trust was soon infiltrated and undermined, with dire consequences for all involved. Analyzing the broader crackdown, I argue that new modes of physical torture and psychological abuse implemented that spring have provided a terrifyingly effective model for the security services in their ever-expanding war on those who disagree.

Biography:

Kevin Carrico is Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies at Monash University. His research examines race, nationalism, and political tensions in China, Tibet, and Hong Kong. He is the author of *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism and Tradition in China Today* (University of California Press) and the translator of Tsering Wooser's *Tibet on Fire* (Verso Press).

Artist-Activists in Protest Hong Kong: Trans/formation of Subjectivity

Kelly Ka Lai Chan, RMIT University, Australia

This presentation situates my PhD video ethnography within the emerging protest culture of transitional Hong Kong. From both a filmmaking and queer perspective, I will trace an emergent contemporary Hong Kong subjectivity from the British handover (1997), through The Umbrella Movement (2014) through to the current anti-extradition protests all of which uniquely give new momentum to creativity, activism and the development of localism. Based in an activist call for leaderless organisation, and de-centred social media communication to resist further erosion of democratic autonomy, Hong Kong has used creative arts and activism to evolve a new subjectivity. I take up Chen Kuan-Hsing's call that decolonising work "has to proceed from the inner logic of the colonized social formation" (2010, p. X) in order to overcome multiple layers and histories of imperialism, and through visual ethnographic attention to artists, activists and queer radicals, my presentation outlines the research design which incorporates current political confrontations and looks at the public pedagogical value of everyday 'artists' and the emerging Hong Kong that needs them. This study investigates how 'artists' as public pedagogues inform a subjectivity that is contemporary, globally-focused, locally-identified, and unique to Hong Kong. In its method, design and conceptual frameworks, this Asia As Method-linked study by me as insider/outsider investigator seeks to put Chen's theoretic to work on the streets of today's Hong Kong.

Biography:

Kelly Ka Lai Chan is a video ethnographer and educator and PhD candidate at RMIT School of Education, Creative Agency and the Digital Ethnography Research Centre. Kelly makes videos to tell stories about humans and more-than-humans. Her current doctoral research focuses on using visual methods to explore subjectivities of artist-activists in Hong Kong. She holds a BEd and MA in English Studies. Her research interests include visual studies, arts, gender and social justice. See: <https://kellyhaha.wixsite.com/reelview>.

Extrajudicial Killing in India: Negotiating Authoritarian Practices in a Democracy

Surabhi Chopra, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

This paper looks at extrajudicial killing in India as an authoritarian practice within a constitutional democracy. It draws upon the work of Marlies Glasius (2018), who argues for moving away from classifying political regimes as authoritarian or democratic, and expanding scholarly attention to whether state practices are authoritarian in nature. I use this practice-focused approach to examine the long-running use of extrajudicial killing in India.

I argue that extrajudicial killing is a well-established authoritarian practice in India. Indian law permits the death penalty for only the gravest offences, and administers this fatal punishment only in the “rarest of rare” cases. In the more restive regions of the country, however, death is doled out by security forces far more liberally than the law permits. Human rights reports and investigative journalism have shown how such killing is routinely resorted to by the military and police in India’s border regions where separatist groups are active.

I trace how has this form of violence - stark, shocking and directly inflicted by state functionaries – has persisted in India despite constitutional checks and balances, and discuss why it should be viewed as an authoritarian practice. I then analyse ongoing public interest litigation in the Indian Supreme Court on extrajudicial killing by the police and armed forces¹. I consider how civil society groups have harnessed judicial oversight, as well as international human rights mechanisms to challenge extrajudicial killing. I then consider what the pursuit of accountability through litigation and advocacy reveals about the strengths and weaknesses of constitutional democratic mechanisms in the Indian context.

Biography:

Surabhi Chopra is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, Chinese University of Hong Kong. She researches national security laws, sectarian violence and the socio-economic rights of the poor. Prior to joining academia, she trained as a barrister (Lincoln’s Inn 2006) and practiced law in the UK and India. She has advised governments, multilateral organisations and NGOs on human rights law and policy. She has a law degree from Cambridge University, a Masters in Human Rights from the London School of Economics, and a BA in Anthropology from Harvard University.

Activist Films: How Grassroots Activists Shape the Construction of National Identity

Brenda Danker, Freedom Film Network, Malaysia

Visual activism can help shape and transform national identity and also intensify nationalism through dialogue on the portrayed socioeconomic and political struggles. This paper examines the part played by activists, with no prior experience in using media, in the shaping of national identity through producing documentary films for public engagement and action in Malaysia. These activists used film to mobilize their campaigns so as to reach a wider audience and to obtain greater impact. This paper shows the specific capacity of film as a powerful social institution in the representation of national struggles and the shaping of public opinion about issues in the country. Ideas of nationhood, such as perceptions concerning the political and social reality and representation ideas of state and the nation, are discussed. The analysed films were produced for the FreedomFilmFest, a reputable annual human rights film festival in Malaysia. The activists, who were grant winners of the Festival, produced films on various human rights issues, amongst them: death in custody, indigenous rights, and, election and democracy. By studying selected films which were produced for the Festival in the past sixteen years, this paper discusses the relationship between visual culture and the activists' shaping of the construction of national identity in using the film medium to advocate their ideas. The research method include interviews with the activists, the organiser of the Festival, the panel of judges, and the writer's personal observations from the perspective of being the producer of these films. As these films are screened nationwide, at international film festivals, and are available online, the paper argues the impact of using the activists' notion of national identity in these films in intensifying nationalistic sentiment and mobilising social and political change, despite the country's strict censorship and control of the media.

Biography:

Brenda Danker aims to empower and amplify the voices of the marginalised community for social change in her various roles as educator, media producer and researcher in Malaysia. She currently manages a film network focused on social justice, and mentors social documentary filmmakers through FreedomFilmFest Malaysia. She has initiated participatory digital storytelling projects with Orang Asli youth to embolden them to share their seldom heard stories and struggles. She has conducted research in activism (specifically, visuals and digital media used in advocacy, and activism in university students), the human rights film festivals, and the impact of technology in classroom teaching.

“When you say activist, it's a scary word”: Situating a politics of climate activism in Singapore’

Sara Fuller, Macquarie University, Australia

Urban climate activism emerges in multiple spaces, with individuals and groups pursuing strategies ranging from traditional organised activities to more diverse and spontaneous forms of ‘everyday’ activism. Theoretical perspectives on climate action often seek to understand how mobilisation occurs within complex, multi-level governance systems as well as exploring spaces and scales of climate action. From this perspective, grassroots or ‘everyday’ climate action is often positioned as more limited than mainstream civil society in its capacity to effect change. However, such activism is nonetheless significant, not only because it highlights the spaces beyond collective arenas where action on climate change may take place but also because it draws attention to the everyday politics and practices that shape climate activism. This paper draws on empirical research in Singapore – a city which offers a unique political and institutional environment for mobilisation around climate change. The paper reflects on the inherent contradictions associated with climate activism in the city and highlights that the power of everyday action and activism should not be overlooked. In conclusion, it argues for a situated understanding of activism that pays greater attention to the dynamics of space and place and their role in enabling change.

Biography:

Sara Fuller is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography and Planning at Macquarie University, Australia. Her research explores concepts and practices of justice and democracy in the field of the environment, with an empirical focus on grassroots, community and activist responses to climate change. Prior to joining Macquarie University, she held positions at Durham University, UK and City University of Hong Kong where she conducted research on low carbon transitions and climate governance; NGO discourses of energy justice; low carbon communities and social justice; and energy vulnerability in communities. Her current research investigates the politics and governance of urban climate justice across the Asia-Pacific region

Resilient Activism under Emerging Authoritarian Governance: The Case of Anti-extradition Protest in Hong Kong

Eric Yan Ho Lai, SOAS, University of London, United Kingdom

This paper explains the strategies and tactics of Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests in 2019, in order to understand how movement sustains in face of authoritarian governance. After the famous occupy movement in 2014, Hong Kong society underwent series of political repression by the authority. However, the waves of protest against the extradition law amendment bill, which would allow local extradition to China, are seen as revival of civil society and social movement of Hong Kong under the rise of authoritarian intervention of its sovereign state.

This paper suggests that, despite the state attempt to disenfranchise the opposition movement by capturing the seen leaders, activism evolves to a leaderless-but-leaderful mode as response. On one hand, traditional social movement organisations continue to play the role of resources mobiliser, individual protestors connect and construct the movement with each other by social media networks on the other. Furthermore, the cross-sectoral support for the movement, the adaptability of frontline protestors and strategies of seeking global solidarity, also enhance the energy and morale of the movement to become more resilient against state repression, and degrade state violence.

This paper contributes to our understanding of the nature of authoritarian governance in Hong Kong, as a semi-autonomous region under China's sovereignty, and the challenges as well as opportunities for resilient activism to sustain as resistance to China's authoritarian rule. This paper also contributes to the theoretical debate that explains sustained protest under authoritarian regime.

Biography:

Yan-ho LAI (Eric) is a PhD candidate of School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He began to engage in the leadership of Hong Kong social movement as the President of Student Union of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2010/11. In 2011/12, he became the convenor of Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), the major social movement coalition in Hong Kong that organises the annual 1st July rally. Lai is a veteran volunteer in CHRF amid the current anti-extradition protest. His current research studies how the rule of law in Hong Kong respond to the rise of authoritarian rule from China.

The mobilisation of competing civil societies groups in the era of Thailand's colour-coded politics: the paradoxical co-optation

Rawin Leelapatana, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

The making of the 1997 Constitution marked a visible symbol of constitutional progress in 21st century Thailand. It centred around political participation among civil-society actors, thus significantly challenging the traditional notion of Thai-ness which emphasises social hierarchy and unity based on 'Karma'. The clash between the two ideas culminated in the colour-coded politics (Yellow v Red), marking the return of two military coups in 2006 and 2014 banning social activism. Despite such democratic roll-back, the 1997 Constitution still has 'an afterlife' as it is still playing a role in reinforcing liberal-minded activists to launch counter-coup protests and to form a political party (i.e., the Future Forward). This paper explores how and the extent to which liberal activism challenges the vigorous effort to retain the hegemonic authoritarian culture, regarding this as the binary-star scenario. I examine such effects from two perspectives: the value judgement (the norm-exception dichotomy) and the legal (the roles of written constitutions in managing the gravitational pull between liberal and authoritarian demands). My findings challenge the two dominant models describing the relationship between activism and authoritarianism in Thailand: the dual state model and the abusive constitutionalism model. In doing so, the question regarding how activism should be conceptualised is clarified.

Biography:

Rawin Leelapatana is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University. He holds a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Law from the University of Bristol. Rawin specialises in public law, human rights, and the philosophy of law. Currently, he is running two research projects. The first project, funded by NUS and collaborating with Professor Andrew Harding, assesses the constitution-making process in 21st century Thailand. The second project is a chapter in a book *Thai Legal History: From Traditional Law to Modern Law* edited by Professor Harding. His chapter examines the key legal features of the Thai-style democracy.

Diaspora Activism Ahead of Malaysian GE14: Experiences and Insights from Melbourne

Praveen Nagappan, Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia in Australia, Australia
Arman Rashid, Monash University, Australia

Malaysian General Election 14 (GE14) was a turning point for the country. After sixty years of Barisan Nasional (National Front) rule, Malaysians voted in the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) led by former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad on May 9, 2018. This milestone election delivered a mandate for democracy, reforms and accountability, while rejecting corruption and authoritarianism. The birth of Malaysia Baru (New Malaysia) was possible because of a longstanding struggle by political parties, civil society and local communities, including the Malaysian diaspora overseas.

Facing delays in receiving overseas ballots, Malaysian voters from diverse backgrounds living in Melbourne came together through crowdsourcing to send their postal votes and make their voice heard on time. Prior to GE14, Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia in Australia (SABMOZ) - a leading Malaysian diaspora organization- was instrumental in holding the largest overseas Bersih gatherings in Melbourne from 2011 with partners. These solidarity rallies calling for free elections in Malaysia were part of a series of advocacy programs, including a monthly Election Discussion Series in the lead up to GE14, organized by SABMOZ.

This paper shares experiences and insights on how the Malaysian diaspora in Melbourne mobilized itself for political change and reforms ahead of GE14. It documents initiatives by SABMOZ and the wider diaspora at a decisive moment in Malaysian history, while examining trends of diaspora activism in the community. The authors will discuss the challenges and opportunities for diaspora civil society activism amidst recent political changes in Malaysia, including evolving modes of engagement under a more democratic government compared to the previous authoritarian regime.

Biographies:

Praveen Nagappan, an auditor by profession, is the President of Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia in Australia (SABMOZ). He has been involved in various civil society organizations in Australia and Malaysia, including serving on the founding Committee of Global Bersih, Chair of the Organizing Committee for Bersih in Melbourne and Co-Convenor of the SABMOZ Election Discussion Series.

Arman Rashid, PhD., is a political analyst, development consultant and counsellor-in-training. He has previously worked as a researcher for the Monash Asia Institute, World Bank, US State Department and Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade. He was the Co-Convenor of the SABMOZ Election Discussion Series in Melbourne before GE14.

Understanding the culture of communication in shaping values, equality and process of freedom in Vietnam's community activism

Lien Pham, University of Technology Sydney, Australia

Using a multiple case study of community activism in Vietnam, this paper draws attention to communication practices as features of political agency and struggle in the public sphere. Three cases of community activities are examined. The first case involves political blogging on social media. The second case involves a community worker engaging in a local NGO. The third case is about a national NGO with an international counterpart in an incident of reputational risk management. Using Harbermas' theory of communicative actions as a political critique of the communication discourse and Mead's symbolic interactionism to analyse speech acts in these cases, the paper will show that agents' communication practices in community activities are "strategic" actions conditioned by their social, cultural and political contexts and coordinated through interest positions. These communication practices condition people's values about community activism which bestow a sense of freedom, and in adherence to this "arbitrary" freedom, they perceive it as real political freedom. It is difficult then to distinguish between real freedom for public discussion from people's imagined freedom to speak when they speak in accordance with the political rules and social norms. The paper thus argues that it is more useful to understand the workings of these "arbitrary" parameters in shaping agency for activism and possibilities for democratic social development that takes account of pluralistic dimensions of State-society relations, rather than assuming democratic agency exist or not exist within certain "liberalist" concept of democratic freedom.

Biography:

Lien Pham is a Lecturer at the Graduate Research School, University of Technology Sydney. She received her PhD in Sociology from Macquarie University. Her research interests and publications are in the areas of political participation, education and development, public policy, language and identity of diaspora, and Vietnam studies combining critical theory and political philosophy. She also provides consultancy in educational policies for multilateral organisations in Asia Pacific and policy evaluations for Australian government agencies. Her PhD research is recently published as a monograph entitled *International Students Returning to Vietnam* with Springer Singapore. She is currently writing a book on "Political Participation and Democratic Capability in Authoritarian States" to be published in the Routledge series Exploratory Studies in Development.

Singing as resistance: Power and Women's Choir Songs

Dyah Pitaloka, University of Sydney, Australia

In my study, I explore the collective forms of cultural production as well as the images and language of nonviolence that embedded in the songs of Dialita choir – a choir made up of 1965 Indonesia mass killings women survivors. For the past ten years, this choir group had constantly and consistently use singing as medium to promote cultural reconciliation, social unification and personal expression. For 50 years since the mass killings, arrests, and torture led by the Suharto-governed military in Indonesia, the victims of the 1965 mass killings (survivors, their family, and their descendants) have been framed in Suharto's New Order discourse and in later versions of state narratives as deserving of the violence because of their Communist linkages, as threats to the legitimacy of the nation-state. Stigma, discrimination, violence, public hatred, and economic and socio-political exclusion have systematically distanced those associated with the PKI and communism from the normative social structure of Indonesian society. Songs, for the survivors represents participation and voices in the construction of reconciliation. Staging choir performance becomes an alternative dialogic space for the women survivors to reclaim their sense of dignity, to challenge the injustice and to co-construct alternative narratives of 1965. These women have developed strategies that answer their problems and best serves their interests – to have dialogue with younger Indonesian generations. Resistance, in this case is seen as a continually transformative process that emerges and evolves in relationship to structure.

Biography:

Dyah Pitaloka is Lecturer at the Department of Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney. She is interested in academic-activist collaborations and dialogue-based participation in addressing unequal health policies. Her research has been focused on marginalised communities in Singapore and Indonesia, where she works with community of transgender sex workers, Indonesian female domestic workers, the survivors of 1965 Indonesia mass killings and women with chronic illness in rural villages of Java. Her current work looks at the use of performance-based approach in addressing injustice and interrogating the unhealthy structures that constrain the health and wellbeing of the 1965 survivors.

Flirting with Gender Purrpectives: Contemporary women’s activist comics in the Philippines

Kristine Michelle L. Santos, Ateneo de Manila University, The Philippines

Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua, Ateneo de Manila University, The Philippines

The Philippines has a rich history of creative and artistic responses to oppressive regimes. From political satires to massive effigies, Filipino artists have utilised various forms of art and media to interrogate and critique governments that control Filipino civil liberties. In the last five years, despite progress in gender and development policies, President Rodrigo Duterte and other public officials have expressed misogynistic and homophobic attitudes that colour public and political opinion against the advancement of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) Bill. In this paper, we examine the artistic responses of comic artists such as Dead Balagtas and Dee Ayroso, and their efforts to disrupt these pervading sexist and homophobic discourses through their works and the safe spaces they encourage both online and offline. Using methods in comic studies alongside ethnographical approaches that examine digital and offline relationships and interactions between the artists and their audience, this paper intends to highlight the multimodal approaches the artists have taken to actively engage and interrogate sexist local politics. We argue that the artist’s production of affective comics contributes to the development of their audiences’ gender literacies while their social engagements, both digitally and offline, contributes to the creation of safe spaces where the topic of gender is engaged and explored. The paper highlights the power of affect and the importance of multimodal social engagements in activism.

Biographies:

Kristine Michelle Santos is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Japanese Studies Program at Ateneo de Manila University. Her research interrogates young women and their contributions to the development of transformative literacies and practices that challenge normative consumption and expression of popular media. Her publications include articles on comic culture such as “Is there a Space for Cool Manga in Indonesia and the Philippines? Postcolonial Discourses on Transcultural Manga,” in *The End of Cool Japan* (Routledge 2016; with Febriani Sihombing) and “Pinoy Manga in Philippine Komiks,” in *Global Manga: “Japanese” Comics Without Japan* (Bloomsbury 2015; with Karl Cheng Chua).

Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua is Director of the Japanese Studies Program and Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Ateneo de Manila University. His research looks at how pre-war Japanese children have been influenced through the representations of the “other” in manga which mold their worldview as they grow up to become adults during the war. His publications include articles on propaganda manga in the Philippines, “The Stories They Tell: Komiks during the Japanese Occupation, 1942 – 1944” and “Boy meets world: The Worldview of Shonen Kurabu in the 1930s.” He has book chapters in *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts* (Routledge, 2013) and *Imagining Japan in Postwar East Asia: Identity Politics, Schooling and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2013).

“Activism Trolled: Why Human Rights Groups Are Losing the Social Media Battle in the Philippines”

Aim Sinpeng, University of Sydney, Australia

Social media was once seen as a saviour for activists in hybrid and authoritarian regimes: it afforded the political space for civic engagement and activism in ways previously unimaginable. Social media, and the internet, more generally is supposed to be the ‘liberating technology’ that has a potential to free up possibility for change in repressive societies. Yet, internet freedoms, social media crackdowns and disinformation have been on a sharp rise across the world, stifling dissent and dividing public opinion on contentious political issues. This article examines the Philippines’ war on drugs conversations on Facebook of three human rights organisations: Human Rights Watch Philippines, Philippine Human Rights Information Center and Amnesty International Philippines during the first three years of the Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency. Preliminary findings show two major issues with social media conversation on these rights groups. First, trolls have largely dominated Facebook conversations and are frequently the most active users on these pages. Second, real supporters did not seem to engage with neither the groups themselves nor the trolls. Being heavily trolled on the one hand, and low engagement with fans on the other raises a question the efficacy of social media activism in general. It also raises issues about what role could the platform play in reducing hateful speech against human rights supporters online.

Biography:

Dr Aim Sinpeng is a lecturer in comparative politics at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on social media and politics in Southeast Asia, particularly on issues of political engagement, electoral campaigning, activism and disinformation. She was recently awarded a grant from Facebook to study hate speech in the Asia Pacific. She is the co-founder of the Sydney Cyber Security Network and a Thailand Coordinator for the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre. Her publications include peer reviewed articles in *Pacific Affairs*, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *Media, Culture & Society* and *Contemporary Southeast Asia* among others.

Alternative form of environmental contention in China: the case of Zero Waste Alliance

Natalie W.M. Wong, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Since the mid-2000s, some major metropolitan cities in China, such as Beijing and Guangzhou, had experience NIMBY protests against the build of incinerators. In response to protests and conflicts between local residents and government authorities, the environmental NGOs (ENGOS) seek alternative solutions for the municipal solid waste (MSW) generation in the cities. This paper presents the case study of Zero Waste Alliance (ZWA), formed by a group of ENGOS, a nationwide platform for dialogue and cooperation among local governments, enterprises, scholars, the public, and NGOs on the MSW management. The ZWA is becoming more widespread and to somewhat extent, its advocacy influences government on MSW policy. The purpose of this study is to investigate how ZWA strategically framed the MSW issues within the community, and explores how the ZWA relate the link with the perceived MSW problems to potential participants and offer them necessary collective incentives to spur action under the fragmented authoritarian political context. Through exploring the mobilization of ZWA itself in MSW issues and the dynamics with different stakeholders, the alternative form of environmental contention appears in the context of China.

Biography:

Natalie Wong currently is Visiting Fellow at Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong. She completed her PhD in Politics at The University of York and her dissertation mainly focuses on environmental governance and state-society relationship in Greater China region and Southeast Asia. Despite of her working experiences in academia, Natalie was the researcher at a Hong Kong based labor NGO which concerns about the labor conditions in Pearl River Delta of China and an international environmental NGO to investigate the air quality of Beijing before the commencement of Olympus Game in 2008. She has published extensively topics on environmental governance, and environmental activism in *China Information*, *Voluntas*, and *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*.

Green Protests in the Shadow of Authoritarian Rule: Boundary-spanning Contention in China and Malaysia

Wei Lit Yew, Yale-NUS College, Singapore

Over recent decades, urban middle-class residents in East Asia have risen up and spilled into the streets, demanding an end to the construction of noxious facilities in their backyards. To what extent does the authoritarian regime type shape the variation in environmental protest strategies? Protests in Malaysia are generally thought to be contained within electoral mobilisation. By contrast, China's contentious activities appear transgressive, given the recurrence of "troublemaking" direct action. Taken together, it seems to support the conventional wisdom that protest tends to be more transgressive in a more authoritarian society. This paper reconsiders this through a comparative study of local environmental protests in these two different illiberal regimes. I argue that protesters respond and channel their radicalism in institutionally-specific ways, as they straddle the bounds between prescribed politics and politics by other means (O'Brien 2003). In both countries, the institutional logics of (de)centralisation, accountability mechanism, and regime ideology generate popular expectations about official behaviours. In accordance with those logics, protesters deploy an ambivalent strategy that is neither transgressive nor contained against the state. Based on interviews with activists, this paper examines four case studies that span distinct geographies and historical periods from 2002-2016. By zeroing in on where and how protesters broaden their goals and tactics, this paper proposes a nuanced conceptualisation of political opportunity structure, which hints at the broader possibilities and challenges accompanying green activism in illiberal regimes.

Biography:

Dr. Wei Lit Yew is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Social Sciences at Yale-NUS College, Singapore. Previously, he was a Visiting Assistant Professor at the Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong. He attained his PhD in Asian and International Studies from City University of Hong Kong. Based disciplinarily in comparative politics, his research focuses broadly on the contentious politics of civil society activism but more specifically on the dynamics of East Asia's environmental movements. His publications can be found in journals such as *Journal of Environmental Management*, *International Journal of Communication*, and *Pacific Affairs*.

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