

# Internationalization in Action:

## *Transformative Student Research at the Asian Institute*

Richard Charles Lee Insights through Asia Challenge  
2021 Virtual Presentation Event

Tuesday, September 28, 2021  
10:00am-12:00pm (EDT)



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

THE ASIAN INSTITUTE at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy is one of North America's leading centres of research and teaching on Asia. Our approach to Asia balances regional specialization rooted in local knowledge with transnational, global, and interdisciplinary conversations that contextualize and transect local viewpoints on contemporary issues.

The Asian Institute prides itself on offering innovative teaching programs, as well as distinctive experiential learning opportunities for students. In their future careers, our students will navigate a knowledge economy shaped by globalization that requires fluency across cultural, business, social, and political spheres.

In order to develop this fluency, student researchers supported by the Richard Charles Lee Insights through Asia Challenge (ITAC) conducted original research projects that engaged pressing and complex issues at stake in Asia and the diaspora using digital research methods. These researchers responded with enthusiasm, creativity, and thoughtfulness, conducting their projects in the remote research context engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The quality, imaginativeness, and significance of the work conducted by these emerging scholars continues to exceed our expectations. Students' ITAC work often serves as a launchpad for transformative, long-term scholarly and professional pursuits. Through this work, students better understand the world in order to reshape it.

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# **Internationalization in Action: Transformative Student Research at the Asian Institute**

**Richard Charles Lee Insights through Asia Challenge**

**2021 Student Research Presentations**

**10:00am – 12:00 pm (EDT), Tuesday, September 28, 2021**

Meeting Link: [https://zoom.us/j/97212132961?](https://zoom.us/j/97212132961?pwd=aTJrT2d4b0plbThEak1TT2U2bDVmdz09)

[pwd=aTJrT2d4b0plbThEak1TT2U2bDVmdz09](https://zoom.us/j/97212132961?pwd=aTJrT2d4b0plbThEak1TT2U2bDVmdz09)

Passcode: 935686

## **PROGRAM:**

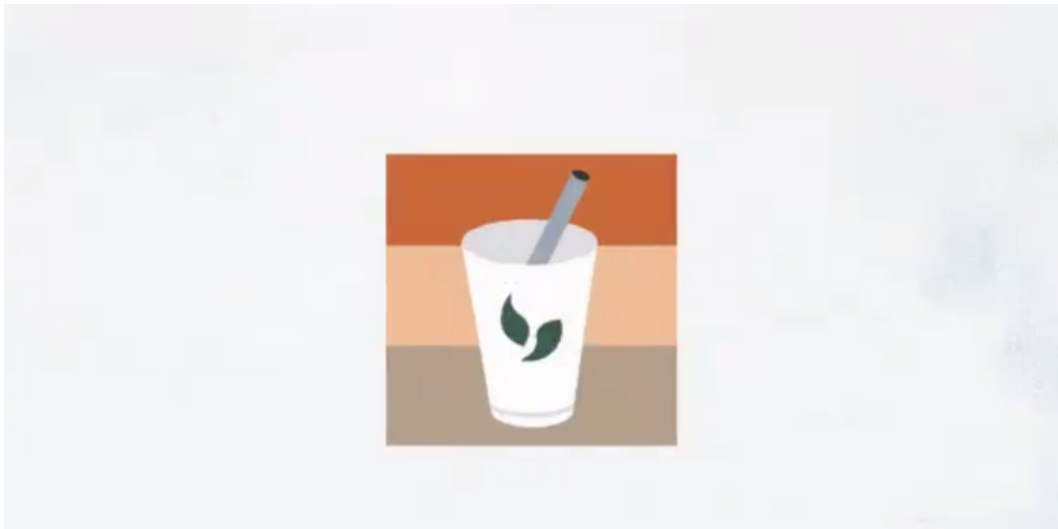
- 10:05-10:10      Welcome & ITAC Introduction  
Dr. Joseph McQuade, Richard Charles Lee Postdoctoral Fellow,  
Asian Institute  
Shannon Garden-Smith, Research Coordinator, Asian Institute  
Professor Rachel Silvey, Richard Charles Lee Director, Asian Institute
- 10:10-10:45      ITAC Presentations

## **Youth Identity in the Milk Tea Alliance**

Tracy Cheung, Contemporary Asian Studies and Human Geography

Rashmi Raj, Contemporary Asian Studies and Sociology

The Milk Tea Alliance is an online hashtag that originated on Twitter to signal solidarity between multiple Asian countries/administrative regions such as Thailand, Myanmar, Hong Kong and more. Primarily powered by youth, this alliance stands for democracy and human rights although it originally began as a meme war. In an increasingly globalized world, social relations and how youth identify themselves are constantly transforming under rapidly changing conditions, which includes emerging online communities. This project examines youth identity in Hong Kong and Thailand in relation to the Milk Tea Alliance to uncover whether this alliance has the potential to impact how youth identify themselves in relation to nationality and on a global scale. Our research asks, if Asian youth are willing to take part in the online, transnational Milk Tea Alliance community, does their participation shift their sense of identity, so that they feel identified with transnational alliances that exceed national identity?



*Image: Twitter's Milk Tea Alliance emoji*

We gathered data through online surveys circulated between Thai and Hong Kong social media users. The results indicated a relationship between Asian youth strongly favouring the alliance and participating in the hashtag and their identification as a global citizen more than a citizen of their nation state. Possible explanations for this trend include their increased immersion in a global community that circulates transnational information with high regard for universal human rights, therefore increasing feelings of solidarity with fellow Asian youth.

### **Rogue Representations: Diasporic Digital Archives of South Asian Musical Media**

Hassan Asif, PhD student at the Faculty of Information

In this essay I explore how social construction of memory is operationalized in South Asian diasporic digital archives of musical media while interacting with the transformative potentials of digital memory-making tools. I ask how social media and related digital platforms develop conditions for digital memory-making for South Asian diasporic communities and question if there are epistemic blind spots in the way we locate power and related negotiations in such diasporic archives of musical media. I do this by presenting two case studies of South Asian digital musical media archives, Discostan and Hamnawa being maintained and curated by individuals in North America. Through semi-structured interviews of archivists from both digital archives, I understand their archival practice, their motivations, and their logics for organizing, negotiating, and approaching South Asian media from the past while constructing alternative presents and futures. These digital archivists consider their archival practice as a labour of love while aiming to rectify projected musical categories imposed by Western archival platforms onto non-Western musical systems that often chart their own trajectories in digital media.

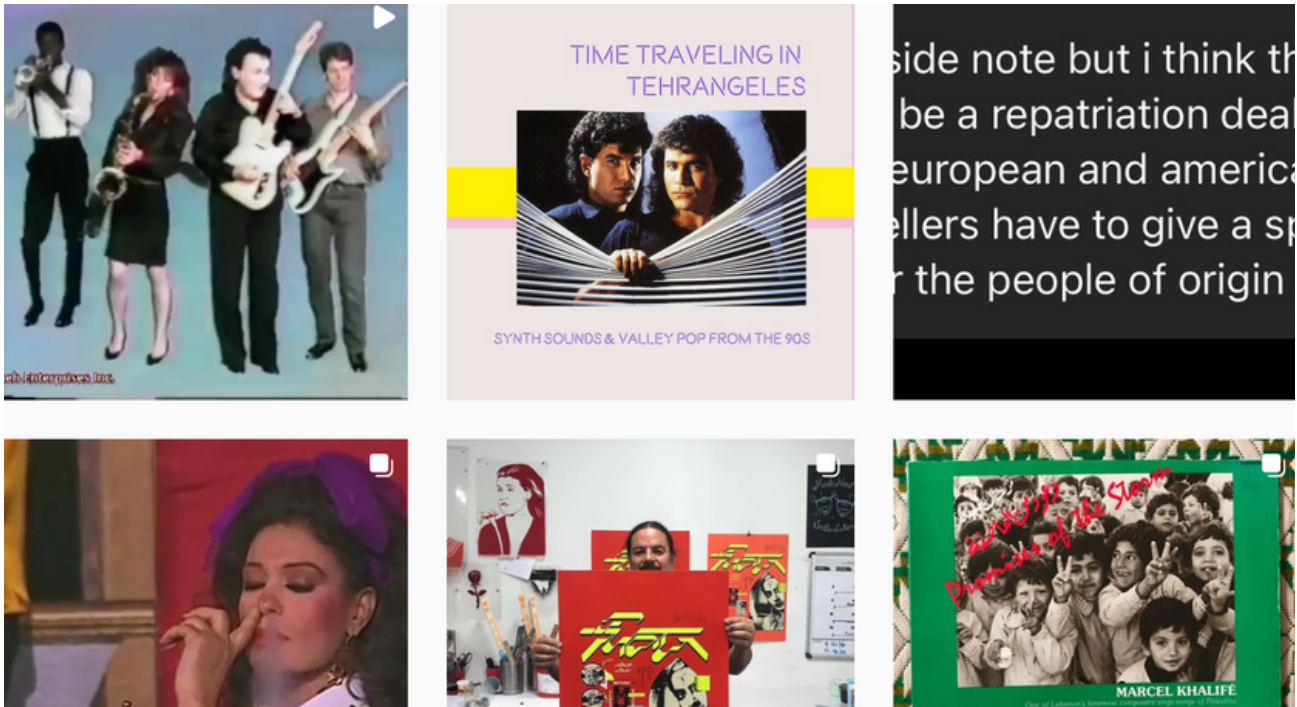


Image: Discostan's feed on Instagram (Source: Instagram.com/Discostan)

### **Camaraderie and Clientelism: A Qualitative Content Analysis of China-Cambodia Relations**

Jonathan Michael Banfield, Contemporary Asian Studies, Peace, Conflict and Justice, and Political Science

The expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) raises critical questions about the nature of client-state relationships within Southeast Asia. Drawing on the case of Cambodia, this paper seeks to draw out the key factors animating official pro-China sentiments through a comprehensive literature review and qualitative content analysis of major Cambodian news outlets. Articles from 2014 to 2021 discussing Khmer-Sino interactions were collected from the Khmer Times, Agence Kampuchea Press, and Phnom Penh Post. These articles were systematically coded for seven themes: Chinese sovereignty, development, deviation, friendship, military relations, neutral foreign policy and sentimental support. Analysis of Khmer Times' content indicated a number of trends, including: an increase in the number of coded mentions of neutral foreign policy in response to increased coverage on development, and a return to emphasis on friendship and decreased coverage on development following the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the other news outlets revealed a general uptick in the number of mentions of friendship over time, with particular spiking attributable to the pandemic. Drawing on Cambodia's case, this article contributes to understandings of Southeast Asian patron-client relations through analysing official sentiments and assessing how and why they are projected thematically in different ways.



*Image: Shanghai West Bund Biennial Pavilions (Source: Schmidt Hammer Lassen Architects)*

## **The Sustainability of Culture-Led Regeneration: 2 Cases from Shanghai's Urban Waterfronts**

Amy Chen, Contemporary Asian Studies, Diaspora and Transnational Studies, and Political Science

Since China's market reforms in the late 1970s, Shanghai has played a leading role in the country's economic restructuring. The transition from a manufacturing-based economy to one that prioritizes creativity and innovation is supported through a series of urban renewal projects. This research compares two urban regeneration project cases on Shanghai's waterfronts—M50 and Shanghai West Bund—and explores the effectiveness of culture-led urban regeneration in addressing the sustainable redevelopment of urban spaces. Data is gathered from primary and secondary literature and analyzed using GIS (geographic information system) technology. It is then interpreted through Bianchini and Parkinson's (1993) proposed debate on culture-led urban regeneration, including the cultural funding dilemma, economic dilemma, and spatial dilemma. The analysis demonstrates the varieties within culture-led strategies of urban regeneration and how different instances of culture-led regeneration have considered sustainability an anchoring factor in their design. This research concludes that Shanghai's culture-led urban regeneration of industrial heritage is faced with the challenges of (a) incorporating the creative resources generated by current institutions into shaping the projects' future development and (b) offsetting the effects of gentrification, brought on due to the urban renewal process, by providing benefits to a fuller definition of the community.

## **China as an Ideological Threat Against America? A Dissemination of Anti-China Sentiment on Far-Right Forum Patriots.win**

Cheryl Cheung, Political Science and American Studies

This project delves into the far-right online forum patriots.win to investigate whether a predominant source of anti-Asian hate within the American alt-right community is based on a fear of the Chinese government's power. Using a case study approach to detect the sentiments underlying posts with keywords relating to China, the findings revealed anti-China sentiment on the forum was largely directed to China as a singular entity overseas, rather than at Asian-Americans. Though the posts reveal a suspicion of government corruption, many of the government-related accusations were also about the state gaining the 'upperhand' over America. In sum, there is looming fear of China's increasing power at the cost of Americans'. Given the dearth of academic research on patriots.win, I encourage greater analysis by journalists and scholars to examine the impact of discriminatory speech on far-right forums like this one as a bid for greater public awareness and more robust policy by lawmakers.

## **(Re)envisioning Routes: Examining Environmental and Cultural Sustainability in Nepal's Tourism Industry**

Ashwini Selvakumaran, Peace, Conflict & Justice Studies, English, Diaspora & Transnational Studies

Neha Dhaliwal, Peace, Conflict, & Justice Studies, Human Geography, Diaspora & Transnational Studies

Aishwarya Patel, Comprehensive Music Studies, Political Science, Certificates in Health Applications in Music & Music Technology

Sachin Oza, Ethics, Society, & Law, Contemporary Asian Studies, Near & Middle Eastern Civilisations

This project analyzes the extent to which tourism practices negatively impact cultural and environmental sustainability in Nepal, and how the government, in tandem with other stakeholders, can alter its approach to preserve the country's unique socio-environmental landscape. In particular, our team's focus was on Kathmandu and Upper Mustang. Through an extensive literature review, we analyzed existing literature related to the socio-economic damage brought about by COVID-19 to Nepal and the intersections between current tourism practices, the cultural sustainability of these practices, and environmental degradation. This provided us with an appropriate backdrop when understanding Nepal's socio-cultural and environmental landscape. We connected with stakeholders and organizations including environmentally conscious NGOs, local people whose livelihood surrounds tourism, and tourism workers. We conducted a range of interviews, collecting



*Image: Upper Mustang*

quantitative data that mobilized the perspective of citizens and workers who are at the forefront of these issues, supplementing our preexisting understanding of the country's tourism landscape today. In a forthcoming policy report, we conclude that conservation strategies must be holistic. Sustainable development measures beyond ecotourism are needed to maintain Nepal's environmental landscape. A wide variety of stakeholders will need to (continue to) work together to support Nepal's culture and traditions and resist the commodification of traditional artefacts by tourists.

10:45-11:00    Break

11:00-11:30    ITAC Presentations (continued)





Image: Screenshots from Rubaiyat Hossain's film, *Made in Bangladesh*

## **Female-Led Labour Unions as Empowerment: Bangladeshi Garment Factories**

Ibnat Islam, Political Science and Peace, Conflict & Justice

This research explores the feminized garment industry in Bangladesh by analyzing the capacity of labour unions to act as a space of sociopolitical empowerment for female workers during COVID-19. Through a literature review, documentary and film analyses, and interviews, the research investigates what Bangladeshi female garment factory workers' labour means in the broader context of the global supply chain, and how pandemic-era mobilizations can impact the workers' ability to empower themselves. The research finds that, set against the backdrop of a globalizing world and a patriarchal society, the class and gender positionalities of female garment factory workers impact their ability to successfully organize into unions. The pandemic has exacerbated the dire working conditions of garment factories and reinforced deep-rooted gender roles through the unequal division of labour both at home and in the workplace. Further, the ability of female workers to unionize has become increasingly more difficult during the pandemic. This is due to the implementation of social distancing measures and the inability of the workers to prioritize their own working conditions, as the capitalist and patriarchal conditions of their environments force them to spend more time servicing their family members and households throughout the pandemic lockdowns.

## **Exile Activism: Hong Kong's Pro-Democracy Activism in the United Kingdom**

Wan Li, Contemporary Asian Studies and Human Geography

Chan-Min Roh, Contemporary Asian Studies, South Asian Studies, and Asian Canadian Studies

Through the case study of Hong Kong's pro-democracy activism in the UK, this research explores the question: How does exile change activism? The origins and process of exile can be traced directly to key political events, notably the escalation of local protests in Hong Kong from 2019 to 2020, the subsequent imposition of the National Security Law, and the enforcement of the BNO policy by the British government. These events impelled the current mass exodus of Hong Kongers to the UK. Drawing on insights from exile politics, social movement theories, and contentious politics, the research focusses on how mechanisms of mobilization change prior to and after exile. Crucially, exile acts as a catalyzing factor that allows for a comparison of two case studies (pre-exile and post-exile). By conducting an extensive literature review on relevant theoretical frameworks, we set out to assess the applicability of the contentious politics framework in the study of exile activism. Through conducting interviews with Hong Kong pro-democracy groups in the United Kingdom and analyzing the primary social media sites of their political mobilization, we are able to identify key mechanisms of mobilization at play as a result of political exile.



*Image: Shanghai interchange (Source: Denys Nevozhai, Unsplash)*

## **Understanding Female Rural-Urban Migration in China**

Saara Meghji, Political Science, Contemporary Asian Studies, and History

This research project seeks to understand the factors motivating female rural-urban migration in China and the impacts of these processes. In particular, the project examines

the scale and specific manifestations of migration including its gendered dimensions. The research considers why women often face increased barriers to migration (due, for example, to traditional gender roles in families and local communities), as well as why overcoming patriarchal and structural barriers in the form of the hukou system is often key for those who do migrate. Further, the project explores how some women are able to mobilize the notion of marriage as an “end goal” in their lives to effectively migrate with husbands, adopt better hukou, and thus access increased economic prosperity. Beyond this, the project concludes that when women migrate, they often face reduced economic opportunities and are more likely to occupy precarious employment in the informal sector. However, the increasing visibility of female migration has contributed to broader changes about women’s roles in China with the potential to continue shaping preference for male children and marriage dynamics.

### **Beginning to Rethink Dharma like a Feminist**

Gauri Persad, Diaspora & Transnational Studies, English and Equity Studies

"Beginning to Rethink Dharma like a Feminist" is a podcast designed to invite a critical feminist view of Dharma in the Bhagavad Gita (BVG). The Bhagavad Gita's reading of Dharma usually provides uncomfortable expectations for women and lower-caste communities. In this project, I explore the standard and hegemonic, hetero-patriarchal, castest readings of Dharma that engulf our society. I attempt to develop the concept of Dharma as compatible with left-leaning, feminist social theory to create a working definition that captures Dharma in the Bhagavad Gita in a way that makes room for everyone, particularly women and minorities. I produced the project as a podcast to make it accessible to the working class, homemakers, and people who need Dharma to be rethought the most. Ultimately, this project concludes that it is possible to reframe Dharma in feminist terms to acknowledge that patriarchy and castism have tarnished potential.

### **Imagining God in the Lockdown**

Ariel Siagan, PhD student, Theology

My project aims to understand how God is imagined by religious leaders and service providers in the Philippines during the time of COVID-19 lockdowns. Using three different mechanisms to explore the topic, I first studied the documents issued by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) during the period of the second lockdown, February to May 2021. Second, I analyzed the liturgies and speeches delivered on the

Peace Summit organized by the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP) via Zoom. Finally, I organized a semi-structured focus group discussion with participants who are direct service providers of social and religious services to the people. Out of eight participants, half are ministers of a local congregation and the other half are ecumenical workers. My data-set suggests that at this critical time, the idea of God is mostly imagined as a concrete experience rather than an abstract idea, more immanent than transcendent. God is imagined as suffering along with the people rather than God at a remove, on the throne.

11:30-11:50 Audience Q & A

11:50-11:55 Closing Remarks

