

# China's global backyard: comparing Chinese relations with Southeast Asia and Africa

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JOINT SEMINAR OF IAS AND THE AFRICAN STUDIES CENTRE  
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ON FRIDAY, 14 JUNE 2013, the International Institute for Asian Studies and the African Studies Centre, both based in Leiden, held the first joint seminar of the two institutions, "China's Global Backyard: Comparing Chinese Relations with Southeast Asia and Africa." The two presenters, Jessica Achberger and Danielle Tan, were both Visiting Fellows at the ASC and IAS, respectively. The seminar was well attended and stimulated an interesting debate on both the role of China in relation to Southeast Asia and Africa, as well as the scholarship presented on it. What follows are excerpts from the two presentations.

## Jessica Achberger

The boom of literature on China and Africa is not entirely surprising: the world, and more specifically, the West, is concerned with every aspect of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. However, in this process, I believe we have lost our focus on producing sound scholarship that truly gets to the root of the issues at hand. Therefore, what we have chosen to do today in this seminar is to critique the current state of scholarship on China's relations with both Africa and Southeast Asia. However, and more importantly, we would like to provide solutions for a better study of China's relations with the developing world.

There are three key issues that we have chosen to address today, which are prevalent in both literature on China and

Africa, and literature on China and Southeast Asia. The first of these issues is bias, and, in particular, to move past the binary structure of 'optimist/pessimists'. My second, related, point is that the western hegemony over scholarship on this topic dictates a pessimistic view. Negativity towards China, and towards China and Africa, is not new. But it does point to the fact that we have been working under a western, pessimistic framework on this topic for far too long. Because of this obsession with China, and particular the 'big bad' version of China, we end up asking the wrong questions, which is the third point I would like to discuss today. By keeping the focus only on China, especially when the perspective is inherently western/pessimist, we are neglecting to get to the heart of many issues within Africa, which happen to involve the Chinese government, Chinese companies, and Chinese people.

However, the next part, and the more important part, is fixing the problem. How do we begin to study relations between China and Africa, at all levels, in a way that fully expresses its complex reality? How do we move beyond the binary, beyond the black and white, to the grey area? What the study of China and Africa, at every level, needs is real empirically grounded questions based on fieldwork that get to the heart of the issues at hand. We need to change the way we talk about China and Africa.



**Danielle Tan**

My argument is that Southeast Asia, considered as China's natural backyard, is a crucial observation field to describe the complexity and the heterogeneity of mobilities and identities in the so-called 'Chinese century'. Southeast Asia's relations with China are distinctive because of a presence of a large ethnic Chinese population over many centuries. Given the long and common history that Southeast Asia and China share together, studying the current forms of Chinese presence in Southeast Asia can provide food for thought for those who are interested in Chinese globalisation in Africa, or the semi-periphery of the West, like Eastern Europe and South America. I will focus my presentation today on what Africa can learn from the Southeast Asian experience.



Above:  
Danielle Tan.  
Below: Jessica  
Achberger.

Jessica just showed the biased perception about Chinese relations with Africa framed by a negative Western perspective, and how this binary vision prevents us from asking the right question. I will go further, showing how that binary vision of China – as a threat or an opportunity – has first been conveyed in Southeast Asia since the colonial period, shaping the image and the relationship with the Chinese. As a result, until today, the study of Chinese migrants has never been objective, but highly motivated by economic and geopolitical interests. I will then propose to break new ground in examining China's rise by raising new research approach and a tentative comparative framework to study China's engagement in Africa and Southeast Asia.

Surprisingly, the disproportionate focus on Africa has obscured the significance of China's emergence as a global player for its closest neighbours. This omission is particularly glaring in the case of Southeast Asia, which has historically been the main theatre of China's commercial engagement with the world. China's comeback in Southeast Asia brought about a revival of Chinese cultural expression. Yet few scholars have seriously considered the effect of China's new economic, migratory, and cultural presence on the position of ethnic Chinese in the region and on the development of these countries. Despite growing nuance in the literature on China's engagement, especially in Africa, analyses that explore what the encounter with China produces in terms of new social, economic, political and cultural configurations within the milieu where its entrepreneurs and workers settle remain the exception.

# Asian Urbanisms in Theory and Practice: The Future of the Vernacular City

2ND ANNUAL ROUNDTABLE OF THE URBAN KNOWLEDGE NETWORK ASIA (UKNA) 1-2 JULY 2013, SINGAPORE

THE SECOND ANNUAL ROUNDTABLE of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) was held in Singapore from 1-2 July 2013, at the modernistic University Town campus of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The Roundtable was co-organized by UKNA, IAS, the Asia Research Institute (ARI), the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Future Cities Laboratory of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The local hosts were Mike Douglass, Professor in the Asian Urbanisms Cluster at ARI and the Department of Sociology at NUS, and Dr. Rita Padawangi, Senior Research Fellow at the Asian Urbanisms Cluster of ARI.

The Roundtable brought together researchers and representatives of the network's partner institutes in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, India, the Netherlands, the UK, France, and of course Singapore itself.

Researchers, academics and activists from Singapore and around the region joined the UKNA contingent on the second day of the Roundtable for a workshop on the vernacular city in Asia.

Several critical cases of vernacular urbanism were presented and discussed, including:

*Integrating street vendors in urban systems in Ahmedabad*  
**Professor Madhu Bharti from CEPT University, India**

*The spatial pattern of everyday life in Beijing and Tianjin*  
**Professor Qiang Sheng from Tianjin University, China**

*Socially inclusive planning in Taipei*  
**Professor Liling Huang of the National Taiwan University**

*The redevelopment of Kampong Susun in Jakarta*  
**Ivana Lee of the Ciliwung Merdeka Association and Ariel Glensk of the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights**

*The case of Bukit Brown cemetery in Singapore*  
**Claire Leow of 'All Things Bukit Brown'**

Presentations and discussions were followed by a walking tour of Bukit Brown cemetery, parts of which are threatened by a planned highway. The grand finale of the Roundtable was the City Possible II Film Festival, which featured short films and documentaries from all over Asia on everyday urban life, compiled by Mike Douglass and Rita Padawangi.

# ukna

UKNA is an IAS coordinated network of over a hundred researchers from 14 partner institutions and is funded by a grant awarded by the Marie Curie Actions 'International Research Staff Exchange Scheme' (IRSES) of the European Union.

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## URBAN KNOWLEDGE NETWORK ASIA (UKNA)

"Human Flourishing and the Creative Production of Urban Space". From knowledge to action in comparative research on cities in Asia

UKNA is an inclusive network that brings together concerned scholars and practitioners engaged in collaborative research on cities in Asia. It seeks to influence policy by contributing insights that put people at the center of urban governance and development strategies. The emphasis is on immediate problem solving as well as on the identification of long-term, transformative processes

that increase the scope for the active engagement of people in the creative production and shaping of the city. UKNA pursues three avenues of inquiry:

1. The "Ideas of the City" research theme explores competing ideas of the contemporary city from historical perspectives to illuminate the continuities and ruptures in the process of city making.

2. The "Cities by and for the People" theme examines who are the actors and how they interact in the production, shaping, contestation and transformation of the city. It explores the relations between human flourishing and the making of urban space and form, with a particular concern for the rights of residents and users in the process.

3. The "Future of Cities" theme considers the challenges of urban dwellers and users in the areas of land, housing, infrastructure, services, planning and the environment, personal well being (including livelihoods and human capital), and "life spaces" (comprising culture, urban heritage, public spaces, and associational life).

Contributions to UKNA's three research areas are welcomed in a variety of forms, including written publications, case studies, seminars and workshops, short-term training activities, and the visual arts.

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