

CALL FOR PAPERS | DEADLINE 5 MARCH 2020

Escaping Kakanian

Eastern European Travels in Colonial Southeast Asia

WORKSHOP DATE

16-17 November 2020 (to be confirmed)

VENUE

Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

Selected participants will be invited to a workshop at the National University of Singapore, and provided with accommodation (3 nights) and return airfare by the most economical route of up to S\$1,200. We aim to publish the final versions of the essays in an edited volume with a reputable publisher.

Scholarship on European representations of Southeast Asia in the colonial period largely deals with Western European colonial powers and their particular imagination, political relationships, orientalisms, and racisms. It is on this limited perspective, defined by the empires, that generalizations about “Europe”, “the West”, and “Western” views of “the East”, are usually based. Among the project’s aims is to challenge this perspective and complicate this picture by focusing on the experiences and writings of people who travelled to/in/through colonial Southeast Asia from “Eastern Europe.” We intend to focus mainly, but not exclusively, on nations that were at one time partly or wholly under the rule of the Austrian / Austro-Hungarian empire such as Croatians, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovenians, etc.

Eastern Europe is characterized by a diversity of histories, geographies, languages, cultures, religions, and literary traditions, a richness that we wish to celebrate. The area is also interlinked through comparable

historical experiences and “family resemblances”: Eastern European identities and self-determination were dreamed and struggled for in the margins, or under the rule, of great empires, West and East, which were trying to divide the region among themselves (rather like Western European empires did in Southeast Asia). We focus on nations that did not have colonies, were at times (semi-)colonized (rather like most of Southeast Asia), and were orientalised in Western perspectives. Yet, to see them as *merely* “marginal” would be to adopt imperial perspectives. They were Europeans who shared much with colonized people in Asia, but who, especially during their travels or stay in Asia, were in various ways dependent on the colonial powers. Some Eastern European travellers wrote of “mixed blood” in characterizing their own (non-)place in colonial society in Asia.

Kakania, Robert Musil’s name for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, comes from the designation *kaiserlich (und) königlich*, “Imperial (and) Royal,” in the imperial language commonly abbreviated to *k. k.* [pronounced kah-kah], even as *kaka-* is also the children’s word for “pooping” (in German, Czech, Croatian, etc.). Kakania, the Imperial and Royal / Poo-poo-land refers to the particular Empire – one manner of homeland – but also a state of mind and a way of being. Yet the name is already charged with an attitude toward the Empire – dissent, rebellion or escape, like humour, like a childish giggle. We use Kakania not to delimit scope or impose a framework but to tickle imagination. *Escaping Kakania*, as travellers did, as the people and nations in the region did over the course of history, should be understood in all its poetic and ironic (im)possibilities and contradictions, forgetting neither the creative and emancipatory desires and unexpected encounters, revelations and transformations that may be part of escaping, nor the ways travellers carry Kakania – along with other dreams and nightmares of homeland – within them, or recognize it in colonial Southeast Asia. For some, that was the ultimate revelation, the ultimate giggle: forever escaping, one never escapes Kakania.

The project aims to cross the boundaries of national languages and academic

enclaves and stimulate a conversation among scholars from (or working on) different Eastern European and/or Southeast Asian countries. It aims to bring out the richness of experiences and imagination of Eastern European travel (and) writing, and to thematise the particularity of the traveller-writers' experiences and views of themselves (including their sense of belonging to a nation and their sense of being "European", "Western", "Eastern", "Oriental", etc.), their views of Southeast Asia and its people (both feelings of otherness and familiarity), of Western Europeans (often as the other Other) and colonialism. At the same time, the project hopes to avoid exoticising Eastern Europe, and simplifying its difference from imperial Western Europe, by highlighting the multiplicity of travellers, countries, and historical situations – including forms of internal colonialism, orientalism, etc. – and by exploring how Eastern Europeans navigated between adopting and deviating from colonial identities, narratives and practices. Our questions include:

*Why did particular Eastern Europeans travel to Southeast Asia? How did they perceive, feel, think, move around, dress, eat, speak, interact with others or not, choose their company, accommodation, etc.? How did they choose to represent this? * How were their views and experiences shaped by their professional, political or religious allegiances? How were the travellers perceived at home and abroad? *How did particular Eastern European histories, cultures, languages and literary traditions (such as the narratives, metaphors, tropes or style of humour prevalent in a language/culture), shape travellers' attitudes, experiences and thoughts in their writings? How do images of/from home and homeland figure in travellers' imagery? In what ways were Eastern European experiences and representations of Southeast Asia specifically Eastern European, Austro-Hungarian, national, or otherwise local – and/or not? Was there a sense of common fate with the colonized peoples of Southeast Asia, and a recognition of the affinity between Eastern European and Southeast Asian imperialisms? How did they view and engage with colonialists and colonial ideologies of inequality and race? How are the genders and the relations between them represented, and how are they racialized (or not)? To what

extent did the travellers conform to colonial behaviour? How did the sea, islands, tropical nature, colonial cities, “civilisation”, etc., figure in the travellers’ imagination? How were their views of themselves, their countries, and the world, affected by their travels? How were they and their countries of origin viewed by Western Europeans and Southeast Asians? What was specific about Southeast Asian localities, peoples and cultures, for the travellers? How do Eastern European perspectives help us to upset or correct existing understanding of “Europe”, European colonialism and racism, as well as European and Southeast Asian modernities? *

We want the papers to animate, complicate, undermine, and expand these initial questions in surprising ways, based on a close study of literary and historical sources. The themes and focus outlined here suggest the initial concentration of this project, but we welcome proposals that go beyond it (for example, research on “travel accounts” in Southeast Asia by authors who did not physically travel there; on visual artists, photographers, composers, etc.; or work on Southeast Asian perspectives on Eastern Europeans).

By “traveller-writer” we mean anyone who travelled to Southeast Asia for work or for personal reasons and wrote about it in any genre (including fiction, poetry, letters, etc.).

We are interested in reflective essays that richly present, analyse and contextualize their material. However, we do not wish to delimit too narrowly the possible approaches, topics and styles. We encourage quotations from primary sources and the incorporation of visual material. We very much welcome contributions *escaping the conventions of academic writing*, in style, genre (e.g., poetry, fiction), the use of visual material, or digital/online media. Please mention any ideas in your abstract.

We are interested in the possibility of papers being complemented by *translations

of brief examples of /excerpts from primary sources* in the resulting publication. When you submit your abstract, please mention if you would be interested in providing such a translation with your paper.

SUBMISSION

Send a title, an abstract (800-900 words), and a brief CV or bio (optionally, include a writing sample, such as a previous publication) to Jan Mrázek at [*seajm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:seajm@nus.edu.sg) <seajm@nus.edu.sg>* by * 5 March 2020*. Selected participants will be informed by 1 April 2020. Complete drafts of papers will be due on 1 September 2020.

CONVENOR

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