

**Symposium on Alternative Modernities, Alternative Methodologies:
Literary and Cultural Southeast Asia post-WWII to the 1960s
14 February 2025 (Friday)**

**National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University
BLK 1, Conference Room (NIE1-01-09)**

This event is held both in-person and online.

Time	Segment
9.15 to 9.45am	Morning Coffee / Tea
9.45am – 10am	Introductory Remarks Dr Angelia Poon, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University
10 am to 11.30am	Rethinking Southeast Asian Sites and Genres <u>Imagining Southeast Asia in the Imperial Metropolis: Notes Towards a Research Agenda</u> <i>Dr Philip Holden, independent scholar</i> <u>Reception of Rabindranath Tagore and Dynamics of Forming Modern National Culture in Vietnam (1954-1975)</u> <i>Dr Chi P. Pham, Tenured Researcher, Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences</i> <u>The Southeast Asian Western as the Vernacular Genre of a Tropical Frontier</u> <i>Dr Elmo Gonzaga, Associate Professor in the Division of Cultural Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)</i>
11.30am to 1.30pm	Lunch break
1.30pm to 3pm	Alternative Formations: Reading Southeast Asia <u>Ang Obrero'y Binubuhay ng Kanyang Pawis: Articulating Socialism in the Philippines in the Novels of Amado V. Hernandez</u> <i>Dr Dominic Sy, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines Diliman</i> <u>Queer Modernity and Other-Malaysia: Speculating the Past in Joshua Kam's <i>How The Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly The World</i></u> <i>Dr Grace V. S. Chin, Senior Lecturer in English Language Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia</i>

Time	Segment
	<p data-bbox="411 237 954 273">Chinese-Malayan Ecologies and the Cold War</p> <p data-bbox="411 304 1377 371"><i>Dr Zhou Hau Liew, Assistant Professor, International PhD Program of Taiwan and Transcultural Studies, National Chung Hsing University</i></p>
3-4pm	<p data-bbox="411 445 943 481">Closing Response and Further Conversation</p> <p data-bbox="411 515 1273 551"><i>Coda: Postwar English Language Textbooks as Anglophone Literary Sites</i></p> <p data-bbox="411 584 1350 620">Dr Ann Ang, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University</p>

[View Programme](#)

[Abstracts](#)

Abstracts

Imagining Southeast Asia in the Imperial Metropolis: Notes Towards a Research Agenda

Philip Holden

Received history would suggest that Southeast Asia was imagined as a region during World War 2, when the Allied creation of the South-East Asian Command in September 1943 introduced a rarely-used term into global political discourse. In the ensuing years, Southeast Asians would claim the term themselves, in the formation of ASEAN, and increasingly in terms of a cultural imaginary.

This paper traces an early moment in such imagining, in London during the Second World War. The British capital at the time served as what has been called a “junction-box” of anticolonial activists who, as Adom Getachew has recently argued, saw themselves as “worldmakers” committed to regional imaginaries of “nondomination” in decolonization, rather than simply as postcolonial “nation-builders.” This paper traces Southeast Asian imaginings at two sites in London during the War: in radio broadcasts on the BBC’s Eastern Service from 1941 to 1942, and the writings of Malayan journalist Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, who would return to Singapore in 1947, and, as an independent Singapore’s first Minister for Foreign Affairs, play a key part in the founding of ASEAN in 1967.

[View Programme](#)

Reception of Rabindranath Tagore and Dynamics of Forming Modern National Culture

in Vietnam (1954-1975)

Chi P. Pham

Vietnam was divided into two political entities following two political ideologies: South Vietnam followed a capitalist model while North Vietnam was socialist. Regardless, Vietnamese intellectuals under these different regimes attempted to decolonize their nations, constructing their ideal modern national culture based on the colonial one. This paper understands the dynamics of idealized modern national literature in divided Vietnam by examining diverse ways of appreciating work by the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). During the colonial period, French-educated Vietnamese intellectuals received Tagore’s work and visit as an embodiment of inter-Asian-based nationalism that aimed to alternate Western-based models. This paper analyzes presentations on and translations of Tagore’s work in South Vietnam and North Vietnam in the context of nation-building policies in the two regimes, identifying the historically different models of modern national culture in Vietnam during this period.

[View Programme](#)

The Southeast Asian Western as the Vernacular Genre of a Tropical Frontier

Elmo Gonzago

Exploring alternative methods for studying Southeast Asian literature and culture as a coherent field, this paper asks how vernacular genres can be used as frameworks to examine the cross-cultural and transhistorical variation of texts. Instead of disregarding them as commercial and formulaic, this paper discusses how genres could be read as contingent indexes of global and regional changes that are imminent and emerging, and thus yet to find definition. The Western was one of most popular genres from the 1940s to the 1960s with many such works produced in different markets during this period. With its imagery of gunslinging cowboys with self-assured morality striving to establish capitalism and civilization in the savage frontier, the paper examines how the Western visualized industrial and militarist expansion during the Cold War. As a case study, it focuses on the understudied films of Fernando Poe Jr., the most iconic actor in Philippine box office history, whose career spanned six decades. His early productions from the 1950s and 1960s could be analyzed as genre movies that captured the flux and ferment of Cold War cultures in Southeast Asia while mediating the normative binaries between urban and non-urban at a time of postcolonial development.

[View Programme](#)

Ang Obrero'y Binubuhay ng Kanyang Pawis: Articulating Socialism in the Philippines in the Novels of Amado V. Hernandez

Dominic Sy

This paper examines the dialogic articulation of socialist thought in the novels of Amado V. Hernandez, one of the most celebrated writers in post-war Philippine literature. Through a close analysis of the linguistic, figurative, and argumentative tropes deployed in *Luha ng Buwaya* (1962) and *Mga Ibong Mandaragit* (1968)--in comparison with other radical writings in the Tagalog language from before and after the Second World War--this paper argues that Hernandez's novels constitute a significant creative endeavor in the Filipinization of Marxist thought through his embedding of Marxist, humanist, and Third World anticolonialist discourses within the constantly evolving language of the Philippine revolutionary tradition.

[View Programme](#)

Queer Modernity and Other-Malaysia: Speculating the Past in Joshua Kam's *How The Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly The World*

Grace V. S. Chin

Joshua Kam's award-winning speculative novel, *How The Man in Green Saved Pahang, and Possibly The World* (2020), boldly reimagines the turbulent historical period of post-WWII to the 1960s as a critical temporal juncture that could have led to

alternative possibilities for, or versions of, Malaya/Malaysia—termed here as Other-Malaysia. This Other-Malaysia celebrates the diverse and exuberant expressions of queer modernity, represented by non-conformative or deviant modern voices and viewpoints that have been censored or erased by legitimised history, including those of queer identities and historical, mythical, or legendary multicultural figures like Nabi Khidir, Tun Teja, Mazu, Lord Murugan, Cheng Ho, and others. Challenging the monolithic fixity of identities and legitimised history/reality produced by the ethnocentric and heteropatriarchal politics of postcolonial Malaysia, Other-Malaysia—via a queer theoretical lens—thus constitutes a vital decolonial method of reading an alternative history of Malaya/Malaysia. By speculating the possibility of Other-Malaysia, the novel ultimately invites us to rethink how history and the past can be usefully harnessed for the reimagining of the present and future state and society of the Southeast Asian nation.

[View Programme](#)

Chinese-Malayan Ecologies and the Cold War

Zhou Hau Liew

What can Chinese-Malayan ecologies and their representations tell us about the global Cold War? In his translated essay collection, *Durians are Not the Only Fruit*, essayist and poet Wong Yoon Wah writes that Chinese-Malayan subjectivity is a transplant like the rubber tree, which ecology is disrupted by British resettlement as part of counterinsurgency efforts during the Malayan Emergency. Drawing from this initial insight, I aim to outline the contours of what I am tentatively calling “Chinese-Malayan eco-literature.” This is a kind of environmental literature that reimagines the Cold War through a transnational perspective. It does so by restaging Chinese-Malayan ecologies such as colonial migrant labor in plantations, guerilla warfare in the rainforest, and exilic villages. I will discuss literary works by writers such as Wong Yoon Wah and Jin Zhimang, as well as visual works by Lau Kek Huat and Sim Chi Yin, and attempt to link their works by thinking about issues of Cold War displacement and Chinese-Malayan relationship to the land.