



## **Conference Summary Report**

### **“Asian Melting Pot: History through the Multicultural Perspective”**

15-16 May 2021

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

The Asian Universities Alliance (AUA) was established in 2017 as a joint effort by flagship universities in the region to address regional and global challenges to Asian higher education and to foster economic, scientific, and technological development by strengthening collaboration among member institutions. Each year the AUA encourages its member universities to organize academic conferences on topics drawn from its central themes. This year, Chulalongkorn University, in close collaboration with the AUA, hosted the international conference “Asian Melting Pot: History through the Multicultural Perspective.” Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the conference was held in a fully virtual format.

The conference was designed to encourage scholars from AUA member institutions and others from wider international networks to bring forth the rich history of multicultural exchanges across the Asian continent from the early modern period to the present day. In order to investigate and re-discover the rich legacy of multicultural Asia, it encouraged presentations from a wide range of fields in the humanities and social sciences while emphasizing trans-regional and trans-continental works.

Over 50 registered participants attended the conference. They ranged from master’s and doctoral students to university lecturers and researchers in various fields, with academic affiliations in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, China, and Kazakhstan. Twenty papers covering a wide range of topics were presented and discussed in a total of six panels, which were divided into three main sessions. Despite the limitations of the virtual platform, these panels spurred fruitful and active discussions that benefited both the presenters and the audience, who brought their insights and questions into these transnational and multidisciplinary exchanges.

The conference was co-organized by Chulalongkorn University and the AUA. The co-hosts at Chulalongkorn University were the Faculty of Arts and the Office of International Affairs and Global Network.

## Opening Ceremony



Professor Bundhit Eua-arporn, President of Chulalongkorn University, presided over the Opening Ceremony. In his welcome remarks, Professor Bundhit reminded the audience that “*we are now undergoing dynamic and historic transformations—transformations that reveal a new awareness, that can alter our fundamental assumptions, and that can enable*

*unprecedented changes.*” He also emphasized that learning together from history is essential since it “*supports us to take perceptive and responsible action for our future*” and encouraged the participants “*to continue to engage in dialogue around our societal concerns from an intercultural perspective.*”

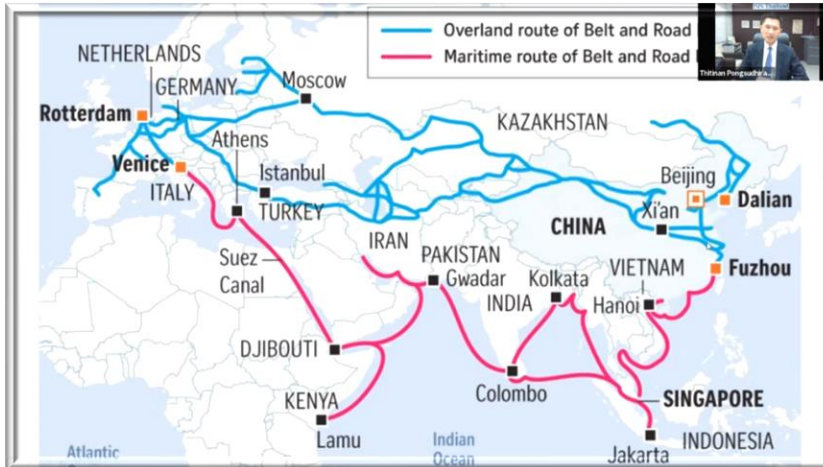
Two keynote addresses were delivered by Professor Datuk Dr. Danny Wong Tze Ken, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, and Professor Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Director of the Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

In his lecture entitled “Chinese Migration and the Shaping of a Multicultural Southeast Asia,” Professor Wong outlined two major waves of Chinese migration in relation to socioeconomic changes in China and Southeast Asia, using the nineteenth century as a working demarcation. Through arrival and settlement in Southeast Asia, Chinese sojourners and migrants brought Chinese cultural elements into contact with Southeast Asian peoples. Traces of the hybrid outcomes of this contact remain across the region today. Professor Wong pointed out that from the nineteenth century, Chinese-Southeast Asian interaction and multiculturalism diminished in the context of new nation-states, although the Chinese also contributed to nation-building and independence movements in the region. Professor Wong concluded his lecture by urging the audience to further uncover multicultural perspectives, such as the examples offered by the history of Chinese migration.

**Early Chinese Migration – Phase 1**

- Pre-19<sup>th</sup> century migration
- Conquest – Vietnam
- Traders
- Religious – Buddhism
- Emergence of Chinese Communities
- Where they met – port cities? Strange Company
- Interaction and outcome?
- When the world came to Southeast Asia?

An illustration showing three figures standing side-by-side. The figure on the left is a man in traditional Chinese attire, holding a bow and arrow. The middle figure is a man in a white robe, possibly a scholar or official. The figure on the right is a man wearing a red turban and a large red shield, possibly a warrior or a representative of a different culture. The illustration is framed within a larger presentation slide.



Professor Thitinan’s address “Asia for Asians: If Not Now, When?” similarly explored the influence of the Chinese on the region, but with a panoramic and state-oriented perspective. Rather than considering Asia as a melting pot *per se*, he suggested viewing it as a mosaic of different pieces coming together on the same canvas. He discussed historical and contemporary

quests for an “Asia-for-Asians,” including the Japanese-led Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, China’s ongoing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the ASEAN as a broker or buffer between superpowers. In comparing China’s BRI to the nineteenth century notion of “Manifest Destiny” in the United States, Professor Thitinan described the BRI as a “Manifest Resurgence,” characterized by China’s sense of entitlement to reclaim greatness and the inevitability of its rise. As China expands its influence through overland and maritime networks, the US is pushing back by expanding into the Indo-Pacific region, building a quadrilateral alliance between the US, Australia, Japan, and India. Whether China will succeed in this geopolitical struggle, Professor Thitinan noted at the end, will also depend on whether it can convince other Asian nations to recognize it as a benign superpower that will promote peace and prosperity with them and rebuild “Asia for Asians.”

On behalf of the co-conveners, Associate Professor Dr. Wasana Wongsurawat introduced the three overarching themes of the conference: modernity and urbanization, migration, and politics. These themes encompass the narratives, opportunities, and challenges that members of the AUA and beyond are facing in the twenty-first century. The conference panels were correspondingly arranged into three sessions: Revisiting Sites of Modernity, the Humanity of Migration, and Intra-Asian State Networks.

In lieu of an in-person meeting and reception, the conference organizers created a virtual study hall for the participants to get to know one another, continue their discussions from the conference, and relax after hours.

### Conference Panels

Under the umbrella theme of “The Asian Melting Pot: Asian History through the Multicultural Perspective,” the presentations were clustered in three sessions or sub-themes, each of which consisted of two panels. The papers encompassed a wide range of disciplines and topics, including history, anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, international relations, public policy, and geography.

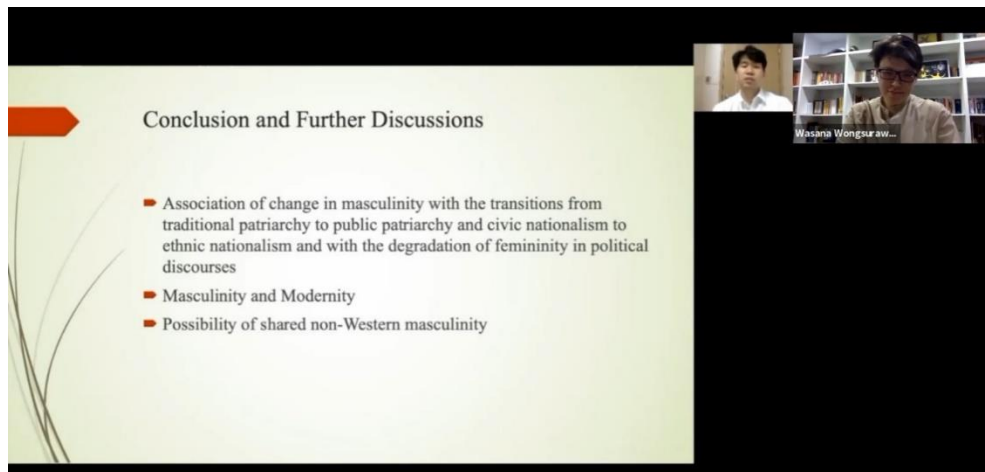
In Session I, the panel “Revisiting Sites of Modernity” discussed processes of modernization in Bangkok and Johor during the nineteenth century. While Mr. Muhammad Izuan bin Abdul Rahman’s paper centered on the role of the Malay elite, Dr. Pimmanus Wibulsilp used the case of an Islamic school in Bangkok to illuminate modernization as a process in which different groups of vested interests compete and negotiate. Going further back in time, Associate Professor Sawitree Charoenpong outlined the spatial transformation of early, or “Old,” Bangkok and asked if what was then underway can be understood as “modernity.” Her presentation prompted a thought-provoking discussion on the many definitions and implications of this elusive and complicated concept.



Muhammad Izuan (inner corner), in his presentation which discusses the role of Malay Dignitaries, joined by Dr. Thibodi Buakamsri (outer corner).

The second panel under the same sub-theme was no less diverse in its treatment of the question of modernity. Topics ranged from the effects of information technology on marriage patterns among ethnic groups in Myanmar and masculinity in Iranian religious nationalism, to digital banking and Thailand-Myanmar border trade. The presentations sparked a lively discussion, especially on the interplay between structural actors, such as states and corporations, on the one hand, and individuals on the other.

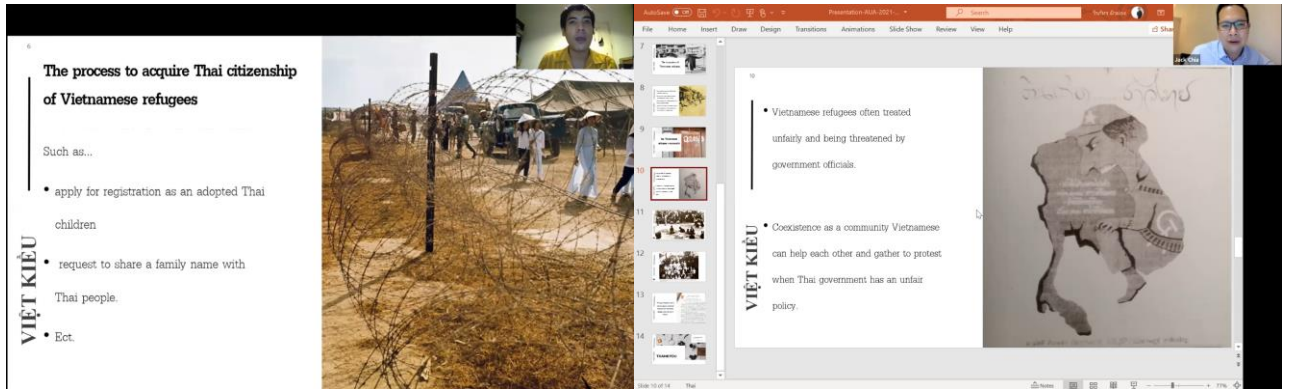
Gunha Kim (inner corner), gives his presentation about Iranian martyrdom, joined by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Wasana Wongsurawat (outer corner).



Session II on “the Humanity of Migration” examined various groups of migrants in both home and destination countries across mainland Southeast Asia, including marginalized

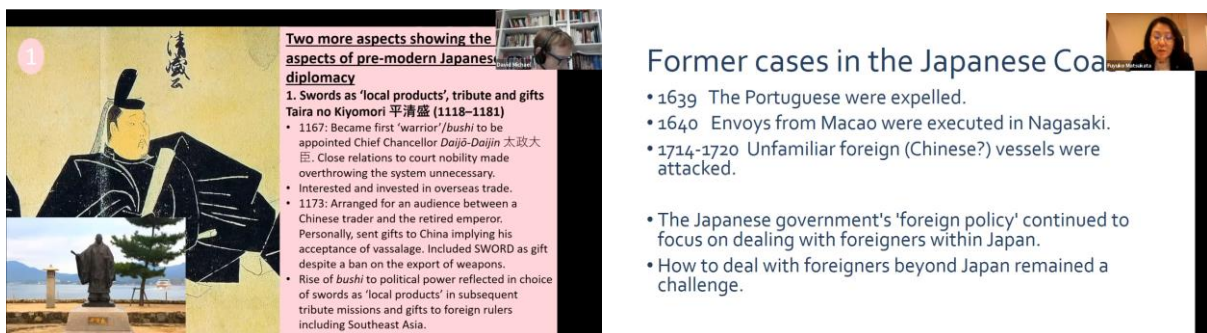


ethnic groups such as the Yinnets and the Kadu in Myanmar, the Gurkhas in Myanmar and Thailand, and Vietnamese refugees in upper northeastern Thailand. These papers converged on a number of issues, including forced migration, assimilation, adaptation, livelihood, and citizenship. The discussion in this panel suggested that the study of migration might benefit from global and regional contextualization as well as cross-case comparison.



Left: Mr. Weerapat, a presenter, talks about the migration of Vietnamese refugees in his presentation. Right: Session moderator, Asst. Prof. Dr. Jack-Chia, discusses the topic in detail.

The final session on “Intra-Asian State Networks” covered a variety of topics concerning Asian international relations from different perspectives and during several historical periods. These included times of early modern diplomacy, modern regional and transnational partnership and cooperation, and the networking of knowledge flows in Asia at large. Three papers examined the diplomatic practices of the Japanese shogunate and contemporary Japan, including its joint actions with Asian and Euro-American partners in the region. The remaining two papers respectively discussed coordination of the travel advisory systems of ASEAN members and patents as indicators of knowledge flow across the Asian continent.



Dr. David Malitz (left) and Prof. Dr. Fuyuko Matsukata (right) discussed pre-modern Japanese diplomacy and former cases relating to Japanese diplomacy, respectively.

In the wrap-up session, Assistant Professor Dr. Bhawan Ruangsilp and Associate Professor Dr. Wasana Wongsurawat from the Department of History, Chulalongkorn University,

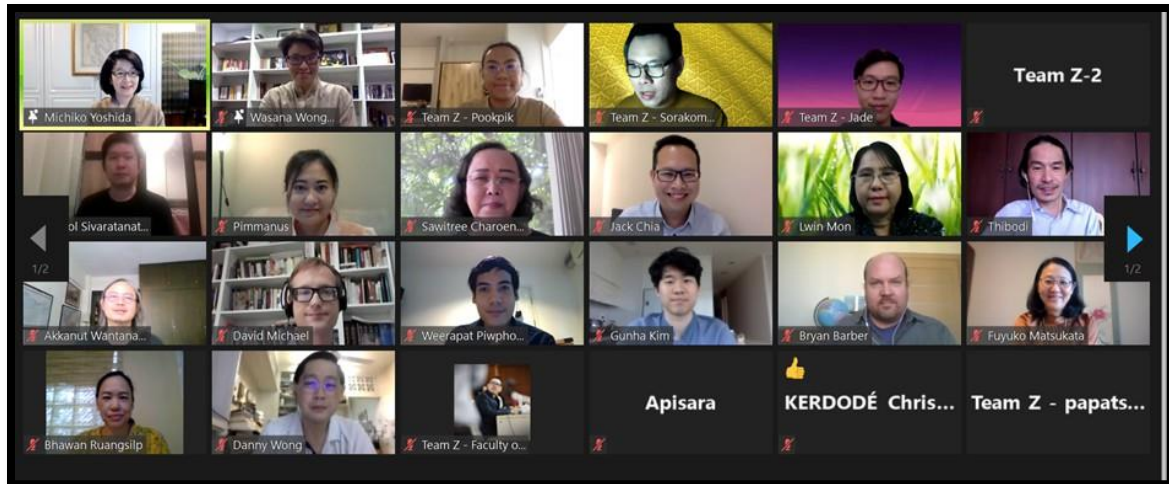
together with Professor Dr. Fuyuko Matsukata from Historiographical Institute, the University of Tokyo, expressed their thankful acknowledgements to all the participants, moderators, and organizers of the conference. They also reaffirmed the importance of inter-Asian cooperation and alliance, especially in the face of political interferences and restrictions on academic freedom and scholarship in many countries. Despite these circumstances, it was remarkable that the conference encompassed a diverse range of subjects and disciplines, including such distinctive topics as Japan-Kazakhstan relations and so forth. As a precedent of its kind, this AUA conference in the humanities and social sciences accomplished its objectives and paved the way for publication and further collaboration.



Asst. Prof. Dr. Bhawan Ruangsilp (top-right), Prof. Dr. Fuyuko Matsukata (top-right), and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Wasana Wongsurawat (left), in the wrap up session.

The conference was concluded with closing remarks by Associate Professor Dr. Suradech Chotiudompan, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. He emphasized the importance of communication and mutual understanding for the survival and flourishing of the AUA members in the face of the pandemic, the rising economic crisis, and political discord in many areas. He insisted that a multicultural perspective should be encouraged, not only for “*a future of better understanding and cooperation among our institutions and nations,*” but also for “*a future of possibilities, alternatives, and solutions to this bleak era of global crises.*” He pointed that the three main themes of the conference—urbanization, migration, and state networks—were crucial to the resolution of the ongoing crises. Dr. Suradech congratulated all the co-conveners and concluded that this conference marked “*the beginning of what looks to be very hopeful future of cooperation in academic exchange and research in the humanities and social science among AUA members and beyond.*”





## Reflection

The enthusiastic response to the Call for Abstracts shows that Asia-based scholars are eager for, and appreciative of, academic dialogues at international conferences. Of particular note is the inclusion of many presenters from Myanmar. Although some could not manage to send in their video recordings nor join the virtual meeting due to technical or other difficulties, this showed a promising sign for new networking opportunities and exchanges among Asian, and especially Southeast Asian, institutions. As this conference has demonstrated, the AUA can well serve as a platform for Asia-based international conferences in parallel and as an alternative to those outside the region. This begs further questions: How should future AUA conferences or workshops be calibrated to serve the primary purposes of Asia-based scholars, whose research conditions might be significantly different from scholars elsewhere? Finally, how can our AUA network promote academic freedom in the region?

**A report prepared by Arthit Jiamrattanyoo**