

Resituating transnational commodity networks: actors, agency, and alternatives.

Co-organizers: B. Lynne Milgram (lmilgram@faculty.ocadu.ca) and
Sarah Turner (sarah.turner@mcgill.ca)

Contemporary transnational trade initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) bring diverse implications for commodity flows originating in the Southeast Asian region, for both participant states and individual traders. Yet ethnographic studies of transnational commodity chains demonstrate a long history of global movements of people, ideas, capital, and commodities that, across scales of practice, have laid complex foundations for their current forms. An examination of the everyday experiences of individuals involved in these commodity flows allows for nuanced interpretations of the numerous and complex opportunities and constraints that define the ability of actors to maintain viable livelihoods. Therefore, the impacts and trajectories of transnational trade cannot be assessed only in relation to formal, measurable mainstream economic motivations (e.g., utility maximization, private accumulation). To fully understand the relationships that enable successful transnational flows, we also need to investigate the innovative networks and side roads that non-state actors operationalize. Such initiatives “from below” (Mathews et al. 2012) often involve de-essentializing the informal/formal economy dichotomy replacing it with the recognition that informality/formality are necessarily bound up with each other. While engaging Southeast Asian ethnographic studies of transnational circulations of commodities such as coffee, cassava, and star anise, this panel asks: What kinds of alternative or other-than-mainstream circulations run across south-north and south-south commodity flows? And what cultural repertoires do transnational traders deploy to navigate the diverse civil and state contexts through which they move and work?