

Social Changes in Contemporary Southeast Asia
Exploring New Forms of Labour Regimes

International Conference
14 -15 December 2023
Bayview Hotel, George Town
Penang, Malaysia



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New Labour Regimes in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Bayview Hotel, 25-A, Lebuq Farquhar, Georgetown
10200 Penang, Malaysia

Conference Programme

14th of December 2023

Morning

“Global Value Chains and Labour”

Keynote (45 min)

Parallel sessions (1.30 h)

Labour and Changes in
the Global Value Chains

Regional Division of
Labour

Managing the Labour
Force (Dormitory Labour
Regime, etc.)

Roundtable Global Value Chains (1h)

Afternoon

“Labour Law, Labour Unions, Industrial Relations, Wage Negotiations”

Keynote (45 min)

Parallel sessions (1.30 h)

Labour Law and reforms

Trade Unions and
Industrial relations
systems

Forms of Wage
Negotiations

Roundtable on Labour Law, Labour Unions & Industrial Relations (1h)

Cocktail

15th of December 2023

Morning

“Transnational Labour Migration and Labour Norms”

Keynote (45 min)

Parallel sessions (1.30 h)

Migrant Labour
Exploitation

Networks and
Migration industry

Productivity Trap
in Southeast Asia

Roundtable on Transnational Labour Migration & Labour Norms (1h)

Afternoon

“Wage, Distribution and Precarious Asia”

Keynote (45 min)

Parallel sessions (1.30 h)

Measuring Wages in
Southeast Asia

Labour Income
Inequality

Precarious Asia

Roundtable on Wage inequality and informal Labour (1h)

Farewell Dinner

Call for communication on

New Labour Regimes in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Introduction

As social, ethnic or religious, identity or position in the political hierarchy is more often pronounced in Southeast Asian societies, labour is rarely at the centre. In particular, labour does not often appear to be at the root of the formation of inequalities. In reality, the labour factor - including migrant labour - clearly fuels the regional dynamics of growth, and enables trade specialisation just as its mobilisation has, in the colonial past, enabled insertion into the international division of labour. Strangely, the concept of labour has too often remained on the margins of analysis of social changes in Southeast Asia.

This conference seeks to bring labour back in at the centre of the analysis. Offering a rare opportunity to pay tribute to the main oeuvres and pioneering authors in the field in Southeast Asia, it will open space to recent ongoing research on social changes with respect to labour relations, working conditions, labour norms, and wages. While also providing a forum for discussion and debate, together with scholars, researchers, public intellectuals and practitioners in the region during two days of scientific exchanges according to the following themes. The conference is organised in 4 parts, consisting respectively of an introductory keynote, a thematic session - 2 to 3 parallel panels - and a roundtable of experts.

Axis 1 : Global Value Chains and the Transformations of Labour in the Region

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In the last two decades, foreign direct investment to ASEAN countries has increased drastically. Regional and international trade have also expanded steadily. Multinational companies - both Western and Asian - are now integrating these countries into their strategies for diversifying production locations. This attractiveness is often seen as a key step in development, contributing to growth and improved infrastructure (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Industrialisation is also supposed to favour the improvement of the wage relationship, by limiting recourse to informal employment and by developing wage labour, and creating better regulated jobs.

For instance, for some, the efforts made by the Cambodian authorities in partnership with the ILO have contributed to its attractiveness in the eyes of international investors (Murg, 2019). On the contrary, other studies show that the development of the textile industry in Cambodia is a source of new forms of poverty (Selwyn, 2019; Franceschini, 2017). The massive factory closures in Asia during the Covid crisis are a reminder of the vulnerability of these populations, when labour is seen as a mere adjustment variable to attract investment (Salvá, 2022). The recent development of special economic zones in various ASEAN countries, and the adoption of the Omnibus law in Indonesia (2020), illustrate this process.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the link between the evolution of the wage relationship and integration into the global production networks remains little studied. Far from being mechanical, the elaboration of a balanced labour regime results from the establishment of institutionalised political compromises. While the current balance of power seems unfavourable for ASEAN workers and their representatives, their strategies for defending their interests at different levels (local, national, international) also deserve to be studied.

Key questions:

- How can the fundamental contradiction of integration into the global production networks be resolved? While this appears to be an essential condition for development, it is generally

accompanied by policies aimed specifically at restricting workers' rights in the name of economic attractiveness.

- The last decade has been marked by a recomposition of Asian production chains, with an evolution of the division of labour between China and the ASEAN countries. Does this process lead to a diffusion of Chinese labour standards to Southeast Asia (and in particular the most contested aspects, such as dormitory labour regimes or the absence of freedom of association)? More broadly, does China's industrial development path serve as a source of inspiration for neighbouring countries?
- Can we observe comparable institutional developments in policies to attract foreign investment across ASEAN countries (in the form of special economic zones, tax reductions, undermining of labour standards, etc.)? Are we witnessing, on the contrary, a deepening of institutional diversity in industrial development strategies at the national level?
- In the context of the deepening of the international division of labour, what are the strategies of local actors, including trade unions and workers, to uphold the interests of labour?

Axis 2. Labour Law, Labour Unions, Industrial Relations, Wage Negotiations

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Here, we closely link labour law to other aspects of the wage relationship and to the various forms of institutionalisation of the employment relationship. With the industrialisation and the consequent integration into the capitalist sphere of a growing part of the Southeast Asian economies, labour law and wage-earners society are developed jointly. Thus, the articulations between the political (individual or collective participation in society) and the legal in matters of employment and work, deserve in-depth analysis.

Through a series of questions, we will try to highlight how the characteristics of labour law and its relationship with society have evolved since the 2008 post-crisis financial and economic crisis (deepening of economic globalisation and financialisation, which have led to bifurcations in industrialisation strategies and policies, This is reflected, in particular, by a stronger Chinese presence) and, secondly, how the diversity of employment systems in countries with such diverse trajectories is being transformed, in particular through changes in labour standards, industrial relations systems and collective bargaining.

In this axis, we would like to explore the following themes:

- The ways in which labour law standards are developed in these countries where colonialism may have created very different legal bases
- The influence of the standards promoted by the ILO through its Decent Work Agenda.
- Why have several of these countries been able to achieve industrialisation without changing their labour legislations?
- Is the formalisation of the labour market in Southeast Asia (via the employment contract) solely an effect of industrialisation or also a product of the emergence of the state with the capacity to support labour market institutions?
- To what extent are labour standards impacted by the presence of Chinese companies from the Mainland as well as from Taiwan or Hong Kong in the context of relocation, construction of Special Economic Zones, construction sites etc) (imported standards)?
- Is the co-presence of strong states/civil societies and weak legal systems a feature of the labour regime in Southeast Asia?
- To what extent the presence of Chinese companies in the region affects the implementation of rule of law and core labour standards?

Axis 3 : Labour Income and Wages Distribution

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Wages and incomes are rarely the first approach to an economic area. They are the fruit of work or investment and result from a set of multiple, more or less articulated components: working hours, the labour market, labour law, productivity, industrial relations, qualifications, etc. They often require knowledge of the economic, social and cultural organisation of the area under consideration before drawing conclusions based on a few indicators, even if they are convergent, such as the average wage, income dispersion (Gini coefficient) or the minimum wage.

Over the period 2005-2019, ASEAN has been relatively successful in reducing poverty. Several countries (Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have successfully reduced their rates from 25% in 2005 to 6% in 2019). The income Gini remains high (0.42 in 2005), but is falling slightly (0.40 in 2020) with countries at 0.45 like Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, then 0.40 like Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia and finally 0.30 for Myanmar and Cambodia. Qualification is one of the major ranking factors between employees (by explicit or implicit pay scales), which is slightly less true between non-salaried workers (trade, transport, finance).

Key questions:

- How have wages and incomes evolved in Southeast Asia? On average, they have tripled since the 2000s, but what about national and sectoral diversity, and between the formal and informal economies? What about the Covid crisis and the inflation crisis? What turbulence in wage systems?
- What about wage and income dispersion? Are rather high Gini coefficients, but slightly decreasing over two decades, encouraging? Does taxation introduce some correction in the discrepancies? What is the boundary between statistical dispersion and sociological inequality?
- Wage policies and strategies: what are the wage bargaining practices (industrial relations)? What are the roles of public authorities (e.g. minimum wage, strong framework for bargaining), the roles of companies, and the roles of international organisations (WB, ILO, ADB)? And what does ASEAN say on these issues?
- Income is not only a given, it is also a project: What part do households play in better pay aiming (education of children, training, social ambition, family strategies, weight of petty trade, informal sector etc.)? What place for social protection demand in trade union claims?

Axis 4 : Transnational Migrant Labour and Labour Norms

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Contemporary Southeast Asia stands out as a major hub for transnational labour migration. In main destination countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore), domestic and/or international migrants populate the lower strata of labour markets in the industrial and service sectors, and in large-scale agriculture, where they provide cheap and flexible labour. These properties – compliance, affordability, disposability – are generated by the public and private actors of the migration industry, through diverse sets of practices. They can be achieved through positive laws *formally* excluding foreign workers from general labour rights provisions (as for foreign domestic workers in Singapore and Malaysia); it can also result from specific administrative and legal practices targeted at foreign workers, *de facto* restricting their access to the legal system or exposing them to exceptional policing practices (such as in Malaysia and Singapore); eventually, it can also be based on the fragilization of workers through their *irregularization* (such as in Thailand and Malaysia).

The properties of this foreign workforce are a direct function of the demand, on labour markets, in destination countries. As a result of these processes, highly fragmented labour markets seem to consolidate, where foreign workers are assigned to tightly controlled and insulated niche positions in labour-importing countries according to their nationality, gender, and ethnicity. Our understanding of this productive

fragmentation of labour norms across the region is still very partial, and often results from country-focussed research. Hence, it is necessary to identify and better characterise the different economic operators and political actors interested in this workforce, as well as the determinants of its attractiveness, considering, in particular, that these forms of labour have been shown to induce a “productivity trap”.

Exploring the overlapping spaces of transnational labour exploitation which link workplaces, in destination countries, to the countries and places of origin of the migrants, at the regional level, this axis aims to deepen our knowledge of these contemporary mechanisms:

- How to measure the economic outcomes of these fragmented normative regimes, describe and compare them at the regional scale, and formalise the political economy of foreign labour in the region?
- How to identify the actors and the continuum of practices involved in shaping the effective working conditions and living circumstances of the foreign workforce in and across the different countries?
- To what extent do contemporary forms of transnational labour exploitation practices display similarities with the large scale, planned workforce migration and bonded labour systems within and across the former British, French and Dutch colonial empires in Southeast Asia?

New Labour Regimes in Contemporary Southeast Asia

Deadlines

1. Submissions

Name and Affiliation, Presentation Title, Targeted Workshop & Session + a 200-word Abstract must be sent in a Word Times new roman 12 format to the Member(s) of the Organisation committee in charge of the respective Axes.

Deadline: 12 May 2023

2. Date of Committee Responses: 1 June 2023

If the abstract is accepted, the Conference registration fee is 220 MYR (50 USD)

3. Conference Programme Edition: 30 June 2023

4. International Conference, Penang 14-15 December 2023

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