The Edible Tide: How Estuaries and Migrants Transformed the Straits of Melaka, 1890-1940

The Straits of Melaka have long played a central role in the history of Southeast Asia, from facilitating the movement of people, ideas, and commodities to marking the edge of states and sultanates. Networks, circulations, and mobilities have, indeed, shaped our historical vision and historiographical understanding of this multi-scale waterway.

In this talk, however, I aim to chart a different kind of story, one that explores the Straits not as a place of passage but rather as a site of production. It is a story about how, and why, these muddy waters became an industrial fishing zone—an industrial estuary, as it were—in the wake of the nineteenth century. The talk draws on two episodes from both sides of the Straits for a pair of reasons. First, I want to think through how the environmental humanities might help us recast (Southeast) Asia in waters that are new, productive, and relevant to knowing the region in the age of climate change. Second, I use these two episodes to explain why estuaries and migrants were central to Southeast Asia’s urban rise in the period from 1890 to 1940. By looking at the Straits during this pivotal moment, I want us to see how ecologies, beliefs, technologies, and cultures all mixed in ways that shaped not only the economic life of Southeast Asia’s estuaries, but also, and more importantly, the place of these estuaries in the economic life of Southeast Asia.

featuring Anthony Medrano
Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for the Environment
Harvard University

April 4, 2019 | 2:30pm | UEL 106