

Spicy (dis)connections: Routes, Values and Imaginaries

Double panel

Conveners: Annuska Derks (University of Zurich) and Sarah Turner (McGill University), sarah.turner@mcgill.ca, annuska.derks@uzh.ch

Discussant: TBA

Throughout its long history, the spice trade has shaped land, politics, and society, while capturing imaginations across the globe. Spices played an important role in European explorations and colonization of Southeast Asia from the 16th century onwards, and the spice trade has been argued to be one of the oldest links between the East and the West, connecting Asia with the Mediterranean through the precious fragrances of cinnamon, cardamom, star anise, pepper, cloves and more. While spices have since lost their status as symbol of luxury, their flavors, fragrances, colors, and medicinal benefits continue to sell globally, while providing important livelihood opportunities for cultivators. This panel focuses on the contemporary routes, values, and imaginaries of spices in and from contemporary Southeast Asia, while also highlighting the diverse connections and disconnections within spice networks. We ask: What can the spice trade tell us about connections between lowland and highland Southeast Asia, neighboring countries, and producers and consumers more generally? How do expanding global markets for spices, (changing) consumer desires, and the international political economy influence producer livelihoods and lifeworlds? What roles do origins, uses, and botanical taxonomies play in assessments of quality and imaginaries of geography? And how do state policies, development interventions, but also forces of nature, such as extreme weather events, impact spice options and benefits? By exploring these questions, the panel members seek to explore the (in)distinctiveness of particular spices on the global market and the various ways in which spices (dis)connect people from different parts of the world.