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Amphibious Asia Created Vietnam's Poor Center: Nature, Networks, and a Region at Sea

Dr. Charles Wheeler

Hong Kong Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences
(inc. the Centre of Asian Studies)

Date: 16 March 2010 (Tuesday)

Time: 4:00-6:00 PM

Venue: Room G12, Fung King Hey Building, CUHK

Dr. Charles Wheeler is Research Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences. He received his Ph.D. in history from Yale University, and recently arrived at HKU from the University of California, Irvine. A specialist in Vietnamese maritime history, his dissertation laid the basis for a new maritime approach to Vietnamese history. His publications address the role of the sea in Vietnamese history; littoral society and long-distance trade; Sino-Vietnamese merchant elites; political ecology and piracy in the South China Sea; archaeology, ethnohistory and political identity in Vietnam's Cham regions; and the role of Buddhism in Chinese merchant diaspora and Vietnamese colonialism in early modern times.

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About the Seminar:

In his talk, Dr. Wheeler will discuss his recently completed book project, in which he challenges the longstanding agrarian model of Vietnamese history. The model was used to legitimize colonial rule and later the modern nation-state. In other words, the agrarian model shapes the very idea of what makes Vietnam Vietnamese. Dr. Wheeler addresses one of the oldest myths supporting this model -- the frontier myth-cum-thesis that Vietnamese call the "March South." He rejects this land-centered, pioneer model of frontier settlement in favor of a dynamic model of regional formation, created by complex inter-Asian social networks, which in turn evolved from the human ecology of Amphibious Asia.

Dr. Wheeler's study relates three simultaneous developments in the history of Asia: the expansion of Chinese maritime trade and shipping networks across Southeast Asia, the southern expansion of Vietnamese settlement and rule south along the coast of the eastern Indochinese peninsula, and the disappearance of longstanding Cham-dominated socio-political orders in the wake of that expansion. All three trends began in earnest in the sixteenth century, and reached the peak of their intensity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dr. Wheeler's book explores how each group, as equal agents, changed the face of the South China Sea's western rim, through a variety of exchange networks. He will relate these three events from a maritime-centered perspective constructed out of the human ecology of the South China Sea.

To conclude, Dr. Wheeler will discuss how his work influences his current research, on the role of transoceanic Buddhism in early Chinese merchant culture, and transnational Buddhism in Vietnam today.