

Friday Seminar



Department of Anthropology
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學人類學系

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Working with the Urban Environment?

Negotiating Permaculture as a Boundary Object in Singapore's City in Nature

Oct 17

1:00 - 2:30PM

NAH 114

Permaculture is a design approach developed in Australia in the 1970s and inspired by traditional farming practices and ecological principles. Now a global movement, it is increasingly practiced in cities in Asia, such as in the design of urban agriculture and community garden initiatives. This paper examines the complex ways permaculture is negotiated within the context of Singapore's spatio-material limits and biopolitical control of urban environments. Permaculture is an assembled body of knowledge and practice that behaves as a boundary object, plastic enough to be (re)interpreted and adapted/adopted in various geographic contexts. In Singapore, while its plasticity is subjected to the biopolitical control of the city-state, it is also internally negotiated by the practitioners themselves, complicating its trajectory of becoming. Singapore's urban permaculturists focus on principles that remain relevant to the city's urban environments, (re)interpreting them in ways that are contested within and outside the fledgling permaculture community. Such negotiations question not only the extent to which permaculture can maintain a coherent identity amidst the intrinsic pressures of urban environmental governance, but also how permaculture's nature as a boundary object complicates our understanding of biopolitical control and resistance.

Marvin Montefrio is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore (NUS). He is also a faculty fellow of the Food Politics and Society Cluster of the NUS Asia Research Institute. His research interest is in the political ecology and cultural politics of food and agriculture in Southeast Asia. His current projects include risk and uncertainty assemblages and climate precarity in the Philippines, the international migration of Filipino farmers and farmworkers, and the politics of urban agrarianism in Southeast Asia.

