

After-Lives of British Water Systems in Asia

This panel invites papers that address the origins, founding values, dialogic transformation, lives and afterlives of colonial-era British water infrastructure in Asia. What could attention to the fates of material imperial remains tell us about ‘the postcolonial’, the politics of transition, reception and the nation-state? We are interested in physical infrastructures for irrigation and for drinking water, for sewerage, drainage and recycling systems, as well as the bureaucracies that develop around them, delineating both postcolonial water predicaments and also water successes. Taking colonial and postcolonial dialogics seriously, how have the founding values of these infrastructures --yet another layer of the infrastructural -- taken on different valuations over time? What is most urgent today? Where are colonial systems locked, and where unlocked, and how did specific bureaucracies break their path dependence on colonial installations?

Previous cultural studies of infrastructure have tended to see infrastructure in terms of precarity, panopticism and/or modern necessity, making things like water systems an allegory for versions of general postcolonial and modern politics. This session intends to reconsider both the precarious and the panoptic, among other thematics, by refocusing our research into more detailed questions about real water systems, re-opening general thematics in useful ways. Moments of optimism and pessimism, failure and success will all interest us with particular attention also to value transformations and institutional perdurance. For instance, if irrigation infrastructure in colonial India was designed to extract revenue, how do we make sense of its rationale and role today when many provincial irrigation departments do not even break even at the end of the yearly revenue cycle? Would approaching postcolonial national politics as a politics of conscription, instead of construction, shed new light on the entanglements of aspiration and history in postcolonies? Conversely, in water-scarce Singapore how did the postcolonial state so quickly and successfully replace British water technologies, moving Singapore from Rome-mimicking aqueducts to reverse osmosis membranes and recycled NEWater? Paradoxically it is in Singapore that top-down conscription is supplemented by value on pleasure and enjoyment in consumption of water.

Tracking changing aesthetics of water infrastructure – from big dams to small meters – we can observe the afterlife of an empire and learn more about changing Asian governmentalities. Because the British took water systems so seriously, we hope to bring together papers that track histories of profound and enduring dilemmas in infrastructural development. How do water systems actually change?