

Cluster Manager:

Christian Oesterheld, email: christian.oes@mahidol.ac.th

Christian Oesterheld is a lecturer in the Social Science Division of MUIC. He studied Austronesian Languages and Cultures at the Asia Africa Institute (AAI), University of Hamburg, and obtained an MSc in “Conflict, Violence and Development” from the School of Asian and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He is currently doing a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Frankfurt.

An anthropologist by training, Christian is interested in the study of temporal and spatial dynamics of frontier zones in Southeast Asia, particularly in the border regions of central Borneo. He has known the area since 2000 and has previously been engaged in research on ethnic conflicts and identity politics. Recently, his focus has developed towards the analysis of historical legacies, memoryscapes and cultural heritage in the heart of Borneo

Further Information:

<https://mahidol.academia.edu/ChristianOesterheld>

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christian-Oesterheld>

Cluster Member:**1. Dr. Hardina Ohlendorf, Social Science Division, MUIC**

Hardina Ohlendorf is a lecturer in the Social Science Division of Mahidol University International College (MUIC). She got her PhD in Politics and International Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Prior to joining MUIC, she worked as a full-time teaching fellow at SOAS and as a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Sociology of Academia Sinica in Taiwan with the Taiwan Fellowship. In 2018, she was a Residency Fellow at the Asia Culture Center in South Korea.

In her research, she is interested in the discursive construction of Taiwan identity, the role of public space and public memory in post-authoritarian societies, political and cultural dimensions of tourism, and strategic Chinese identities in frontier zones. She has carried out fieldwork in China, Taiwan, South Korea and Northern Thailand.

Further information:

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hardina-Ohlendorf>

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff64550.php>

Email: hardina.ohl@mahidol.ac.th

Sub-project I:

The Upper Mahakam Region in Central Borneo: Culture, Society and Development in a Frontier Region

Christian Oesterheld

Being one of the latest regions to obtain the status of 'regency' (kabupaten) within Indonesia's decentralization process, the upper Mahakam (Mahakam Ulu) is situated in the north-western corner of East Kalimantan province, right at the heart of Borneo – a dynamic frontier space with borders to the Malaysian territory of Sarawak and to the provinces of North, Central and West Kalimantan. The area was amongst the last to be added to the Dutch colonial possessions in the East Indies and had remained terra incognita until the late 19th century, allowing for the development of a distinct regional identity in an ethnically diverse setting.

This cross-disciplinary research project investigates processes of socio-cultural and socio-economic change in connection to the "transformation of marginal space into frontier zone" (Cons and Eilenberg 2019), focusing on the "assemblage" character of such spatial and temporal zones of convergence. As such the project connects historical and contemporary perspectives when engaging with the process of the area's (re) frontierization dynamics. We address the question of how frontiers are made at specific moments in history and discuss the lifecycle of such frontierization – as well as the frontier's "afterlife": the occasional reemergence of a geographic area as a frontier. We are also interested in vestiges of "frontier heritage" that emerge when frontiers disappear: public memory, social adjustments, economic adaptation or legacies of political suzerainty.

The project has initiated a loose cooperation with the government of Mahakam Ulu Regency, which is currently in the process of formalization. Our international team of researchers also cooperates with local scholars in East Kalimantan to foster a collaborative network of exchange and mutual inspiration.

Sub-project II:

Frontier Communities: The Kuomintang Villages in Northern Thailand

Hardina Ohlendorf

This project seeks to examine the so-called Kuomintang (KMT) villages in Northern Thailand through the theoretical lens of 'frontier community'. Frontier in this case is understood in several dimensions: 1. As a political frontier, where different claims of statehood and national belonging intersect and overlap, namely those of Thailand, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, and Taiwan. 2. As a socio-economic frontier where expanding forces of crop cultivation, forest preservation and global tourism interact. 3. As a spatial frontier, where investment, infrastructures and personal networks from China and Taiwan intersperse and occasionally fragment Thai national territory. 4. As a cultural frontier, where contesting memories, diverse languages and religious faiths meet. Employing Appadurai's (2001) concept of process geography, this project conceives of the KMT villages not as areas with well-defined limits and lines, but rather as places with a social life, as localities that are constantly produced and re-configured through the flows of people, goods and ideas. Relying on semiotics, interviews and archival research, this project seeks to shed light on identity constructions of the KMT villages in the current period by examining perceptions of the Chinese, Taiwanese, and the Thai state by KMT villagers, generational dynamics in self-identification and senses of belonging, the impact of tourism on identity constructions in KMT villages as well as discourses on the KMT villagers in contemporary China and Taiwan. This project aims to advance our understanding of overseas Chinese networks in Southeast Asia, and, in a wider sense, seeks to contribute to discussions of the role of 'place' for identity formations in frontier zones and spaces. The research is expected to shed some light on how not just issues of "national belonging", but also intercultural and interethnic interactions shape cultural identities and senses of citizenship. It thus aims at contributing to a better understanding of processes of migration and integration in the contemporary period.