

SNUAC Special Seminar

Transpacific Chinoism: From Manila's Chinatown to Yucatán's Coolie Imaginary

This talk explores the shifting meanings of East Asian identity across the transpacific routes that connect Southeast Asia and Latin America. Focusing on the historical trajectory from the establishment of Manila's Chinatown—the oldest in the world—to the presence of Chinese indentured laborers (coolies) in 19th-century Yucatán, the talk examines how these early figures of Asian migration were racialized and integrated into the colonial order.

Drawing on the concept of Chinoism—an interpretive tool emerging from interdisciplinary studies on the racialization and cultural consumption of East Asian identities in postcolonial Latin America—the talk analyzes how the figure of the Chinese coolie has been reimagined through contemporary fandoms surrounding K-pop and Japanese pop culture. In particular, it considers how young Latin American audiences engage with East Asian pop culture not only as consumers but also as co-creators of meaning, navigating between exotic desire, digital intimacy, and colonial memory.

By tracing these historical and cultural continuities, the talk invites participants to reflect on the long-standing transpacific connections that have shaped perceptions of "Asia" in Latin America. In doing so, it encourages a comparative perspective between the Philippines and Latin American countries—both former colonies of Spain—on how colonial histories and contemporary media cultures converge in the formation of racial imaginaries and cultural affinities.

Wonjung Min, Ph.D. is a visiting research fellow at the Seoul National University Asia Center and former professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Her research focuses on transpacific cultural exchanges, East Asian diasporas in Latin America, and the reception of Korean and Japanese popular culture in postcolonial societies. Through the lens of cultural studies, digital media, and diaspora theory, she explores how East Asian identities are racialized, consumed, and reimagined across the Global South.