

Understanding Asia: Ideas, Democracy, and Rights

# Public Shadows: The Social Life of Shade in Saigon



(Scan for registration)

**Erik Harms**  
(Yale University)**29. April 2024**  
**16:00 – 18:00 c.t.**  
**X-C3-107**  
Hybrid event

This talk builds from an ongoing but still shadowy larger project on the anthropology of shadows and shade. Here, I draw attention to the ways in which daytime shadows play a role in demarcating the public spaces within which much of Saigon's social life takes place. From dusk until dawn, as the figural shapes cast by shadows move across and shapeshift through the voids of Saigon's built environment, they both trace the fixed outlines of social space and set them in motion. In doing so, the edges of shadows create dynamic but clearly demarcated exterior interiors within which it is possible to enter "inside" defined social spaces despite being "outside" on the streets. Because these spaces bring together public and private in important ways, I suggest that understandings of Saigon's urban public space have much to gain by paying closer attention to shadows. In addition to offering comfortable places to sit in a hot city, urban shadows both gain their meaning from and transform the social-political qualities of urban spaces. If it is within the city's shifting and mobile shadows that Saigon's urban public congregates, then it stands to reason that any understanding of the city's public sphere depends on getting to know the social life of shade.

**Erik Harms** is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Anthropology, and the chair of the Council on Southeast Asian Studies at Yale University. His research focuses on the social and cultural aspects of rapid urbanization in Southeast Asia, building from more than twenty years of ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, commonly known as Saigon. Professor Harms is the author of *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minnesota, 2011), *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon* (California, 2016), as well as numerous peer-reviewed articles. He has served as the president of the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology (APLA), a scholarly section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), and is currently an elected member of the AAA executive board.