

Urbanism and Post-Colonial Nationalities: Theorizing the Southeast Asian City

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Any attempt to analyse the Southeast Asian city (apart from the most purely synchronic account) must inevitably encounter the notion of the post-colonial — not in a reductive universal fashion, but acknowledging the particular differences posed by the different forms of historical colonialism in the region. Singapore and Malaysia experienced a different form of colonialism under the British than did Vietnam under the French, Indonesia under the Dutch, or the Philippines under the Spanish and later the Americans (if the latter can be considered a form of historical colonialism comparable in some ways to the other models). Thailand's history was a careful negotiation of independence in the presence of more powerful nations (India and China, and more recently the USA), although abiding cultural influences such as the use of the Sanskrit script, the development of sex tourism, as well as the presence of multinational corporations and franchises, problematize the whole notion of the “independent nation” and the nature and forms of “cultural colonialisms.” Even between Malaysia and Singapore, differences in attitude and policy by the colonial British government had ramifications for the different urban landscapes and cultures of the two nations: the British policy of appeasing and respecting Malay religion, customs and way of life under the “Residency” system,

meant that some of the infrastructural and cultural changes which shaped the small entrepôt of Singapore, with its predominantly Chinese mercantile community and immigrant labouring classes, did not affect Malaysia the same way at the same time.¹

The pluralism of forms assumed by historical colonialism in this region, is further complicated by the micropolitics of culture. In this perspective, colonialism (with its induction of labour on a wide scale from India and China) is only a more recent contributor to a condition of racial and cultural diversity characteristic of the region. Old trade routes and relations, treaties and alliances, juxtaposed a wide variety of religions, languages and cultures and peoples in the relatively small land-mass of Southeast Asia. Pre-modern empire building such as that of Thailand established an already-heterogeneous racial and cultural composition, prior to the cultural transformations of the age of industry and European empire. The Catholicism and Portuguese cultural and linguistic heritage of the Eurasian communities in Malacca and Penang may be downplayed within the larger political coalitions and contestations involving the majority races (Malays, Chinese and Indians), but these micropolitical relationships play a significant role in the construction of urban spaces and identities at the local and particular level.² More dramatically, the crisis of centralized power in Indonesia has highlighted the ethnic and linguistic pluralisms that have been minimized under the tenure of Sukarno and Suharto, and which are now breaking out in violent confrontations. While this is largely a regional rather than metropolitan problem, it does call attention

¹Among other things, the British colonial Residency system, by respecting the 'kampung' structure of Malay education, social organisation and economy, did little to foster the urbanized life of the Malays until well into the twentieth century. The other races in contrast, particularly in the Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore, were assimilated quite quickly into the structure of urban occupations, schooling and housing (Chai 1977: 27).

²See, for example, Goh's (2001) analysis of the spatial contestation in the Kampung Serani area of Penang, involving the Portuguese-Eurasian Catholic community and their relationship with the larger racial and religious groups of Malaysia.

to the problematic strategies involved in the construction of a unified nationhood (which closely involves the spatial and symbolic activity of the metropolitan capital) in the light of these deep-rooted divisions and differences.

These micropolitical and historical factors thus create urbanisms that are finely inflected and nuanced, opening up sites for a wide variety of contestations. It is hardly surprising that Southeast Asian scholarship has yet to address the rich terrain of complexities produced in the cities of the region where culture and history intersect with power, politics and policy in myriad and often dialectical ways. If culture — understood among other things as the range of ethnic, linguistic and socio-religious forms which have historically informed the nations in this region — is the underlying base of Southeast Asian urbanism, then policy and governance (which have attempted to shape modern, unified, postcolonial nations) are the infrastructural layers built on culture; the latter are more evident and more susceptible to analyses of power and order, and yet their own constitution is shaped by the history of culture (again as suggested by events in the Asian Economic Crisis, which of course was also a cultural and social one).

Often cited as the seminal work on Southeast Asian urbanism, Terry McGee's *The Southeast Asian City* attempted a morphological analysis of Southeast Asian cities based on the cyclic movement from “colonial imposition” to “western replication” (McGee 1967). Typical of the “developmentalist” approach familiar from the Chicago school of urban studies, McGee's account privileged the growth paradigm of Western cities and attempted to impose this as a template upon which to analyse and evaluate Southeast Asian cities (Yeoh 1996: 5). It might be argued that the very notion of capital growth vitalizing a key “firm-centred” urban district utilized in McGee's account, is already a rough homogenization which assimilates local histories and particularities (caste, religion, social groupings and relationships, historical antagonisms, etc) into the story as “native” obstacles to growth, rather than as authentic components of a complex and layered urbanism. In this regard, King's (1976: 58–66) account of cultural contact in British India provides an analytical model which

is more cognizant of the co-causal relationship between Western colonial influence and the cultural particularities of the colonized peoples, in the creation of the colonial urbanisms which leave their mark on the newly-independent nations.³ This has further inspired other accounts of colonial cities as the products of *both* colonial control and local resistance as found in Nezar AlSayyad's (1992) *Forms of Dominance* and Brenda Yeoh's (1996) *Contesting Space*.

What is clearly needed are similar (and also different) theoretical endeavours to be undertaken for contemporary Southeast Asian urbanisms, accounting (among other things) for the role and function of heterogeneous racial, religious and linguistic conditions in the construction of nationalisms after colonialism. Scholarship in this field is still in its early stages but growing, as attested to by recent attempts to engage with the urban cultures of Asian cities on their own terms, rather than using the imported templates of Western urban developments. These efforts include the noteworthy *Culture and the City in East Asia* (Kim *et al.* 1997) and *Globalization and Urban Change* (Olds 2001). The former volume makes the important claim, which hitherto has hardly received sufficient attention, that the local cultures of the major Asian capitals are an integral part of their patterns of economic and urban development. While the focal cities — Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, Hanoi, Hong Kong and Singapore — fall within broadly similar categories of “East Asian culture,” *Culture and the City* argues that the range of different conditions of economic and infrastructural development, and of micropolitical conditions of gender, class and racial or caste groupings, are contributing factors to the differences in economic praxis and urban form represented by these examples. *Globalization and Urban Change* takes a somewhat different approach to the notion of Asian ‘culture,’ studying the role of ethnic Chinese property developers and ‘brand name’ architects in Vancouver, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Paris and London.

³It must be noted, however, that the tendency has been to emphasize the influence of the colonizing culture in space-making processes shaping the city at the expense of the colonized given the asymmetries of power relations under colonialism.

Another recent volume, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space* (Evers and Korff 2000), broadens the notion of Asian ‘cultures’ with a usefully diachronic approach, focusing not merely on the impact of local sociological conditions on recent urban development and projects, but also on the role played in all this by “local traditions,” “ritual structures,” the sacred, the history of “struggles among social groups” (Evers and Korff 2000: 17). Thus while the emphasis is still to a considerable extent on the “rapid change” and recent “economic growth” of Southeast Asian cities, and the impact this has on urban structure and development; the implicitly historical and symbolic view of urbanism in this volume means that these infrastructural analyses are located in relation, not to an imposed model of Western urbanism or global capitalism, but to a plurality of local social influences and factors, including the historical force of various “traditions.” Evers and Korff use the theories of Lefebvre, Habermas, Urry and others to argue for the constitution of an abstract space in modern social relations, in which spatial forms, the mechanisms of social interaction, and the cultural parameters standing behind these, are constitutive of urban meanings and experience. Evers and Korff (2000: 6) insist that the Southeast Asian metropolis “can have several, often conflicting meanings” — a crucial corollary of the focus on the centrality of local cultures in urbanisms, and a necessary balance against the emphasis on global capitalism and global culture.

The present volume forms what is hoped will be a complementary project to the kind of economic-cultural analyses described above. While global competition and its cultural consequences are implicit in most of the contributions to this volume, the emphasis will be on the work of established critical and analytical tools for the study of the Southeast Asian “city as text.” As Shields (1996: 227) observes, invoking a wide range of critical theories which in various ways contribute to the textual analysis of the city, such a project emphasizes the fact that “the city is always aporetic, a ‘crisis-object.’” This may be true *a fortiori* of Southeast Asian cities in the wake of historical colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the ethnic, religious and linguistic pluralisms and other fault lines which mark the ongoing

contestations. Thus a number of common assumptions run through these papers: that the hegemony over the city on the part of the dominant political power or discourse is illusory from the point of view of urbanism-as-experience or as hermeneutical contest; that the meaning of the city is constituted in a variety of ways and perspectives, each of whose value and persuasiveness will depend upon the context of engagement; and that city sites are indeed aporetic, if the totality of these competing significations is taken into account.

Having said this, the following chapters pursue independent agendas in the exploration of the textual dynamics of the Southeast Asian city, and appropriately so. The volume arises out of a conference which sought to juxtapose different disciplinary perspectives on the text of the Southeast Asian city; as a consequence, these selected papers represent the various approaches and perspectives of architects and planners, cultural and social geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural historians and critics. The result is a semiotic opening up of the Southeast Asian city, both in terms of method and in interpretations, that works not only against the assumed hegemony of dominant discourses (modernization, globalization, governance, the construction of elites), but also in some sense pitting essay against essay as part of a field of hermeneutic possibilities.

In the first chapter, Tay Kheng Soon (a pioneering architect and planner) and Robbie Goh explore the cultural costs of modernization, in the loss of a vernacular moment (architectural, sentimental, literary, popular) that might be called “Malaya.” While the imperatives of modernization after independence from the British overrode the desire to preserve aspects of that vernacular style, it returns in a range of expressions, including those of loss, nostalgia, and anxiety. Some of the problems of modernization in Southeast Asia are due to ethnic mixtures and the ways in which policies have to acknowledge those differences, sometimes in terms of an abstract proportionality, sometimes in terms of affirmative actions — the Malayan condition is in some ways reflected in the modernization projects of other cities in Southeast Asia, India and the Far East as well.

In Chapter Two, Brenda Yeoh and T.C. Chang explore the signification of monuments within the multiple contexts of a modern urban landscape, the politics of nation building, the discourses of tourism, and other ideological constructions. The history of the Singapore Tourism Board's creation of the Merlion as corporate symbol and then as a physical landmark is analysed as a historiographical and symbolic exercise which, while drawing upon pre-modern traditional lore (Sang Nila Utama's alleged sighting of the lion that is associated with the discovery of Singapore), also creates a carefully 'neutral' symbol for a variety of ideological purposes. This very variety then opens the symbol to dissent and disputation, as in the well-known literary engagement over the Merlion that is undertaken by two of Singapore's leading English-language poets, Edwin Thumboo and Lee Tzu Pheng. These differences in representation, interpretation and engagement thus form the basic ground which the creation over time of an 'organic' national symbol has to negotiate.

Chapter Three explores Singapore's public housing project as an exercise in the management of racial and social difference — an exercise reflected in various spatial forms, the most pertinent of which is perhaps the void deck. Robbie Goh argues that while this is ostensibly an attempt by the public housing authority (Singapore's Housing Development Board or HDB) to encompass and give spatial accommodation for the tensions of relatively confined individual living spaces, and of racial, linguistic and economic differences in the nation as a whole, void spaces by their very construction in fact enable a number of dissenting positions to this discourse of social harmony. They are thus the space of contesting significations — upward mobility and constraints on this, the local and the global, public and private property, and so on — which point to the problematics of the 'utopian' Southeast Asian city in an age of global competition.

In Chapter Four, Shirlena Huang and T.C. Chang consider the history of the Singapore River's physical as well as symbolic constructions and refurbishments. While the socio-economic roles (and attendant re-shapings) of the river in various stages of Singapore's

development could be carried out by fiat on the part of the relevant authorities, the corresponding symbolic constructions required a process of editing and selecting “histories and memories.” Yet the intended meaning is only accomplished at the cost of a certain textual violence, which the essay reveals with its detailed incorporation of personal interviews, archival recoveries, and critical interpretations of associated spaces. Singapore’s river district is also located in relation to similar tourist-municipal projects of icon-creation in other global cities.

In Chapter Five, Tim Bunnell regards Malaysia’s new cybercities, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, as the creation not merely of real infrastructural support for Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project, but also of a related “intelligent citizenship” with implications for the governance of culture and national identity. The intelligent city and its citizenship pose significant problems for the discourses of nationhood, particularly by constituting hubs for transnational flows, affiliations, and identities. As sites in which symbolic constructions and discourses are particularly significant, these cybercities become the arenas for differentiated definitions, where a Western individualism associated with cybercommunities like Silicon Valley is countered by Malaysian discourses of the family, where the “anti-citizen” propensities of electronic culture are explicitly refuted in favour of an “intelligent citizenship” of responsible and socially-beneficial cyber-praxis. Yet in the final analysis, the very nature of cybercities (as hubs of information from multiple origins and ideologies) both permits forward-looking national discourses, and simultaneously offers the means by which they may be dismantled, thwarted and circumvented.

Chapter Six considers the role of museums in the construction of ethnically plural Southeast Asian cities like Jakarta and Singapore. Here, Kathleen Adams argues that these museums are inherently textual constructions, the “rehearsal of various identities” motivated by considerations of national unity, central authority, and so on. She examines how the social function and discourse of ethnographic museums are interrogated by the experiences and perceptions of social, economic, regional, cultural and religious difference on the part of visitors.

Chapter Seven by Anthony Guneratne considers Singapore filmmaking as a textual corollary to the project of nation building and infrastructural development. The history of film production in Singapore is an index of the social conditions of the respective periods of “consolidation” after the war, independence and modernization (the clearing of slums, the creation of communications networks), and the contemporary situation. Film production, including elements such as language and theme, directorial styles and genres, reflected the larger social story of immigrant communities, social tensions, labour and social change within which this production functioned. The result is that these filmic narratives register a “Singaporean hybridity” which cannot be inscribed onto the “hard” physical landscape of the city; the filmic city is thus susceptible to the layerings of multiple meanings which the palimpsest of the concrete city cannot adequately record.

In Chapter Eight, Rajeev Patke extrapolates the critical paradigm of Walter Benjamin’s peripatetic method, written in the context of his wanderings through the street of Paris, to Bombay in particular and the Asian city in general. Benjamin’s sensitivity to the dislocating cultural force of modernity and industrialization — a sensitivity which was a refinement, and not always a sharing, of post-Marxist dialectical thinking — places his writings in a particularly appropriate relationship with the forces of urban and social change faced by Bombay and many Asian cities in a similar stage of development. Patke’s Benjaminian flâneur then reads Bombay using a variety of texts, interweaving literary discourses, spatial readings and critical tropes to view the city (in spite of its own ambitions to unity and order) as a site of “self-divisive violence,” of “troubled ambivalence.”

Readings, however varied, can never pretend to exhaustiveness, especially when the text is one as complex as the Southeast Asian city, and this is a caveat applicable to this volume as well. In terms of geographical focus, it is also clear that Singapore and its closest neighbouring nations and cities are the dominant focus. This is partly explained by the history of this volume (it arose out of a conference on the “City as Text” held in Singapore, and may reveal something about the ways in which discourses of cities, like scholarly networks

themselves, arrange themselves around perceived and constructed foci or hubs), and partly by real affinities and links between cities like Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur (and to a lesser extent the cities of the Indian and Chinese diasporas). Nevertheless, it remains true that this leaves much unsaid about other possible critical trajectories involving cities like Hanoi, Bangkok and Manila, distinguished from the focus cities of this volume by (respectively) communism and the dominant religions of Buddhism and Catholicism, and the textual strategies through which these engage with other local conditions. In lieu of exhaustiveness or comprehensiveness, the value of readings is perhaps in the critical paradigms and hints offered, a suggestion of the wealth of textual and cultural resources that might be brought to bear on the “city as text,” an opening of possibilities. In these respects, it is hoped that the present volume complements the other scholarship in the field of Southeast Asian urbanisms, and (perhaps more importantly) suggests some avenues for the ongoing critical engagements that are needed.

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