

Book Reviews

Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment in Colonial Singapore. By Brenda S.A. Yeoh. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Contesting Space is a monumental work. Theoretically and ideologically engaging, it attempts at no less than rewriting the history of colonial Singapore by bringing the cultural logic of colonial rule under the purview of the key issues of dialectics of power, spatial order, and local resistance. The recasting of French theory — in this case, that of Michel Foucault — in the context of colonial Singapore is long overdue. And for Southeast Asianists, there is much insight to be gained from the energetic efforts of scholars in South Asia in their deployment of Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, and Jacques Derrida in examining the complex entanglement of colonial desire and local discourses of subjectivity, gender, and social action.

Clearly, *Contesting Space* signals a major departure from the conventional narratives of the way colonialism worked in Singapore. There is no celebration here of Raffles' "discovery" of Singapore, which he subsequently turned into a free port, bringing benefits to British and immigrants alike. Neither does Yeoh give in to the temptation of rehearsing the tales of Chinese community leaders renowned for their hard work, business talent, and of course philanthropy, on which much of their power and influence depended. What we have instead is a brilliant analysis of colonial rule as a problematic, and as being administratively uncertain and politically complex. It is Yeoh's contention that urban planning — and by implication, all aspects of administration — of colonial Singapore should be seen not merely as a placid instrument of colonial policy, but as a major site of contestation in which both the colonizer and the colonized attempted to realize their respective aims

and wishes, a site in which the colonized community transacted their resistance to official rule.

To argue for what might be called a post-modern approach to power and the politics of spatial order, Yeoh turns to French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, and, of course, philosopher Michel Foucault. She criticizes conventional literature which stresses, firstly, the highly simplified “traditional” and “modern” binary in understanding the urban structure of the colonial city, and, secondly, the dominant logic of colonial political economy in the formation of urban spatial order. These conventional emphases privilege a unilinear flow of power from the colonizer to the colonized. Such a notion of “power” in colonial polity is theoretically and empirically untenable: this idea of “power” and the politics of colonial spatial order itself have to be problematized.

Yeoh begins by tracing the development of the Municipal Authority of Singapore over the period 1819–1930. On the whole, she sees the history of municipal constitutional reform as being largely underpinned by “the tension between granting local autonomy and in the fear that this would lead to the domination of Asian interests in city government” (p. 58). There are impressive empirical details on the composition, and the manifold bureaucratic instruments of the Municipal Authority. And it is the analysis of the formulation and the implementation of urban policies and their local reception that anchors the central discussion of the book. Local resistance and bureaucratic power are dialectical twins in Yeoh’s analysis. Evoking the theoretical insights of Foucault, Lefebvre, and James Scott, Yeoh shines a powerful theoretical light on reform-oriented urban policies like sanitation. Under such a light, the social benefit of public health measures took on a different political hue simply because the native — largely Chinese — population saw the apparently commonsensical formulation of sanitation policies differently. There is a distinct echo of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci here, who saw the formulation of “commonsense” as a final destination of the imperceptible naturalization of political ideology. The public good of urban policy, like good weather, was seen by the authority as naturally desirable and perhaps inevitable. For Yeoh, the failure of colonial administration to impose successfully on the colonized urban policies “for

their own good” is suggestive of a major political failure of the colonizer. The fact that the flow of power from the colonizer was capable of being deflected by the masses is an important insight which allows Yeoh to trace the intricate processes of local response and resistance to colonial authority. Such a response was highly strategic, never totally confrontational nor completely yielding to the demands and policy intentions of the Municipal Authority.

Yeoh is most impressive when she outlines the complexities of cultural difference in colonial Singapore. The social and cultural principles of the Chinese medical system and health perceptions were different from British assumptions and this led to a colonial policy of public hygiene being received as functionally alien if not politically unacceptable. One fact she continually drives home is the colonial state’s propensity to deliberately ignore the functional logic of local health and hygiene systems and spatial requirements. Resistance from the natives arose often not so much out of an awareness of their own political repression or “class position” but from the functional incompatibility of colonial urban policies with their own cultural experiences. Nonetheless, this sense of incompatibility, and the social action it motivated, did have political effects as active resistance in some convoluted way led to the municipal authority modifying some of its policies.

Based on the author’s doctoral thesis written for Oxford University, the book is theoretically succinct and empirically thorough. Nevertheless, a cautious note in relation to the issue of “resistance” is offered by Yeoh herself when she asks: “How effective were these forms of ‘passive resistance’ in protecting or advancing the interests of the Asian masses in the long run?” (p. 123). Referring to James Scott’s work on peasant resistance in rural Kedah, Malaysia, she warns against “over-romanticizing ‘people’s power’” (p. 123). *Contesting Space* has, on the whole, avoided this fault, but its lingering valorization of “resistance” cannot be so easily removed. For the privileging of the colonized cannot help but turn the book into a rehabilitative project, one that “rescues” the colonized from the fate of analytical discursive neglect. However, by restoring the social, cultural, and political integrity of the native subjects, *Contesting Space* also reaffirms the binary and structural separation be-

tween the colonizer and the colonized. It is this binary opposition, as readers will recall, which has engaged Homi Bhabha in his criticism of the similar tendency in Edward W. Said's analysis of the discourse of Orientalism.

In *Contesting Space*, the unstable institution of the municipal authority and the continuously shifting responses of the Chinese and Indian natives are not given the centrality they deserve. Neither colonialism nor the colonized community are unitary or closed entities immune from the influence from the other: this is the brilliant insight that Subaltern Studies from South Asia offer. To recognize the heterogeneity of how the "local" is constituted is to highlight a crucial but largely neglected issue in the literature of colonial Singapore — the complicity of the colonized in the constitution of colonial order. The simple point is that Chinese members in the municipal body such as See Tiong Wah were largely wealthy English-educated Straits Chinese. Hence, their positionality in the colonial system of things would be vastly different from the "plebeian class". Most crucially, the respective modes of contest and negotiation with the colonial authorities by these classes of natives would be dramatically different, just as the cultural-ideological register and effectiveness of their "resistance" would be distinct. The "Queen's Chinese" were an important intermediary between the colonial power and the local population. The complicity of the Straits Chinese, and their sharing of economic and political interests with colonial power, would suggest other processes of negotiation far more congenial than those suggested by the term "resistance".

The second point this review would like to make is in regard to the "use" of Foucault. While the author's deployment of Foucault's concepts of power and surveillance undoubtedly helps to illuminate the repressive working of urban spatial policy, it is nonetheless useful to remember that Foucault is primarily concerned with quintessentially modern forms of social control. For him such a control typically takes the form of and is realized by "impersonal domination" via highly objectivized scientific techniques and bureaucratic rules. While impersonal forms of domination are often mediated by personal relations, it remains the case that there are distinctive qualities of these forms of control based on im-

personal and techno-official principles. This has two implications. For one thing, it means that inherent bureaucratic principles — and their social benefits — cannot be easily politicized in terms of articulating the hegemonic intentions of the colonizer. Indeed, it is Foucault's contention that power is not simply a matter of the powerful unproblematically accruing benefits, nor does it always achieve the repression of the powerless in any straightforward way. In regard to public sanitation in colonial Singapore, for instance, the social abuse of facilities could be evaluated in other terms than the political: for example, in terms of the "plebeian classes" lack of familiarity with modern facilities. In short, the lack of compliance of the colonized could be due more to unequal distribution of technical knowledge rather than direct expression of political discontent.

At the same time, there is located in the space between power and repression an interesting dimension of what Foucault calls "personal domination". This is something akin to the Hegelian "master-slave" relationship characterized by mutual dependence in the very condition of power differences and conflict. The issue of "personal domination" would take us to examine the idealization of colonial power — and its benevolence — by the natives. And one suspects that there would be a dimension of this among the "plebeian classes", as well as among the wealthy "Queen's Chinese". How idealizing colonial power, or the ideological fetishization of colonial power (to use a more strident Marxist phrase) worked to reshape if not undermine organized or random resistance is a question that can only be settled by turning to empirical processes on the ground. Above all, the tenor and consequences of local resistance is also a matter of evaluative judgement by the actor in situation as much as by the analysis. For clearly, one person's "passive resistance" is another's "tacit compliance". Critical vigilance is obviously crucial here. It helps to free a discussion of "local resistance" from the possibility of totalization, and from the irresistible temptation of "idealizing the repressed".

On the whole, *Contesting Space* makes a strong and convincing case for refocusing analytical attention to the complex processes of subaltern politics in colonial Singapore. The author's discussion of the problem-

atic nature of colonial power, and the tension between discursive construction and the physical realization of colonial spatial order enrich our understanding of colonial rule in Singapore, its success and failure, the imposition of power and local response, and complicity and resistance by a socially differentiated and economically divided colonized community. Such an understanding is only made possible by an innovative theorizing which looks at colonial Singapore in fresh light. The work makes a significant contribution by showing that such innovative theorizing is both possible and necessary. Hopefully, it will encourage other critical projects in the examination of nineteenth century Singapore far beyond offering, again, another comforting picture of a benevolent colonial power and subservient, hard-working natives.

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