

*Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space.* By Hans-Dieter Evers and Rudiger Korff. New York: St. Martin's Press and Munster: Lit Verlag, 2000. 268 pp.

Dominating the book's front cover is a close-up photograph of a towering greyish, gothic-like monument. Taken from the base of the structure, the visual angle conveys a sense of vertigo as its crown merges with the skies above. On the back cover, the monument is revealed and its symbolism deciphered. The monumentalist structure belongs to the Kuala Lumpur Petronas Twin Towers, the tallest building in the world when it was completed in the late 1990s. In a panoramic poster found at another nationalist showcase — the Kuala Lumpur International Airport — the monument is positioned in the centre, amidst a crowded ensemble of similar icons of modernity. Boldly emblazoned across the poster is the aphorism: "The future is here".

Fortunately, the tone of *Southeast Asian Urbanism* is comparatively sober. Indeed, it is a book that generously revisits past scholarship to draw out the social, cultural, and religious antecedents that have informed the formation of Southeast Asian urban centres and urbanism. The book expressly looks at "the connections between micro and macro processes, between grassroots interactions and urban structures, between social theory and empirical data" in order to "provide a vivid picture of the great variety of urban forms, the social creativity in the slums of Bangkok, Manila, or Jakarta, the variety of cultural symbolism and the political and religious structuration of urban space" (p. v).

Based on over two decades of fieldwork in the region, the scholars' cumulative breadth, depth, and intimacy with the subject matter is evident. Theoretically, the authors position themselves around what they call "emic constructionism". Instead of deconstructing the city, they deploy the "grassroot-oriented" perspective of Manuel Castells (*The City and the Grassroots*, 1983). Hence, Evers and Korff explicitly set off "to study the ideas, concepts, and struggles underlying the social construction of the city by the urban inhabitants themselves" (p. 11).

The first two chapters provide a theoretical overview of urbanism in the region. As is well-known, cities are not alien to Southeast Asia. They

chronologically precede European colonialism. Two main patterns of urbanism connected to state formation are identified and distinguished. Commercial cities were predominantly coastal, and situated along the international trading network while inland sacred cities of the rulers constitute the second. Nonetheless, both types were intertwined with one another through a division of labour.

While the inland states had as centres of power strong capital cities which were integrated into sacred rituals through which kingship was legitimated, and expressed their centrality through the articulation of heaven, world and underworld by magnificent tectonic marks ... the centrality of the commercial cities did not need an outer expression, it expressed itself in the success of business. (P. 29)

However, with the advent of colonialism, commercial cities became also a centre of territorial and bureaucratic administration as bigger regions were integrated. Over time, the division between commercial and peasant production area was dissolved. Synoptic accounts of the manner and scope in which urbanization impacted and modified various selected cities in the colonial and post-colonial eras are then elaborated in chapter two.

Chapter three analyses and compares the cultural construction of urban space in a few selected urban centres — Bangkok and Korat in Thailand, a composite picture drawn from a survey of landownership of eighteen towns in peninsular Malaysia and Padang (a “Sumatran town”) in Indonesia. In the case of Bangkok, its foundation as a Theravada Buddhist city with an exemplary centre and a regalia for monarchic rule is increasingly dissolving. Despite the ideological portrayal of Bangkok as a “symbiosis of tradition and modernity”, Evers and Korff argue that there is in reality a divorce between the two trends, powered by the market forces of urban development (p. 95). Consequently, several structures with differing centres are configured — “the traditional Theravada Buddhist capital city, the national capital, and the centre of commerce and modernity in Thailand” (p. 92). At the level of the inhabitants of Bangkok, these places take on differentiated importance and meanings dependent on how they are integrated into their everyday routines.

By contrast, the authors argue that in the case of provincial Korat where the syncretist cult of Ya Mo, as an enduring symbol of freedom from the invading armies of Laos, continues to be a vital “constructed tradition”, the diverse cultural elements and social groups in the city are more closely integrated. At the other end of this continuum is the multicultural example of Malaysia. While “Malay cities” historically lack an urban image as the centre of *kampung* life was centred on the palace (*istana*) and the mosque, the migrant Chinese brought with them the science of geomancy (*feng shui*) with ramifications for conceptions of religious, social, and political spaces. It is this essential difference, the authors surmise, that “the Chinese mental map was clearly focused on major urban areas whereas the Malay one was centred on the primarily rural home districts” (p. 115).

Chapter four draws from the subsistence or survival strategies of the urban poor in Bangkok and Jakarta to substantiate the analytical notion of the “shadow” or the “informal” economy. As opposed to an oppositional dichotomy between “formal” and “informal” sectors, and the marginalization of the latter, this chapter essentially brings out the linkages between the two. Urban slums are arguably places and sources of consumption and the reproduction of labour power, both important aspects in maintaining the urban economy.

Chapter five forms the other bulky and substantial portion in the book (the other being chapter three), stretching to just over seventy pages. The focus is on patterns of land ownership in cities, a topic of study which the authors observe, “has hardly ever been touched upon” although “questions of how urban land is used, who occupies it, and at what price it fetches on the urban land market have been discussed in great detail” (p. 170). Again, Bangkok forms the principal point of reference with Padang (Sumatra) and Malaysian towns primarily offered as supplementary case studies. They are backgrounded with the well-established argument that urbanization and the development of the European concept of private property are intrinsically linked. The formation of colonial cities thus gave rise to a dual system of land rights differentiating between Western individual property rights in the cities and “native land rights” in the rural areas.

In the example of Padang, the provincial capital for West Sumatra, the authors note that the Minangkabau notion of communal land tenure and property rights is still relatively intact, and has not been swallowed up by the individualization of ownership rights. The persistence of customary inheritance law (*adat*) and renewed efforts at re-establishing communal land ownership patterns are some of the factors sustaining this feature.

Based on a sample survey of Malaysian towns conducted in 1975–79, by comparison, the authors note that more than any other Southeast Asian country, it is Malaysia which shows “a tendency towards rural/urban residential segregation and occupational specialization by ethnicity” (p. 185). The authors suggest that it is this scenario of differential access to urban land and thus to better economic opportunities which partly accounted for the landmark ethnic conflicts of May 1969, and to subsequent government social engineering efforts in changing the urban land ownership pattern.

The section on the evolution of urban Bangkok is the most detailed. It examines the various means in which urban land and social space are secured by different social classes and agencies in this rapidly expanding metropolis. The social organization and resistance strategies of slum dwellers and *kampung* dwellers (villagers) complete the discussion on the observation that “globalization and modernization increase the pressure on urban land, which in turn leads to eviction and demolition” [of these entities] (p. 240).

Overall, the book’s panoramic scope is also arguably a factor in its structural weakness. Reflecting the drawn-out period within which the topics were first researched and theorized, the book reads disjointedly and unevenly at places, presenting a collage of loosely related and overlapping themes rather than a coherent argument. Some may quibble over the absence of recent influential theorists on globalization, colonialism and urbanism — like Anthony King and Ulf Hannerz, for instance — and an explicit critique of the relevance of their ideas to the city-formation of modern Southeast Asia. Additionally, others may point to the glaring lack of explication of urban space from a gender perspective given its major theoretical inroads over the last couple of decades.

From an editorial point of view, moreover, certain aspects of the book could have been improved upon. As intimated earlier, some chapters are unwieldy, and appear to be large chunks reproduced from earlier pieces of work with minimal revision. The bibliography is impressive and particularly useful for newcomers to the subject. It showcases not only established Anglo-American scholarship but also German and Dutch sources that, in some cases, stretch back some forty years. No doubt, with such a wide sweep of the region, an index page and a glossary to navigate through the book would have been appreciated. Moreover, appropriately chosen photographs, diagrams, and maps would have enlivened the tome-like publication. Lastly, it would have been desirable if the embedded historical contexts of the empirical data (like local currencies) and “the ethnographic present” accounts be more explicitly unpacked. In the absence of this, the narratives, while undoubtedly providing a wealth of information nevertheless also give an unnecessary static and essentialist impression.

These minor blemishes notwithstanding, *Southeast Asian Urbanism* is a timely and important book, providing a fascinating window into the cultural and “grassroots” dimensions of urbanization and urbanism in the region. In the light of overly “macro” and economic accounts of the phenomenon, the book offers a valuable counterpoint. Clearly, much of the original empirical contexts will bear fruitful revisiting in the years to come.

YEOH Seng Guan