Contemplating the Rise of Asian Cities

Ho Chi Minh City, 2015. View from District 2 across the Saigon River towards District 1. The building in the middle is the new home of Vietcombank, designed by Pelli Clarke Pelli architects of New Haven. Photograph by Tram Luong, PhD student, Department of Anthropology, Yale University.

Build, Dwell, Live
3:30p, Monday, February 1, 2016

"Crypto-Colonialism and Not-So-Crypto-Neoliberalism in Conflict Over Bangkok"

Michael Herzfeld (Harvard University)

Thinking about the role of the Western powers in trying to "direct" Siamese/Thai culture is, in the context of the design of Bangkok, less a matter of spotting "Western influence" on architectural and planning practices – though these are also important evidence of geopolitical relations in the past – than of understanding the cultural implications of the uses of space in the city. With Bangkok's emergence as a consumer hub in the past two decades, continuing imitation of Western models has intensified already painful tensions between the idea of the city as an indigenous moral community and that of a commercial enterprise – tensions that have also been politically translated into conflict between the capital and the provinces. Among the effects of these tensions in Bangkok are attempts to erase the semiotic traces of its origins in the conflicting roles of Siamese royalty and Chinese entrepreneurs in the founding and shaping of the modern city. Will current geo-politics, with its marked tilt toward China, reverse that trend? Or will neoliberalism carry the cultural logic of crypto-colonialism forward in a new guise?

Michael Herzfeld is the Ernest E. Monrad Professor of Social Sciences at Harvard University.

“Sixty Pages and a Roast Duck: Meditation on the Remains of a Shanghai House”

Qin Shao (College of New Jersey)

In 1949, the Zhu family in Shanghai owned six houses. By the end of 2005, they had lost all of them—the first five to Mao’s socialist reform in the 1950s and the last to the post-Mao urbanization in 2005. Today, two things remain: a sixty-page inventory the Red Guards left behind after searching the last house and confiscating its contents during the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s; and a roast duck recipe passed down through the generations. Since 2005, the now 93 years old mother has lived as a self-imposed hostage in a tiny flat to protest the 2005 domicide; the son has dutifully made the roast duck for every Chinese New Year while utterly refusing to ever look at that sixty-page inventory of his home-no-more ; the daughter-in-law has not only petitioned to be compensated for the 2005 loss but also joined a “Demanding Our Houses Back Group” (讨房团) in Shanghai that focuses on the private houses the Chinese Communist state took in the 1950s. By following the Zhu family, this paper looks into the multiple property regimes in China and their impact on dwellings, lives, and the human tapestry that complicates and challenges the rise of the new Chinese city.

Qin Shao is Professor of History at The College of New Jersey.

“Collective Assembly at the Other End of the Commodity Chain”

Lisa Mitchell (University of Pennsylvania)

Historians of contentious politics have asserted that collective forms of state-directed protest first emerged in post-industrial Europe, appearing sometime between the 1780s and the 1840s before spreading elsewhere around the world. South Asian historians, too, have largely supported this chronology when attributing Gandhi’s political innovations of the early 20th century to his exposure to post-industrial European influences. Yet archival evidence suggests that state- directed forms of contentious collective assembly emerged much earlier in South Asia than in Europe, offering us not only a critique of existing histories of mass politics, but also a new method for approaching our understandings of the state. This paper ties the history of collective political assembly to the expansion of urban

nodes within global commodity chains rather than to European factory-style industrialization, paying particular attention to those cities that were directly linked to the early modern cotton textile trade such as Madras, Surat, Machalipatnam, and Vishakhapatnam. It contrasts state-directed collective forms of communication already present in South Asia by at least the 1660s, with collective actions in Europe (e.g. charivari, skimmington), which were still being used primarily as forms of social discipline against those seen to violate social norms (e.g. the hoarding miller or an adulterous or otherwise inappropriate coupling) rather than as collective communicative acts addressed to representatives of the state. It also offers a longer genealogy for the South Asian forms of political practice that first attracted global attention during the anti-colonial nationalist mobilizations of the early 20th century. This genealogy suggests that the efforts of the East India Company (and later the British Crown) to limit the influence of contentious collective assemblies on the state, though not entirely successful in eliminating such forms of practice from available political repertoires, were somewhat more effective at erasing them from global historical narratives of the political.

Lisa Mitchell is Associate Professor of Anthropology and History in the Department of South Asia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Imagine, Conceive, Represent
3:30p, Monday, March 7, 2016

"Master-Planned Dreams and Informal Urbanization in Three Chinese Megaprojects"

Max Hirsh (University of Hong Kong)

Explorations into the rising Asian city often focus on large-scale urban megaprojects such as airport hubs, satellite towns, and master-planned university campuses. These observations are infused with an element of "megastructure porn": that is, a visual attraction to the sheer scale of what is being built in rapidly developing Asian cities. Yet remarkably little attention has been paid to the many ways in which these urban projects, once built, are appropriated by the public for purposes that diverge considerably from—and often negate—their intended uses. Focusing on three examples in the Pearl River Delta—a new town in Hong Kong, the Shenzhen international airport, and a "higher education mega center" in Guangzhou, my talk draws attention to the informal, creative, and unsanctioned reconfigurations of urban megaprojects in order to rethink some of our fundamental assumptions about the aesthetic, social, and spatial dimensions of urbanization in contemporary China.

Max Hirsh is a research assistant professor in the history and theory of architecture and urban planning at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong.

"Humor in Colonial Hanoi"

Martina Nguyen (Baruch College)

This paper explores the nature of humor in late colonial Hanoi. It focuses on Phong Hoá [Mores], Vietnam's first satirical newspaper and suggests that such a journal could only have emerged in an urban context. The paper will examine a number of humorous genres the paper made famous, such as cartoons, jokes, and antiphrastic irony, and describe how the transformations in the city of Hanoi in the early 20th century gave rise to an urban audience that can appreciate such humor. The paper argues that Phong Hoá's humor did not merely serve as an instrument toward social reform; it involved an entirely new way of being and seeing that was thoroughly modern. In particular, I focus on Ly Toet, the largest and most well known of Phong Hoa humorous topoi, as a way of examining the nature of humor as a modern urban sensibility. As most of the cartoons were submitted by readers, the cartoons give a rare glimpse into the collective preoccupations of Vietnamese readers towards modern urban life and their resistance to the Group's attempts at reform.

Martina Nguyen is Assistant Professor of Modern Southeast Asian History at Baruch College.

"Jinnealogy: Archival Amnesia and Islamic Theology in Post-Partition Delhi"

Anand Taneja (Vanderbilt University)

In stories told in contemporary Delhi, long-lived jinn act as transmitters connecting human beings centuries apart in time. In petitions deposited to jinn-saints in a ruined medieval palace, medieval ideas of justice come together with modern bureaucratic techniques. What is the relation of saintly jinn, with their plenitude of time, to the time of the post-colonial present? In this paper I use oral history accounts, popular Urdu theological literature, and files from the Record Room of the ASI to bring together two parallel tracks; the growing presence of the jinn in post-Partition Delhi and the institutionalized amnesia of the official archives concerning everything prior to Partition and Independence in 1947. I show how the jinn are increasingly present in the blank spaces of the map, where the plans of the bureaucracy, the verdicts of the judiciary and the illegibility of the post-Partition Indian state attempt vast erasures of the city's Muslim landscapes,

and how jinnealogy, the supersession of human chains of memory by the long lives of the jinn, challenges the magical amnesia of the state by allowing for other temporalities and modes of witnessing against the empty, homogenous time of the bureaucratic present.

Anand Vivek Taneja is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Anthropology at Vanderbilt University.

Move, Connect, Exchange
3:30p, Monday, April 4, 2016

"Living on The Lake of Fire: The Perils of Growth in Bangalore"

Tulasi Srinivas (Emerson College)

Bangalore city is currently one of the top ten megacities of the world. The centre of Asia's Information Technology industry, with burgeoning population growth and "smart" city planning, Bangalore should be model for the rising Asian city. Yet the city is plagued by eroding infrastructure, ecological degradation, rolling blackouts, desertification, corruption and outdated planning tools. In this presentation I explore one case--the lake of fire--in which all the perils and promise of the city is evoked. in 2015 a local water body, the Bellandur Tank, started to catch fire repeatedly due to industrial effluents being released into its waters. Tracing the ecological history of the region, and the immediate populist uprising to clean up the tank, I attempt to unpack the unexpected lessons of Bangalore's spectacular growth, as a illustration of the perils of a rising Asian megacity.

Tulasi Srinivas is Associate professor at Emerson College in Urban and Cultural Anthropology.

"Artists on the Move: Contemporary Art, Globalization, and the Regional Question in Southeast Asia"

Pamela Nguyen Corey (University of London, SOAS)

One of the most salient features of contemporary art is the concerted endeavor to accentuate notions of locality and place, despite their embeddedness within regional propositions vexed by the very conditions of globalization in which they are solicited. Southeast Asian cities outside of the increasingly branded constellation of global Asian arts centers (e.g. Shanghai, Gwangju, Singapore), have themselves been part of ambitious, although often failed, exhibition projects attempting to foreground their possibilities as nodes of artistic interaction, community, and innovation. Prevalent platforms in contemporary art, such as biennales, the project model, artist-run initiatives, and performance art, have enabled new mobilities across regional scales, typically sited in urban centers. Yet cities such as Phnom Penh, Hanoi, and Saigon have struggled to emerge from historical frames and infrastructural constraints. On the one hand, this has limited the potential of institutional support and impact. On the other hand, this has stimulated ground-level networks and exchanges shaped through the social and the discursive. I will present a number of examples and questions in order to think further about the ways in which cities are made through their representations and relations, both constituting and undoing a regional geography.

Pamela Nguyen Corey is Lecturer in Southeast Asian Art at SOAS, University of London.

"Embedded Urban Transnationalisms: The Case of Southeast Asia Within Larger Asian Contexts"

Eric Tagliacozzo (Cornell)

How singular are the cities of Southeast Asia? While there are universalizing trends in global urbanization currently taking place across the planet, several Southeast Asian cities will adopt these new frameworks and institutions at least partly within a local model that is already several centuries old. Particular to the region, this model does not parallel

South and East Asia's urban evolutions, the two regions traditionally (and somewhat erroneously) regarded as the well-springs of Southeast Asian culture. Rather, it contradicts it. The cities of the "lands beneath the winds" have been and will continue to be primarily their own creatures from a variety of vantage points. Yet it is only by examining the pattern of these cities' evolutions that we can hope to gain any insight into how these urban centers may unfold in the future. It is in the distant and colonial past that we can sift for geographic and demographic clues that auger how the new Asian "super-capitals" sitting astride the equator may evolve in the years to come.

Eric Tagliacozzo is Professor of Southeast Asian History at Cornell University.

Contemplating the Rise of Asian Cities: Workshop and Plenary Session

Monday, May 9, 2016, 4:30 p.m. @ Greenberg Conference Center

This final session invites workshop participants and interested Yale scholars and affiliates to come together for an open conversation about new directions in the study of Asian cities at Yale. The evening will include two plenary talks by distinguished scholars of Asian and global urbanism, as well as ample time for conversation and discussion over dinner.

Plenary speakers:

Ananya Roy (University of California, Los Angeles)

Ananya Roy is Professor of Urban Planning and Social Welfare and inaugural Director of The Institute on Inequality and Democracy at UCLA Luskin.

Neil Brenner (Harvard Graduate School of Design)

Neil Brenner is Professor of Urban Theory and Director of the Urban Theory Lab at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

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