

Contemplating the Rise of Asian Cities

Report by Erik Harms

Throughout the Spring 2016 Semester, scholars from across Yale assembled for a semester-long workshop series entitled "[Contemplating the Rise of Asian Cities](#)." The workshop series was sponsored by the Whitney Humanities Center, the MacMillan Center, and the Councils on South, Southeast, and East Asian Studies. Professors Erik Harms, Helen Siu, and K. Sivaramakrishnan served as faculty organizers.

The core of the series consisted of a [semester-long series of workshops](#) held on the first Monday of each month at the Whitney Humanities Center. With three invited speakers at each session, the events attracted a broad mix of scholars studying Asian cities from multiple perspectives and disciplines who were all interested in questioning what the rapid growth of cities across Asia means in humanistic, social, and aesthetic terms, all while critically engaging the trope of the "Rising Asian City."

In the first workshop session, "[Build, Dwell, Live](#)," held on February 1st, speakers illustrated how non-state actors come into conflict with the state, and how they mobilize alternative forms of political agency. Michael Herzfeld taught us that the rise of a modernist monumental city in Bangkok has not fully succeeded in displacing affective, place-based modes of urban consciousness. In documenting the ways in which a small community resisted eviction, Herzfeld showed how the bonds of the *muang* counter the top-down vacuity of the elite-centered *prathet*. In another paper, Qin Shao, who has worked intensively with communities facing eviction in Shanghai, showed how different members of the same evicted family developed different responses to their eviction. Finally, in that same session, Lisa Mitchell showed that contentious mass politics seems to have emerged in India much earlier than in Europe. The modern form of politics brought by colonial documentary practices and record-keeping has actually suppressed rather than enabled the expression of justice in India. In all three cases, we learned how non-state actors come into conflict with the state, and how they mobilize alternative forms of political agency.

In the second session, "[Imagine, Conceive, Represent](#)," held on March 7th, speakers revealed the centrality of everyday practices to the meaning of a city's rise by reimagining urban development and analyzing gaps in the logic of transportation design, satire and humor in colonial newspapers, and the use of folklore in critiquing urban bureaucracy. Max Hirsh directed our attention to the "airport urbanism" of the low-budget "flying public" which is emerging all across Asia due to low-cost carriers. He showed how low-end carriers, with their check-in counters located in low-end shopping malls, and the budget transport systems that bring such travelers in and out of cities and airports, are fundamentally altering the landscape of Asian cities. Looking historically at understudied parts of Hanoi's colonial newspaper culture, Martina Nguyen taught us to pay attention to humor and satire. She showed us comic bumpkins whose figure rose in prominence precisely at the time that Hanoi began to grow as a metropolis. Anand Taneja presented a beautiful study of the ways city residents engage with the jinn-saints that inhabit the ruins of a medieval fortification in central Delhi. He showed how people petitions the jinns to fulfil and carry out various requests, almost as if they are applying to various

organs of the modern Indian bureaucracy. This otherworldly bureaucracy sometimes promises to be more efficacious than the actually-existing bureaucracy of the contemporary Indian state. All three papers showed the centrality of everyday practices to the meaning of a city's rise.

In the third workshop, "[Move, Connect, Exchange](#)," held on April 4th, speakers traced the uneven and troubled development of the rising city by presenting cases of environmental repercussions, failed attempts in developing global art centers, and port cities as historic centers of exchange. Tulasi Srinivas forced us to think critically about the much-vaunted rise of Bangalore by reminding us of the often unacknowledged ecological and social costs of growth. She focused on the apocalyptic symbolism of the Lake of Fire, which literally became reality when the city's Bellandur Tank caught fire in 2015. In that same workshop, Pamela Corey critiqued the rise of global art centers. While the rise of such centers have been heralded as evidence for the rise of many Asian cities, they have also excluded many artists from the economy of global prestige. Finally, the historian Eric Tagliacozzo placed the idea of the rising Southeast Asian city in a deeper historical perspective by tracing the role of port cities in long processes of exchange.

At the end of the semester, on May 9th, the series came to a close with a pair of [plenary lectures by Ananya Roy and Neil Brenner](#) in a packed Greenberg Center amphitheater. The event concluded with a lively banquet dinner, where assembled guests discussed initiatives for further work on the study of Asian cities at Yale.

Throughout the workshops this semester, speakers reminded audiences of three central points: (1) that the so-called rise of Asia is neither new nor universally dictated by the imperatives of circulating capital alone; (2) that scholars must look beyond surfaces and superficial forms of spectacular urbanism and pay attention to quotidian and popular engagements with cities; and (3) that scholars need to approach the concept of the Rising Asian City with healthy skepticism--for every spectacular rise, there is often an important set of unacknowledged costs. The workshops also helped establish a network of scholars of Asian cities from across the university. The organizers hope this network will foster continued interdisciplinary and inter-Asian work on the study of cities at Yale.