

# BOOK REVIEWS

**THE NEW ASIAN CITY: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form.** By *Jini Kim Watson*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xi, 311 pp. (B&W photos.) US\$25.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-8166-7573-9.

If there were one word to describe this book, it would be speed. The book focuses on the production of what Watson calls the “New Asian City” aesthetic of Singapore, Seoul and Taipei from the 1960s to the 1980s. The exhilaration of speed is not just that the urban explosion in the three cities was dizzying, such that any exposition of its fictional expressions would necessarily leave the reader with motion sickness. It is also that Watson, innovatively merging a Marxist materialist approach and a postcolonialist sensitivity to culture, takes the historical production of space seriously enough to begin her analysis from deep within the old colonial town, before bursting into the transformative nationalism of postwar urbanism and finally arriving at each of the three globalizing industrial cities to discover the cultural logics of the Asian city. Structured into three parts to cover each phase and compacted into a thin book, this is nothing short of a fast-paced ride through the compressed *longue durée* of East Asia’s incorporation into the capitalist world-system.

Despite the speed, the book does achieve a depth that many recent books on Asian urbanisms lacked due to their attempts to explicate what is new about the Asian city. Watson works through key fictional texts with a sharp eye to spatial aesthetics, digging into the political unconscious of imaginaries that prop up the architecture of modern Asian subjectivities. Ironically, Watson’s most crucial argument, which is only fully unveiled at the end of the book, is that the New Asian City is neither new nor specifically Asian. The modernity of the three cities, Watson argues, drawing from Michael Denning’s transnational history of globalization, is “the profound product of the age of three worlds, even as it is often thought of as exception to it” (253). In the interlinked global history of the East, the West and the South, the three cities are urban forms emergent from the contradictions of expansive capital that drive the dialectical moments of colonialism and nationalism, neocolonialism and globalization.

There are three major blind spots in the ride towards the gleaming concrete, steel and glass hearts of the Asian Tigers. The two theoretical figures that hold up the arc of the book’s argument are Henri Lefebvre and Franz Fanon. Fanon is the weaker column of the two. Watson begins the first part of the book on colonial cities with a long quote of Fanon’s famous Manichean splitting of the colonial city in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

in which the native town is described as the crouching village to the settlers' town of stone and steel. Watson imposes this framing unto Seoul and Taipei too easily, without pausing to consider the contrast between precolonial "Sino-influenced planning" to the "Japanese-controlled space" reflecting "Western-style colonialism" (39) as possibly too stereotypical.

When it comes to Singapore, Watson acknowledges the crucial distinction of the colonial port city. However, the initial and creative Heideggerian impulse to see worlding urbanisms quickly lapses into the stereotype of Singapore as segregated into the sanitized European town and the Chinatown of crouching natives. In part, this is due to Watson's dependence on two works on Singapore's colonial urbanism in the 1990s and neglect of the colonial port city scholarship that has emerged since then and Anoma Pieris's *Hidden Hands and Divided Landscapes: A Penal History of Singapore's Plural Society* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), which offers a complicated and fractured picture of Singapore's urbanism.

The second blind spot is that despite the postcolonial sensibility, Watson tends to privilege interpretations of the Asian city and subjectivity by European modernists and postmodernists over worlding voices grounded in indigenous experience and local histories. This is especially so in the second part of the book that deals with postwar urbanism, as the cities found themselves caught in the Global South between East and West. I find it disconcerting that my own native Singapore is hung by Watson on Rem Koolhaas' hook, supposedly suspended by Asian authoritarianism and inscrutability (101), the old tropes of Oriental despotism. On the other hand, Watson reduces prominent local architect and cultural theorist William Lim to a supposedly factual statement on the squalid slums that filled the immediate postwar landscape of Singapore (102). We are back to Fanon's crouching native villages, but now with a Koolhaas Orientalist gloss.

This blind spot is not limited to the critique of urbanism. In the second chapter of part 2, on interiority and the woman as trace Watson cites Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the nationalist inner spirituality against the materiality of the public sphere (136). This is however quickly forgotten as Watson turns to the Frankfurt School to discuss how woman disappearing into the home functioned as a disavowal of the urban relations of production taking root outside (141). There is no sanctuary in the New Asian City, except perhaps in the fictional text itself.

Part 3, which Watson breaks into three chapters on the urban logics of capital as captured in poetry for Singapore, cinema for Taipei, and the novel for Seoul, is arguably the best part of the book. But even here, in the sanctuary of texts, the urban asserts its hegemonic sway only to end in capitalist nihilism. Each city's dictator is counterpoised to ambivalent fictions and reduced to a psychoanalytic theme. Singapore is the orphaned technocratic utopia of progress and repression; Taipei is the dislocated space of mobility fantasies failing to escape from China; Seoul is the traumatized, ravaged landscape

seeking democratic redemption and unification. In the final analysis, the city disappears into the literary forms, the specificity of which Watson fails to explain. The New Asian City turns out to be neither new, nor Asian, nor a city.

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**ASEAN AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF EAST ASIA.**  
*Routledge Security in Asia Pacific Series, 17. Edited by Ralf Emmers. London; New York: Routledge, 2011. xiii, 230 pp. (Illus.) US\$140.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-61434-4.*

So far the theory of regional security has drawn heavily on European experience. Yet East Asia, too, can contribute to our understanding of the security of regions. This is why the book under review is an exceptionally interesting one.

The book starts on the level of nation-states. Christopher B. Roberts claims in his chapter that state weakness, most notably in Myanmar, spills over to regional affairs. It diverts resources away from ASEAN cooperation and damages the region's image. Furthermore, in order to tackle domestic legitimacy problems, states might divert popular anger against regional targets.

A more optimistic picture of ASEAN is drawn by Mely Caballero-Anthony, who focuses on non-traditional security cooperation. While acknowledging problems with regional pooling of sovereignty, the chapter sees some prospect in the ASEAN political security community, with justice, democracy and harmonious environment as common core values of states and non-state actors of non-traditional security.

The ASEAN integration strategy is put to the test in the chapter by Allan Collins, who looks at ASEAN's institutions and their ability to respond to the dilemma of HIV/AIDS. The test is functional (measuring how the system delivers outputs) rather than relational (how it creates trust, common world views). The choice between functional and relational is one of the themes that is discussed in most of the chapters of this book.

Concerning ASEAN's contribution to broader regional security cooperation, Herman Kraft analyzes the mutual constitution of ASEAN East Asian regional policies and regional identities. Kraft claims that ASEAN's security activism in East Asia can be understood best as an effort to sustain ASEAN identification as the leader of East Asian security institutionalization.

The chapter by Takeshi Yusawa presents a highly critical argument according to which the ASEAN culture of non-implementation of common decision, rules of non-committing decision-making and the self-restraint related to agenda building have divided East Asia into activist powers (Japan, US and Australia) and reserved powers (China and most of ASEAN). Instead of socializing East Asian reserved powers into an approach less hostile