Introduction: Seeing through the City

In 1922, the Edinburgh Geographic Institute published a new edition of the *Times Atlas of the World.* Vivid colours portrayed old empires, new empires, and burgeoning nation-states in the wake of the First World War. The political map of Asia featured a blush of British imperial red crossing Afghanistan, India, and Malaya. Purple enveloped Korea as part of the Japanese empire. A lemon-yellow China occupied its centre, connected in colour to an independent Siam, which sat nestled between British Burma and French Indochina. A distinctive new Turkey jutted towards the map’s top left corner, while Java, the last stronghold of the Dutch maritime empire, dipped below its frame. On closer inspection of the bottom half of the map, where the sea appears in faded blue, one finds a constellation of lines tracking distances, marked in nautical miles, from Aden to Zanzibar and Bombay, from Colombo to Rangoon and Penang, from Singapore to Bangkok and Saigon, from Manila to Hong Kong and Shanghai, and from Yokohama to Vancouver and San Francisco. Snaking black rail lines linked ports to hinterlands, and cities to each other across porous borders. The plotting of these routes signalled an inter-connected web of mobility and exchange, linking Asia’s busiest ports.

These lines depict a world in motion, in which port-cities were nodes of commerce, communication, and power. Old European empires had invested in them, making them prizes that a rising new Japanese empire sought to claim. By the 1920s, they were dynamic environments in which Asians could re-imagine the world. The drawing of new borders as well as the speed of travel and communication inaugurated radical mental shifts. Port-cities were hotbeds for religious reformers, aspiring political leaders, new literati, and a rising middle class. News of the Philippine Revolution of 1898, the Chinese Revolution of 1911, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 inspired Asian nationalists and socialists to join forces against European colonial rule. The Khilafat movement of 1920 led Muslims to see themselves as part of transnational Islamic *umma,* as Malay,

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1 This map is available at www.cambridge.org/Cities_in_Motion
Sumatran, and Javanese students formed new regional communities in Cairo. Martial ideas of race in Europe and the colonial world existed alongside calls for world brotherhood. Asian anarchists and communists saw the city as a site of economic disparity, while Asian capitalists saw opportunity and social mobility. Women, for the first time, joined international movements and seized new educational and professional opportunities, while the modern girl emerged as a global phenomenon in fashion, advertising, and film. Gramophone companies, jazz musicians, cinema magnates, and entertainers moved through Asia, introducing technologies, sounds, and images shared at a global level.

While movement, migration, and bustling cities characterize this period, the story of twentieth-century Asia has been dominated by the rise of the nation-state. Upon inheriting the state from departing colonial powers, Asia’s post-colonial political leaders wove narratives of the greatness of past civilizations, while elevating the importance of race, religion, and language as fundamental social bonds. School textbooks focus on revolutionary wars and key nationalist elites. Scholarly accounts of the period, born largely out of regional studies departments created during the Cold War, dwelled on the emergence of distinct ethnic and religious identities. Recently, historians have begun to focus on gender and notions of ‘popular’ nationalism; while illuminating, these continue to be confined within particular country histories. This book widens the lens, adopting three inter-connected cities rather than the nation as a frame of reference. It focuses on the urban sphere as an environment that was simultaneously modern and multi-ethnic. Rather than privilege any one ethnic community or nation-state, I locate the emergence of a nascent and cosmopolitan civil society in Asia in its multi-ethnic port-cities.

Four themes run through this book: global and regional connection, the city as a cosmopolitan site, the rise of a self-consciously progressive middle class, and the cultivation and prominence of youth in modern civic life. The port-city was a site of encounters and tensions between the local and the global, between various ethnicities and religions, between authoritarian rulers and a critical public, and between the young and the old. Colonial-era port-cities were fraught with racial hierarchies and economic inequality, yet they were also incubators of modern sensibilities open to new ideas of political and social change, from democratic government to women’s rights. These cosmopolitan histories have been buried...
in acts of post-colonial forgetting and the creation of ethno-centred national narratives; yet they nonetheless left substantial legacies for cultural pluralism and activism still present in these cities today.

**A World of Connections**

While sociologists see ‘global cities’ as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, associated with accelerated flows of capital, information, and migrant labour accompanying global integration, historians have traced these processes much further back in time. Port-cities and market-oriented city-states, antecedents to today’s global cities, knitted together the world’s regions and acted as key nodes within social and commercial networks. The cosmopolitan trading ports of maritime Asia have deep roots, and are part of the history of globalisation. The area known to Chinese merchants as the ‘Southern Ocean’, the Nanyang, and to Indian, Malay, and Arab merchants as the ‘land below the winds’ has acted as a gateway for Asian and global commerce for over a millennium.3 From spices and copper in the early modern age to rice, teak, and tin in the colonial era, the region’s wealth of natural resources and long coastlines have long provided a stimulus for maritime trade. Historians often compare Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean – an interconnected zone of commerce, unified by the sea.4 Some argue that it is Southeast Asia’s long-standing involvement in trade and receptivity to the outside world that has enabled many ordinary Southeast Asians to develop ‘modern’ sensibilities, open to the cultural appropriation of new trends.5

In his seminal two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Anthony Reid points to the vibrant, adaptable trading cultures of early modern Southeast Asia to highlight its central role in a world linked through maritime trade. This world suffered a contraction in the seventeenth century and was further disrupted by the entry of European trading powers, backed by weapons and gunships. Local rulers’ loss of control over trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth century resulted, according to

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Reid, in the demise of cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia’s port-cities and a shift of direction that was not to be reversed until nationalists were able to wrest control of the state in the revolutionary and post-colonial era of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet during the colonial era, regional and global connections, urbanism, and cosmopolitanism were revived and transformed. Empires linked vast swathes of territory, and produced accelerated amounts of traffic in various forms. The late nineteenth century was a watershed for new connections to emerge, following the opening of the Suez Canal, when the flow of capital, goods, and ideas in, through, and out of Asia grew exponentially. This was a turbulent age, in which Southeast Asian port-cities, some of the most ethnically diverse urban centres in the world, experienced unprecedented levels of economic and demographic growth. Urban geographers attribute the spectacular levels of growth in these cities to their status as ‘nerve centres for colonial exploitation’ and gateway cities that channelled primary commodities – rice, tin, rubber, and sugar – from their hinterlands into the global economy. European commercial firms grew rich on these resources, and adopted ideas of ‘white prestige’ and racial superiority to justify their right to rule.

While port-cities were, indeed, vectors for the exploitation of raw materials, they also produced dynamic societies transformed by demographic growth, migration, and investment. By looking through the lens of multiple port-cities, we see how global networks and channels of influence ran through the region simultaneously. Innovations in sanitation, public transportation, and municipal governance changed the shape of modern urban life. Sojourning migrants began to put down roots, building families in expanding cities. The growing ease of travel and the acceleration of communications served as a channel for ideas and the emergence of a small professional, intellectual, and creative class. In the 1920s and 1930s, young men and women flocked to cities for education and social mobility. Port-cities were entry-points for books, newspapers, films, and other sources of information. Tracts espousing communist revolution, pan-Asianism, and religious reform circulated through underground networks and via the speeches of travelling pundits in public halls and city streets. Reuters wires and discerning Asian newspaper proprietors and editors channelled news of social and political movements occurring elsewhere in the world. Film magnates brought cinema from Hollywood, Bombay,
Hong Kong, and Shanghai to Asian audiences, while jazz, Tamil and Hindi drama music, and Chinese opera circulated through the radio and the recordings of the Gramophone Company, inspiring Asian artists to create new forms of popular culture that combined both local and global influences.

Competing models of modern life emerged from all over the world to challenge existing structures of power within colonial society, ridden with ossified racial hierarchies. Western influences contested each other, with the popular ascendency of what Henry Luce called ‘the American century’ providing a new model of the West for Asian audiences. Democratic ideals and the mass consumer culture of the jazz-age side lined the image of colonial empires, weakened, and weathered after the First World War. News of the proceedings in Paris in 1919 was transmitted over news wires to cities all over the word, with the Wilsonian ideal of self-determination and the League of Nations providing the promise of an international fellowship of free states. While ideas of internationalism continued to resonate, visions of pan-Asianism and socialist brotherhood emerged as the League’s promises proved futile to the colonial world, generating a new sense of imaginary, non-imperial futures. Moscow offered the promise of a truly international brotherhood, while Ireland’s fight for independence provided a blueprint for colonial states under British rule. Meanwhile, industrialising Japan, revolutionary China, Russia, India, Turkey, and Egypt provided non-Western models of independent, modern, and politically dynamic societies. These events, reported in local newspapers, made an impact not only the mentalities of emerging political elites, but everyday urbanites – from doctors, journalists, and teachers to aspiring musicians, cinema-goers, schoolchildren, and modern girls. They provided a new framework for comparison to that of metropole and colony, creating fresh vocabularies for Asians to challenge the colonial order and view their place on an international stage. Outside influences and ideas came from all over the world, and were turned over, debated, appropriated, hybridised, and made relevant to local audiences.

New rail and communications links enabled states to exert control over the hinterland and centralise their administrations, but they also forged connections to the world and to the rest of the region. A regional rail

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8 For an excellent account of America’s influence in the region during the interwar period, see Anne L. Forster, Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).


network connected Bangkok, Penang, and Singapore, facilitating inter-city travel and accelerating Siam’s engagement with Europe and the Indian Ocean world. Independent learned societies in the region, formed of both Asian and Western intellectuals, wrote to each other and exchanged publications, and were the first to generate the term ‘South-east Asia’. Clubs and associations generated new regional networks as well as publications calling for colonialism’s demise and new visions of multi-ethnic citizenship. Intensified connections produced new modes of belonging not simply to empires and ethnicities, but to cities, to civic cultures, to multi-ethnic nations, to new regional and transnational communities, and to a world becoming increasingly, perceptibly smaller.

The Depression highlighted how closely Southeast Asian societies were integrated into the global economy. As Wall Street collapsed at the end of the twenties, Americans stopped producing automobiles and global sources of credit dried up. By the 1930s, Southeast Asian economies suffered from an oversupply of rubber and sugar, while the rice frontiers of the Mekong, Irrawaddy, and Chao Praya river deltas came to a close. Indian Chettiar migrants, having lost access to sources of outside credit, were forced to foreclose on loans to Burmese agricultural workers, halting the flow of capital that had helped open up the delta and breeding seething discontent in the countryside. Many urbanites were able to make do as commodity prices fell, yet the Depression also tested race relations. Colonial authorities and commercial industries divided workers along ethnic lines during periods of social unrest and imposed new immigration restrictions, and unemployed native workers lashed out at new, migrant communities who worked for lower wages. Long-standing, affluent migrants, such as the Chinese, were forced to seek new sources of revenue as tax-farms on opium and gambling were shut down. It was a difficult time for Southeast Asian economies, but it was also one in which government intervention and investment into industry grew – due in large part to the Asian commercial class – and urban economies remained relatively robust. In spite of the economic and racial tensions exacerbated by the Depression, particularly in the countryside, Asian urbanites continued to look outwards as well as in, forming connections and seeking new sources of social change.

The Cosmopolitan City

Cosmopolitanism is an elusive but exceedingly popular term among scholars, one that resonates with the consciousness of living within an

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increasingly integrated world. Around the turn of this millennium, scholars of international law and ethical philosophy reclaimed Kant’s Enlightenment vision of a global fellowship of nations, or a ‘global civil society’, as a cosmopolitan ideal. Literary critics, sociologists, and anthropologists employ cosmopolitanism as an analytical category which destabilises rigid cultural identities within a globalised world, punctured by the movements of exiles, migrants, and travellers. In the words of historical geographer Caroline Cartier, cosmopolitanism is a useful, ‘humanist counterpart to globalization’. Discerning scholars have made a distinction between cosmopolitanism as an abstract moral ideal and cosmopolitan practices, or ‘actually existing cosmopolitanism’. The notion of cosmopolitanism as a practice, and more specifically a process, is adopted in this book. A number of historians have latched onto cosmopolitanism as a mode of describing ‘ways of being’ in the world that move away from the stark, anachronistic boundaries of nations to examine cross-border flows, hybrid identities, and modes of affiliation that cross-cut communal divides. The port-city, in particular, is an appropriate site to ground cosmopolitanism, given its status as a node within global commercial, migratory, and intellectual flows, and its ability to attract inhabitants of diverse backgrounds. Alexandria, Tangiers, and other port-cities of the Mediterranean have long been seen as cosmopolitan arenas, where people adopted and adapted cultural forms from other confessional groups.


At the eastern end of the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia’s port-cities have been just as diverse, though the extent to which their inhabitants interacted and emulated each other is still up for debate. Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok – though late eighteenth-century creations – emerged within a historical lineage of Southeast Asian port-cities exposed to high degrees of cross-cultural interaction and long-distance trade. A walk through their waterfront landscapes, markets, and built environments is a visible testament to long-standing communities of multiple faiths. Chinese, Indians, Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, Hadrami Arabs, and other regional trading communities from the Mons of Burma to Javanese and Bugis traders constituted a powerful presence throughout these cities. Western observers tended to describe Asian port-cities as ‘mosaics’ and ‘kaleidoscopes’, as ‘colourful’ but also fragmented spaces. The influential colonial scholar J.S. Furnivall argued that these distinct communities were ‘plural societies’ that were self-segregating, engaging with each other only in the realm of commerce. Historical geographers have continued to turn to Furnivall to describe colonial port-cites like Singapore, where diverse communities lived essentially separate lives, interacting only in the marketplace. The spatial geography of colonial cities such as Singapore as well as Rangoon, with its European cantonment areas, is a testament to this, as are distinct ethnic enclaves of native, Chinese, and Indian communities.

In Southeast Asia, colonial-era port-cities were visibly cosmopolitan in that they accommodated a host of diverse ethnic and religious groups, but they were also sites of racial tension and conflict. Europeans created stark racial hierarchies, spatial divisions, and, within colonial settings, erected seemingly insurmountable barriers to positions of power. Migrant communities were seen to occupy privileged economic positions, and were sometimes viewed as isolated communities who kept to their own kinship groups. But from street markets and festivals to buildings and infrastructure, these cities were built on migrant labour and economic activity derived from trade. Most migrants were not at the top of the social ladder, but often worked in the lowest-paid and most demanding jobs that locals refused to take – as street-sweepers, rickshaw runners, petty traders, and dockworkers. At times of economic crisis, as in 1930s Rangoon after the Depression, racial tensions erupted into conflict when many Burmese were traders and artisans were forced to compete with menial Indian (and particularly Indian Muslim) labour.

The particular context of colonial modernity, while creating social divisions, also produced new kinds of affiliation. Some of these were
‘national’ in character, reaching out to a wider ethno-linguistic community to restore a sense of cultural pride. Many of the promoters of nationalism were themselves cosmopolitans — they went to multi-ethnic schools and universities within towns and cities, they studied foreign languages and ideas, and they drew on various models of political change from elsewhere. But cultural nationalism was one mode of affiliation among many new kinds of identities emerging within the context of the cosmopolitan city. Popular theatre, entertainment parks, and street parades created a spectacle of a hybrid, multi-ethnic social landscape. What Sumit Mandal calls ‘trans-ethnic solidarities’ also emerged among the urban poor in colonial settings; oral history interviews point to evidence that in 1930s Penang, low-income communities relied heavily on their neighbours as a social safety net regardless of race; even among the racial conflicts of 1930s Burma, intellectuals accused the colonial government of inciting divisions between communities, advocating workers’ solidarity.18

Nowhere was cross-cultural interaction more apparent than among an aspiring, urban middle class. In colonial cities, the ‘Colour Bar’ limited Asians from attaining high positions in the colonial civil service, but experiences of exclusion also served to unite Asian professionals. The 1920s and 1930s were a period of political and social change: a small number of Asians began to enter the ranks as magistrates, legislators, parliamentarians, lecturers, and higher-level civil servants. Some Europeans stepped out of, or avoided, the walls of the colonial clubhouse to fraternise with Asians in underground associations and other semi-private venues. Furnivall himself was a member of a learned society which accommodated European, Burmese, as well as Chinese members. While some migrants did remain in their own self-enclosed communities, others participated in civic life with local counterparts. Alongside communal and religious associations, traditionally seen as the hotbeds for ethnic nationalism, emerged non-political organisations of minority communities, as well as a host of multi-ethnic secret societies, labour unions, women’s groups, philanthropic and professional associations, sports teams, and literary societies. These associations testify to the emergence of a ‘civic’ rather than an ‘ethnic nationalism’ within cities, one which cross-cut ethnic lines.

The vernacular press was a harbinger of nationalism rooted in linguistic solidarity, as Benedict Anderson has argued, yet Asian port-cities also witnessed the emergence of presses in various languages, and thus multiple ‘imagined communities’ existing in the same civic space. In cities like Penang, Singapore, Rangoon, Bangkok, and Manila, which witnessed a host of newspapers emerging in a number of Asian languages, a new kind of English press emerged, which in many cases challenged English-language papers written by and for European elites. These new newspapers were financed and staffed by a diverse group of multilingual Asians and covered multiple dimensions of urban life, while critiquing the policies of the colonial and, in Bangkok’s case, absolute state. Mission schools, schools started by long-established migrant communities, private experiments in bilingual education, and universities at home and abroad brought different communities together to learn in pluralist educational environments. These served as platforms for Asian urbanites to challenge rigid hierarchies, assert new and often hybrid visions of cultural identity, and interact among diverse ethnic groups.

For many urban-dwellers at this time, personal experiences of migration, sociability, exposure to books and ideas, new educational environments, popular culture, and trade and consumption entailed encounters with foreign ideas and ways of life, and instilled a sense of an awareness of the wider world, one that occurred simultaneously with a search for cultural authenticity. Apart from cross-cultural interaction, cosmopolitanism also entailed a process of becoming self-consciously ‘modern’. What Frederick Cooper calls the ‘politics of engagement’ within colonial situations often required, on the part of Asian actors, mentalities that were cosmopolitan, reflecting a willingness to take on new ideas and employ them to make political claims.

In this book, the city provides the arena for examining different layers of cross-cultural interaction, challenging historical narratives of the period that focus on communal division. Here, cosmopolitanism is not an abstract ideal, nor a condition of migration or exile, but a process of negotiation between diverse communities participating in a dynamic and shared public sphere. I look at three different aspects of cosmopolitanism: the interactions between various ethnic groups within the domain of the city; the appropriation, integration, and hybridisation of various cultural influences to produce new visions of modernity; and a commitment to social improvement that often cross-cut communal lines. As a site populated by migrants, continually exposed to new ideas