Cities in Motion

In the 1920s and 1930s, the port-cities of Southeast Asia were staging grounds for diverse groups of ordinary citizens to experiment with modernity, as a rising Japan and the growth of American capitalism challenged the predominance of European empires after the First World War. Both migrants and locals played a pivotal role in shaping civic culture and the emergence of the modern woman. Moving away from a nationalist reading of the period, Su Lin Lewis explores layers of cross-cultural interaction in various spheres: education, popular culture and the emergence of the modern woman. While the book focuses on Penang, Rangoon and Bangkok – three cities born amidst British expansion in the region – it explores connected experiences across Asia and in Asian intellectual enclaves in Europe. Cosmopolitan sensibilities were severely tested in the era of post-colonial nationalism, but are undergoing a resurgence in Southeast Asia’s civil society and creative class today.

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Asian Connections

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Asian Connections is a major series of ambitious works that look beyond the traditional templates of area, regional or national studies to consider the trans-regional phenomena which have connected and influenced various parts of Asia through time. The series will focus on empirically grounded work exploring circulations, connections, convergences and comparisons within and beyond Asia. Themes of particular interest include transport and communication, mercantile networks and trade, migration, religious connections, urban history, environmental history, oceanic history, the spread of language and ideas, and political alliances. The series aims to build new ways of understanding fundamental concepts, such as modernity, pluralism, or capitalism, from the experience of Asian societies. It is hoped that this conceptual framework will facilitate connections across fields of knowledge and bridge historical perspectives with contemporary concerns.
Cities in Motion

*Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940*

Su Lin Lewis

University of Bristol
For Ken and Wendy
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Michel de Certeau’s observation that ‘history begins on the ground level, with footsteps’ was true of this book. It began with walks through the historical cores of three cities where Chinese temples, mosques, Hindu shrines, Sikh gurdwaras, synagogues, and Armenian and Portuguese churches exist alongside each other amidst crumbling neo-classical and Art Deco architecture. These cities were built on tangled roots, from the movements of migrants to the trappings of colonial modernity. When I came across yellowed broadsheets from 1930s Penang filled with lively debates among multi-ethnic readers, an early fascination with the architectural ghosts of cosmopolitan pasts began moulding itself into a work of social history. Stemming from those early encounters, this book is an attempt to understand how people of diverse backgrounds tried to shape a common life.

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