

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.

Su Lin Lewis is Lecturer in Modern Global History at the University of Bristol.

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

Su Lin Lewis
University of Bristol



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[More Information](#)

For Ken and Wendy

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of maps</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Introduction: Seeing through the City	1
1 Maritime Commerce, Old Rivalries, and the Birth of Three Cities	27
2 Asian Port-Cities in a Turbulent Age	47
3 Cosmopolitan Publics in Divided Societies	95
4 Newsprint, Wires, and the Reading Public	138
5 Playgrounds, Classrooms, and Politics	181
6 Gramophones, Cinema Halls, and Bobbed Hair	227
Epilogue: Cosmopolitan Legacies	264
<i>Bibliography</i>	273
<i>Index</i>	300

Figures

1	Shwe-ta-lay cartoon, <i>c.</i> 1930s. Reproduced with the permission of the Ludu family.	page 57
2	Postcard of Weld Quay, Penang. Wade Collection.	59
3 and 4	Photo essay on Rangoon from <i>Asia</i> magazine, 1933. © The British Library Board.	60
5	Postcard of Burmese girls on the tram in 1906. Author's collection.	81
6	City Hall, Rangoon. Photograph by the author.	90
7	The Li Ti Miao 'Healing Temple'. Photograph by the author.	105
8	The Muslim Free Hospital in Rangoon. Photograph by the author.	106
9	'A Miniature League of Nations' in <i>The Straits Echo</i> , 1937.	126
10	<i>Bangkok Daily Mail</i> editorial staff. © The British Library Board.	155
11	<i>The Straits Echo's</i> Gracie Khoo.	162
12	<i>The Straits Echo's</i> Jane Sez.	162
13	<i>The Straits Echo's</i> Katie Lee.	162
14	<i>The Straits Echo's</i> Vivian Goh.	162
15	Cover of <i>The Eastern Courier</i> featuring Sun Yat-Sen.	172
16	Thai medical students at the University of Manila, 1930. <i>Bangkok Daily Mail</i> .	212
17	Residents of Inya Hall, University of Rangoon, 1936. Ludu family collection.	214
18	Khin Myo Chit in the offices of the Toetatye publishing house, 1937. Khin Myo Chit family collection.	220
19	Rangoon Student Union, 1936.	223
20	Columbia record of Burmese and Indian music. Pansodan Archive, with permission from Aung Soe Min.	233
21	HMV record of Burmese music. Pansodan Archive, with permission from Aung Soe Min.	234

Maps

1	Asian port-cities in the 1920s.	19
2	Popham map of George Town. Andrew Barber collection.	51
3	Map of Bangkok, 1910. Cambridge University Map Collection.	53
4	Map of Rangoon, c. 1930.	84
5	Map of George Town, 1933. SN Khoo collection.	87

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