

1 Introduction: Asia's Urban History and the Concept of the Modern City

Throughout much of human history, the largest, wealthiest, and most technologically advanced cities in the world could be found in Asia. Asian cities have taken many shapes over the centuries, including as centers of administration, pilgrimage, and trade. Cities were integrated in various ways into broader politics and economic networks. Poets, historians, and travel writers celebrated their respective attractions. Political theorists and philosophers incorporated the phenomenon of cities into governance frameworks and idealizations of locality, world, and universe that evolved over time.

Beginning two centuries ago, Asian communities encountered a new and powerful conception of cities that had developed primarily in the context of Western Europe's industrialization and then spread around the world. The emergence of the concept of the "modern city" resulted from worldwide developments in the early modern period. In the decades around 1900, though, the modern city was presented by its advocates as a special cultural product of a putative "Western civilization." European, American, and Japanese imperialism promoted the spread of the new ideas about cities and urban governance in those decades, but new communication networks also allowed Asian activists to access such information outside of the direct control of imperialist authorities. Both "modern" and "city" being notoriously hard to define, what exactly constituted the modern city was always debated; nevertheless, as we shall see, it was a powerful concept linked to awe-inspiring technologies that transformed social and political life. In her study of Japanese "urban-centrism" in the 1920s and 1930s, Louise Young (2013: 18) writes that "the idea that modern cities possessed a kind of manifest destiny to expand their territory, power, and resources" was common in Japan and throughout the world during those decades. Alternative visions arose from within and beyond Asia to challenge urban-centrism to some effect, but, particularly in postcolonial Asian states, new governments often adopted development policies that perpetuated it.

This Element examines how the new conception of the modern city was received and contested, actualized, and transformed in various parts of Asia over time, focusing primarily on the past 150 years. I argue that this period witnessed both an unprecedented obsession with cities and the growth of city-centered politics in Asia. During the decades before and after 1900, entrepreneurs and activists took advantage of the new significance of the city as an economic engine, cultural center, and site of governance to pursue a wide variety of goals. Thus, the concept of the modern city played an important role in Asia during a tumultuous era, despite much critical commentary on the

ideals associated with it. By the 1940s, the city yielded its political centrality to the nation, as decolonization efforts gained ground and new nations emerged from the ashes of WWII. Still, modern cities remained an important marker of national achievement during the Cold War. In recent decades, cities have continued to play a central role in economic and cultural affairs in Asia, but the concept of the modern city has transformed markedly, a process that continues today. Asian ideas about urban governance and visions of future cities are significantly shaping that transformation.

As is the case with cities throughout the world, ordinary people did almost all the work of building and maintaining Asia's cities, in addition to shaping their cultures in many ways. This Element focuses primarily on how cities were conceptualized among elites who claimed authority over them or who led movements critical of them. As a result, the experiences of the majority of cities' inhabitants are but lightly touched on. It is to be hoped that future contributions to this series will spotlight popular conceptions of the city and daily life in modern Asian cities.

1.1 The Nineteenth-Century Concept of the Modern City

In the late nineteenth century, writes historian Daniel Rodgers (1998: 212), “the city stood at the vital center of transatlantic progressive imaginations.” In Western Europe and the United States, industrialization had led to rapid urbanization and increasing concern about disease, poor housing conditions, social fragmentation, and crime. In addition to jeopardizing human health and safety, industrialization enriched cities. Wealth concentrated in the hands of a minority, but city governments gradually learned how to pry some of it out of those hands to improve the urban environment for a broader public. Industrialists and merchants appreciated the benefits of better transportation infrastructure to facilitate the movement of goods, and municipal governments gained the authority to manage improvements in that area. Health crises, property crime, and labor unrest led to new experiments in municipal policing and sanitation. Gradually, municipal governments took on more and more urban services, with activists calling for the municipal provision of water, gas, electricity, schools, and hospitals and for traffic control and enforcement of regulations on buildings and commerce. Activists outside government pressured the officials and merchants to improve urban conditions and organized associations to promote reforms and offer public services.

Technological marvels – steam-powered factories, gas illumination, and steel-framed multistoried buildings – revolutionized urban life. Simultaneously, the money and goods flowing through cities created a fertile environment for public

culture. Newspapers and social clubs proliferated. Museums and public gardens and music halls appeared. Entrepreneurial innovation nourished a new urban consumer culture that almost everyone could participate in to some extent.

The industrializing cities of Western Europe and North America, with their expanding municipal administrations and associational life, engaged in intercity competition to earn recognition as culturally advanced and well managed – considered key criteria for being “modern,” that amorphous but desirable quality. They also inspired the formulation of a body of social theory about the role of cities in human history. Historians pointed to the emergence of “burgher” (German for “merchant”) society in late medieval European cities as the beginning of the end of the feudal era. Burghers, also known as the bourgeoisie, demanded urban self-rule, complete with a legal system that protected property rights. Thus, liberal theorists saw cities as the source of civilization: the cradle of the Enlightenment, where ancient Greek democratic values had been revived and could best grow. More radical thinkers, such as Karl Marx, conceived of cities – the headquarters of the bourgeoisie – as sites of class struggle, where workers would one day seize power from their capitalist exploiters.

Regardless of ideological bent, late nineteenth-century European and American social theorists and activists fixated on technologically advanced, firmly regulated cities as centers of change and progress. This is the conception of the modern city that made its way around the world in the decades before and after 1900. Modern cities were thought to reflect the great achievements of progressive “Western civilization.” Writing in the early twentieth century and without having set foot in Asia, sociologist Max Weber provided a sophisticated theoretical framework to support the judgment that Asian cities lacked the rational organization and progressive dynamism commonly associated with modern cities (Rowe 1984; Sunar 2019).

Thus, many European and Americans of the time thought of their own cities as distinctive. They were modern, while cities in the rest of the world were not. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European travelers had been impressed by the size and wealth of many Asian cities. In the nineteenth century, though, reports tended to stress disorder, lethargy, and squalor as defining characteristics of Asian cities. Nineteenth-century travel accounts published in English often note that Asian cities seemed like “big villages.” By then, many of the port cities of South and Southeast Asia had been taken over or destroyed by imperialist European expansion, and the two great East and South Asian empires, the Qing and the Mughal, were in decline for a whole host of reasons. More important than indigenous Asian developments for understanding the power of the concept of the modern city, though, was the growth of Western

European economic and political dominance, which gave the concept a cultural authority that made it both highly attractive and difficult to dispute (although, as we shall see, some prominent Asian activists did challenge it). In the history of the concept of the modern city in Asia, we can trace the rise and fall of a world view.

1.2 Why Asia? What Asia?

The modern city concept circled the globe in the decades around 1900. A global history of its reception and transformation could and ought to be written, but to do so within the constraints of a Cambridge Element would be a difficult challenge. Globalized history has become a popular genre before most Anglophone readers have been able to acquire even rudimentary familiarity with local histories in much of the world and gain appreciation of the rich texture of community life outside of Western Europe and the United States.

The writer Pankaj Mishra, while not focused on cities, illustrates the value of highlighting the human scale in world history. In *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* (2012), he shows how prominent Asian thinkers – including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Liang Qichao, and Rabindranath Tagore – reformulated local cultural knowledge and helped other Asians imagine how to challenge Euro-American conceptual frameworks in the twentieth century. Mishra’s “Asia” includes the areas encompassed by the Qing, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. This Element adopts a more compact geographical conception of Asia, extending from Japan and Korea in the east, through Southeast Asia and China, to the territory of British India (today’s Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan).

Like any attempt to divide the world up for analytical purposes, this Japan-to-Pakistan conception of Asia has its limitations. As Lewis and Wigen (1997: 194) point out in their call for “more supple and sophisticated frameworks” to capture “the plasticity of spatial forms and the plurality of spatial identities,” all analytical efforts to slice and dice the world are political. The geographical framework of this Element has been shaped by the history of area studies in the United States – my own academic training was done within the institutional environment established there in the wake of WWII, when the Association for Asian Studies claimed a mandate to promote knowledge of what came to be called East, Southeast, and South Asia while paying some attention to Central Asia. Although there were many obvious strong connections over the centuries between South Asia, Southwest Asia (the Middle East), and Eastern and Northern Africa, they have been de-emphasized within Asian studies scholarly communities until recently. The rise of the concept of the Global South

(see Section 6.2) is gradually changing that older area studies perspective, and no doubt more comparative urban histories will adopt that framework in the future (Parnell and Oldfield 2014).

Despite the limitations of this Element's geographic framework, I do want to emphasize how enjoyable and enlightening it has been to widen my own China-focused urban history expertise and bring it into conversation with the work of specialists in contiguous regions. Scholars such as Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong have noted the usefulness of working within the framework of Asia even in the absence of a clear definition (Roy and Ong 2011: preface; see also Chen and Chua 2007). Citing Gayatri Spivak's *Other Asias*, Jini Kim Watson (2011: 254) notes that "the loose signifier of 'Asia' . . . holds potential as both a regionalizing and pluralizing concept that will undo the bilateralism between the West and the non-West." I hope that my efforts along these lines will stimulate comparison and critique among urban historians with expertise in other areas of the world – particularly in other parts of Asia and in Africa and Latin America.

As this Element will show, the aspiration to build modern cities and the imperative to critique them brought Asian people together across national borders. Colonial cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Bombay impressed Chinese and Japanese observers in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Mao Zedong attracted followers across Asia and beyond as they attacked the dominance of the modern city concept and articulated alternative visions of social progress. In the twenty-first century, Asian organizations and activists are increasingly shaping the global conversation about cities.

2 Colonial Cities in the Age of European Imperialism

Ports constructed in many Asian harbors link the land and the sea in what historians call the Indian Ocean world. Janet Abu-Lughod (1991) traces the flourishing of commerce across that world that coincided with the rise and decline of the Mongol empire. By the late seventeenth century, two powerful empires, the Qing and the Mughal, had claimed control of huge expanses of continental Asia, and the booming economies they presided over stimulated trade even more. Their political capitals, Beijing and Delhi, did not themselves face the sea, but commercial entrepôts proliferated within and outside their territory, on the coasts of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Some of these port cities had very long histories, while others were more ephemeral. Guangzhou in southern China supplied porcelain, silk, and tea to the rest of maritime Asia for more than 1,500 years (Fong 2014). Artisans produced

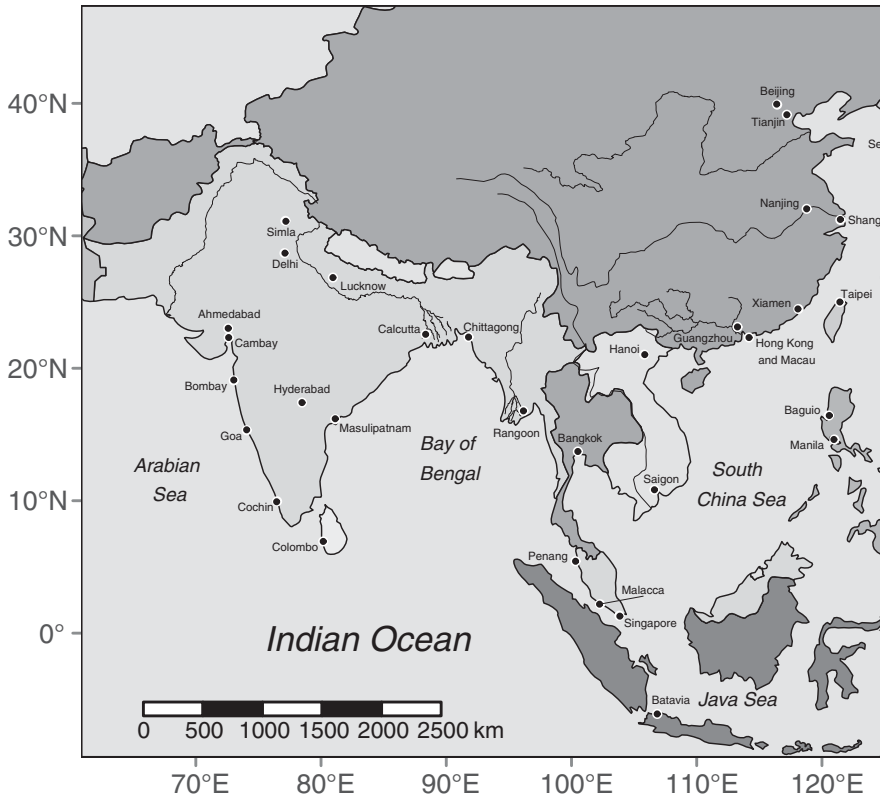
jewelry and other goods in Cambay in the northwestern Indian region of Gujarat, a center for trade with the Arab and Persian worlds from around 1000 CE until its decline in the seventeenth century. Chittagong in the Bay of Bengal and Masulipatnam on the Coromandel coast connected producers and consumers in those regions with their counterparts in Southeast Asia and beyond (Ray 2017). The communities that constituted port cities were constantly in flux, given the contingencies of trade and environmental constraints in the age of sail. In much of maritime Southeast Asia, port cities grew and declined rapidly, as harbors silted up and the political environment grew more or less welcoming (Blussé 2013).

In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean world, followed by the Spanish, Dutch, British, and French. Sophisticated ships and weaponry supported their ambitions to dominate trade and spread Christianity. A new chapter in Asian urban history opened as European powers established fortresses and then urban bases in the west and south of India and across Southeast Asia. By the nineteenth century, the British, Dutch, Spanish, and French controlled expansive colonies: British India and Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, the Spanish Philippines, and French Indochina. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the modern city concept was introduced in colonial capitals and spread within a context of political and economic inequality and racism. Still, many people in Asia found the concept useful for their own purposes.

2.1 Asian Port Cities and European Adventurers

The great transformation European colonization wrought in the relationship between cities and the wider world of maritime Asia is clearly illustrated in the history of the Straits of Malacca (the Straits). That waterway offered the easiest route between India and China (see Map 1). Its dominant city before the 1500s was Melaka. The city emerged around 1400 in the wake of the collapse of Srivijaya, a maritime empire that had dominated the region from its base in Sumatra. As documented by ShawnaKim Lowey-Ball (2015), the rulers of Melaka, who claimed descent from the Srivijaya royal family, made its port the center of intra-Asian trade with their openness to foreign people and ideas.

Admiral Zheng He's Ming treasure ships regularly awaited the changing of the monsoon winds in Melaka's port beginning in 1407. Melaka's second ruler adopted the Muslim title of sultan and encouraged Muslim traders and clerics to take up residence, although he may not himself have been a believer. Lowey-Ball argues that pre-1500 Melaka flourished as no Asian city-state had before, thanks to its growing multiethnic bureaucracy, tolerance for cultural diversity,



Map 1 Asian cities mentioned in Sections 2–4. Map designed by Collin O’Connor, Department of O

legal code to regulate conduct among strangers, and singular focus on trade. By 1500, some 150,000 people lived there. In 1511, however, the Portuguese conquest brought the Melaka experiment to an abrupt end.

The Portuguese romanized the city's name as Malacca. For a while, it continued to serve as a center of trade, part of a network of Portuguese-controlled Asian ports: Goa, Cochin, Colombo, Ternate, Macau, and so on (Subrahmanyam 1993). A fortress, churches, and monasteries were added to the cityscape, but trade fell off sharply as Portuguese discrimination against Muslim merchants and imposition of state monopolies lessened the city's attractions as an entrepôt. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch had helped the sultan of the nearby state of Johor, a descendent of the Melaka ruling house, to drive the Portuguese out of the city. Although the Sultan of Johor gave the Dutch control over Melaka, Dutch warships policed the Straits from their Asian headquarters in Batavia, on the northwestern coast of Java, and Melaka lost population and wealth.

In exchange for a defensive alliance against Siam, in 1786, the Malayan Sultan of Kedah had granted Britain the island of Penang, on the western approach to the Straits, on which they founded George Town (Figure 1). During the Napoleonic era (1798–1815), the British and French fought each other across the globe, everywhere with the assistance of local allies (Jasanoff 2005). Napoleon's defeat of the Netherlands in Europe led Britain to occupy Batavia, giving it control over the Straits in the early nineteenth century. The French defeat in 1815 allowed Britain to expand its presence in Asia; in the early 1820s, Britain gained sovereignty over Singapore via a treaty with the leaders of Johor. The British opened the port of Singapore to merchants of all countries, and it gradually supplanted Malacca as the regional trade center over several subsequent decades. The state of Johor provided Singapore what Malacca had lacked: a base for agricultural products, harvested by Chinese workers recruited by the state's Malay leaders (Barr 2019).

Anthony Reid notes that, in the early decades of European conquest, the new masters of Asia's port cities adopted many of the economic and social practices long present in places like Melaka, including rituals establishing social hierarchy and sumptuary rules to make hierarchy visible. Labor was secured by purchasing workers. Although Europeans referred to such people as "slaves," the difficulty of preventing them from running away or attacking their masters meant that European employers generally had to treat their "property" in ways that conformed to local custom. Gradually, however, as their power grew, European colonial authorities gained the "ability to impose a uniform legal system on their inhabitants" and began to dominate the social order (Reid 1999: 195–96). The growing use of stone and brick in constructing forts, churches,



Figure 1 Two early twentieth-century stereoscopic views of Penang. Top: *Penang, from Anchorage in the Harbor – Off the Malayan Peninsula, West* (1901). New York: Underwood & Underwood. Source: www.loc.gov/item/2020639372/. Bottom: *Loading Freight into Native Buffalo Carts at the Waterfront, Penang, Straits Settlement* (1907). Chicago: H.C. White. Source: www.loc.gov/item/2020639366/

official buildings, and residences indicated the wealth of the European city-builders and signaled their intent to maintain their dominance (Andaya 1999: 19). The British government of Singapore paid for its infrastructure and staff salaries by selling to “tax farmers” the right to tax opium and other commodities and services (Trocki 1990).

The names and histories of the European adventurers who conquered Asian territory have long been famous in Anglophone history. They include, among others: Jan Pieterszoon Coen, founder of Batavia on the island of Java; Robert Clive, who established Calcutta as the Asian headquarters of the British East

India Company; and Stamford Raffles of Singapore. All of them succeeded by taking advantage of rivalries between powerful local rulers, allying with one or the other, providing military and other assistance, and thereby establishing a foothold to build from. Their local allies adopted aspects of the culture of the outsiders, a phenomenon that had recurred throughout history, from early periods of Indian influence within Southeast Asian courts to the spread of Islam (de Casparis and Mabbett 1999). To some extent, the activities of Christian missionaries and European merchants in Asia fit old patterns.

The quality of European influence in early modern Southeast Asia, however, differed from that of earlier waves of cultural change because it was supported by strong states seeking military and economic dominance in an atmosphere of intense interstate competition. The Dutch and British governments chartered East Indies companies and gave them trade monopolies and the power to wage war to consolidate control over Asian territory. Still, although the Europeans were clearly military conquerors, they offered opportunities to ambitious Asians to take up positions within their regimes, and the urban and economic development they promoted appealed to many Asian entrepreneurs. In the case of the Straits colonial cities, Chinese and Indian businessmen and workers quickly outnumbered Malay and European residents, although Europeans set the rules and enforced them. The distinctive militaristic and developmentalist nature of European expansion into the Indian Ocean world is visible in the history of European-controlled Asian cities.

2.2 European Port Cities in Asia and Their Influence

Even before the modern city concept was introduced into European colonies in Asia in the late nineteenth century, certain features of urbanizing Europe's culture and social thought gained advocates among Asian intellectuals. Their promotion of these new ideals and practices helped legitimize colonial rule even as it called into being conservative opposition and newly articulated ideas of cultural identity. Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) is a striking example of such a figure in Indian history.

A native of Bengal, Rammohan Roy rebelled against parental expectations and sought out a broad education, including in the principles of European philosophy, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. His studies led him to conclude that his Brahmin family and other practitioners of what the British called “Hinduism” had distorted the wisdom of the ancient classics they claimed to revere. He praised British society for valuing intellectual inquiry and promoting literacy. After working as a translator for the British East India Company, Roy founded Bengali- and Persian-language newspapers in Calcutta in 1821