

# All at sea?

What is to be expected from an edited volume entitled: *Port Cities in Asia and Europe*? While the title gives away little about the content, the brief editorial Introduction is clear: The book is not on port cities in Asia and Europe in general; rather the processes of transformation which seaports have undergone in the global age. While some port cities have coped successfully with the required 'speed' for transactions in today's global economy (p.xv), many seaports have had to re-invent themselves in order to stay relevant; others face decline.

Hans Schenk



MAIN PICTURE: Port of Singapore. INSET: The old port of Marseille.

Arndt Graf and Chua Beng Huat, eds. 2009.

*Port Cities in Asia and Europe*.  
Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.  
222 pages. ISBN 0 7103 1183 4

EMERGING FROM A WORKSHOP on port cities and city states in Asia and Europe in 2004, the editors of this volume have brought together 12 articles in five sections, ranging from 'History' to 'Beyond port cities'. However, I am forced to wonder whether the emphasis on the 'city-state' during the workshop provides sufficient motivation for five of the 12 articles in this book to deal completely or partly with Singapore and two with Hong Kong?

Similarly, I am left wanting by the fact that the editors have not attempted to discuss the concept of a port city or of the present-day global economy. This may explain why a sizeable number of the essays do not, or only marginally, touch upon the main theme of the book. The two articles in the first section on history are a case in point. They refer to the history of the port of Osaka (by Towao Sakaehara) and that of Marseille (by Laurent Metzger) respectively. The authors dig deep into the past but do not touch upon transformations of these port cities in the current global economy. It is a pity, for example, that the essay on Marseille makes no mention of the recent shift of the old port towards the new harbour in Fos, 50 kilometres west of the city, or of recent waterfront developments. Instead, we are offered a summing up of passenger and freighter ships and their VIP passengers in the past.

#### 'Curious comparisons'

The second section of the book covers contemporary developments and consists of four articles. The first is a curious comparison of the port cities of IJmuiden in the Netherlands, Banjul in The Gambia and Jakarta by Peter Nas, Timoer Reijnders and Eline Steenhuisen, respectively. These authors appear to have at least posed the question: what is a port city? They discuss some approaches to the concept of a port city in terms of quays, market systems, logistics, etc and conclude that such approaches are biased and based upon West European port cities. The authors want to see a colonial harbour model introduced which would take into account relations with the colonial motherland. However, a wealth of leading studies on the concept of Asian port cities – many of them colonial in major parts of their history – is already available from authors such as Frank Broeze and Rhoads Murphy (in two volumes edited by Broeze). It is surprising then that these authors make no reference to these works in their own quest for a model of a colonial port city.

Two further studies in this section refer to waterfront development, notably in Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai, and in George Town, Penang. Dirk Schubert describes three winners in

the process of transformation from former 'insignificant colonial bases into knowledge-based and service based centres and important hubs in the worldwide network of seaports' (p.81); while Morshidi Sirat concludes that George Town has lost its importance as a port due to global industrial developments and what he describes as the re-invention of the port for 'urban heritage tourism' (p.115). It is a pity that the dozens of names of streets, quays and other landmarks that Schubert mentions for Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai are not accompanied by reference maps. Without them, this topographical hubbub seems surplus to requirements.

The section contains, finally, an account by Kacung Marijan of the transfer of political power for the port city of Surabaya, to local government in Indonesia. Despite this devolution of power, the municipal authorities of Surabaya have not taken the lead in managing their port; rather a central government-owned and financed port enterprise has remained in charge. This case study forms a useful example of the global pitfalls of decentralisation policies.

The next section: 'Contact zone', contains two interesting studies. The first one, by Yong Mun Cheong, is on the specific roles of Singapore and Hong Kong during the period between 1945 and 1949. Both cities neighboured countries in revolution and turmoil: in the Netherlands East Indies and mainland China respectively. Both cities were instrumental, perhaps vital, in the (illegal) transfer of war supplies and refugees. But one may wonder whether the editors consider this epoch in the histories of the two cities – which are so well described – as examples of transformations in the new global economy which are promised to the reader. The second contribution, by Miriam Rohde, covers the trade relations between three minor ports in Hokkaido, Japan and Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands of Russia. Since Russia and Japan have never concluded a peace treaty, officially such relations should not exist at the national level. At the regional level, however, there are flourishing *de facto* trade relations, hidden behind statistical manipulations and despite cultural misunderstandings and expressions of racism. The paper is interesting and a good example of common sense in spite of the fact that '...it may take some time for the Russian sailors to learn how to behave in a Japanese bath.' (p.153). But, it is not a global economy that makes port cities function or change; it is a regional one.

#### From movies to marketing

The section named 'Representation' contains what the author, Yvonne Schulz-Zinda, calls a 're-invention' of Shanghai in Chinese film. Shanghai's harbour has become almost virtual and served as décor for a movie culture spanning seven decades, from 1934 to 2004. Here, finally, some of the attributes of a port city are revealed: a sky line, dancehalls and prostitution and a cosmo-

politan outlook; but only via a discussion of 13 movies exhibiting the 'Paris of the East' and Western nostalgia for Shanghai. This study would be better placed in a movie magazine!

The harbour becomes even less than virtual décor in a paper by Arndt Graf on marketing the city-states of Hamburg and Singapore on the internet. Harbours are apparently not even mentioned anymore on the websites outlining the selling points of these two cities. If this is true, why bother to include this paper in a volume on port cities? And why go to even more trouble to compare a German city state with some degree of autonomy with the independent city-state of Singapore?

Singapore sells itself as one of the best places in the world for business: competitive, profitable, free from corruption and a global player. In Chua Beng Huat's paper on Singapore he explicitly mentions its huge port as a marginal factor in the economy of the city. Singapore's industrial developments have over the last decades moved in the direction of international finance, high technologies and life sciences. These movements have called for a 'cultural industry', both as an area of investment and for supporting the knowledge-based industrialisation (p. 193). Thus the arts are promoted: a dance company, an art museum, a film industry, etc. to keep the highly skilled Singaporeans and expats happy. Chua Beng Huat has an interesting paper, but struggles to make it compatible with the analysis of Singapore's internet marketing. Not a word is mentioned on 'culture' in Singapore's internet pages, according to Graf.

The final section, named 'Beyond port cities', contains just one paper. It is once more on Singapore and its author Tan Tai Yong tells of its history in relation to its insecure hinterlands. He discusses some conceptual issues of port cities and takes hinterlands as a vital aspect of an enduring port. This is a sensible essay: it poses some of the basic questions that should have been asked by the editors in the Introduction and which could have served as a guideline for selecting the conference papers for this edited volume. The volume as it is published now contains fortunately valuable essays, but in a disappointing book.

Hans Schenk  
Research Associate, AMIDSt  
University of Amsterdam  
Schenk1937@planet.nl

#### References

Frank Broeze (ed), *Brides of the Sea, Port cities of Asia from the 16th to the 20th centuries*. New South Wales University Press, Kensington, Australia, 1989.  
Frank Broeze (ed), *Gateways of Asia, Port cities of Asia in the 13th -20th centuries*. Kegan Paul International London & New York 1997.

Singapore sells itself as one of the best places in the world for business: competitive, profitable, free from corruption and a global player.