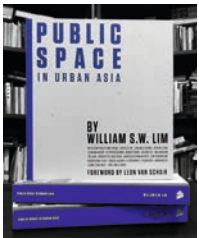


Public space in urban Asia

Public Space in Urban Asia gives a compelling insight into the research conducted by the *Asian Urban Lab*. The lab, as led by chairman William S.W. Lim and co-directors Sharon Siddique and Tan Dan Fengh, is an attempt to align “the best local and international thinking on spatial justice to the particularities of various specific Asian conditions” (p.11).

Sander Holsgens



Reviewed title: Lim, William (ed.) 2014. *Public Space in Urban Asia*, London: World Scientific Publishing, ISBN 9789814578325

IN ORDER TO PURSUE THIS AMBITION, this edited work offers ten case studies in which urban phenomena in Asia are explored in a multidisciplinary manner. Because of the researchers involved, Singapore can be considered as the focal point of this volume, but there are also contributors analysing Chongqing, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. What’s more, the second half of the volume offers a handful of commentaries on the case studies, as well as four thought-provoking essays by William Lim.

Hawker centres in Singapore

In specific, there seems to be an interest in the ethnography as research output. One example of this is Randy Chan and Jolene Lee’s chapter, called *Hawker Centres: Siting/Sighting Singapore’s Food Heritage*. In this chapter they explore how the term hawker centre “has become an iconic part of the Singapore landscape” (p.91). The centres offer low-cost and convenient meals, based upon street hawking – a way of selling affordable products, without having a fixed location. In the years preceding Singapore’s independence, street hawking was common, “for it allowed the unemployed to find a means of livelihood” (ibid).

Chan and Lee claim that precisely because street hawking became an integral part of Singapore’s economy and culture, it was eventually formalised. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, hawkers were offered a centralised shelter, so that sanitary conditions could be maintained and the businesses could be controlled if necessary. These shelters grew into hubs for small food businesses. What is present here is a narrative of the multi-generational hawker family: “the hardworking heartlander is able to forge a good living for his or her family, representative of the success of the Singapore story” (p.97).

For Chan and Lee this predominantly monetary success is, ironically, the biggest threat of the hawker centre. Indeed, a vital part of this success story is that the children of these hawker families receive good education. While some hawkers eventually pass their food stall to their children, most of the times the children opt for different jobs. Or, reversely, the parents prevent their children from working in a hawker centre, for reasons “that range from not wanting their child to have to work as hard as they did, to not being able to find a worthy disciple to pass their recipes on to” (p.98).

This is not to say that hawker centres are actually disappearing. On the contrary, the new generation of hawkers “are aspiring entrepreneurs who see the hawker centre as a starting point in their foray into the food and beverage industry due to the low entry cost” (p.101). Because of this, the hawker centres might change – their designs might become better and may look ‘spiffier’. But the core experience, namely one of affordable, hygienic food in an inviting and familiar public space, will be maintained.

Local and experiential

Chan and Lee’s research is emblematic of *Public Space in Urban Asia*, for two reasons. First, this volume is concerned with the particularities of specific urban phenomena, cities, and public spaces. So even though the geographic scale of the volume suggests otherwise, the various chapters are concerned with regional cases and local phenomena. In so doing, generalisations about a continent, a country, or a culture are kept to a minimum. There is an implicit emphasis on the notion of difference – one of the strengths of this volume.

Second, *Public Space in Urban Asia* is primarily concerned with the lived experiences of urban space. One example of this is Lim Teng Ngiam’s chapter *Thick Crust of Time: Kuala Lumpur*, which explores the ways in which the quick urban transformation of Kuala Lumpur is experienced. In this ambitious case

study Lim argues that cities are, up to a certain extent, shaped by time. Over time and because of time, dynamics of everyday spaces morph and transform.

In Kuala Lumpur this has led to a so-called thick crust of time, which consists of layers of memories. It is ‘thick’, not because of the linear age of the city, but because of “the number of times [the city] changes and renews itself. Kuala Lumpur has a thick crust, with its thick narrative of changes and renewals” (p.155). These continuous, frequent, and perpetual changes or transformations affect the ways visitors and inhabitants experience Kuala Lumpur. Or, in other words: the Malaysian city is experienced in relation to temporality.

Multidisciplinary, reflective, and relevant

In line with Lim Teng Ngiam’s *Thick Crust of Time: Kuala Lumpur*, most chapters in *Public Space in Urban Asia* are both thought-provoking and considerate. This can also be said about William S.W. Lim’s essays. There is, however, one remark to be made. Especially in the essays *Spatial Justice and Happiness and Change We Must*, Lim’s tone of voice differs on a fundamental level from the other contributions. Instead of merely exploring urban phenomena, Lim seems to be more concerned with the things that need to be done in and about public spaces in urban Asia, and more specifically: in Singapore. The essays communicate a sense of urgency, in particular with respect to the notion of sustainability. In order to mobilise younger generations and to secure “a genuine comprehensive sustainability for their communities” (p.255), some form of change is required. This change takes place on the level of values and lifestyle and is necessary to bring about a ‘true’ form of sustainability.

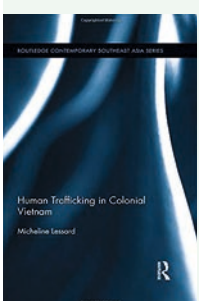
In this sense, Lim’s essays could have been better aligned with the other contributions. The inclusion of commentaries, in which Jane M. Jacobs, H. Koon Wee, and Lilian Chee individually respond to the ten case studies, are more successful in this regard. Not only are these short essays in dialogue with earlier chapters, they also contextualise these case studies in a relevant manner. Moreover, the fact that the *Asian Urban Lab* has brought together not only architects and urbanists, but also historians, documentary makers, journalists and sociologists, underscores the volume’s diversity and appeal. It is a multidisciplinary work that operates on multiple levels and within a variety of disciplines, yet it remains specific and reflective.

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Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam

Sex trafficking is a hot topic in international politics today. Millions of dollars of international monetary and in-kind aid flows into Southeast Asia to stop the trade in women and children. Yet the literature on trafficking in Southeast Asia tends to treat it as a modern development and, as a result, some aspects of forced migration and forced prostitution have been grossly misunderstood.

Christina Firpo



Reviewed publication: Lessard, M. 2015. *Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam*, London and New York: Routledge, ISBN 1138848182.

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is the first in-depth historical study of trafficking in Vietnam. Drawing on a vast base of empirical evidence from 19th and early 20th century missionary reports, military documents, newspaper stories, diplomatic correspondence, and reports from the domestic colonial government, Lessard exposes large scale trafficking networks that sold women and children within Vietnam or to China and Hong Kong, where they would ultimately be sold into marriage, prostitution, or domestic servitude. Lessard argues that while trafficking networks predated French colonial rule, colonialism exacerbated the trade. War, state monopolies on goods and opium, and social norms in which women and girls were both “prized and preyed upon” (xv) beget conditions in which a black market that traded kidnapped women and girls flourished.

The first chapter explores missionary experiences with human trafficking networks. Lessard contextualizes missionary writings on trafficking in a time when Catholic priests aggressively sought converts and the French government launched colonizing missions and established a border with China. Conflating Catholic missionaries with colonial forces, rebel forces raided Catholic villages, kidnapped converts and sold them up into China. Missionaries, heavily influenced by the European abolitionist movement, aimed to stop slavery and the sale of women and children. Their solution was to purchase slaves and adopt them into the missionary community. For all their good intentions, as Lessard shows, their efforts were ill executed. Missionaries focused on saving only Christians and they were driven by misconceptions about Vietnamese culture and gender relations. Missionaries operated under the assumption that children would fall victim to infanticide and women would be negatively influenced by what they judged to be a promiscuous Vietnamese culture, as a result Catholic missionaries refused to return trafficking victims to their home villages.

Chapter 2 investigates kidnappings and trafficking that occurred within the context of the pacification of Tonkin in the second half of the 19th century. Lessard draws on military accounts, newspaper stories, and travelers’ memoirs of their experience with trafficking in Tonkin, a politically volatile region during this time period. Trafficking of women and children, she shows, was a byproduct of political and military activity in the area. Hostilities between highlanders and ethnic Vietnamese fueled the kidnappings, and victims were sold into the opium trade. After the Tai Ping rebellion in China, bandit groups migrated into northern Vietnam and attacked villages for survival. The Nguyen government eventually coopted some of the bandits and used them to vex the French military as it took over Tonkin. Within this context, kidnapped women and children proved to be valuable commodities that were easily traded for opium and weapons.

The third chapter focuses on trafficking incidents discovered by the French consulate to China or discovered by merchant marine vessels or customs and borders agents, both of which were accountable to the command of the consulate in cases of human trafficking. The French consul was then responsible for repatriating victims, yet, as Lessard shows, repatriations caused diplomatic problems when Chinese men claimed rights to Vietnamese women and children. The French consul attempted to stop the trafficking of Vietnamese women by strictly regulating departure permits for Vietnamese or Chinese women traveling to China and checking ships that departed from Hanoi for trafficked stowaways.

The final chapter examines the pressures that human trafficking placed on the colonial government in Indochina. With newspapers reporting horrifying cases of beheadings and victims being thrown overboard, France’s inability to stop traffickers from crossing borders or using colonial ports and coastland embarrassed the French colonial government. Vietnamese intellectuals criticized the colonial state for the hypocrisy of justifying colonialism with claims to ‘protect’ its subjects. As much of the trafficking trade was run by Chinese gangs, these discussions fed into anti-Chinese fears and claims that the colonial state was too soft on the Chinese community.

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is a thorough investigation into the political, diplomatic, and economic context in which the market for women and girls flourished during the colonial period. With its incredible detail drawn from an array of sources – some known to historians and many previously undiscovered – Lessard proves that human trafficking is not a modern concept in Vietnam and indeed has a long history in Indochina. One of the strengths of this book is that the author is never simply satisfied that her sources corroborate information; instead, Lessard asks hard epistemological questions of her sources. As she approaches the topic of trafficking from the viewpoint of missionaries, military men, the consulate to China, and high-ranking colonial authorities, she is careful to critique the biases of these sources as well as to evaluate how likely a source was to have experience with trafficking networks or victims themselves. This book will prove essential for the study of human trafficking – both academic and applied. It will be useful for both undergraduate and graduate courses in Asian history, French history, and gender studies. It should be a mandatory read for aid workers who focus on trafficking in Vietnam and China.

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