Urban Knowledge Network Asia

Integrating rivers with their environmental, cultural and economic dimensions into the fabric of contemporary cities in South, East and Southeast Asia.

River cities
Water space in urban development and history

Symposium, Surabaya, Indonesia, 11-12 December 2017

Paul Rabé (IIAS)

This symposium, co-organized by the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA),[1] sought to investigate the relationship between rivers and cities from a multi-disciplinary perspective in the humanities and social sciences. A three-day follow-up symposium will take place in Shanghai in December 2018. In this issue of the Newsletter, we provide an overview of the topics explored during the Surabaya conference.

On 11-12 December 2017, the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) organized a symposium in Surabaya, Indonesia, entitled 'River Cities: Water Space in Urban Development and History'. The event was hosted by the Faculty of Humanities of Airlangga University in Surabaya and jointly organized by IIAS (through UKNA) and Airlangga University. The symposium conveners were Rita Padawangi (Singapore University of Social Sciences), Adrian Perkasa (Airlangga University) and Paul Rabé (Coordinator of UKNA at IIAS).

The symposium sought to investigate the relationship between rivers and cities from a multi-disciplinary perspective in the humanities and the social sciences. It aimed to contribute innovative ways of thinking about how to better integrate rivers, creeks and canals, and with them, their environmental, historical, social, political, cultural and economic dimensions, into the fabric of contemporary cities in South, East and Southeast Asia. Following a competitive call for papers, seventeen scholars, ranging from PhD students to established academics, presented their papers in Surabaya. Together, they addressed four main categories of investigation (featured below). In this issue of the Newsletter, we provide an overview of the seventeen papers presented, which will be part of an edited volume to be published in the IIAS Asian Cities series of Amsterdam University Press.

A follow-up symposium on the topic of water in urban Asia, entitled 'Water Heritage in Asian Cities', will take place in Shanghai from 29 November through 1 December 2018. It will be hosted by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), and jointly organized by UKNA, SASS, New York University Shanghai (China), Fudan University (China) and IIAS.

Category 1: Rivers and cities in historical perspective

'Water world to inundation: river cities in Southeast Asia from old to new millennium'
Howard Dick, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Melbourne, Australia; Faculty of Business and Law, University of Newcastle (NSW), Australia

Accelerating climate change is now giving rise to a new challenge of sustainability. This paper explores this problematization in the case of Surabaya, and considers how it applies more broadly to other river cities in Indonesia, notably in Sumatra and Kalimantan, and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia. The emphasis will be on how the urban system has adapted, failed to adapt or mal-adapted to the exigencies of a monsoonal climate.

'Through the passages and across the worlds: the bridge-and-temple complex and the popular procession in a "rurban" town in Jiangnan region'
Xiaomei ZHAO, Department of Cultural Heritage and Museology, Fudan University, China

Water towns in Jiangnan have been urbanizing since the 16th century. Popular rituals in these towns represent their special economic and administrative position between (urban) cities and (rural) villages. The temples of local deities are usually situated by the canal with a bridge built in front. The bridge serves as a passage to the sacred temple from the profane world, and this spatial transition is represented by processions across the bridge. Based on literature reviews and fieldwork, I reproduce the historical procession scene in a 'rurban' town in the region, and I provide an explanation about the changes in the social relations among participants.

'The influence of political economy on the river landscape of Banjarmasin during the sultanate period (1526-1860)'
Vera Dian Damayanti, Centre for Landscape Studies, Graduate School of the Humanities, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Banjarmasin, the capital of South Kalimantan Province, is well known in Indonesia as the city of one thousand rivers. The urban development of Banjarmasin started when this area was designated as the capital and commercial port of the Banjarmasin sultanate in 1526. This paper explores landscape changes in Banjarmasin town during the sultanate period (1526-1860). These changes involved spatial and physical landscape elements caused by warfare, contacts with foreign traders, and the divided territory under the treaties with the Dutch. With its riverine terrain and tidal-swamp environment, urban life in Banjarmasin took place along its rivers, which made this city different from other port cities in the archipelago, which developed on the coast.

'From the city to the sea: riverside temple networks in South India'
Emma Natalya Stein, curatorial fellow for the Southeast Asian Art Freer Gallery of Art; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (USA)

During the 8th–12th centuries, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu served as the royal capital for two major dynasties, the Pallavas and then the Cholas, and it was home to thousands of priests, literati, and landholding elites. Flowing into and out of the city from west to east, the Palar River directed Kanchipuram's expansion as it developed outwards from the urban core. However, settlements that once belonged to the city's expanse today have become remote villages. Using Kanchipuram's rural-urban hinterland as a case study, this paper asks how the river contributed to the urbanization process during the premodern period, and how the river's deterioration in recent centuries may have contributed to the disappearance of places that previously thrived.

Category 2: Neighborhoods and social life of riverine communities

'Sacred river, syncretic city: reflections on the dialectics of co-living and contestation in Varanasi'
Pralay Kanungo, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India; International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and Leiden University, the Netherlands

The mother river Ganges/Ganga has given birth to many cities, of which Varanasi/Kasi/Benaras has always been prominent in terms of its history, religion, culture and commerce. In this paper, reflecting on various cultural symbols and rituals, from Lat Bhairo and Bismillah Khan and from silk-weaving to Hindustani classical music, I will explain how Varanasi represented a unique cultural heritage (Ganga-Yamuna Tehzib) that celebrated shared traditions and composite culture. While this heritage has promoted syncretism in everyday life and inter-community interaction and exchange, Varanasi's history has also witnessed contestations and ruptures among communities.

'The decline of ritual practices in response to pollution in the Vishnumati river, Kathmandu, Nepal'
Rajani Maharjan, Institute for Social and Environmental Transition-Nepal, Nepal

As the water of the Bishnumati River in Kathmandu is becoming visibly contaminated with sewage and toxins, people are avoiding going near the river and are using water from other sources, including dug-well, tap or bottled mineral water, to conduct centuries-old rites and rituals. This paper argues that the decline of riverside ritual practices, combined with a decline in the frequency with which people approach the river, has an impact on people's perspectives about living with water. An ecologically balanced way of living with the environment, in the name of numerous cultural and religious rites and rituals, is being replaced by rapid and unsustainable development.

'Floating settlements in Sintang City, West Kalimantan: a representation of urban-rural dendritic connectivity'
Mira Lubis, School of Urban and Regional Planning, Tanjungpura University, Indonesia

This paper explores the life of migrant communities in floating houses (rumah lanting) along the urban riverfront areas of Sintang, the capital city of Sintang District in the interior of West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia, which is located at the intersection of two large rivers, Sungai Kapuas and Sungai Melawi. Growing from the river's edge, the present Sintang still maintains its riverine culture in the form of floating houses as its legacy of the past, when rivers played an important role as main transportation routes for political and economic activities. The dendritic network of rivers and tributaries around Sintang plays an important role in linking Sintang city with villages in the interior, from where most migrants hail. Historically, the river network has always shaped power relations between indigenous communities in the interior with the authorities on the main rivers who controlled river-based transportation and trade, and this relation-ship persists until today.

Category 3: Evaluating experiences with riverfront and riverbank settlement and design interventions in Asia

View of Sabarmati Riverfront, Ahmedabad.
Courtesy of Manjil Purohit via Wikimedia Commons.

'The unjust redistribution of floodwater within the city: the story of and resolution for Shezidao, Taipei City'
Liao Kuei-Hsien, Graduate Institute of Urban Planning, National Taipei University, Taiwan

Shezidao is a low-lying and flood-prone sandbar sandwiched between two major rivers of Taipei City, home to approximately 10,000 residents. The area has been excluded from the Taipei Area Flood Control Zone and is currently subject to a development plan that would enhance the perceived injustice by displacing most current residents and encircle it with high levees. This paper explores how floodwater has been and would be redistributed between Shezidao and the rest of Taipei and the relationship between flood management, social justice, and sustainability. An alternative plan for Shezidao is also discussed, as well as 'flood mitigation banking' as a policy tool to address the social-environmental controversies often arising from the development of urban riverine communities around the world.

'The canal and the city: water's edge urbanisms in Chennai'
Karen Coelho, Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), India

Through the case of Chennai's Buckingham Canal, this paper examines the edges of urban waterways as a specific kind of intra-urban 'periphery' offering a crucial geography from which to theorize urban transitions in Indian metropolitan cities. The Buckingham Canal has undergone shifting valuations in the city's urbanization schemes over its history since its construction by the British in the 1800s to transport freight down the eastern coastal tracts of the Madras Presidency. Employing multi-sited ethnography in three canal-bank settlements, this paper highlights the specific conditions of water's edge urbanism and the shifting trajectories of opportunity, challenge and threat it offers, showing how the production of urban space in each of these neighborhoods is shaped by the canal's changing ecological and economic values.

'Colonial-global Tianjin: the politics of design centered on the Hai River between past and present'
Maurizio Marinelli, University of Sussex, United Kingdom

During the last two decades, the port-city of Tianjin has undergone a massive urban revitalization program conducted under the aegis of 'beautification', which has radically transformed the cityscape. The hyper-colonial phase of Tianjin, when the treaty-port city constituted an unparalleled microcosm of the world with up to nine foreign concessions (1860-1945), has been actively re-interpreted as marking the beginning of the Tianjin's global age. This paper analyses the importance of Tianjin's urban revitalization from the perspective of a 'river city'. Particular attention is given to the contribution played by the Hai River to the production of space in colonial-global Tianjin, through the analysis both of its historical role and the narratives constructed in the colonial past vis-à-vis the Tianjin Municipal Government-led 'beautification' strategy in the present.

'Community initiatives in the riverine area of Kali Pepe, Surakarta'
Eng Kusumaningdyah N.H., ST., MT, Urban-Rural Design and Conservation Laboratory (URDC Labo), Sebelas Maret University of Surakarta, Indonesia

The environmental degradation of the Kali (River) Pepe in Surabaya, Indonesia, has many physical, social and economic implications for residents of the city, especially the downstream communities that interact with the river the most. This research identifies community initiatives in the riverine area of Kali Pepe, through in-depth interviews with local leaders and community representatives, to understand how local communities interact with the river. The objective is to obtain a new perspective about how communities experience the river and how community initiatives are attempting to contribute to the sustainability of the river itself.

'Sociocultural and spatial factors in river-edge relationships: a comparative case study of rivers in Indonesian cities'
Michaela Prescott, Monash University, Australia

This paper describes a comparative analysis of qualitative aspects of river improvement in Indonesia in order to understand the amelioration potential of river cities. The research employed fieldwork to collect material evidence of the spatial reconfiguration of river edges along four urbanized rivers, namely: the Code and Winongo (Yogyakarta); the Cikapundung (Bandung); and the Bengawan Solo (Surakarta). Building from architectural and social science approaches, a conceptual and method-ological framework for evaluating improved riverfronts is developed. These cases are examined using schematic drawings and then classified based on aspects of the physical environment shaping the river-edge relationship.

Category 4: Urban policy perspectives and innovations related to rivers and other urban water bodies

'Recovering the stream: contestation about river access as a catalyst for eco-city development in Suwon City, South Korea'
Youngah Guahk, IN-EAST School of Advanced Studies, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

In Suwon, an industrial city of 1.2m inhabitants located not far from South Korea's capital Seoul, a small river, the Suwoncheon stream, had been covered with concrete in the context of rapid economic development during the 1980s and 1990s – a decision taken in order to provide for additional road construction and car parking facilities. While local businesses initially welcomed the idea, a popular movement formed soon after the construction, objecting to the project on both ecological and cultural grounds. This paper charts the contestation process and the effects of political mobilization around the issue of environmental protection, demonstrating the important implications that contestation over river access can have in an industrial city in Asia.

'Division and marginalization in the lower Brantas Basin: a longue durée approach'
Anton Novenanto, Department of Sociology at the Brawijaya University, Indonesia

This paper focuses on the genealogy of the Porong River in East Java, to which humans have made various modifications and alterations despite the fact that it is man-made. Public and academic attention to the river has been increasing following the unnatural, ongoing Lapindo mudflow starting in May 2006. Using secondary historical data and collective memories of the locals, the paper addresses human-

nature relation as a two-way, rather than a one-way process: on the one hand, environmental change and modification should be perceived as a consequence of the reciprocity; and, on the other, nature has its own natural process and environmental modification affects human society.

'What transnational planning visions have done in Red River, Hanoi in Vietnam'
Ms. Sujee (Suzy) Jung, Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers University (USA)

Since 2005, Hanoi City has hosted numerous transnational collaborators and riverfront planning experts to upgrade the Red River. This ambitious project was initiated to facilitate Hanoi City's rapid urbanization and industrialization by developing and connecting both sides of the Red River's banks. By taking a dialectical perspective, the historical review examines three aspects of this initiative: first, the future-oriented global visions to make a world-class Red River in Hanoi; second, contrasting local realities as a challenge against the previous proposal; and third, local planning authorities' efforts to reconcile the gap between the first two.

'Hybrid riverscapes: governing river cities beyond land and water dichotomies – the Yamuna in Delhi, India'
Alexander Follmann, Institute of Geography and the Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne, Germany

The inherent complexity of environmental change along urban rivers requires a change of perspective going beyond binary conceptualizations of water/land, river/city and nature/culture. By linking a discourse analytical approach with theoretical concepts from governance research and urban political ecology, the conceptual paper develops the framework of hybrid and outlines an innovative conceptual framework to study environmental change and governance in river cities. Using the case study of Delhi's riverscapes along the Yamuna, the paper focuses on the multiple city-river relationships from the 1970s to current processes of urban environmental change.

'Narmada water on Sabarmati river: a ship of Theseus?'
Parthasarathy Rengarajan, Gujarat Institute of Development Research, India

Ahmedabad has had a long and complex relationship with the River Sabaramati. Whereas the city once depended on the Sabarmati River's water for domestic and other uses, it later started ignoring the river and the slums on its banks and let sewage and industrial effluents flow downstream. In a more recent development, city administrators have built a riverfront to cash in on high land values abutting the river. The river is now a pond with gates on either side and is filled with water from the Narmada River. This paper analyses a Theseus's paradox, which is essentially a thought experiment raising the question whether the River as an object that has had all of its components replaced remains fundamentally the same object.

Note

1 UKNA (Urban Knowledge Network Asia) is an inclusive network that brings together concerned scholars and practitioners engaged in collaborative research on cities in Asia. Consisting of over 100 researchers from 17 institutes in Europe, China, India, and Southeast Asia, the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) represents the largest academic international network on Asian cities. UKNA's Secretariat is hosted by IIAS in Leiden, the Netherlands.