CULTURAL STUDIES

JOHANNES WIDODO

THE BOAT AND THE CITY

Chinese Diaspora and the Architecture of Southeast Asian Coastal Cities

ARCHITECTURE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN COASTAL CITIES SERIES

CHINESE HERITAGE CENTRE 華裔館

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Introduction

The South China Sea can be perceived as the Mediterranean of Asia, where great civilizations met and international trades crossed, generating unique cultures, urban forms, and architecture. Big and small trade vessels cruised across Southeast Asia following the Monsoon or the Trade winds for hundreds of years. The trading ships and immigrant boats were not only carrying people and goods, but also conveying cosmological and geometrical memories from its original lands into the new landscapes, implanting new layers in the emerging cosmopolitan settlements in coastal Southeast Asia. Some fishing villages developed into entrepots, and some entrepots prospered into great Emporiums.

The history and morphology of Southeast Asian cities is relatively a new subject of study. This book is one of the attempts to accomplish a coherent and comprehensive approach towards the urban history, morphology, and architecture of Southeast Asian cities, by looking into the interweaving process of the different groups and events from its formation until its development in the recent past.

This book is the latest stage of my continuous research since 1984, having consolidated my PhD dissertation on the urban history of Southeast Asian coastal cities in 1996, which has since then been developed through continuous researches in different coastal cities of Southeast Asia. My passion and curiosity on Southeast Asian cities persists, and I made numerous visits and re-visits, interpretation and re-interpretation of different settlements and cities in this region. This book is the result of my thoughts, speculations, and statements of almost twenty years of continuous endeavor up to this moment, and it will become the point of departure for another series of research and publications of monographs on the urban history and morphology of individual coastal cities in Southeast Asia.

There are several reasons why this book is written. The city is a totality of different elements and layers continuously accumulated and transformed along its historical periods. Currently there are still a void in the repository of textbook and research publications on the morphology and transformation of Southeast Asian cities written from an architectural perspective. Therefore it is essential to study the city using interdisciplinary and multi-perspective approaches to get a coherent and comprehensive picture. Hopefully this book will be able to complement the existing studies from non-Architectural perspectives (historical, sociological, political, economic, geographic, etc.).

The special role and contribution of the Chinese Diasporas particularly has been highlighted. For decades their significant contribution was ignored, forgotten, or even intentionally erased in different Southeast Asian countries—especially since the rise of anti-colonial and nationalism spirits. Some minority communities in several Southeast Asian countries have become targets of racial sentiment and discrimination. Urban riots targeted to the Chinese populations occurred from time to time in some coastal cities. This situation has prompted some national governments to pursue the policy of unnatural cultural "assimilation" or enforcing a "de-culturization" process towards a certain ethnic

group, to ensure national unity and integration. This policy has resulted in the loss of identity and civilization degradation process. This book is dedicated to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia for their indispensable contribution to the foundation and development of multi-cultural urban communities and to the physical articulation of the coastal cities in Southeast Asia.

The global economic integration has affected Southeast Asia at the turn of this century. Southeast Asia, following East Asia and the rest of the world, rides the wave of economic booms and downturns. The power behind the dynamic force is the network of Chinese community and the synergy of multi-racial populations in Southeast Asian cities who have lived together for several generations and became indigenous on different places across the region. Unfortunately, the rapid economic growth has accelerated the cultural and physical transformation process, which often leads to the fragmentation and destruction of old urban fabrics, and creating serious problems of cultural definition and identification of its inhabitants—loss of memory and identity, a cultural amnesia. Conflicting agendas of different interest groups have made the situation worse. This book is also dedicated to the students, academics, professionals, policy-makers, and activists, who especially work in the field of Architecture, heritage conservation, and cultural promotion, to empower them in the efforts of restoring and nurturing our own identity and memory for the sake of future generations.

As Southeast Asia is a very vast, diverse and complex region with a long history, it is almost an impossible task to cover all regions and all cities within a short span of research and within the limited pages of this book. It is not also possible to cover all aspects of its history and morphology from every possible direction and scale levels. The narration is ended in the mid-twentieth century because the World War II and the Pacific War have radically changed the course of world history including Southeast Asian cities as have never happened before and therefore it is necessary to write separate books and monographs on the post-independence urban history and morphology of Southeast Asian cities as continuation of the current series.

Nonetheless I consider this effort as part of a continuous on-going journey of self-discovery, deconstruction and reconstruction of Southeast Asian identity and theory. This initial publication is expected to trigger further debates, discourses, researches, and publications in the field of Southeast Asian morphology and architecture of the city.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Southeast Asian Urban Morphology

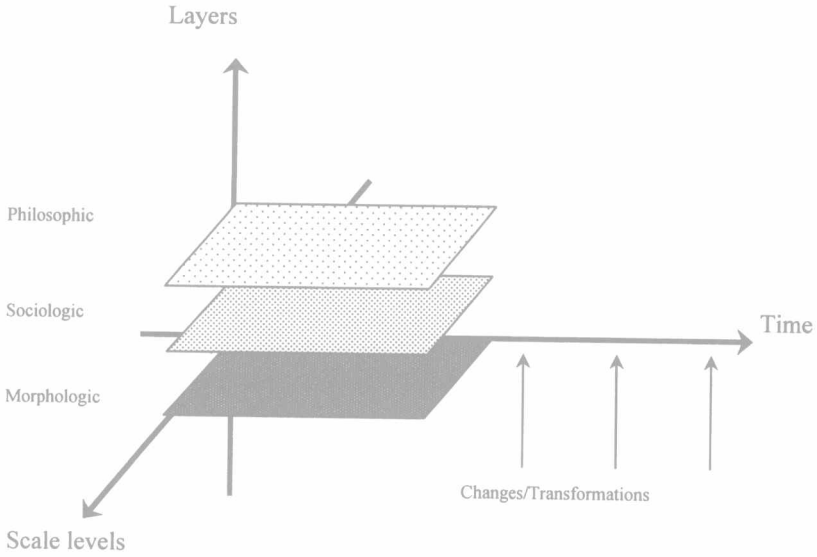
THE TOTALITY OF ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of the city as a whole can be viewed from different perspectives. Architecture can be seen in different scale levels, from the smallest interior space, dwelling unit, building block, urban segment, settlement, city, up to the vast geographical territory. The city is a product of collective memory and the materialization of the culture of its inhabitants along history. The city is in itself a repository of history; it is the locus of the collective memory. The physical articulation of architecture and the city is the reflection the "spirit of the ages" ("Zeitgeist") or the social-political-cultural aspects of its people evolving along time. The urban fabric of the city can be imagined as a pile of "tissue" consisted of different "layers" from different time periods.

Architecture can also be observed through different time frames or historical periods in the process of transformation. Within this transformation certain elements of permanence can be identified. Elements of permanence—or the monuments-keep the memory and identity of places and events. In each scale level there are propelling and pathological monuments amongst the ordinary dwelling fabric, and the quality of monuments will determine the features of transformation.

On every scale level in each historical period, Architecture can be perceived as a totality of at least three main layers: morphological (physical, formal), sociological (activity, functional, anthropometrical), and philosophical (meaning, symbolical, mythological). Morphological articulation is directly related to the sociological inhabitation activities, and to the ascription of meaning.

FIGURE 1-1 Diagrammatic model of the layers of Architectural totality



Therefore the architecture of the city deals with this multi-dimensional matrix. The physical and spatial form of the city is the product of its inhabitants, the manifestation of their culture along history. To get a holistic understanding towards the history and morphology of the city, synchronic (across different layers) and diachronic (across historical periods) readings should be carried out. The hermeneutic approach should be employed, incorporating multi-disciplinary analysis such as anthropology, archaeology, sociology, economy, geography, history, etc. Therefore a collaborative and inter-disciplinary approach is essential.

CULTURAL LINKS AND MORPHOLOGICAL FUSION

Located right at the cross-road of world trading routes, Southeast Asia has been very open towards various influences from outside: India, Arab, China, the Europeans, Japan, and the rest of the world. All of those influences were peacefully and harmoniously absorbed and adopted into

local culture, then expressed into unique but yet closely linked culture, language, architecture, and artifacts. Diverse, eclectic, fused, adaptive, tolerant, inclusive, integrative, can perhaps describe the complex nature of Southeast Asian architecture and urbanism.

The ships from the north (China, Japan, and Ryukyu) sailing to the south made use of the northern monsoon between January–February, and returning home by the southern monsoon between June–August. Indian and Arab ships went eastward by the southwest monsoon between April-August, and returned by the northeast monsoon from December. During the cyclone periods or the changing monsoon seasons, these traders stayed in Southeast Asian ports and inhabited the markets, while waiting for their trading partners from the other parts of the world.

These exchanges took place mostly in and around the South China Sea, Java Sea, and Melaka Strait—which could be perceived as the Mediterranean of Asia—lying between two great sub-continents (China and India), and between two great oceans (Pacific and Indian). Since the first century the coastal regions and their hinterlands therefore became fertile grounds for the growth of new civilizations, new blends of urbanism and architecture, new settlements and cities.

The city is like a boat or a vessel, loaded by people, goods, activities, rituals, and symbolism—a vessel of civilization sailing across history, from the past heading towards the future. The trading ships and immigrant boats were not only carrying people and goods, but also conveying cosmological and geometrical memories from its original places into the new landscapes, implanting new layers in the new lands. The different layers from different cultures have been super-imposed, adapted, and undergone process of indigenization along its history, forming a truly blended cosmopolitan urban morphology and culture, manifested in the myriad of forms and artifacts in different localities.

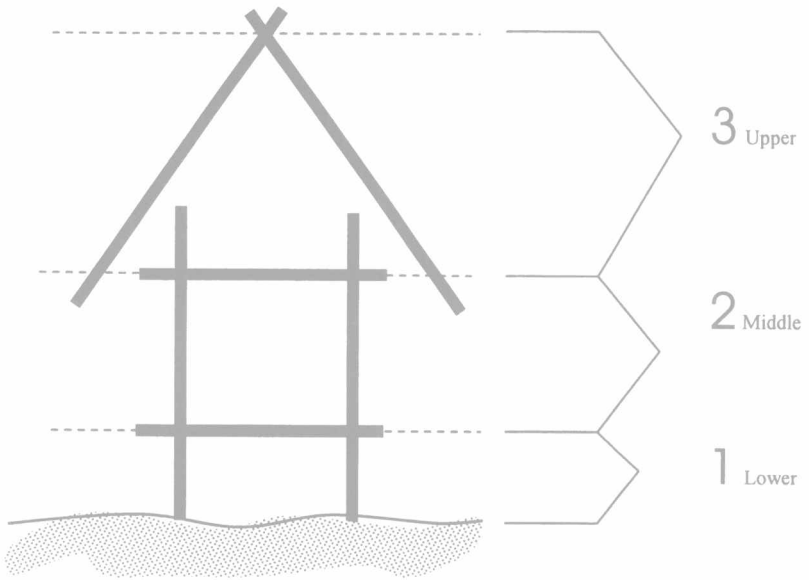
ORIGIN AND PLACE

Vernacular man of Southeast Asia believes that humans live between the two poles of the universal order: the divine and the evil, upper and lower, mountain and sea, north and south; also between sunrise and sunset, or east and west. These three cosmological divisions or hierarchies (upper-middle-lower) are related to the metaphor of the human body: the head, the torso, and the leg, and also the metaphor of the universe: the sky, surface of the earth, and the underground.

Traditional settlements across Southeast Asia follow this cosmological pattern, by situating a village in between a mountain and the sea or a river. The most important building or function (shrine of origin, chief's house, ancestor's grave) is placed on the highest point of the village or to the direction of a mountain. The functions associated with death or impurities (temple of death, dirt, waste disposal) were placed down near the waterfront. In many cases the rice barns—very important functions in a rice growing community—were situated on the eastside of the village facing the sunrise.

In coastal regions vernacular settlements are normally situated in between the hills and the coastline or a river. River was the main transportation means from the coastline into the hinterland and hamlets were formed along the river.[1] The waterfront village was a natural place for sailors or traders passing by to make a brief stop for fresh water and food supplies.

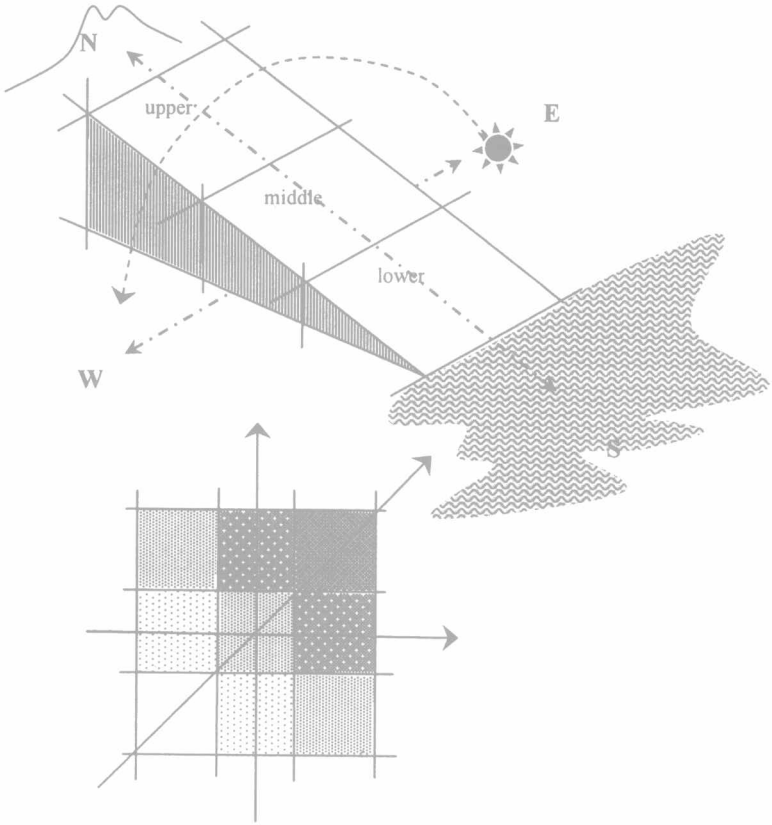
FIGURE 1-2 Vertical cosmological hierarchy of space



Ancient building tradition in Southeast Asia is the outcome of the engagement of local climate, building materials and techniques, and also indigenous beliefs and rituals. The main physical elements of vernacular architecture are made of wood and perishable building materials, an expression of the temporary nature of human being, subject to the supremacy of the divine being. Southeast Asian vernacular architectural language is offering the most contextual and integrated solution towards human needs, in their relation with the nature, the community, and the supra-natural beliefs.

HIERARCHY AND CENTRALITY

FIGURE 1-3 Mandala: superimposition of four cardinal directions



The indigenous cosmology of vernacular tradition was then elaborated further by the influence of Indian cosmology, known as the Mandala principle. Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning a hierarchical order of concentric circles. In geometrical sense, it could be drawn as a square subdivided into nine sub-squares. It could be perceived as superimposition of two hierarchies of space (upper-middle-lower) of North-South and East-West (two primary orientations).

The middle space is the neutral; the navel and the womb, the axis of the universe, or simply the centre of the four cardinal directions. The upper-right corner space is the head, the highest spatial hierarchy, or the most respected place. The lower-left corner space is the feet, the lowest spatial hierarchy, the dirtiest, or the threshold to the impure outside world. A city, a village, a house, or a room can be arranged according to this hierarchy of values and meanings.

From the fertile Mekong delta region, the source of rice culture of Southeast Asia, the first kingdom of Funan was established around the Mekong delta around 100-600, then followed by Chenla (600–790), Pagan (849–1287), and Khmer (790–1431). Another kingdom, Ayutthaya—the capital of the Thais, appeared in the Chao Phraya basin (1350–1767). Further to the north, the Champa kingdom was flourishing between 192–1471. Its wet-rice culture, river systems, and international trades between India and China influenced the architecture and settlement patterns of the Chams, Khmers, and Thais. We can still find marvelous artifacts from this period in the stone temples of Angkors in the present Cambodia, and the brick temples of Champa in the present southern and central Vietnam.

The decline of those inland rice-growing kingdoms was soon followed by the rise of Srivijaya maritime power (600–1290), which took effective control over the main trading routes of Melaka Strait and Java Sea. The physical remains of the heritages of this great cultural, political, and military Buddhist kingdom have almost vanished, due to the non-durable brick and timber materials[2]. In Java—the most fertile volcanic island next to Sumatra—many stone Buddhist and Hindu temples from around eighth century still survive[3].

The palaces and the ordinary buildings from this period have not survived because of the perishable materials they used (clay bricks, timbers). But the archeological findings suggest that the layout of the royal capitals from this period (such as Ayutthaya near present Bangkok, Thailand, and Majapahit in eastern Java, Indonesia) clearly showed

underlying Indian ordering principles based on Mandala. From my observation there are many cases in different contexts in Southeast Asia which clearly shows some evidences that the vernacular tradition merged with the Indian cosmology. We can still perceive the clear and strong spatial hierarchy, axiality, and orientation of villages, temples, palaces, and houses such as in Balinese dwelling and village architecture (Indonesia); Burmese, Thai and Cambodian temples and shrines, or even Javanese house and palaces.

Buddhism spread from India northeastward (to Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea), eastward (to Myanmar, Thailand, Sumatra, and Java), and southward (to Sri Lanka), generating unique forms of Stupa architecture (in temples, monasteries, palaces) as a result of the blending process of Hindu architectural style with the new Buddhist style[4]. The simple and basic shape of Stupa architecture in India and Sri Lanka evolved into a highly elaborated and complex one in Southeast Asia, developed by the local aesthetic creativity and building traditions.

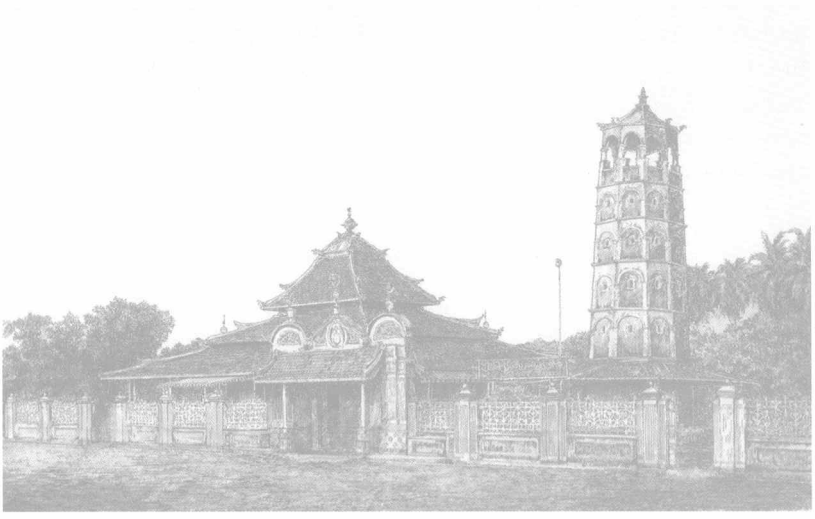
In Southeast Asian coastal regions some villages developed into larger port towns of the inland kingdom. The inland kings adopted Indian cosmology in order to legitimize their ruling and to organize their territory. The Hindu-Buddhist spatial concept was transplanted into the settlement pattern, with clear distinction between centre and periphery, clear hierarchy of space divisions, and clear structure of functional organization. In some coastal port towns the native authorities built their palaces in auspicious sites according to Indian cosmology and by preserving or continuing the indigenous traditions and beliefs.

ORIENTATION AND ADAPTATION

Islam entered and spread throughout Southeast Asia through two different main trading routes. The first one was through China (by the Silk Road, and then by Ming dynasty's admiral Zheng He's voyages in the fifteenth century from southern China to the northern coast of Java, then to Melaka and all over Indonesian archipelago). The second one was through India (by Gujarat and Tamil traders to the Malay peninsular, to the west coast of Sumatra, and finally to northern coast Java and all over the archipelagos). Arab and Persian traders were also opening direct trading routes to Southeast Asia, connecting Europe with Asia.

Islam introduced new orientation (the Qiblat or praying orientation towards Mecca) and new typology in architecture and urban space (such as Sultan's palace, mosques, and central urban open space) into the vocabulary of Southeast Asian architecture and urban planning. Again the fusion process of the new Islamic design principles into the previous building and urban spatial typology was clearly evident. The transition and transformation processes took place peacefully and naturally, such as in Demak (the first Islam sultanate in Java of the fifteenth century, and the primary Islam mission in Southeast Asia), Kudus, and Cirebon (both are early Islamic cities in northern coast of Java). The Javanese mosque typology with three layers of pyramid roof also existed in Melaka (Malay Peninsula), in old Singapore and in different parts of Indonesian archipelago. It was transformed from Hindu-Javanese architecture, mixed with Indian, Chinese, Malay, and even Greek and Persian architectural elements.

FIGURE 1-4 Tengkera Mosque in Melaka (Malaysia) built in 1728. The tomb of Sultan Hussein of Johor and Singapore who signed the treaty with Raffles in 1819 is inside the compound.



In the British Straits Settlements of Malay Peninsula, the mosques erected by the Muslim community from southern India—also in eclectic architectural style—can be found in Melaka and Singapore. Located at the middle of the so-called "Chinatown"[5], in the same row as other religious buildings (Chinese temples, Hindu shrines), the architecture of these southern Indian mosques in the Straits Settlement were really reflecting the cosmopolitan and the tolerant nature of the Southeast Asian urban culture in embracing and incorporating new foreign elements. The craftsmen from different racial and cultural groups worked together and blended their artistry and skill into new and unique building tradition and architectural totality.

COSMOLOGY AND URBAN PATTERN

There is strong evidence that the Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia had followed their traditional urban settlement patterns of their ancestral land. Those mental blueprints were used everywhere, in all levels of urban forms and spaces. Although a lot of local elements were then absorbed to form unique and contextual physical forms and spaces, we can still trace some morphological and typological similarities back to the port and water cities in Southern and Southeastern China. One reason is because almost all Chinese settlements in Southeast Asia were built on the waterfront, and in very close relation with the sea and the river.

More than one-third of all overseas Chinese can trace their origins to Fujian province. The tradition of maritime trade and overseas exploration has been encouraged by its long coastline and relative isolation from China's centre of power. Fujian prospered for several centuries from trade with Southeast Asia, but lost its wealth when China isolated itself during the later period of Ming dynasty. Coastal cities in southern China (Fujian and Guangdong provinces) were the main source of Chinese immigration to Southeast Asia since the fourteenth century. These immigrants built many urban nucleuses throughout Southeast Asia, which in turn would became the primary elements of Southeast Asian coastal cities.

Quanzhou was one of the main cities in Fujian and for five centuries it had been an important port for foreign ships in China. It had a large Muslim community[6]. Muslims entered China through the Silk Road, through both land and sea routes. A Muslim explorer, Ibn Battuta, arrived at the city of Quanzhou in the fourteenth century, and he called it Zaitun.