# Architecture and Urban Form in Kuala Lumpur

*Race and Chinese Spaces in a Postcolonial City*

YAT MING LOO

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## Introduction

> *Resisting oppression means more than just reacting against one's oppression, it means envisioning new habits of being, different ways to live in the world.*[1]
>
> *bell hooks*

Most societies in the world today are marked by multicultural heterogeneity of one kind and to some degree. Multiculturalism and commitments to cultural diversity increasingly gain currency in the academic world, but they are contested with multiple and conflicting interpretations, meanings and implications.[2] In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the impact of globalisation, migration and the race riots in some major European and Western cities have heightened the importance of a critical understanding of race, identity and multiculturalism.

In view of the existence of ethnicities, races and peoples from virtually all parts of the world in a significant number of cities around the world, Anthony King argues that the place of the first historical occurrence of what we today call the 'multicultural' city might not lie in the West:

> *[T]he question where the first historical occurrence was of what today we call the 'modern multi-cultural' city, the answer is certainly not the European or North American 'core' cities of London, Los Angeles and New York, but probably in one-time 'peripheral' one of Rio, Calcutta, Shanghai or Batavia (today, Jakarta). [...] I also put quotation marks round 'core' and 'peripheral' as it is evident from what I am saying that, from a social and cultural (rather than an economic and political) perspective, the core would become the periphery and the periphery, the core.*[3]

King also highlights elsewhere that it is colonialism itself that has pioneered methods of incorporating pre-capitalist, pre-industrial and non-European societies into the world economy and has formed ways of dealing with ethnically, racially and culturally different societies.[4] To sum up King's ideas on the dialectic between the West and the non-West, a study of a colonial city and a postcolonial one will give some insight into the emerging 'multicultural' cities in this global world.

Malaysia is a classic plural society[5] and a creation of British colonialism; and Malaysia is an example par excellence of a multi-cultural society and hence is a fertile site for the investigation of the race politics and its effects on the production of urban spaces. As of 2004, Malays made up an estimate of 50.4 per cent of the population, Chinese 23.7 per cent, indigenous people 11 per cent, Indian 7.1 per cent and others 7.8 per cent.[6] Sometimes referred as to a microcosm of Asian culture, coupled with a multi-ethnic and multi-culture society, Malaysia has arguably been regarded as a rare successful example of the legacy of British colonialism and a postcolonial modern state for its achievement of racial harmony and economic success.

However, 50 years after independence from British colonialism, Malaysia is still plagued by the issue of national integration and by racial tensions. In addition, a key predicament of nation building in Malaysia is marked by the non-recognition and exclusion of the ethnic minority cultures from the national culture. The historical factor for this predicament, in my view, is linked to imperialism and colonialism. The modern nation state requires the construction of an imagined community.[7] But, as a multi-racial postcolonial nation, Malaysia has a very different set of problems in comparison to Europeans' experiences of nation-building. For the agenda of colonial control to be effective, colonialism and imperialism constructed a plural society by grouping people of various different ethnicities and localities into the same colonial administration region.[8] With the ending of colonialism, the new nation inherited the legacies of this plural society from the former coloniser. The modern nation-state formed on this land has to deal with a significant variety of ethnic groups who were amalgamated into the same fate under this new nation. This fate can be a gift or a curse: for a postcolonial multi-racial nation like Malaysia, the 'fate' to deal with this plurality and multi-racial context is both challenging and an opportunity, for the success of creating a multicultural society can be a model for others to follow.

The successful Malaynisation, Islamisation and modernisation in Malaysia, in particular after 1970s, has further marginalised the non-Malay culture. At the state level, success has allowed its political leadership to act as spokespersons for the postcolonial world, and at the same time, new forms of social control have also been created. Since the 1970s, state development policies accompanying modernisation and globalisation are perceived as favouring particular ethnic groups, i.e. the Malays, and disadvantaging the non-Malays. This has led to a politicisation of ethnicity by which the maintenance of integration has been pursued through the development of social control mechanisms that in turn has given rise to new identities and tensions. The issue of race and ethnicity therefore has not disappeared with the state's idea of globalisation, but instead has become an ever more important political issue. In turn, because the political dimension of ethnicity has gained in prominence, today we find an overall ethnicisation and politicisation of everyday life.[9] Indeed, most issues of race are treated as sensitive issues and open discussion and debate about them is repressed. Inevitably, a sense of injustice and hurt is perceived by the marginalised groups, the dominated and the disenfranchised. The non-Malay ethnic minority, such as the Malaysian Chinese, is one of these disenfranchised groups. The former head of the opposition stated that 'non-Malays feel like second-class citizens in their own country'.[10]

Following the impact of colonialism and modernisation, and now globalisation, how do all these circumstances lead to the formation of a cultural identity of this plural society? More importantly, how does this affect Malaysian architecture and urban landscapes? Ambivalence around the inclusion and exclusion of non-Malay cultures is the key predicament in the construction of the modern Malaysian nation and this is reproduced in the architecture and urban space in cities. Having a large majority of Malaysians of Chinese origin is a historical characteristic of urban settlements throughout Malaysia.[11] The promotion of the Malay culture in Malaysian cultural policy means that urban Chinese heritage and history is consciously downplayed. The post-independence nation-building project by a Malay-dominated state subscribes to a notion of a Malay nationalism in order to amalgamate the multi-ethnic and multiculture society into a national imagination. The site of cultural contentions is centred over the status and place of different ethnic groups and cultures in the public sphere. To construct a national culture founded on Malay culture meant the construction of a public space where Malay and Islamic culture are omnipresent, while the non-Malay cultures are relegated to the periphery. However, to advance the Malay cultural symbols and Islam in public space, the state has to roll back the historically expansive presence of non-Malay cultural symbols in public space.

## WRITING POSTCOLONIAL SPACES: AIMS AND STRATEGIES

I situate this book in the studies of postcolonial architecture, city and urban space. This book engages with local and specific material practices and politics of postcolonial spaces. Taking Kuala Lumpur as its primary site of investigation, this book aims to write about postcolonial architecture and urban space with the inclusion of the contestations of ethnic minority. It explores a contested vision in which the marginal urban spaces and voices of the ethnic minority, i.e. the Malaysian Chinese, are present. I examine the spatial contestation of the repressed Malaysian Chinese against the state's construction of national identity and how, through their spatial struggle, this ethnic minority is contesting their cultural identity and negotiating their contemporary nationality and multiculturalism. By including the voice of the Malaysian Chinese in the nation-building of Malaysia, the book aims at problematising the conception of race, identity, nation-building and decolonisation in Malaysia and renders transparent the hegemonic construction of and race relations. It proposes a recuperative urban and architectural history that seeks to revalidate the marginalised spaces of Chinese settlement in Kuala Lumpur, and rescript them into the narrative of the postcolonial nation state.

One of the aims of this book is to address the contribution and challenges of the non-Muslim minority group and its urban spaces in a majority Muslim country which is lacking in the current academic discourse. Though some Muslim countries are home to some of the most diverse societies in the world, the current academic discourses treated these societies as homogenous nation. The main inquiry asks how multi-racial social space and urbanity are shaped by both the state's postcolonial nation-building project and the contestation of the Malaysian

Chinese, and what the implications for imagining and forging national identity and inter-racial relations in Malaysia are. The book has two major lines of inquiry. First, it asks how the factor of race has taken shape in buildings and urban forms in colonial and postcolonial Kuala Lumpur (KL) from the 1880s to 1980s; and how, in turn, these buildings and built forms helped to further shape race, identity and power relations. It traces the technologies of power embedded in the ever-changing form of racial strategies and (post)colonialism. In order to pursue these lines of inquiry, the study examines the state monumental projects in the 1990s, i.e. the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) project and the new administrative capital city of Putrajaya, as representing national identity and signifying cultural dominance of the Malays, while marginalising the Chinese. Second, it traces the negotiation and contestation on the part of the Chinese community and the social struggle of this minority group in the 1990s. It examines how the Chinese used their marginal urban spaces, i.e. historical and cultural landscapes such as the Kuala Lumpur Chinese Cemetery and Chinatown, and voices to contest their cultural identity and negotiate their contemporary nationalism.

The key concern of the book is to relate the city and its urban spaces to the process of decolonisation and de-imperialisation. It is about questioning, replacing, dismantling and transgressing the previous containments and hierarchies of space, power and knowledge that divided ethnic groups. It argues that the nation-building project has been plagued by the residues of racism and colonialism. Indeed, there is a form of internal colonisation in the country, which has seen further segregation and racialisation of ethnic relations, with injustice to the different 'other' in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sex etc. The study seeks to construct a history in order to mediate the future of the country; the purpose of history, after all, is not just to know the past but also to engage with the present and the years to come.[12] In the search for national origins and nationalism, colonial imaginations regarding visual cultures were often reconfigured to support nationalist agendas and later became an integral part of the rhetoric of new nation-states and their newly constituted national identities and national history. This colonial mentality needs to be challenged. By re-visioning and contesting nationalist history, people can re-imagine the city and the country as well as their political and cultural identity. More specifically, this points at the possible beginning of a re-visioning of a pluralistic society and living space. Therefore, this book aims at problematising the decolonisation project sanctioned by the postcolonial state in order to open up different possibilities of decolonising practices.

Due to the inter-disciplinary nature of the investigation, the study crosses disciplines such as postcolonial theory, cultural geography, cultural studies, ethnography, architecture and urbanism. I use three main strategies in this book.

### Engaging Ethnic Minority and Race

This book tells the story of the people, particularly the struggle of the repressed ethnic minority. It aims to reinterpret postcolonial architecture and urban space by including the contestations of the ethnic minority in the writing of the nation-building process. It challenges the conception of colonial/postcolonial city,

which focuses on giving voice to the once-colonised nation through the binary construction of coloniser/colonised, while keeping the ethnic minority groups in the shadow of the nation.

I argue that the postcolonial nation-building project aims at constructing the national subject and subscribing to a submission of minority groups. Hence, the study of the oppression and resistance of the minority groups is vital to reveal the condition of postcolonial architecture and urban space. Recent studies of once-colonised nations, particularly in Asia, show that reclaiming 'the freedom to imagine' the nation can be different to the prescribed script set by the coloniser. Geographer Brenda Yeoh's statement is representative:

> *For a postcolonial urban geography to aspire to significant breaks with the prescribed script, the first step would be for the once-colonised to claim 'the freedom of imagination' in a contested field of power to imagine our cities differently.*[13]

Exemplary studies have questioned the persistence of colonial genealogies in the contemporary imaginations of national past,[14] and have identified the agencies and strategies in constructing postcolonial identity.[15] However, significant scholarship seems to be lacking in articulating the contestation of the ethnic minority to the postcolonial state. There are two problems here. First, these studies work within the framework and spirit of the nation-state. While the studies celebrate the resistance of the colonised, they treat the nation as a homogenous entity. This is not sufficient to show the complexities and condition of a multi-racial nation and it silences the voices of ethnic minorities. Second, by juxtaposing the dualism of coloniser/colonised or West/East, these studies could fall into the danger of endorsing the existing power structure and nationalist narrative of the postcolonial regime and its state ideology.

In the broadest sense, this book investigates the inter-relations between race relations, political culture, cultural identity, urban space and architecture in a multi-racial and multicultural society. The obvious question is: if the politics, cultural identity and social relationships, in fact all aspects of Malaysia, are so racialised, and have their roots in the colonial past, then what is the role or relation of the architecture and urban space within this racialisation process, and what is the impact on the social relations and the forging of cultural identities?

One of my main arguments is that the postcolonial condition and the cultural oppression of the Malaysian Chinese is a condition which has not been fully explored by the current scholarship of postcolonialism and post-colonial city.[16] For example, taking the Chinese in Malaysia, John Hutynk has argued that scholarship has not achieved much in terms of promoting an openness that can undo exploitation and inequality.[17] I contend that using a postcolonial concept such as 'hybridity' to address the issue of difference cannot do justice to the oppressed condition of a repressed ethnic minority group such as the Malaysian Chinese. This view is supported by postcolonial theorist Rey Chow who ascertained the ethical affirmation of the historical and social as the site of struggle against exploitation. History, she asserts, should no longer be the master narrative, instead

it is difference, supplementary writing and other-ing.[18] She also warns that some popularised concepts like hybridity, diversity and pluralism can serve to obliterate questions of politics and histories of inequality, hence occluding the legacy of colonialism as understood from the viewpoint of the colonised, and as a result, ignoring the experiences of subalterneity that persist beyond the achievement of national development.[19]

In terms of tracing the persistence of coloniality, I focus on a specific theme, i.e. the racialised process within the urban landscape. It also argues that race relations play an important, if not the most important, role in shaping postcolonial urban form and architecture in a multi-racial society. I would like to critically register the cultural violence of both colonial and postcolonial states, as I believe the healing of the repressed ethnic minority in the postcolonial condition can be facilitated in this way. It hopes to be a text that can help the repressed ethnic minority to articulate the identity crisis they experience.

Gayatri Spivak's examination of the issue of subalternity serves as a reminder in my research. In response to Spivak's questioning of 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'[20] I treat the ethnic minority as one form of subalternity. My concern is 'How does the subaltern speak?' by investigating how the Malaysian Chinese community contested the meaning invested in the state's urban projects and how they identified themselves and invested their own meanings using their own urban projects. Spivak highlighted the danger of speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity of the subaltern or any community group as that will re-inscribe their subordinated position in society.[21] There is also the risk of falling on a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among heterogeneous people. This conception remains as a caution and guide, particularly in the analysis of the condition of the Malaysian Chinese when I use the term 'community'.

It must be pointed out that the ethnic Chinese in Kuala Lumpur or Malaysia are not all the same, they are themselves divided over dialect, clan loyalties, economic status etc.[22] Even the Chinese community mentioned throughout this book consists of different groups with variant responses and preferences toward preserving the Chinese spaces and history. I have adopted Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'Strategic Essentialism' freely here to use the provisional essentialised category of the 'Chinese community' in order to discuss more directly about the Chinese reaction, respond; and more importantly their political resistance to the state-sponsored nationalism and construction of urban space.

## Engaging Local Politics and Contestation of Power

This work engages with local and specific material practices and politics of postcolonial spaces. The study of Kuala Lumpur situates itself in the contested intellectual terrains and debates of postcolonialism in general, and (post)colonial architecture and cities in particular. It responds to a particular form of postcolonial scholarship concerned with the actual situations and political dimensions of specific postcolonial spaces. Anthony King calls for postcolonial academic works to engage with specific material practices, actual spaces and real politics.[23] King also calls for the engagement of scholars of the one-time colonised society to contest

the meta-narratives that emerge from the West and to offer alternatives on the basis of a more intimate local knowledge.[24] King's suggestions are in line with the aim of this book.

However, I contend that the 'scholars of the one-time colonised society' never existed as a homogenous entity; instead they consist of sometimes antagonistic and incommensurable members. Thus, the purpose of this study here is two-fold: First, to contest the meta-narratives (for example, a formulation of colonial and postcolonial city) with a more intimate local knowledge; second, and more importantly, to contest the cultural oppression and hegemonic national narratives by the postcolonial nation-state machinery. Indeed, this is a two-fold task and identity, and even 'fate', I argue, for any critical engagement of a scholarship from a minority group of a one-time colonised country.

The study of postcolonial architecture and urban space is currently lacking an emphasis on the relations between political cultures and the built environment, and how this contributes, produces and reproduces the social relations, identity and subjectivity of the people. One exception is Abidin Kusno's study on Indonesia. In his book *Behind the Post-Colonial*,[25] by treating modernity and modern architecture as a 'gift' inherited from the coloniser, Kusno shows how the postcolonial ruling regime re-articulates the colonial strategy and uses urban landscape to shape postcolonial political identities. His study, however, has placed emphasis only on the state machinery and imagination, and less on how the people negotiate their own political identities. This book will vary from Kusno's study in three aspects. First, this study will locate the racial politics embedded within the colonial and postcolonial state ideology and the racialised urban landscapes. Second, it refuses to see the nation as a single homogenous entity, whether in the context of the colonial or postcolonial state. Third, this book will include the on-the-ground struggle and negotiation of the minority group (in this case, the Malaysian Chinese) in contesting the national project and their subjectivity. It aims at providing a view from the bottom-up from the grass-roots, alongside the state's representation of space.

This book reveals the power of contestation (of the subjugated people) and the contestation to the state power. It takes the view that state power (colonial and postcolonial) will always be resisted; and therefore contestations and oppositions within colonial and postcolonial cities will always exist.

Adopting Benedict Anderson's formulation of imagined community, exemplary studies were done to examine how the nation was imagined through the state through nation-building architectural and urban projects.[26] Previous studies of colonial urbanism emphasised the ways in which colonial and postcolonial power exerted control over the indigenous population.[27] These studies remain useful references for this study, particularly regarding the way in which the urban symbolic and the representation of space were used to construct the colonial/postcolonial power. This book has a different focus, in which I try to examine the contestation of the minority, and rejects the idea that the imagined community is solely 'imagined' by the state.

My strategy here is to treat the city as a contested city. In this way, the colonial and postcolonial city can be read as anti-colonial and anti-(post)colonial city. A significant amount of more recent scholarship in the study of colonial cities has

been carried out to reveal the contestation of the colonised.[28] The focus of these studies, in different ways, is to regain the subject of the colonised by emphasising the role of the indigenous agency and resistance of the colonised subject. One of the implications of these studies is that (post)colonial cities, in my view, can be interpreted as anti-(post)colonial cities. In my view, the conception of the contested city has been implicated in Zeynep Celik's study on Algiers, Brenda Yeoh's exploration of colonial Singapore and Chu-Joe Hsia's essay on colonial Taiwan.[29] However, this book differs from the above noted studies in three ways. First, the above studies focus on colonial architecture and space, and do not examine the postcolonial condition. Second, the colonised, to a great extent, remains an apparently homogenous entity, i.e. neglecting the role of ethnic minority. Third, the above studies lack an examination of the impact of race and race relations. My study hopes to contribute to the field by emphasising these three issues.

Many recent studies on postcolonialism are concerned with 'writing back' to the West to free themselves from the cultural imperialism. On the contrary, I am more interested in investigating the cultural oppression of the repressed ethnic minority in the postcolonial condition. I am more interested in examining the condition of the diverse colonised people and nation after independence. The structure and spirit of this book is similar to Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* in terms of addressing both the power of cultural imperialism, but at the same time acknowledging the power of contestation.[30] Of course, my scope and research subject is very different, and instead of concerning myself with the dominant cultural power of the West and the contestation of the East, my focus here is on the cultural imperialism of the dominant postcolonial state and the contestation of the minority cultural and ethnic group within the nation.

### Engaging Alternative Research Materials

As a methodological and ethical consideration, this book employs alternative research materials and archives in a four-fold manner. First, it engages the representations, voices and media of the Chinese community, which are written in Chinese language (the official national languages in Malaysia are Malay and English, in either academic and public arenas). Second, it engages with local and regional scholars and theorists. Third, it engages with non-state-sponsored academics and materials, including verbal information from social activists. Fourth, personal struggles and experiences are intimated in the research and writing. These methods are explained in detail as follows.

Very often, writings on the postcolonial city do not reveal the condition of the life and perceptions of the local people. The faces and stories of the local people are often flattened in scholarship which emphasises totalising theories. This book tries to engage with the elusive politics of the street, or rather politics as seen from the street level, in order to disclose those hidden forces which contribute to the changing nature of cities and political identities.

As it aims at producing a critical interpretation of urban forms and challenging the normatised national narrative, the study, in part, relies on primary and secondary sources from relevant studies outside the conventional field of