

36th Southeast Asian Seminar

— Cities and Cultures in Southeast Asia —

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Between 20-23 November 2012, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), in collaboration with the Cebuano Studies Center of the University of San Carlos, held its 36th Southeast Asia Seminar entitled "Cities and Cultures in Southeast Asia." Twenty participants of 13 nationalities were selected from over 340 applicants to travel to Cebu City, the Philippines, where they were joined by six Philippine participants, to engage in intensive discussion on one of the most salient issues in the region: the rapid emergence and growth of cities and their impact in the lives of citizens in the region.

Southeast Asia has some of the world's largest and most vibrant cities. Roughly 250 million people or over 40% of the population in the region, live in urban areas. Mega-cities like Manila, Jakarta, and Bangkok are home to more than ten million people each, and serve as administrative and financial centers as well as migration, transportation and communication hubs. Singapore is touted as a "global city," a status to which Kuala Lumpur also aspires. "Secondary cities" like Cebu, - where the Seminar was held - Chiang Mai, Penang and Surabaya have histories and cultures that are as rich as those of the national capitals from whose shadows they are emerging as part of larger, polycentric urban systems (including corridors) and networks across the region.

Over three days of lectures and group discussions, the semi-

nar looked at the social and cultural processes and practices that have played out in the region; how cities have emerged, grown, decayed and changed; and how Southeast Asians are interpreting and voicing these transformations. Cities are concentrations of people, goods, capital, and infrastructure in space and across time; sites of power; objects of fantasies, aspirations, and "planning." They are concentrated spaces of cultural, national and world "heritage." Furthermore, they also fulfill the aim of functioning as the subject of literature, cinema, and other forms of representation. And importantly, they are arenas of contestation, struggle, and negotiation involving individuals, groups, communities, and institutions: the fundamental basis for social transformation.

Participants, with their own training, understandings and conceptualizations of urban change in Southeast Asia discussed the fast paced blurring of boundaries between the urban and rural, the increasing connections and hierarchies within and between cities and megacities, and how second-tier and smaller urban areas are making themselves felt in the culture, politics, and economy of Southeast Asian countries.

Three separate sessions were thematically organized along the themes "History and Heritage," "Cities and Urban Communities," and "Economic Transformation and Political Negotiation." The keynote address by Resil Morajes, one of the most promi-



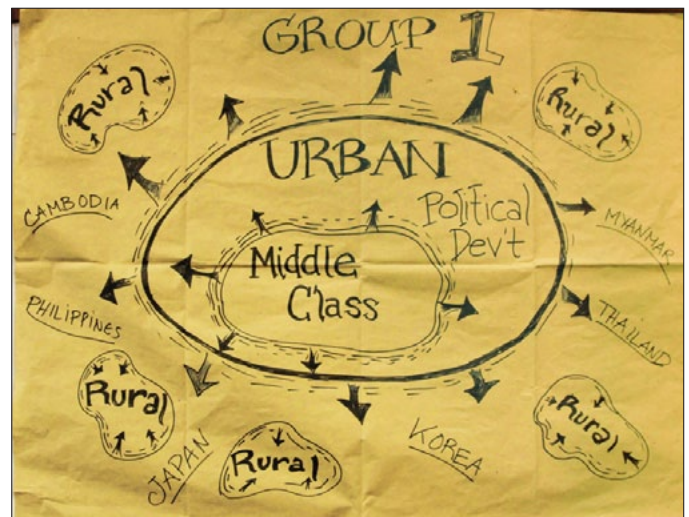
Participants in the 2012 Seminar gathering for a group photo

nant Philippinists active today, set the theme for the three days: what kind of conceptual tools do we need to be able to understand the wax and wane of the growth and transformation of cities in the 21st century? Morajes examined the conceptual possibilities and limits of a mandala for urban history and tried to build not a theory, but rather, encourage discussion on how we can rethink the growth of cities, taking Cebu as a case study. Morajes set the agenda by stating that for cities to be meaningful and satisfying places for those who dwell in them, a vision of coherence and wholeness must drive those engaged in the cities' making.

The "History and Heritage" session dealt with how cities figure in history and the imagination of those writing about them. Chris Baker looked at eighteenth-century Ayutthaya in terms of its previous booming, industrious and cosmopolitan features, in effect asking us to re-read the past in a new light. Jose Bersales explained the contested politics of imagining and creating Cebu's heritage and how this plays out in understandings and policy toward the modern day city. Hope Sabanpan-yu and Neil J. Garcia both explored how the city metaphorically plays out in literature, looking at gender roles and how the city, as a neocolonial construction articulates and influences gay and lesbian identities.

The "Cities and Urban communities" session followed up on the discussion on how cities articulate their residents and the imagination. This session focused more specifically on how ideas of cities shape the life processes and trajectories of their residents, and how people make and remake their cities. Nathan Badenoch, a linguist working in Southeast Asia, looked at three cases of the convergence of community, language, and cities to examine the tensions between the forces of homogenization and diversification of languages in the region. What Badenoch strongly emphasized was how cities can promote resistance to trends to homogenization that are usually promoted by national policy. Kenta Kishi, talked about the possibilities for self expression in urban spaces, discussed problems and solutions to contemporary urban development projects, framing his discussion within the re-discovery of positive potentials of urban community in contemporary Asian cities. Focusing on a form of "allegiance to being consistent," Kishi argued that "consistency" is a key to protecting and ensuring our efforts to achieve planning goals in the context of urban landscapes in Southeast Asia. Loh Kah Seng, a historian, shifted attention to "emergencies." Looking back into Singapore's history, Kah Seng spoke of the typecasts of disorderly urban growth in the creation and planning of stable postcolonial states. He explained how expert knowledge discourses shaped urban terrains in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and traced their echoes into the present to see how they impact upon understandings of expert-based disaster management. By looking at how states received the advice of international urban planning experts, our attention was brought to how policy makers, bureaucrats, and residents measured the varied responses toward development of urban cities

The final session, "Economic transformation and political negotiation" emphasized the disproportionate share of wealth that national capitals in the region command. Urbanization in cities has also shaped the various classes, yet capital accumulation has also led to schisms in cities whereby the urban poor co-inhabit the same spaces as gated communities. Pasuk Phongpaichit, speaking on trends in inequality, focused on contextualizing the contestation that took place between the



Display produced from a discussion group focusing on presentations given by lecturers.

Yellow and the Red Shirts in Thailand's contemporary politics. Phongpaichit made clear how different actors expressed and understood the urban-rural divide and how it was most pronounced in their political consciousness, aspirations, expectations toward the Thai government, consumption and lifestyles, and hopes and dreams about themselves and their family. What comes out of her commentary is that the rural population in Thailand is now a major force that is making more political demands to participate in electoral politics. When demands are resisted, tension, as evidenced in Bangkok in recent years, becomes palpable in urban areas. Okamoto Masaaki, a political scientist working on Indonesia, further highlighted how classes operate in large urban areas in Southeast Asia. Through an analysis of the Betawi, indigenous Jakartans, Okamoto suggested that there are new ways to interpret metropolitan class and identity politics. Yet, this is only when the historical roots and the contrast between the Betawi and other groups who share the urban space are factored into any consideration of electoral and bureaucratic politics in the megacity. He succinctly explained how the new middle and upper-middle classes impact upon Jakarta's urban politics. Finally, Kusaka Wataru, discussed class politics as they play out in Metro Manila. Whereas most studies on the Philippine's class politics have been conducted from the perspective of unequal distribution of wealth and modes of production between two parties, Kusaka persuasively argued that this focus misses the moral aspects of class politics. That is, the struggle over who gets to define rightness and draw moral borders that divide those who are right and wrong. Analyzing the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), Kusaka showed that the Authority's governance offers a false prescription through moral discourse which ultimately "camouflages" the real problems that afflict the urban landscape: an unequal socio-economic structure in which the poor cannot help violate laws to make ends meet.

What the seminar drove home for all participants is the need to further understand the growing changes that are radically altering the growth of megacities, the connections between them and national hinterlands, and the dense networks which traverse them. If we are to further pursue the nature of cities in the twenty-first century, then we need to continue to question them on their own terms in order to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of their growing power and influence in the Southeast Asian region.