

*Cities in motion: Urban life and cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940*

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The scholarship on early to mid-twentieth century Southeast Asia makes it easy to assume that the only thing people in cities were doing during that period was trying to foment nationalism. Radical and often charismatic nationalist leaders in all these countries began to imagine themselves as the future leaders of independent nation-states at roughly the same time, and scholars have not surprisingly focused much of their energy tracing the histories of individual nation-states in the region's late colonial cities between the 1920s and 1940s. While this scholarly interest on the emergence of nations and nationalism is understandable, it has led to a major blind spot regarding how social life in many Southeast Asian cities actually looked and felt. As Su Lin Lewis clearly and convincingly argues in this book, such a focus on the emergence of nation-states has obscured many of the ways in which Southeast Asian port cities fostered a sense of cosmopolitanism that actually transcended the sense of national consciousness so often written about. In her wide-ranging comparative study of Bangkok, Penang and Yangon during this period, Lewis takes readers into cosmopolitan worlds of books, movies, music, classrooms, and public life that were all outwardly oriented to the world at large. It turns out that people in the port cities of the region were not only focused on building nations; instead, many of them were trying to get into international schools, read the newest books, see the latest films, and listen to the most popular current global sounds. The truly fascinating story, then, is not that nationalist consciousness emerged at this time, but how it emerged in a symbiotic relationship with a burgeoning sense of global consciousness that often seemed to leapfrog over the nation.

The port cities Lewis examines were not just important parts of emerging nations. They were also — perhaps more importantly — marked by multi-ethnic interaction and interconnections with a modern world of circulating ideas that swirled around the globe along with new technologies of transport and communication. The polyglot urbanites in these cities were not only incipient nationalist heroes, but often saw themselves as members of a new kind of urban international class. They not only read and wrote about nationalist things, but read cosmopolitan newspapers written in global languages like English. They were multilingual students enrolled in English-language high schools and universities, music lovers listening to gramophone recordings of international as well as local music hits, film buffs versed in the most popular English-language blockbusters as well as more parochial films made in local languages for more ethnically segregated audiences. By focusing on the study of cities, Lewis vividly traces the interests of this cosmopolitan population. In doing so, she concertedly 'moves away from histories of the nation in favour of a deeper exploration of urban intellectual formation, civic cultures, regional connections, and transnational networks in the twentieth century' (p. 21).

The book is especially valuable for directing readers towards historical perspectives and sources that are often overlooked in overly nationalist histories. Lewis takes popular culture seriously and follows strains of music and fashion, as well as the social worlds that were emerging within the international schools that were appearing in all of these cities. Instead of a parochial nationalism, the young people in these schools were multilingual, were able to communicate across national boundaries in refined English, and cultivated cosmopolitan tastes and attitudes. Their identities were framed by the sense that they were city-dwellers connected to other city dwellers very much like them. While a Yangon modern girl at the time might have been starting to understand herself as Burmese, it is also true that she would likely see herself as having more in common with a Bangkok modern girl than with a rural woman from her own country. Lewis's book is full of stories and examples of this cosmopolitan outlook, and offers readers a valuable look at the everyday life and interests among city residents in the region's port cities between 1920 and 1940.

One of the challenges in writing an ambitious comparative book like this is deciding how to convey the wealth of information covered while at the same time drawing the reader into the more intimate details of everyday lives discussed. At times, (perhaps because I am an anthropologist) I would have liked to hear more details about the lives of some of the individuals discussed in the book, which would have helped convey the ambivalent tensions they faced in their struggle to reconcile their cosmopolitan outlook with more national commitments. For example, the brief discussion of the Burmese female writer Khin Myo Chit (an intellectual book lover who nonetheless rejected radical books as 'unreadable' and instead preferred detective novels and movies) offers tantalising assertions about the way her story can 'complicate and diversify the nature of the student experience at Rangoon University'. But her story itself remains truncated in the book, and excerpts from her memoirs are kept overly short. In this regard, emphasising the comparative similarities across Bangkok, Penang, and Rangoon comes at the expense of offering more intimate historical detail. However, this should be recognised as a strategic choice rather than a fatal flaw. Let us hope that the author will flesh out some of these fascinating stories in future publications.

The nearly simultaneous development of independence movements throughout the region after the Second World War has understandably led scholars to focus much of their attention on the intimate connection between late colonialism and the twentieth-century development of national consciousness in the region. As Su Lin Lewis shows, however, the development of nationalism should not obscure the ways in which Southeast Asians in this period were interested in cross-cultural interaction and developed the cosmopolitan sensibilities that are so evident across the region. This book should be recommended reading for any scholar interested in Southeast Asian intellectual and social history, and is a necessary complement to the standard narratives of nationalism that have become so central to the way we understand the region.

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