

Introduction: Seeing through the City

In 1922, the Edinburgh Geographic Institute published a new edition of the *Times Atlas of the World*.¹ Vivid colours portrayed old empires, new empires, and burgeoning nation-states in the wake of the First World War. The political map of Asia featured a blush of British imperial red crossing Afghanistan, India, and Malaya. Purple enveloped Korea as part of the Japanese empire. A lemon-yellow China occupied its centre, connected in colour to an independent Siam, which sat nestled between British Burma and French Indochina. A distinctive new Turkey jutted towards the map's top left corner, while Java, the last stronghold of the Dutch maritime empire, dipped below its frame. On closer inspection of the bottom half of the map, where the sea appears in faded blue, one finds a constellation of lines tracking distances, marked in nautical miles, from Aden to Zanzibar and Bombay, from Colombo to Rangoon and Penang, from Singapore to Bangkok and Saigon, from Manila to Hong Kong and Shanghai, and from Yokohama to Vancouver and San Francisco. Snaking black rail lines linked ports to hinterlands, and cities to each other across porous borders. The plotting of these routes signalled an inter-connected web of mobility and exchange, linking Asia's busiest ports.

These lines depict a world in motion, in which port-cities were nodes of commerce, communication, and power. Old European empires had invested in them, making them prizes that a rising new Japanese empire sought to claim. By the 1920s, they were dynamic environments in which Asians could re-imagine the world. The drawing of new borders as well as the speed of travel and communication inaugurated radical mental shifts. Port-cities were hotbeds for religious reformers, aspiring political leaders, new literati, and a rising middle class. News of the Philippine Revolution of 1898, the Chinese Revolution of 1911, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 inspired Asian nationalists and socialists to join forces against European colonial rule. The Khilafat movement of 1920 led Muslims to see themselves as part of transnational Islamic *umma*, as Malay,

¹ This map is available at www.cambridge.org/Cities_in_Motion

Sumatran, and Javanese students formed new regional communities in Cairo. Martial ideas of race in Europe and the colonial world existed alongside calls for world brotherhood. Asian anarchists and communists saw the city as a site of economic disparity, while Asian capitalists saw opportunity and social mobility. Women, for the first time, joined international movements and seized new educational and professional opportunities, while the modern girl emerged as a global phenomenon in fashion, advertising, and film.² Gramophone companies, jazz musicians, cinema magnates, and entertainers moved through Asia, introducing technologies, sounds, and images shared at a global level.

While movement, migration, and bustling cities characterize this period, the story of twentieth-century Asia has been dominated by the rise of the nation-state. Upon inheriting the state from departing colonial powers, Asia's post-colonial political leaders wove narratives of the greatness of past civilisations, while elevating the importance of race, religion, and language as fundamental social bonds. School textbooks focus on revolutionary wars and key nationalist elites. Scholarly accounts of the period, born largely out of regional studies departments created during the Cold War, dwelled on the emergence of distinct ethnic and religious identities. Recently, historians have begun to focus on gender and notions of 'popular' nationalism; while illuminating, these continue to be confined within particular country histories. This book widens the lens, adopting three inter-connected cities rather than the nation as a frame of reference. It focuses on the urban sphere as an environment that was simultaneously modern and multi-ethnic. Rather than privilege any one ethnic community or nation-state, I locate the emergence of a nascent and cosmopolitan civil society in Asia in its multi-ethnic port-cities.

Four themes run through this book: global and regional connection, the city as a cosmopolitan site, the rise of a self-consciously progressive middle class, and the cultivation and prominence of youth in modern civic life. The port-city was a site of encounters and tensions between the local and the global, between various ethnicities and religions, between authoritarian rulers and a critical public, and between the young and the old. Colonial-era port-cities were fraught with racial hierarchies and economic inequality, yet they were also incubators of modern sensibilities open to new ideas of political and social change, from democratic government to women's rights. These cosmopolitan histories have been buried

² Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, 'Introduction: Orienting the Global Women's Suffrage Movement', in *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004): 1–23; Alys Eve Modern Girl Around the World Research Group et al., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

in acts of post-colonial forgetting and the creation of ethno-centred national narratives; yet they nonetheless left substantial legacies for cultural pluralism and activism still present in these cities today.

A World of Connections

While sociologists see ‘global cities’ as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, associated with accelerated flows of capital, information, and migrant labour accompanying global integration, historians have traced these processes much further back in time. Port-cities and market-oriented city-states, antecedents to today’s global cities, knitted together the world’s regions and acted as key nodes within social and commercial networks. The cosmopolitan trading ports of maritime Asia have deep roots, and are part of the history of globalisation. The area known to Chinese merchants as the ‘Southern Ocean’, the *Nanyang*, and to Indian, Malay, and Arab merchants as the ‘land below the winds’ has acted as a gateway for Asian and global commerce for over a millennium.³ From spices and copper in the early modern age to rice, teak, and tin in the colonial era, the region’s wealth of natural resources and long coastlines have long provided a stimulus for maritime trade. Historians often compare Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean – an interconnected zone of commerce, unified by the sea.⁴ Some argue that it is Southeast Asia’s long-standing involvement in trade and receptivity to the outside world that has enabled many ordinary Southeast Asians to develop ‘modern’ sensibilities, open to the cultural appropriation of new trends.⁵

In his seminal two-volume work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Anthony Reid points to the vibrant, adaptable trading cultures of early modern Southeast Asia to highlight its central role in a world linked through maritime trade. This world suffered a contraction in the seventeenth century and was further disrupted by the entry of European trading powers, backed by weapons and gunships. Local rulers’ loss of control over trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth century resulted, according to

³ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: The Lands Below the Winds, 1450–1680* (New Haven: Yale, 1988).

⁴ Georges Coedès, *Les États Hindouïses D’Indochine Et Indonésie*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680 Vol. 2: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Francois Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean: Port-Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th–21st Century* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011). For a critique of this approach see Heather Sutherland, ‘Southeast Asian History and the Mediterranean Analogy’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34:1 (2003).

⁵ O.W. Wolters, ‘Southeast Asia as a Southeast Asian Field of Study’, *Indonesia* 58 (1994): 1–17. Barbara Watson Andaya, ‘Historicising “Modernity” in Southeast Asia’, *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40:4 (1997).

Reid, in the demise of cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia's port-cities and a shift of direction that was not to be reversed until nationalists were able to wrest control of the state in the revolutionary and post-colonial era of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet during the colonial era, regional and global connections, urbanism, and cosmopolitanism were revived and transformed. Empires linked vast swathes of territory, and produced accelerated amounts of traffic in various forms. The late nineteenth century was a watershed for new connections to emerge, following the opening of the Suez Canal, when the flow of capital, goods, and ideas in, through, and out of Asia grew exponentially. This was a turbulent age, in which Southeast Asian port-cities, some of the most ethnically diverse urban centres in the world, experienced unprecedented levels of economic and demographic growth. Urban geographers attribute the spectacular levels of growth in these cities to their status as 'nerve centres for colonial exploitation' and gateway cities that channelled primary commodities – rice, tin, rubber, and sugar – from their hinterlands into the global economy.⁶ European commercial firms grew rich on these resources, and adopted ideas of 'white prestige' and racial superiority to justify their right to rule.

While port-cities were, indeed, vectors for the exploitation of raw materials, they also produced dynamic societies transformed by demographic growth, migration, and investment. By looking through the lens of multiple port-cities, we see how global networks and channels of influence ran through the region simultaneously. Innovations in sanitation, public transportation, and municipal governance changed the shape of modern urban life. Sojourning migrants began to put down roots, building families in expanding cities. The growing ease of travel and the acceleration of communications served as a channel for ideas and the emergence of a small professional, intellectual, and creative class.⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s, young men and women flocked to cities for education and social mobility. Port-cities were entry-points for books, newspapers, films, and other sources of information. Tracts espousing communist revolution, pan-Asianism, and religious reform circulated through underground networks and via the speeches of travelling pundits in public halls and city streets. Reuters wires and discerning Asian newspaper proprietors and editors channelled news of social and political movements occurring elsewhere in the world. Film magnates brought cinema from Hollywood, Bombay,

⁶ T. McGee, *The Southeast Asian City* (New York: Praeger, 1967); Gregg Huff, 'Export-Led Growth, Gateway Cities and Urban Systems Development in Pre-World War II Southeast Asia', *Journal of Development Studies* 48:10 (2012): 1431–52.

⁷ On the 'creative class', see Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Hong Kong, and Shanghai to Asian audiences, while jazz, Tamil and Hindi drama music, and Chinese opera circulated through the radio and the recordings of the Gramophone Company, inspiring Asian artists to create new forms of popular culture that combined both local and global influences.

Competing models of modern life emerged from all over the world to challenge existing structures of power within colonial society, ridden with ossified racial hierarchies. Western influences contested each other, with the popular ascendancy of what Henry Luce called 'the American century' providing a new model of the West for Asian audiences. Democratic ideals and the mass consumer culture of the jazz-age side lined the image of colonial empires, weakened, and weathered after the First World War.⁸ News of the proceedings in Paris in 1919 was transmitted over news wires to cities all over the world, with the Wilsonian ideal of self-determination and the League of Nations providing the promise of an international fellowship of free states.⁹ While ideas of internationalism continued to resonate, visions of pan-Asianism and socialist brotherhood emerged as the League's promises proved futile to the colonial world, generating a new sense of imaginary, non-imperial futures.¹⁰ Moscow offered the promise of a truly international brotherhood, while Ireland's fight for independence provided a blueprint for colonial states under British rule. Meanwhile, industrialising Japan, revolutionary China, Russia, India, Turkey, and Egypt provided non-Western models of independent, modern, and politically dynamic societies. These events, reported in local newspapers, made an impact not only the mentalities of emerging political elites, but everyday urbanites – from doctors, journalists, and teachers to aspiring musicians, cinema-goers, schoolchildren, and modern girls. They provided a new framework for comparison to that of metropole and colony, creating fresh vocabularies for Asians to challenge the colonial order and view their place on an international stage. Outside influences and ideas came from all over the world, and were turned over, debated, appropriated, hybridised, and made relevant to local audiences.

New rail and communications links enabled states to exert control over the hinterland and centralise their administrations, but they also forged connections to the world and to the rest of the region. A regional rail

⁸ For an excellent account of America's influence in the region during the interwar period, see Anne L. Forster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ See Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms', *American Historical Review* (2012): 1461–85.

network connected Bangkok, Penang, and Singapore, facilitating inter-city travel and accelerating Siam's engagement with Europe and the Indian Ocean world. Independent learned societies in the region, formed of both Asian and Western intellectuals, wrote to each other and exchanged publications, and were the first to generate the term 'South-east Asia'. Clubs and associations generated new regional networks as well as publications calling for colonialism's demise and new visions of multi-ethnic citizenship. Intensified connections produced new modes of belonging not simply to empires and ethnicities, but to cities, to civic cultures, to multi-ethnic nations, to new regional and transnational communities, and to a world becoming increasingly, perceptibly smaller.

The Depression highlighted how closely Southeast Asian societies were integrated into the global economy. As Wall Street collapsed at the end of the twenties, Americans stopped producing automobiles and global sources of credit dried up. By the 1930s, Southeast Asian economies suffered from an oversupply of rubber and sugar, while the rice frontiers of the Mekong, Irrawaddy, and Chao Praya river deltas came to a close.¹¹ Indian Chettiar migrants, having lost access to sources of outside credit, were forced to foreclose on loans to Burmese agricultural workers, halting the flow of capital that had helped open up the delta and breeding seething discontent in the countryside. Many urbanites were able to make do as commodity prices fell, yet the Depression also tested race relations. Colonial authorities and commercial industries divided workers along ethnic lines during periods of social unrest and imposed new immigration restrictions, and unemployed native workers lashed out at new, migrant communities who worked for lower wages. Long-standing, affluent migrants, such as the Chinese, were forced to seek new sources of revenue as tax-farms on opium and gambling were shut down. It was a difficult time for Southeast Asian economies, but it was also one in which government intervention and investment into industry grew – due in large part to the Asian commercial class – and urban economies remained relatively robust. In spite of the economic and racial tensions exacerbated by the Depression, particularly in the countryside, Asian urbanites continued to look outwards as well as in, forming connections and seeking new sources of social change.

The Cosmopolitan City

Cosmopolitanism is an elusive but exceedingly popular term among scholars, one that resonates with the consciousness of living within an

¹¹ Peter Boomgaard and Ian Brown, *Weathering the Storm: The Economies of Southeast Asia in the 1930s Depression* (Leiden: KITLV, 2000), p. 2.

increasingly integrated world. Around the turn of this millennium, scholars of international law and ethical philosophy reclaimed Kant's Enlightenment vision of a global fellowship of nations, or a 'global civil society', as a cosmopolitan ideal. Literary critics, sociologists, and anthropologists employ cosmopolitanism as an analytical category which destabilises rigid cultural identities within a globalised world, punctured by the movements of exiles, migrants, and travellers.¹² In the words of historical geographer Caroline Cartier, cosmopolitanism is a useful, 'humanist counterpart to globalization.'¹³ Discerning scholars have made a distinction between cosmopolitanism as an abstract moral ideal and cosmopolitan practices, or 'actually existing cosmopolitanism'.¹⁴ The notion of cosmopolitanism as a practice, and more specifically a process, is adopted in this book. A number of historians have latched onto cosmopolitanism as a mode of describing 'ways of being' in the world that move away from the stark, anachronistic boundaries of nations to examine cross-border flows, hybrid identities, and modes of affiliation that cross-cut communal divides.¹⁵

The port-city, in particular, is an appropriate site to ground cosmopolitanism, given its status as a node within global commercial, migratory, and intellectual flows, and its ability to attract inhabitants of diverse backgrounds. Alexandria, Tangiers, and other port-cities of the Mediterranean have long been seen as cosmopolitan arenas, where people adapted and adopted cultural forms from other confessional groups.¹⁶

¹² See for example Carol A. Breckenridge et al. (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Stephen Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

¹³ Carolyn Cartier, 'Cosmopolitics and the Maritime World City', *Geographical Review* 89:2 (1999): 279.

¹⁴ See Craig J. Calhoun, 'The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travellers: Towards a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (2002); Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, *Cosmopolitanism in Practice* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

¹⁵ See Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne, 'Cosmopolitanism: Its Pasts and Practices' and other articles in *Journal of World History* 21:3 (2010); Sheldon Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Shuang Sheng, *Cosmopolitan Publics: Anglophone Print Culture in Semi-Colonial Shanghai* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2009).

¹⁶ Kenneth McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change', *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 83; Dieter Haller, 'The Cosmopolitan Mediterranean: Myth and Reality', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 129:1 (2004): 29–47; Henk Driessen, 'Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered', *History and Anthropology*, 16:1 (2005), 129–41; Will Hanley, 'Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle Eastern Studies', *History Compass* 6:5 (2008): 1346–67.

At the eastern end of the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia's port-cities have been just as diverse, though the extent to which their inhabitants interacted and emulated each other is still up for debate.¹⁷ Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok – though late eighteenth-century creations – emerged within a historical lineage of Southeast Asian port-cities exposed to high degrees of cross-cultural interaction and long-distance trade. A walk through their waterfront landscapes, markets, and built environments is a visible testament to long-standing communities of multiple faiths. Chinese, Indians, Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, Hadrami Arabs, and other regional trading communities from the Mons of Burma to Javanese and Bugis traders constituted a powerful presence throughout these cities. Western observers tended to describe Asian port-cities as 'mosaics' and 'kaleidoscopes', as 'colourful' but also fragmented spaces. The influential colonial scholar J.S. Furnivall argued that these distinct communities were 'plural societies' that were self-segregating, engaging with each other only in the realm of commerce. Historical geographers have continued to turn to Furnivall to describe colonial port-cities like Singapore, where diverse communities lived essentially separate lives, interacting only in the marketplace. The spatial geography of colonial cities such as Singapore as well as Rangoon, with its European cantonment areas, is a testament to this, as are distinct ethnic enclaves of native, Chinese, and Indian communities.

In Southeast Asia, colonial-era port-cities were *visibly* cosmopolitan in that they accommodated a host of diverse ethnic and religious groups, but they were also sites of racial tension and conflict. Europeans created stark racial hierarchies, spatial divisions, and, within colonial settings, erected seemingly insurmountable barriers to positions of power. Migrant communities were seen to occupy privileged economic positions, and were sometimes viewed as isolated communities who kept to their own kinship groups. But from street markets and festivals to buildings and infrastructure, these cities were built on migrant labour and economic activity derived from trade. Most migrants were not at the top of the social ladder, but often worked in the lowest-paid and most demanding jobs that locals refused to take – as street-sweepers, rickshaw runners, petty traders, and dockworkers. At times of economic crisis, as in 1930s Rangoon after the Depression, racial tensions erupted into conflict when many Burmese were traders and artisans were forced to compete with menial Indian (and particularly Indian Muslim) labour.

The particular context of colonial modernity, while creating social divisions, also produced new kinds of affiliation. Some of these were

¹⁷ McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change', p. 83.

'national' in character, reaching out to a wider ethno-linguistic community to restore a sense of cultural pride. Many of the promoters of nationalism were themselves cosmopolitans – they went to multi-ethnic schools and universities within towns and cities, they studied foreign languages and ideas, and they drew on various models of political change from elsewhere. But cultural nationalism was one mode of affiliation among many new kinds of identities emerging within the context of the cosmopolitan city. Popular theatre, entertainment parks, and street parades created a spectacle of a hybrid, multi-ethnic social landscape. What Sumit Mandal calls 'trans-ethnic solidarities' also emerged among the urban poor in colonial settings; oral history interviews point to evidence that in 1930s Penang, low-income communities relied heavily on their neighbours as a social safety net regardless of race; even among the racial conflicts of 1930s Burma, intellectuals accused the colonial government of inciting divisions between communities, advocating workers' solidarity.¹⁸

Nowhere was cross-cultural interaction more apparent than among an aspiring, urban middle class. In colonial cities, the 'Colour Bar' limited Asians from attaining high positions in the colonial civil service, but experiences of exclusion also served to unite Asian professionals. The 1920s and 1930s were a period of political and social change: a small number of Asians began to enter the ranks as magistrates, legislators, parliamentarians, lecturers, and higher-level civil servants. Some Europeans stepped out of, or avoided, the walls of the colonial clubhouse to fraternise with Asians in underground associations and other semi-private venues. Furnivall himself was a member of a learned society which accommodated European, Burmese, as well as Chinese members. While some migrants did remain in their own self-enclosed communities, others participated in civic life with local counterparts. Alongside communal and religious associations, traditionally seen as the hotbeds for ethnic nationalism, emerged non-political organisations of minority communities, as well as a host of multi-ethnic secret societies, labour unions, women's groups, philanthropic and professional associations, sports teams, and literary societies. These associations testify to the emergence of a 'civic' rather than an 'ethnic nationalism' within cities, one which cross-cut ethnic lines.

¹⁸ Sumit Mandal, 'Transethnic Solidarities, Racialization and Social Equality' in Edmund Terence Gomez, *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity, and Reform* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), pp. 49–78; Harold de Castro, oral history interview conducted by Michelle Low, 2 September 2005, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Disc 1; Than Tun, 'Race Riots in Burma', *Workers' International News*, September 1938.

The vernacular press was a harbinger of nationalism rooted in linguistic solidarity, as Benedict Anderson has argued, yet Asian port-cities also witnessed the emergence of presses in various languages, and thus multiple 'imagined communities' existing in the same civic space.¹⁹ In cities like Penang, Singapore, Rangoon, Bangkok, and Manila, which witnessed a host of newspapers emerging in a number of Asian languages, a new kind of English press emerged, which in many cases challenged English-language papers written by and for European elites. These new newspapers were financed and staffed by a diverse group of multilingual Asians and covered multiple dimensions of urban life, while critiquing the policies of the colonial and, in Bangkok's case, absolute state. Mission schools, schools started by long-established migrant communities, private experiments in bilingual education, and universities at home and abroad brought different communities together to learn in pluralist educational environments. These served as platforms for Asian urbanites to challenge rigid hierarchies, assert new and often hybrid visions of cultural identity, and interact among diverse ethnic groups.

For many urban-dwellers at this time, personal experiences of migration, sociability, exposure to books and ideas, new educational environments, popular culture, and trade and consumption entailed encounters with foreign ideas and ways of life, and instilled a sense of an awareness of the wider world, one that occurred simultaneously with a search for cultural authenticity. Apart from cross-cultural interaction, cosmopolitanism also entailed a process of becoming self-consciously 'modern'. What Frederick Cooper calls the 'politics of engagement' within colonial situations often required, on the part of Asian actors, mentalities that were cosmopolitan, reflecting a willingness to take on new ideas and employ them to make political claims.

In this book, the city provides the arena for examining different layers of cross-cultural interaction, challenging historical narratives of the period that focus on communal division. Here, cosmopolitanism is not an abstract ideal, nor a condition of migration or exile, but a *process* of negotiation between diverse communities participating in a dynamic and shared public sphere. I look at three different aspects of cosmopolitanism: the interactions between various ethnic groups within the domain of the city; the appropriation, integration, and hybridisation of various cultural influences to produce new visions of modernity; and a commitment to social improvement that often cross-cut communal lines. As a site populated by migrants, continually exposed to new ideas

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

and influences, and where various races and classes had to learn to live together, the city provided the venue for all three strands of cosmopolitanism to feed off each other. Cosmopolitanism entailed a sense of 'double consciousness' of both global processes and local pluralism, as well as a commitment to social change. This commitment could take the form of broad-based nationalism, civic participation, philanthropy, social reform, or participation in spheres of debate and in the production of hybrid cultural forms. To enclose the politics of the colonial era within the singular category of anti-colonial or ethnic nationalism is to miss the other kinds of everyday politics that emerged in these plural societies. The inclusion of non-colonial Bangkok in this study and engagement with the historiography of 'popular' nationalism in early twentieth-century Siam allow us to see connections we may miss when we focus solely on anti-colonial politics, or when we forget the importance of the urban environment.

The process of cosmopolitanism that emerged in Southeast Asia's colonial-era port-cities was profoundly local, rooted in cities where diverse ethnic and religious groups lived in close proximity, and where an emerging group of civic leaders, professionals, artists, literati, and students worked with and inspired each other to make cultural and political claims in the interests of a broader society. The patterns of exchange that emerged between the trading communities of an earlier, pre-colonial age persisted tenaciously in the age of colonialism, communalism, and narrow nationalism. In the city, civic communities were not imagined, but *built* through the intimate, face-to-face interactions of individuals able to look to shared notions of community, despite racial and religious differences.

History from the Middle

Popular portrayals of the contemporary Asian middle class depict a picture of Asian consumers, attached to cell phones, frequenting shopping malls, and eating at Western fast-food chains.²⁰ Marketing companies see them as symptomatic of white-collar professionals emerging out of the Southeast Asian economic boom of the 1980s. The middle classes have also been an important source of contemporary social change in the region, bringing down dictators in the Philippines in 1988 and in Indonesia in 1998, and providing the bulwark of civil society as members and patrons of the press, NGOs, and voluntary associations. Yet the

²⁰ See Richard Robinson and David S. G. Goodman. *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Asian middle class is not a new phenomenon, nor is it one modelled on the West, as some historical narratives would have us believe.²¹ The origins of the middle class in Southeast Asia lie at least as far back as the early modern era, and particularly to the mobile Asian trading communities who were not bound by hierarchical loyalty to native kings and feudal lords. The autonomous, cosmopolitan maritime kingdoms of the early modern era are often seen in a positive light, yet were largely built on slave labour, feudal obligation, and often discouraged the rise of a native commercial class.²² This was particularly true in the seventeenth century with the introduction of revenue farming, where predominantly Chinese businesses were given a monopoly on port and market duties, salt, opium, and gambling in return for an advanced sum given to the ruler. In the nineteenth century, both colonial rulers and Siamese kings irrevocably transformed the urban and rural landscape, and depended on trading diasporas to provide small-scale capital and spur commercial growth. Powerful Chinese business communities emerged in Bangkok, Rangoon, Singapore, Saigon, and Manila throughout the nineteenth century. Migrant traders to the region followed the pattern of marrying native women, resulting in the creation of hybrid communities who were influential in shaping a nascent public sphere, as in the case of the Straits-Chinese and Jawi-Peranakan (Tamil Muslim and Malay) communities in Singapore and Penang, who played a critical role in establishing printing presses in Chinese, Malay, and English.

The late colonial era was an age of opportunity for an expanding urban middle class, one composed of local, migrant, and hybrid communities. By the 1920s and 1930s, most Southeast Asian cities saw a marked expansion in education, particularly for women.²³ This resulted in the rise of urban professionals – of teachers, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and civil servants – some of whom were barred from exclusive professional associations and the higher echelons of government service, either due to their race (in colonial Southeast Asia) or their lack of noble blood (in Siam). It was a landmark period for the formation of modern,

²¹ A. Ricardo Lopez with Barbara Weinstein, 'Introduction: We Shall Be All: Toward a Transnational History of the Middle Class', in *The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History*, eds. Lopez and Weinstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 5.

²² See Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce Volume 2*; Anthony Milner, 'Who Created Malaysia's Plural Society?', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (2003): 1–24; Ian Brown, *Economic Change in South-East Asia, c. 1830–1980* (Oxford, 1997).

²³ For excellent synopses of the entry of women into the public sphere and public discourse in Bangkok and Rangoon, see Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002) and Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

outward-looking, middle-class sensibilities in Asia, with professionals and educated youth participating in new kinds of critical and associational life. In Burma, educated urbanites read Marx and the tracts of Fabian socialism, and helped organise labour movements in the 1930s in the wake of the Depression, arguing on behalf of those without a voice in the public sphere.

The expansion of print and associational culture in this period has often been viewed through the lens of nationalism, in both colonial and non-colonial contexts. In a classic, yet still unpublished PhD dissertation, Matthew Copeland re-examined the 1920s as period of popular (rather than state-driven) nationalism in Thailand, describing processes such as the growth of the press, the critique of authority, and calls for democracy.²⁴ While 'nationalism' has often served as a useful framing device, the growth of print culture in Siam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia can more broadly be attributed to processes of increased urbanisation, rising educational levels, and the desire for political participation by an emerging and socially engaged middle class. In the colonial context, 'nationalism' has often been seen as an anti-colonial reaction among a group of radical intellectuals, often resulting in the emergence of new racial identities. William Roff situates the growth of the Malay press and the rise of an 'autochthonous intelligentsia' within the rubric of nationalism, while Anthony Milner examines the rise of race-based nationalism in Malaya, particularly around the use of the Malay term *bangsa*. Members of the *thakin* movement in Burma often employed the language of race in pursuit of nationalist aims, excluding politically active students from migrant backgrounds. Ethnic and religious nationalisms were among many offshoots of a broad-based process of imagining modern notions of self and community, one that came from educational opportunities and new professional and political expectations. A number of important intellectuals, activists, and others emerged within the pluralist, multi-lingual context of Penang, Singapore, Bangkok, and Rangoon, and consciously moved away from race-based nationalism to argue for broad-based social change and pluralist visions of the nation.²⁵

²⁴ See Matthew Copeland, 'Contested Nationalism and the 1932 Overthrow of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Australian National University, History, 1993) and Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*.

²⁵ Singapore is not included in this study, but excellent work has already been done on the city and its Anglophone intellectuals by Mark Frost, 'Emporium in Imperio: Nanyang Networks and the Straits-Chinese in Singapore, 1819–1914', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36:1 (2005) and Mark Ravinder Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, *Singapore: A Biography* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009); as well as Chua Ai Lin, 'Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-War Singapore's in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, ed. Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

By the early twentieth century, it was becoming increasingly common for both long-established migrant communities as well as affluent and urban Malay and Burmese communities and professionals to send their children to Western and bilingual schools. Members of this aspiring middle class have often been portrayed as a homogenous group of ‘Western-educated’ professionals, officials, intellectuals, and merchants, shaped largely by Western values emanating from the colonial metropolis.²⁶ Yet, particularly in Asia’s cosmopolitan cities, this class was ethnically diverse and often multi-lingual, moving in and out of various social worlds and networks. European languages – particularly English – solidified imperial linkages while also providing a means of questioning these ties in the languages of the coloniser, employing ideals of citizenship, freedom, and self-determination. More importantly for the purposes of this book, English (and in some cases, French, Spanish, and to a lesser degree, Dutch) also served as link languages between educated Asians of diverse backgrounds within the city, the region, and the wider world.²⁷ While Siam’s aristocracy had taken to Western education since the late nineteenth century, by the 1920s and 1930s, a growing group of middle-class professionals in Bangkok learned English, French, and German in order to work alongside Europeans in Siam’s civil service and expand their professional clientele, and also so that they could read and learn about the world. In colonial settings, these local bilingual literati translated books as well as foreign news for the vernacular press, providing ‘models’ of nation-ness, as Anderson has argued, as well as other models of modernity, including international feminism. Local bilingual Asians – rooted cosmopolitans – were transmitters of new ideas from, as well as *to*, the world outside the port-city.

In Bangkok, Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, and Manila, English newspapers and journals were produced and funded by Asians to reach a wide audience. They were vehicles by which Asians moved beyond discussions of ethnicity to speak to each other in a period when English grew in importance as a powerful global, and regional, lingua franca. Readership of such newspapers was limited to a few thousand at most. Yet their readers were influential figures within emerging, cosmopolitan publics, providing critical voices and forming new networks to push for political change. They suggest that print-capitalism not only invented a sense of nationalism, as Anderson has suggested, but also overlapping

²⁶ Takashi Shiraishi, ‘Introduction: The Rise of Middle Classes in Southeast Asia’, in *The Rise of Middle Classes in Southeast Asia*, eds. Takashi Shiraishi and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2008).

²⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 5.

notions of community within cities and across borders. The use of English by Asians as a sign of modernity and worldliness did, nonetheless, spark class divisions within cities and between cities that emerged particularly in the post-colonial period of nation-building and continue today. Yet among a burgeoning civil society in the region, English also served to connect diverse communities and contributed to ideas of broad-based social justice, while also giving Asians an outlet to challenge the tenets of colonial rule and, as in the case of Siam, renegotiate unequal extraterritorial treaties on a diplomatic stage.

Anderson has argued that around 1900, 'young educated people in Batavia (Jakarta) knew more about Amsterdam than they did about a Cambodia with which their ultimate ancestors had close ties, while their cousins in Manila knew more about Madrid and New York than about the Vietnamese littoral a short step across the South China Sea'.²⁸ Yet increasingly by the 1930s, new venues were emerging where Asians from all over the region met each other in professional associations and learned societies, in higher education establishments in London and Paris as well as Hong Kong and Manila, and even in the multi-ethnic sports teams that often travelled throughout the region. International civic associations, from the YWCA to Rotary, often (but not always) used English as a medium of communication, and provided ways in which Asians could connect across ethnic lines and belong to a global civil society. Modern associational forms, circulating through cities, inspired early nationalist organisations like the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) of Burma, founded on the model of the YMCA (as was the case with the YMBA in Colombo and San Francisco and the Young Men's Muslim Association in Cairo). The roots of civil society in Southeast Asia, as in much of the world, lie in the global circulation of new associational models and organisations, from Asian commercial guilds, Asian and Western secret societies, new international civic associations, early trade unions, and women's leagues. Within these arenas, a socially conscious sector of the middle class emerged as active participants in a vibrant civic life, leaving important legacies that would help shape post-colonial and contemporary civil society.

This book is thus a history from the middle. It is, largely, a social history of an aspirational multi-ethnic group of urban professionals and their children who moved and thrived within the context of the colonial-era port-city. While it makes use of a number of official archives, it also seeks to recover the forgotten voices and conversations that do not fit

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

comfortably within the dialectic of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. It includes interactions and friendships between indigenous and migrant groups, and features ardent internationalists and self-consciously cosmopolitan modern girls. These voices are found within the readers' pages of newspapers, editorials, memoirs, student magazines, and oral histories, as well as interviews with those that experienced the cosmopolitan city as children.

But rather than view the middle class as an isolated social phenomenon, this book demonstrates a degree of porousness between the worlds of the middle and working class within the city.²⁹ A sector of the middle class engaged with issues affecting the working class through civic activism and philanthropy, while broad-based interactions occurred on public transport and in cinemas, music halls, and entertainment parks. Due to the persistent inequalities of the archive, we have more material about what middle-class cosmopolitans thought and felt than we do of the working class in these cities.³⁰ But their stories nonetheless tell us something about what it meant to live within a particular dynamic time, when questions of national identity were very much in flux. They tell us something about the ways in which identities are composite and multi-layered, forged through relations with others and looking outwards to the wider world.

Cities of the Young

'Youth' has a particular, revolutionary salience in nationalist narratives and Southeast Asian histories. The late colonial era is often told through the stories of then young, usually male nationalist heroes, from burgeoning political leaders such as Sukarno and *pemuda* revolutionaries in Indonesia to Aung San and the *thakins* in Burma who revolted against colonial regimes. This book examines the emergence of a much broader and diverse spectrum of 'the young' within a world shaped by the actions of their parents' generation. I argue that it was the first generation of what

²⁹ On experiences of colonialism modernity among the working class, see Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912–1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); James Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); James Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

³⁰ On working-class cosmopolitanism, see Abidin Kusno, 'From City to City: Tan Malaka, Shanghai and the Politics of Geographical Imagining', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24:3 (2003): 327–39; Tim Harper, 'Singapore, 1915, and the Birth of an Asian Underground', *Modern Asian Studies* 47.6 (2013): 1782–811; Contemporary examples include Joel Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).

Anderson calls 'creole functionaries', the handful of those that schooled in colonial metropolises in the decades around 1900, who helped build the educational world of cosmopolitan youth in the 1920s and 1930s, by shaping colonial educational policy and funding innovative, often bilingual schools that combined a respect for Asian religions and customs with Western-style education. Due to the increased investment placed in education at this time, a much broader group of children had access to educational opportunities than the handful of students initially sent abroad.

School networks and university experiences abroad created new kinds of solidarities among students, who often rebelled against structures of authority. Alliances were formed in mission schools and the playgrounds of the Penang Free School, where children defied their European teachers by speaking in hybrid slang. A privileged few were given scholarships to attend universities in London, Paris, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Cairo. These metropolitan experiences did not simply inculcate colonial students in Western thought; rather, they also provided opportunities to know, meet, and socialise with other Asian students. Paris was a hotbed for young, cosmopolitan Asian revolutionaries from Indochina, China, and Siam who gathered in the hostels of the West Bank. London and Oxbridge, similarly, provided a venue for Indian, Burmese, Straits-Chinese, and Malay students to meet each other, to debate and critique Western policies, and to plug into international socialist networks that promised racial and economic equality for all. Cairo attracted Muslim students from around the world. Asian port-cities were also becoming important educational nodes at this time, drawing students not only from the hinterland but also from around the region. Penang was a regional hub for English, Islamic, and Chinese secondary education, while Hong Kong, Manila, and Rangoon boasted excellent new universities. Teacher-training schools, nursing hospitals, and vocational schools provided an expanding class of youth, and particularly women, with new opportunities to build a professional life.

Schools drew students from all over the region, taking them out of the home and exposing them to the urban environment. In turn, they reshaped the city on their own terms. In cinemas, dance halls, and city streets, a generation of young men and women embraced trends in popular culture from Hollywood, Shanghai, and Bombay, while refashioning their own forms of music, dance, and theatre. The city was the locus of modernity, a place where Asians came to feel, and become, modern. Residential schools and universities provided an opportunity to escape familial networks and engage in new friendships and affiliations outside of their immediate kinship group. Away from the watchful eyes of their parents

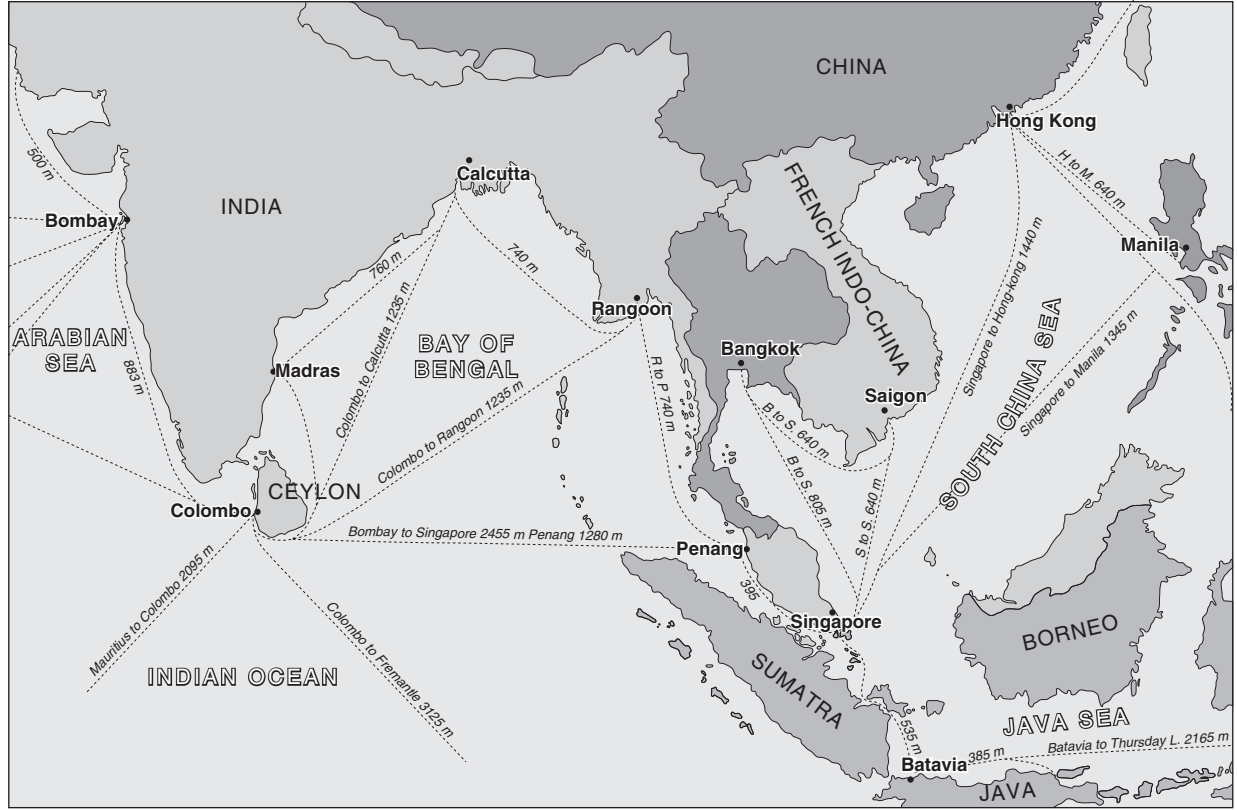
and families, young men and women indulged in new romantic and sexual relationships in the city and in the clandestine halls of student dormitories.

Perhaps the most cosmopolitan figure of the era was Asia's modern girl, who observed the slim, shapely cuts of the age in magazines and cinema, and transformed traditional elements of Asian fashion to suit the times. She was by no means a homogenous figure, but a shape-shifter, who emerged simultaneously in various Asian cities adopting her own sense of style. She conversed with and often married whomever she pleased. She was a popular figure of debate among both Asian men and women that wrote in the pages of the local press. She was a constant target of attack by male nationalists, who accused her of being too Western, too liberal, and too independent, even when she participated in student politics and heated intellectual debates. While the young male nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s may have encapsulated the freedom of the nation, the modern girl symbolised the freedom of the city to reshape oneself, one's culture, and one's community in new ways.

A Web of Three Cities

While examining the connections and comparisons between a number of cities across maritime Asia, this book largely focuses on three sites: Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok. These three cities were closely connected to one another geographically. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were well placed on the steamship routes that connected Europe, India, China, and America after the opening of the Suez Canal, yet have garnered little attention within the Asian network of colonial-era port-cities in comparison to Batavia, Singapore, and particularly Shanghai, which has generated its own sub-field of modern Chinese and urban history.³¹ Singapore would have been an obvious choice for such a study, and

³¹ See Leonard Blussé, *Visible Cities: Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia and the Coming of the Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Chua Ai Lin, 'Modernity, Popular Culture and Urban Life: Anglophone Asians in Colonial Singapore, 1920–1940', Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2007; Frost and Balasingamchow, *Singapore*; T.N. Harper, 'Globalism and the Pursuit of Authenticity: The Making of a Diasporic Public Sphere in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12:2 (1997): 261–92; Sunil Amrith, 'Asian Internationalism: Bandung's Echo in a Colonial Metropolis', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6:4 (2005): 557–69. On Shanghai studies, see for example Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).



Map 1 Asian port-cities in the 1920s.

makes multiple appearances in this book. Much excellent research has been done on Singapore's cosmopolitan past by Tim Harper, Mark Frost, Chua Ai Lin, and Sunil Amrith, whose work I build upon. Singapore's cosmopolitan history and multi-ethnic heritage is fast becoming a part of its own national identity as a global city-state. Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok were on par with Singapore in their diversity (and also, in the case of Rangoon and Bangkok, in size), yet in the post-colonial era their histories as cosmopolitan port-cities were quickly subsumed within ethno-nationalist narratives of the state in the making of post-colonial Malaya, Burma, and Thailand. As port-cities, they owe their existence to the resources of the hinterland – the tin-producing Kinta Valley in the case of Penang, and the Irrawaddy and Chao Praya delta and teak forests of northern Burma and Siam in the case of Rangoon and Bangkok. This meant that their citizens, by the 1920s, negotiated the outward-looking, cosmopolitanism of their cities with an astute awareness of the need for social and economic integration within what would become nation-states.

From the perspective of anti-colonial nationalism, Rangoon, Penang, and Bangkok could not have been more different. The British seized the port of Yangon during the Second Anglo-Burmese War and named it Rangoon, a provincial capital of British India, which later replaced the royal court of Mandalay as the administrative centre of colonial Burma. Penang was ceded to the British East India Company early in the age of free trade liberalism, turning a sparsely populated island into a thriving free port that attracted immigrants and traders from all over maritime Asia. As a result, whereas Penang's civic leaders were often heavily Anglophile, embracing British citizenship and using British ideals of a free press, rule of law, and social justice to argue for piecemeal political change, Burmese students in Rangoon took part in one of the strongest anti-colonial nationalist movements in Asia. Bangkok, meanwhile, was the capital of the only non-colonised state in Southeast Asia, thanks to its geographical position as a buffer-state and the diplomatic wiles of its modernising kings.

Yet an examination of Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok as dynamic, multi-ethnic port-cities lends itself to untold connections and comparisons between them and with other Asian cities. All three cities were born within thirty years of each other, their origins entwined in regional geo-political struggles between warring kingdoms and Western colonial expansion into the region. They emerged out of a lineage of inter-Asian trade – the waves of migrants from China, India, and the Arab world that flocked to the region in the colonial era echoed the movements of Asian traders who came at an earlier time, building temples, mosques, and churches in the coastal vicinity of these cities. In the early twentieth

century, steamship, rail, and communications routes linked Penang, Rangoon, and Bangkok to each other and to the outside world. These cities were made by migration and acted as crossroads for various Asian and Western intellectual traditions, including Marxism, Fabian socialism, Chinese republicanism, as well as Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic reform movements. Associational and educational networks allowed Southeast Asians to travel throughout the region and meet each other for the first time. The aim of this book is not only to examine shared experiences of diversity and modernity in Southeast Asian cities in the early twentieth century, but also to contribute to a new field of inquiry that 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.

While each of these cities is distinctive, they are all finding a new lease of life in their cosmopolitan pasts today. Penangites have long taken pride in their multicultural island past. Penang was founded in 1786, forty years before Singapore, as the first free port in Asia, with trade protected under the British flag. Within a few years of its founding, the port had attracted thousands of Asian merchants from all over the region, away from Dutch monopolies in Batavia. Even after being eclipsed by Singapore in the mid-nineteenth century, Penang was still a favoured destination for fortune-seeking immigrants, political exiles, and religious reformers. Throughout the colonial era, Penang was run nominally by a colonial administration seated in Singapore, and in reality by a motley mix of secret societies and Asian capitalists, while boasting a more tolerant atmosphere of press freedom than colonial Singapore. Penang is and always has been the contrarian island, a hub of social, intellectual, and political activism and opposition to the state-imposed status quo in contemporary Malaysia.

Bangkok shares its global city status with Singapore, yet until recently there was little acknowledgement of its multi-ethnic past. Historical debates about the colonial era dwelled on Thailand's uniqueness in avoiding colonialism, although Benedict Anderson, in 1978, led the charge of a new group of historians who pointed out that Thailand was never as 'unique' as Thai historians supposed, but shaped to a large extent by neighbouring colonial powers.³² Siam's aristocracy, unhindered by solid colonial ties, sent their children and their country's best and brightest abroad to learn how to be *sivilai*, that is, 'civilised' in the ways of the West, but also to confirm Siamese superiority within the international

³² See Benedict Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies', in *The Study of Thailand*, ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens: Ohio Centre for International Studies, 1978); Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm, 2002).

sphere.³³ Siam's openness to outside influences dates back to Ayutthaya, known in the early modern era as the 'Venice of the East' and the model for modern Bangkok. Bangkok's urban landscape in the 1920s and 1930s resembled that of other colonial port-cities, its waterfront dotted with foreign consulates and commercial firms, Chinese shop-houses, Indian fabric markets, and Portuguese churches, and built largely by migrant labour. Models of modernity influenced critical intellectuals and civic actors in Bangkok not only via journeys abroad and migrant histories, but also through new experimental schools, cinema, and popular culture.

Rangoon's downtown core is home to Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques, churches, and a synagogue, all nestled within a densely packed urban area. Isolated for decades under xenophobic, military rule, Rangoon's urban landscape, with its crumbling grand colonial architecture, was for many decades a testament to a bygone era when it was one of the world's busiest ports. Foreign observers of Rangoon in the 1920s and 1930s called it an 'alien city', in which over 60 per cent of its population was born elsewhere. Yet the site on which Rangoon was founded had its antecedents in Dagon and Pegu, coastal nodes that attracted both merchants and pilgrims from around the region. Colonial rule resulted in a major demographic shift. As part of British India, Burma's borders were open to Indians, who saw it as a land of wealth and opportunity, much as many Chinese entrepreneurs saw the *nanyang* as a whole. Rangoon was built on the backs of Indian labour, run largely by middle-brow Indian civil servants and injected with flows of capital from Anglo-Indian businessmen and Chettiar money-lenders. Yet it was within the dynamic framework of the colonial-era port-city that everyday urbanites in Rangoon, as in Bangkok and Penang, found a voice, looking inwards as well as outwards, and harnessing ideas circulating in an interconnected world.

Although the bulk of the book is a comparative study, these cities were also close enough to each other to have influenced each other's trajectories, as Chapter 1 makes clear through its examination of the entwined origins of all three sites. In the late colonial era, Penang was a regional hub for English, Islamic, and Chinese education, with Thai elites and intellectuals schooling in the city from the 1920s. Schoolchildren and sports teams travelled the length of the Southeast Asian peninsula, gaining a new awareness of urban and regional neighbours. The mother of Malaysia's first prime minister was Thai, and Tunku Abdul Rahman himself spent

³³ See Thongchai Winichakul, 'The Quest for "Siwilai": A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59:3 (2000): 528–49.

his early school days in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Bangkok before moving back to Penang. The primacy of English in the early twentieth century enabled new connections among an emerging class of multi-lingual Asians, both within the region and outside it in the interwar educational hubs of London, Paris, and Cairo. Learned societies in Bangkok and Rangoon exchanged publications, inspiring each other and promoting the growth of a new regional intellectual culture across borders.³⁴ By looking at all three cities together, we can come to appreciate neglected comparisons and connections in a region whose modern history has long been studied through the lens of the nation.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 examines the older, commercial linkages within maritime Asia that produced the Southeast Asian port-city through engagement with literature on pre-colonial port-cities in the region. In doing so, it situates Southeast Asian cosmopolitanism within a much older geographic unit than the modern nation-state. It traces the emergence of Southeast Asia's major urban centres – Jakarta/Batavia, Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, Bangkok, and Saigon – as port-cities emerging at the advent of European imperialism in the region. It concludes with a look at the revival of intra-urban connections throughout the region through steamship, rail, and air travel. By tracing the entwined origins of these cities within a regional framework of geopolitics and power, I provide a starting point from which to study modern Asian cities and their inhabitants outside a national framework.

Chapter 2 emphasises the transformation of the cosmopolitan port-city within a colonial-era context. It stresses the simultaneity of modern metropolitan life around the world from the late nineteenth century, exploring the role of municipal councils in borrowing models of managing urban growth, from public transport to zoning residential and commercial districts. It examines different urban spaces transformed by the influx of migrants and capital, from the waterfront, the downtown core, ethnic enclaves, and markets. The chapter ends by looking at ways in which the city was re-claimed on Asian terms, through architectural statements, boycotts, and strikes, stressing the combustible nature of the colonial-era port-city.

The next two chapters consider the tensions and possibilities that came with the development of a cosmopolitan public sphere. Chapter 3

³⁴ Su Lin Lewis, 'Between Orientalism and Nationalism: The Learned Society and the Making of "Southeast Asia"', *Modern Intellectual History*, 10:2 (August 2013).

examines urban associational life in the city. Departing from the study of 'proto-nationalist' associations which have characterised the modern historiography of the region, it focuses on cross-cultural sociability through the role of freemasonry, Rotary clubs, learned societies and reading groups, professional associations, and philanthropic organisations, from the Red Cross to women's councils. Chapter 4 looks at the role of print and the accessibility of books and newspapers in creating new *informed* communities. It considers the ways in which print-literature invented not only indigenous nationalism, but also print-reading communities in various languages that linked readers to a wider world abroad and local, multicultural affairs within the world of the city. It focuses on the way in which Anglophone Asians used the English-language press to reach a wider audience within the city and the world beyond to debate with each other and articulate their claims.

The final two chapters are primarily concerned with 'the young' as new and visible participants in urban life. Chapter 5 examines the plurality of educational initiatives within the port-city. Penang's schoolchildren, Siamese students in Paris, and Rangoon University students provide case studies of the possibilities of primary education, education abroad, and higher education at home in fostering cosmopolitan sensibilities. Chapter 6 explores the rise of the modern girl within the context of popular culture. It explores the impact of cinema and jazz in introducing mentalities of popular modernity, shared with urbanites around the world. It looks at shifts in gender relations among the young and the impact of the educated young woman as a new model of femininity.

By exploring interactions and networks across Asian port-cities, I seek to open up new questions on the nature of urban society, multiculturalism, and globalisation in Asia. Via these six themes – urbanism, associational life, the press, education, and popular culture – I situate the emergence of a cosmopolitan set of urbanites within pan-Asian and global experiences of modernity. In investigating the spaces in which diverse communities found commonalities with each other, while reaching out to a wider world, we can begin to unearth a forgotten history of urban cosmopolitanism in early twentieth-century Asia that has left important legacies in the post-colonial era up until the present day.

The children of the interwar period grew to adulthood during the war and made their careers in a post-imperial world – as professionals, artists, journalists, activists, and intellectuals. The memory of studying in multi-ethnic schools and universities and of navigating cosmopolitan port-cities in an era of possibility stayed with them as they contested the rise of crude ethnic nationalisms. The 'imaginary futures' of the interwar era led to a necessary civic negotiation of the post-colonial state as Thailand entered

the American era, as Burma entered a difficult period of fractious parliamentary democracy, and as Malaya underwent a decade of decolonisation. The battle between narrow, prescriptive views of the nation and more pluralist sense of community continues to be fought by civil society actors today.

Today, Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world. The cosmopolitan port-city has now become the cosmopolitan airport city. Both Asian and Western models of political and cultural modernity vie for ascendancy. A young generation of affluent Asians who have had the opportunity to work and study abroad have returned to invest in the cultural life of their homelands. Whereas past rulers looked to artistic and literary influences from India and China, this young generation is inspired by Mumbai novelists, the Beijing art scene, Shanghai design, and Singapore restaurant entrepreneurs. Some are opening up bookshops in which novels by Asian authors, undiscovered by publishing houses in London or New York, sit side by side with the latest Booker Prize winner. Hotels, galleries, and restaurants draw upon colonial grandeur, Art Deco, and the hybrid cultures of the 1930s, such as the Peranakan Straits-Chinese. Southeast Asia's creative class is investing in the architectural history and the eclectic hybridity of its cosmopolitan past.

Meanwhile, a new intelligentsia is finding ways to improve their country's economic, social, and environmental situation through multi-lateral institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, and international NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children, and the Red Cross, as well as Google and internet start-ups. Activists working in local NGOs – women, environmentalists, journalists, educators, and LGBT communities – appeal to 'issue-based' trans-national networks throughout the region and the rest of the world. Journalists and bloggers draw from international standards, human rights discourses, and contemporary politics elsewhere to criticise authoritarianism at home. Even under Myanmar's most repressive periods of rule, urban Burmese still listened to the BBC and Voice of America, circulated literature, and frequented the long-standing Indian and Chinese street-stalls that still line the streets of downtown Rangoon.

Local historians, museum curators, and filmmakers are now challenging the older narratives of nationalism institutionalised in state museums – relics of a colonial past that demanded a linear, national narrative of civilisational progress. Instead, they are drawing on a more cosmopolitan past to turn Southeast Asian cities into global cities. All this is happening beneath and across the realm of nation-states. While a policy of 'official nationalism' in post-war Southeast Asian history was at first

empowering, it became dangerously homogenous and culturally prescriptive, leading pragmatic and visionary cosmopolitans to reach out for the more universal and cross-cultural connections within and across national borders. The persistence of cosmopolitan civic culture in Southeast Asia has not easily withered away despite attempts to stamp it out. The dynamism of the region today springs from long and deep roots.