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Growing cities in SEA

iewed by Cheah Boon Kheng

IN the Asian Pacific region, Singapore is not only the most "global" city but the new "information city" par excellence. Its information economy has become vital to current economic policy, says Australian geographer Dean Forbes in this concise, fast-paced survey of the rapid growth of the various Southeast Asian metropolises, their urban environment, economies and social problems.

"No other Southeast Asian city has made as much progress as Singapore towards developing as an information city," observes Forbes. This means that Singapore has had a head start over Kuala Lumpur, which is due to launch its Multimedia Super Corridor soon.

Of all the Southeast Asian cities, Forbes says only Singapore and Bangkok might each be considered as a "world city". Jakarta, KL and Manila are nowhere near this status as they have played a limited global role.

World cities are defined by their mode of integration in the global economy by providing the vital services that are needed by global corporations and agencies such as management, banking and finance, and consulting.

Such cities are generally big, with populations of between five and 15 million, and spread over large areas. Transnational elites are dominant in world cities, establishing a core of cosmopolitan culture. The quintessential "world-cities-in-the-making" include Tokyo, New York, London and Hong Kong.

Singapore qualifies as a "world city" because a number of multi-national corporations (MNCs) set up their Asian headquarters there, attracted by the lower tax rates that apply to this form of office development. It is also the largest port in the region (and one of the largest in the world) and is a significant air traffic destination. Investment in telecommunications and information technology has helped to supplement this transport role.

Bangkok's population is three times the size of Singapore. It is a dominant industrial and economic centre, a centre for regional and international organisations and conferences and, like Singapore, a key destination for international and regional air traffic.

Forbes' voice throughout the book is one of moderation and caution, not necessarily supporting the growth of "global" cities, but suggesting that their development is inevitable. He urges Southeast Asian governments to plan ahead and prepare their societies to face the resultant problems.

While he admits there is nothing unique which can be identified about the Southeast Asian city per se, he acknowledges that scholars have observed a distinctive shift towards an Asian variation of an urban conurbation, or megalopolis. Professor Terry McGee calls it *desakota* (*desa* for village and *kota* for city), in which an agricultural or rural hinterland is closely enmeshed with a city's urban economy. During this process, the countryside is urbanised, without the hinterland population necessarily moving into the city.

Bangkok, Yangon and Hanoi are developing into such megalopolises, in which the major city becomes enmeshed with a very large urbanised rural hinterland sometimes consisting of seven or eight provinces, thereby multiplying the city's population five or six times.

Singapore and Kuala Lumpur are excluded from this category, the former because it is a city-state, and KL because it is surrounded by a lightly

settled hinterland that is dominated by plantation agriculture, not intensive wet-rice agriculture like Bangkok, Hanoi and Yangon.

Normally, however, most cities expand by swallowing up rural villages and small towns, forcing the population to migrate to slums at the city fringes and giving rise to informal sector enterprises such as roadside vendors, coffee shops, restaurants and trishaws, or what has been called the pavement economy.

While some cities like Jakarta have cracked down on trishaws, others like Hanoi have allowed their numbers to grow unchecked owing to the newly-introduced capitalist economy. Forbes makes a plea for national governments to accommodate the informal sector because the poor still predominate in Southeast Asian cities.

The contrast in the different levels of economic development of Southeast Asian cities is striking, especially between Singapore and Hanoi, where office block development, hotels and banking facilities are still rudimentary and post and telecommunications are in a very poor state.

Singapore laid the infrastructure for its information economy as early as 1980 when it set up a Committee on National Computerisation, followed by an executive agency known as the National Computer Board. All of Singapore is being networked by fibre-optic cable, linking government offices, business houses, institutions, households, and even vehicles into a giant information system.

It is revealing, however, that despite Singapore's advanced information economy, it has failed to attract Bill Gates and the other big names within the IT world to participate in a similar setup like the MSC in the city-state. One reason for this is believed to be Singapore's reluctance to give up controls on the multi-media corporations, unlike Malaysia, whose Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed has agreed to give them a free hand in the MSC.

Singapore's information economy has its pros and cons. On the one hand, it has been argued that this is a second industrial revolution which needs to be embraced in total. On the other, the technology is creating a set of new problems for human society.

"Critics are concerned that it takes the idea of the corporate state to an extreme, and creates very strong pressure to conform to a particular view of Singapore's future," says Forbes. "Some point out that networking allows for much increased surveillance of citizens, and hence can be a political tool for enforcing repression."

Of the 13 largest cities in Southeast Asia, six are in Indonesia and two in Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, 1.1 and 3.2 million, respectively, in 1990). Clearly, not all the region's capital cities feature among the largest of Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia's largest city is Jakarta. In 1990 it had a population of 9.3 million. Its population growth rate in the period 1980-90 was 2.4 per cent annum. The second largest city is Manila with 8.5 million, followed by Bangkok, whose population in 1990 grew to 7.2 million. The United Nations projections suggest it could reach 10.3 million by the year 2000.

By comparison, Singapore is ranked eighth with its 2.7 million population in 1990, while Kuala Lumpur is 10th with a population of 1.7 million. Ho Chi Minh City, Bandung and Surabaya are larger than Kuala Lumpur and take fifth, sixth and seventh places, respectively.

Southeast Asia's middle class is growing, so are its cities' glitzy shopping centres which resemble the shopping malls of Los Angeles or Adelaide. Outside them, however, are the incongruities - the crowded buildings, the narrow streets and the poor masses in the slums.

The impact of the metropolis on the physical environment will result in

increased problems of population, waste disposal and land degradation. Environmental problems, observes Forbes, appear to increase during the periods of accelerated economic growth in Southeast Asia.

A new feature of the Southeast Asian city is the increasing role women play in its life. Women migrate in large numbers from the rural areas for independence and for work in the cities, but are paid wages lower than men's. The overwhelming majority, however, are powerless, as their presence in government is minimal. Except in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, female literacy levels are also below men's. But Forbes thinks there is a growing assertiveness among women in Southeast Asian cities. Probably only among the better educated, middle class ones.

As for prostitution, Bangkok unfortunately stands alone as Southeast Asia's unrivalled centre of the commercial sex industry. Forbes estimates that the number of prostitutes in Thailand ranges from 500,000 to one million. In Bangkok alone it was estimated there were 200,000 to 300,000 prostitutes in the early 1980s.

He asks some shocking questions: "Why do Thai women take up prostitution, and not, say, factory work? Is there something in Thai culture which can be held responsible? Buddhism encourages women to be seen as second-class citizens, with an inadequate store of merit in previous lives and a lower moral status."

Forbes' final verdict on Southeast Asian cities is dismally pessimistic. With the exception of Singapore, the metropolises are going to remain very large settlements in which large numbers of people are poor, and the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty in the city is potentially destabilising.

Packed with informative text, statistics and illustrations, this is a good handbook on Southeast Asian cities for the university student as well as for the non-student reader.

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