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### Cosmopolis and Nation in Central Southeast Asia

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**Anthony Reid**

Asia Research Institute  
National University of Singapore  
[aridir@nus.edu.sg](mailto:aridir@nus.edu.sg)

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#### **Asia Research Institute**

National University of Singapore

Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7, Level 4

5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

Tel: (65) 6874 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: [www.ari.nus.edu.sg](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg)

Email: [arisec@nus.edu.sg](mailto:arisec@nus.edu.sg)

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**Cosmopolis and Nation in Central Southeast Asia\***

Anthony Reid

Ben was a wonderful eccentric friend. I think it was 1975 when I first had the pleasure of staying in his disorganised central Bangkok flat, enjoying his stories about the city that fascinated him. He was later my colleague at the ANU in 1977-79. There he had a research position that suited him perfectly, because it enabled him to develop his technique of coming in to work about the time others were leaving, and working through the night. He became good friends with the cleaners and a few other famous night owls.

I pushed and bullied him into publishing his outstanding dissertation in the ASAA series I edited, and into collaborating in another useful volume (eventually edited by Al McCoy) on the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia (Batson 1979). But he loathed and feared public performance, and I remember him being white with terror in giving that admirable presentation at the Japanese occupation conference. He would never perform publicly, or venture into print, unless an even more powerful motive overcame this anxiety, his sense of obligation to a friend.

He moved from Canberra to NUS, where I believe the bonds he formed with students gradually overcame his dislike of public performance and daylight hours. I was from time to time able to visit his even more disorganised Singapore flat, with mountains of *Straits Times* and *Bangkok Posts* piling up, and some excavation required to find the bed to sleep in. On one occasion he was obsessed with trying at last to clean all this up for a coming visit by Jennifer Cushman, another Thailand historian colleague from Cornell and Canberra. Sometimes we all wondered what Ben did in his strange nocturnal cycle, at his best when the rest of us were asleep, and where he put that intense capacity for love and affection that his friends knew he had. Only after Jennifer died tragically in 1989 did he reveal to me once that he nursed a hopeless love for her. I like to think that somehow they sorted this out in another place or dimension after both lives were tragically ended by illness while still relatively young – his in January 1996. In his will, Ben surprised us all by leaving large sums equally to two of his loves – the History Department at NUS, where he spent the longest of anywhere in his short life – 16 years; and the Jennifer Cushman fund which we had established after Jennifer's death, to support work on the Chinese diaspora.

I hope my subject is a fitting tribute to Ben, who was a splendid representative of the cosmopolitanism of Central Southeast Asia. Though he would never aspire to being a heartlander anywhere, he did feel much more at home in Singapore and Bangkok than in any city of his American fatherland. He loved the cosmopolitanism of Bangkok, and celebrated the pre-nationalist pluralism of the old 'absolute' monarchy and the basic decency with which it sought to deal with all its subjects, however plural their own loyalties might seem to be.

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\* This is the text of the Third Benjamin A. Batson Memorial Lecture, delivered for the History Department, NUS, on 17 January 2004.

## Definitions

In using the term cosmopolis, I should make a bow not so much to the cosmopolitan-heartlander dichotomy of Singapore discourse, but to my current ARI colleague Joel Kahn, whose pursuit of a ‘cosmopolitan anthropology’ is I believe pioneering a promising direction for his discipline (Kahn 2003). Behind him sits Immanuel Kant and his newly fashionable *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795), where cosmopolis is used to denote a world system where differences between communities are accommodated in a kind of federal structure (Held 1995; Archibugi 2002). But my agenda is more modest than Kant’s universal one, and my use of the term is restricted to an urban context. I use it to describe a form of city-state relatively well-developed in Central Southeast Asia (as in some other global crossroads), where a necessarily plural community is governed through leaders themselves cosmopolitan in culture and able to mediate between groups. I will however endorse one finding of Kant, that while religion and language separate nations, “the spirit of commerce unites them”, so that the task of cosmopolis is to mediate these two contrary impulses.

As a kind of antithesis of cosmopolis we place the familiar modern idea of nation, as a community imagined as having important elements of cultural homogeneity, the location of which coincides, or should coincide, with the territorial borders of a nation-state and the authority of a single government. Putting aside for the moment a few antecedents of the national idea which may have made a marginal earlier impact in some quarters of Southeast Asia, I will argue that this was a concept imposed by Europeans, and that it remained alien to the region until the twentieth century’s remarkable love affair with nationalism. One of the features of 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism was to try to impose the nation backwards onto a cosmopolitan past, claiming the ‘Empayer’ of Melaka, Brunei or Majapahit as the antecedent of modern nation-states. In this construct cosmopolis is embarrassing, and where it cannot be avoided has to be put down to aberrant colonial schemes to divide and rule. I want to proceed in the opposite direction, tracing the cosmopolitanism of quite ancient times forward to the point where it is overtaken by nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to see whether this makes a difference to how we imagine the future.

As for Central Southeast Asia, the third element of my title, it is a place in quest of a more adequate name. It is the Bangkok-Jakarta central axis of Southeast Asia formed by the world’s longest peninsula, nearly blocking the shipping route between East Asia and the rest of Eurasia and Africa, the two Straits through which it obliges that shipping to pass, and the adjacent littoral. It is thus a natural place of entrepots and meeting places, set moreover in a climatic zone relatively unfriendly to intensive agriculture. The high year-round rainfall, thick vegetation and mediocre soils made this in the *longue durée* a region very difficult to develop for rice agriculture, so that hunter-gatherer populations, as well as tigers and elephants, dominated the hinterlands. The entrepots which developed at strategic locations in this zone took for granted that they would import most of their food staples by sea. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were the malarial lowlands of this region harnessed on any significant scale for permanent agriculture. I have called it elsewhere the historically “empty centre” of Southeast Asia, or the “low centre” of my saucer model of Southeast Asian identity (Reid 1999). Although Central Southeast Asia began to develop substantial centres of wet-rice agriculture in the colonial period, it remains today what it has been throughout recorded history, one of the most urban-dominated zones of the world.

The first major population concentrations to arise in this zone must have been watering points for vessels, and harbours where cargoes were discharged from vessels and transferred to portages across the rivers and passes of the peninsula. Paul Wheatley (1961) called the whole long period between about 550 and 1400 AD ‘the Isthmian Age’, because of the importance of little port-states at both ends of the portages across the Peninsula. At times when piracy was under control and the sea route of the Straits was viable, entrepots were still essential for vessels waiting for a change of monsoon to take them safely home on a following wind. It was therefore essential to the viability of such entrepots to be hospitable both to traders coming across the Indian Ocean from India and the Middle East, and to those coming across the South China Sea. A third strand, usually also present, were traders bringing spices and forest products to this central zone in exchange for textiles and other manufactures from China and India.

Cosmopolis was therefore built into the nature of the successful entrepot in this zone; but security was not. The problem for cosmopolis in this part of the world was to find a form of government that would protect commercial communities rather than preying upon them. Where it happened the formula had almost nothing to do with nation, but much with the supernatural charisma of kingship. Since monarchs were themselves one of the greatest dangers to the accumulation of wealth, some of the most successful cosmopolis, [like Banten and Patani in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century or Aceh in the late 17<sup>th</sup>], chose a female ruler or a minor as a means to combine royal charisma with the effectively oligarchic power of the leaders of commercial communities (Reid 2003).

### **Pre-colonial cosmopolis**

Chinese and Arab sources since the 6<sup>th</sup> century have reported numerous collecting and trade centres with puzzling names within this zone, of which the most important was San Foqi, Sribuza or Srivijaya. They make clear that it was a crossroads, “an important thoroughfare on the sea-routes of the foreigners on their way to and from [China]”, as Zhu Qufei reported it (cited Wheatley 1961: 63). The earliest inscriptions in the Malay language are here, and they are in the form of curses, threatening horrible things if the diverse groups who took the oath at the stone failed in their duty of loyalty. It was, in other words, a very plural polity, held together by largely magical means.

Although Srivijaya has surprisingly little to say for itself, the way it is remembered in the Malay texts is interesting. The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* records a long-standing concept of Malay sovereignty, that a charismatic ruler attracts a diverse trade and population.

It became known among all nations that Bukit Seguntang had a king whose demeanour was exceedingly kind and courteous, and who cared for all foreigners. After this was heard in all countries, people from all places started gathering at Bukit Seguntang, and they came from overseas as well as from overland (cited *Indonesia Heritage I*: 49).

The surest historical evidence for the diversity of foreigners who spent time in Srivijaya, however, was the description of the city by the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese monk I

Qing. He insisted that there were more than a thousand Buddhist priests in its monasteries, and advised pilgrims from China to spend time there to master Sanskrit and Pali before traveling on to the holy places of India. Where there were Indian and Chinese monks maintaining these language abilities, there must have been Indian and Chinese commercial communities maintaining the monks. Chinese trading communities are also likely to have helped manage the tributary trade between Srivijaya and Tang China, so important for the commerce of the whole region.

The still-dominant Prince Damrong model of Thai history hardly does justice to cosmopolis, as it traces the rise of the great Thai-ruled port of Ayutthaya to a lineage from the northern agricultural polity of Sukhothai, stiffened by the hierarchic influences from Angkor kingship. This notably fails to explain why the first entry in the Ayutthaya chronicles has that city claiming suzerainty at its 1350 foundation over the whole peninsula including Tenasserim, Nakhon Sithammarat, Melaka and (more mysteriously) “Chawa” (Cushman 2000: 10-11), and why the Siamese were reported attacking Temasek/Singapore in the 1340s (Rockhill, 1915: 100). The revisionist view of Chris Baker, and my colleague Geoff Wade, is more persuasive, attributing the maritime success of Ayutthaya to an older tradition of ports such as Phetburi in the Gulf of Thailand, which had extensive maritime interaction with China in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (Baker 2003). Having just returned from a fascinating Singapore/Thai conference on the ‘Plural Peninsula’ in Nakhon Si Thammarat, the major centre for Thai-Buddhist influence in the Peninsula, I have to mention its chronicle, which explains the dispersion of Thai dynastic authority down the Peninsula by reference to a Chinese marriage alliance with Phetburi, the salt-exporting port on the Gulf. I read this as a Sino-Thai attempt to use the Gulf port to compete for the mantle of Srivijaya as a centre monopolising the tributary trade to China. This appears to have preceded Ayutthaya’s rise to primacy in the Thai world.

From the beginning the Siamese capital was a plural place embracing mercantile communities of Chinese, Mon, Malay, Indian and other derivation. When we have fuller descriptions in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Choisy (1687: 242) claimed that “almost half of the kingdom is populated by Peguans, taken in war...there are also many Lao”. The royal guard was Chinese and Muslim; while the standing army was composed in equal measure of Thai, Mon, Khmer and Lao. La Loubère also emphasised both the hybrid nature of the dominant population, and the great influx of foreign traders. It was the freedom of its commerce, he related, that attracted to Ayutthaya

a great multitude of strangers of different nations, who settled there with the liberty of living according to their own customs, and of publicly exercising their several ways of worship. Every nation possesses its own quarter...Moreover every nation chooses its chief, or its *Nai*, as the Siamese do speak, and this chief manages the affairs of his nation with the Mandarin, whom the king of Siam nominates for this purpose (La Loubère, 1693: 112, also 10-11).

Bangkok continued this trend in the nineteenth century. Though population estimates of the flourishing cosmopolis’ total population vary, everybody agreed that Thais were a small minority in a rich tapestry. The figures given by Malloch are the most detailed in ethnic terms – Thais 36%; Chinese 45%; Mons 11%; Laos 3%; Malays 1.5%; Indian Muslims 1%; and Vietnamese, Khmers and Christians of diverse sorts each a little less (Malloch, 1827, cited Terwiel 1989: 226).

Further south, Wang Dayuan reported of Singapore's predecessor, 14<sup>th</sup> century Temasek, that "the men and women dwell together with Chinese people" – which suggests there was not yet a developed cosmopolis with separate ethnic quarters, but rather a mixing tending towards hybridity (Wang Dayuan 131).

Of Melaka in the following century we know much more. Essentially a hybridised Malay-speaking Muslim elite ruled over an intensely cosmopolitan entrepot by developing a ritualised charismatic monarchy, and by putting the highest possible priority on succeeding Srivijaya as the privileged tributary gateway from Central Southeast Asia to the China market.

Tomé Pires (1515: 269) reported that 84 distinct languages were spoken by the people of pre-Portuguese Melaka. The most important commercial communities, each settling in their own districts with wealthy bilingual headmen over them, were Gujaratis (1000), other North Indians, Arabs and Persians (3000), South Indians (unspecified, but more numerous than the former); Javanese (10,000 settled in Upeh), Mons from Pegu, Luzons, Ryukyans, Chinese and various peoples from the Archipelago (ibid.: 254-5, 281-2).

Over a century later the most important entrepot at the southern end of the Straits was Banten in West Java, where there was an effective segmented international market. The Dutch who arrived wide-eyed in Banten in 1596 described Arabs and Persians as traders and financiers, Gujaratis as sailors who took money in bottomry, while the Malays and Klings invested in their voyages. The Chinese were among the most important communities in a separate compound, and provided the city with all kinds of services and manufactures, as well as engaging in trade. For all the merchants it was customary to acquire a temporary wife for the period of residence, who was also an essential commercial partner.<sup>1</sup>

Thus far the pattern of pre-European Asian cosmopolis.

### **How did 'nation' make its entry?**

Nation became important for Europeans from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, though in much higher degree in the 19<sup>th</sup>. If we exclude the eccentric imperial project of the early Ming emperors and the Zheng He fleets, it was the quarrelling Europeans who brought to the Indian Ocean for the first time the idea of using military force to support the commercial aims of one "nation" against its perceived competitors. Especially when projected into foreign, Asian waters, this concept rested on new concepts of loyalty based on race, culture, and identity.

The Portuguese and Spanish set out on their voyages of discovery at almost the identical moment, in 1492, when they took the major step towards the nationalist project of realising homogeneity within their borders, by expelling their Jews and Muslims. To Southeast Asia the Portuguese introduced a spirit that is often described as crusading, but it is closer to the mark to say they projected overseas the religiously-

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<sup>1</sup> The Malays and Klings [south Indian Muslims] are merchants who invest money at interest and in voyages and bottomry. The Gujaratis, since they are poor, are usually used as sailors, and are those who take money in bottomry, on which they often make one, two, and three times profit....The Chinese live at Banten in their own quarter, which is surrounded with a strong palisade...When they first come from China, like other merchants they buy a wife, who serves them until they again return to China, when they again sell her, taking the children with them that they have produced. Those who live here are the ones who buy up pepper from the farmers, going through the countryside with their scales in hand...gathering the pepper against the return of the Chinese ships....They are so clever in their handiwork and trade, that they exceed all other nations. (Lodewycksz 1598: 120-2, 124).

coloured early nationalism of a small and compact people. Their visceral enemies were first the “Moors” whom they had fought down the Iberian Peninsula, but secondly the Protestant Dutch, who replaced the Muslims as enemy number one, and thirdly the Castilians with whom they bitterly contested exclusive rights in Asia.

Tomé Pires may have been the first to write the word nation in a Southeast Asian context when explaining why the classic cosmopolis of Melaka, ready as always to use Gujarati and other merchants to defend it, had fallen before a handful of passionately nationalist Portuguese.

The people did not back the king of Melaka, because in trading lands, where the people are of different nations (*nacões*), these cannot love their king as do natives (*naturall*) without admixture of other nations. This is generally the case, and therefore the king was disliked, though his mandarins fought (Pires 1515: Engl. 279, Port. 504).

I believe the ruling elite of Melaka would have had great difficulty understanding this point, since every Southeast Asian monarch had relied upon professional forces culturally different from himself. This is true whether we think of the Mainland Buddhist states with their Muslim and later Portuguese gunners, or further south of the way cosmopolis like Melaka were served by orang laut, by Gujarati and Arab shippers, by Cham and Luzon Muslim refugees, or even the exemplary warrior Hang Tuah with his admission of being “Hybridised Malay [*Melayu kacukan*], mixed up with Majapahit Javanese” (*Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 1971: 175). Malay accounts of the fall of Melaka are essentially about cosmic retribution for the king’s having fractured the contractual basis of the polity. When identity is at issue, it is about royal lineage, not anything that could be translated as nation.

I would like to be able to quote a Melakan defense of pre-colonial cosmopolis, but the best I know is that of the Thai King Narai, defending pluralism against a mission from King Louis XIV of France which conveyed the king’s request that he become a Catholic Christian. He expressed surprise that King Louis was concerned about ideological conformity, whereas God himself seemed to rejoice in diversities.

For would not the true God that made Heaven and Earth, and all things that are therein, and hath given them so different natures and inclinations...if he had pleased, also inspired into them the same sentiments for the religion they ought to follow, and for the worship that was most acceptable to him, and make all nations live and die in the same laws?... Ought not one to think that the true God takes as great pleasure to be honoured by different worships and ceremonies, as [he does] to be glorified by a prodigious number of creatures (cited Tachard 1688: 223-24).

Their early nationalism helped the Portuguese to win some battles, but it largely killed the golden goose of cosmopolis, which the Portuguese essentially sacrificed to their initial sense of nation having to exclude Muslims. Titling himself “Lord of the conquest, navigation and commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia and Persia”, King Manoel was too much prisoner of the national idea to allow his servants to play the necessary neutral role in the would-be Portuguese entrepôts. On the key sectors of trade where it had influence, the Portuguese crown sought to monopolise trade in the



hands of either the crown itself (increasingly unable to cope with the demands) or merchants licensed by the crown. Only in Macao and Nagasaki, where the Portuguese were too weak to apply their dangerous ideas of nation, could they make substantial profits by operating within a kind of cosmopolis.

### **European nation ruling Asian cosmopolis**

Of course not all the cosmopolis was on the Asian side, or nation on the European. Firstly the Portuguese onslaught onto Muslim shipping caused a reaction, whereby the expelled or injured Muslim merchants rallied behind rulers, particularly Aceh, willing and able to stand up to the Portuguese. We could trace a kind of nation response in Aceh, which notably injured cosmopolis there by excluding not only the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but the Chinese in much of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. The 17<sup>th</sup> century law against Thai women marrying foreigners is another such contradiction of the long-term tolerance which appears to mark Thai management of foreign traders (Smith 1974: 286-7).

The Europeans for their part learned quickly of the enormous advantages of cosmopolis, and built their own versions, albeit with a touch of nation in the way they ruled. The Portuguese were less successful than their successors largely because they made all the mistakes from which the Spanish, Dutch and English learned.

The Spanish learned something from Portuguese mistakes, but basically they were extraordinarily lucky. Though dreaming of spices and souls, Legazpi's conquistadors arrived in the Philippines just as China for the first time licensed its shippers to trade to the south legally, in 1567. Since the anti-Muslim bias didn't get in the way of this arm of trade, the Spanish moved their headquarters in 1571 to the principal Chinese trading base at Manila, and took advantage of the boundless enthusiasm of Chinese traders for Mexican silver. Manila managed to become both the most important single Southeast Asian destination for Chinese traders until about 1640, and the most important for Japanese until about 1610 (when Hoi An took over), despite the paranoid outbreaks of Spanish nationalism that constantly threatened to kill this golden goose also. By 1603 there were about 20,000 Chinese residents in the city, largely self-governing, as well as 1,500 Japanese (de la Costa 1967: 68, 205; Boxer 1951: 302).

For our Central Southeast Asia story, however, the Spanish are important chiefly as a model for the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who more self-consciously learned the lessons of how to build an Asian cosmopolis. The Dutch brought a more clearly established sense of nation, in which a republican ideal of the common participation of the property-holding elite was far more important than either religion or dynasty. The chief foes of their nationalism, however, were the Spanish and Portuguese, not the Muslim and Chinese traders they found in Asia. They managed therefore to be relatively clear-eyed about the commercial advantages of cosmopolis. Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629) was the most determined advocate of establishing a permanent Dutch stronghold in Asia, like the Portuguese and Spanish, and established it in 1619 by capturing Jakarta and renaming it Batavia. His goal was, as he explained to his Board of Directors,

to establish a place where so great a concourse of people would come to us, Chinese, Malay, Javanese, Klings and all other nations, to reside and trade in peace and freedom under Your Excellency's

[VOC] jurisdiction, that soon a city would be peopled and the staple of the trade attracted, so that [Portuguese] Melaka would fall to nothing" (Coen 10.10.1616, in Coen I: 215).

Note the similarity of these calculations to those of Raffles two centuries later, that by attracting Asian traders through good conditions, Singapore would eclipse the Dutch settlements. But in his time Coen was so far ahead of most English opinion that one nationalist English trader complained,

I cannot imagine what these Hollanders meane, to suffer these Maleysians, Chinesians and other Moores of these countries, and to assist them in theyr free trade through all the Indies, and forbidde it theyr own servants, countrymen and bretheren (Floris 1615, cited Blusse & Fernandez-Armesto: 182).

Impressed at the wealth that Manila had been able to extract from Chinese residents, Coen tried initially to bully every Chinese junk into leaving 100 of its men behind before it would be permitted to return to China (Coen IV: 641; Blussé 1985: 79; Meilink-Roelofs 1962: 200-01). Coen was certainly heir to Dutch ideas about the nation, but fortunately for Jakarta his scheme to develop a solid Dutch citizenry in Batavia to embody it were a failure. The Dutch-speaking European and Mestizo communities declined steadily in demographic significance as the city grew, from 29% of the population in 1632 to less than one percent after 1770 (Raben 1996: 85-93).

Within two years of its founding there were 1263 Chinese paying the city's poll tax, attracted or dragooned from Banten and other nearby sites, as well as from Chinese ships. They were engaged in service industries, construction, craft production and provisioning. Unlike Manila or Portuguese Melaka, Batavia did not particularly encourage Chinese or other Asians (unless they were Catholics and therefore potential enemies), to adopt the Calvinist faith of its rulers. The developed Dutch sense of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation here worked in favour of cosmopolis, by setting limits to the local hybridity tolerated in the Dutch community, and thereby necessitating a plural city.

During Batavia's commercial apogee between 1680 and 1730 it was probably the most important international entrepot in Asia, and had an extremely diverse population. Of the 71,600 counted both inside and outside the walls in 1699, for example, 4.8% were European and Eurasian Christians; 11% Asian Christians of very diverse ethnic backgrounds (*Mardijkers*); 16.2% Chinese; 1.8% Indians, chiefly Muslim, 3.5% Malays; 31.6% assorted other Indonesians (Javanese and Balinese beginning to predominate); and 36% slaves of chiefly east Indonesian background (calculated from tables in Raben, App. III). Each of these categories was enormously varied internally, but the diasporic tendency to ally and identify with larger groups, especially where these had official status, was also in play here.

The two most economically important Asian categories for the trade of the city, Chinese and Malays (an essentially diasporic trading community having little in common with 20<sup>th</sup> century understandings of the term), each had their own captains and administrative autonomy. From the outset a prominent Chinese trader, So Bingkong, was appointed Captain of the Batavia Chinese, and his authority was reinforced with the right to certain monopoly revenues, in what became an entrenched pattern of Sino-Dutch economic partnership. Indian Muslims acquired their officer

only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while the less trusted Indonesian groups were governed by a European officer.

### **British cosmopolis**

By the nineteenth century Britain was certainly a nation-state, and the British imposed many of the fundamental monopolies of the nation-state in Asia. One of the first steps had to be clear boundaries within which British sovereignty was absolute and British laws, currency and institutions prevailed. The nineteenth century was unprecedented in the way the map of southern Asia (China-Korea-Vietnam had got there first) was painted in different colours, with lines demarcating one sovereignty from another. Burney, for example, pointed out to the Chancellor [*Kalahom*] of Siam:

the advantage of having regular boundaries established as soon as possible between the Siamese dominions and our conquests on the coasts of Tenasserim...I added that the English earnestly desire to live in the vicinity of the Siamese as good friends and neighbours, and not in the same unsettled and unsocial terms as the Burmese had done; that for this reason we are anxious to have the boundary and rights of each party fixed, so as to prevent all chance of mistake or dispute between our subordinate officers”

Journal of Burney, 15 Feb. 1826, *The Burney Papers* I: 85-6.

But being sated with nation in India and Burma, the British saw the merits of cosmopolis in Central Southeast Asia, and were very slow to encourage any imagining of nations there.

### **Siamese cosmopolis into Thai nation**

The way in which nation transformed his beloved Siam in the 1930s and '40s was of course a particular preoccupation of Ben Batson, whose two major works traced the attempts of the old absolute monarchy to turn itself into a democracy before harsher events overtook it. As he said, his hero King Prajadhipok had the misfortune of being “a moderate man in an immoderate time.” (Batson, 1984: 261). He liked to quote, as many after him continued to do, the abdication speech of Prajadhipok stating that he was “willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people.” (Prajadhipok, 2.3.35, cited Batson 1974: 102; 1984: 317).

As last week's ARI/Walailak/Chulalongkorn conference on the ‘Plural Peninsula’ forcibly reminded us, the Japanese-aligned extreme nationalist government of Pibun Songkran in 1938-44 went out of its way to impose nation on cosmopolis in the most traumatic way. A single Thai identity was defined, with prescribed patterns of western dress and behaviour, Chinese and Malay newspapers and schools were almost all closed, and the separate system of Islamic inheritance and marriage law was abolished in favour of a uniform Thai system (Skinner 1957: 261-72; Thanet 2004: 44-45).

At the opposite, southern, extremity of Central SE Asia, the Dutch subordinated Batavia, Palembang, Medan, to the needs of an imperial nation, with rather extreme forms of monopoly, mercantilism and protectionism at different times. In consequence Batavia was in uninterrupted decline as cosmopolis, relative to other centres, from about 1760 until today. Having established the supremacy of the nation over the cosmopolis by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there could be no logical way out except eventually to democratise that nation through some form of majority rule. Indonesia could have made its transition to nation-state-dom more happily, democratically and plurally had the cards fallen differently in the 1940s, but it is difficult to imagine a decolonisation process that could have revived the once-great Batavia cosmopolis—particularly in competition with Singapore.

### **Straits Settlements to Malaysia/Singapore**

The ports on the Peninsula side of the Straits became in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century the archetype of cosmopolis, perhaps more resistant to the contrary needs of nation than any other corner of the globe. The British took cosmopolis to one of its highest levels by adding their own notion of a free port open to migration and trade to what they inherited—the indigenous notion of cosmopolis and Dutch legal arrangements within it. Penang and Singapore were open virtually to anyone, and attracted a diverse population. The proportion that could be considered “British” (though that category was not emphasised in censuses) never exceeded one percent in Penang and Singapore, though English and Malay became the *linguae francae* of an exceptionally mixed population. Of similar demographic weight in Penang in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were populations of Sumatrans, Burmese and Siamese. Arabs (142 in 1833), Parsees or Zoroastrians (51) and Armenians (21) were smaller but distinctive groups sustaining their own social and religious institutions. No culture could be said to dominate Penang at that time, and the largest categories in the census of 1833 – 40% Malays; 22% Chinese; 20% “Chulias” and 3% “Bengalis”—were in practice much divided into different linguistic and cultural groups. In Singapore the British rulers were similarly dwarfed by Bugis, Javanese, Balinese, North Indian and South Indian census categories, as well as the bigger catch-all categories of Chinese (40% in 1833) and Malays (34%) (Newbold 1839: 54-5, 284-5). Arab, Jewish, Armenian and German communities were smaller but economically and socially significant, with their own religious and social institutions (the German club was established before Germany was, in 1856 – Buckley 629-70). In the twentieth century Russian and Japanese communities became significant, and increasingly also a French-speaking one. Religious festivals, marriages, funerals, national days, and visiting troupes from external homelands were the occasions for each group to celebrate its culture and to put it on show for the cosmopolitan audience.

The story is well known of how ideas of race and nation made their impact on these extremely diverse *cosmopoleis* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most traumatic moments occurred in the turbulent period between 1942 and 1965, when the conviction was universal that nation-states were the only viable form of polity. “State simplifications”, of the sort James Scott has analysed, required that homogeneities be imposed on diverse populations through education. But even that homogenising process had to be plural, with the familiar triad of Chinese, Malay and Indian, each tormented by rival concepts of nation, as well as by the new would-be national states called Malaya, Malaysia, or Singapore. National celebrations of culture uneasily interacted with,

incorporated or replaced the extraordinary mosaic of cultural forms which cosmopolis had always sustained.

Nevertheless cosmopolis continued to flourish, and to revive more vigorously as increasingly global competition created an international context where it was more necessary than ever. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the public rhetoric of nation appeared both less necessary in itself and less opposed to cosmopolis. Public leaders appealed to make Singapore, in particular, “a cosmopolitan centre, able to attract, retain and absorb talent from all over the world” (Lee Kuan Yew, 2000, cited Yeoh & Huang 2004: 31), or “a global hub where people, ideas and capital come together” (Goh Chock Tong 1999, speech to opening of Parliament).

The Singapore figures show an intriguing turnaround in the last decades of the nationalist century. Singapore’s foreign-born population, one clear measure of the strength of cosmopolis in the mix, has usually been among the highest in the world, reflecting its status as cosmopolis par excellence. But this proportion showed a consistent decline throughout the twentieth century, as migration from China, India and Indonesia largely ceased, domestic birth-rates soared, and the pressures of nation made themselves felt. The foreign-born proportions fell from a world-beating 72% in the 1921 census to 35% in that of 1957 and 21.8% in that of 1980. Since then, however, it has risen to 24% in 1990 and 33.6% in 2000, almost back to the level of 1957 (Saw, 1999: 33, supplemented by 2000 census).

The interplay between cosmopolis and nation will continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The needs of nation for cultural coherence and political community will not disappear, though they may seem less urgent as nation-states and their members are knitted ever more intimately into supranational communities and economies. We can be sure that the models of Cosmopolis that have long flourished in this uniquely open crossroads of the world will be of increasing importance to a globalised world in which nobody can afford to isolate themselves behind a wall of homogenised national culture. Having managed to resist the demands of nation better than most may prove an asset in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it was not always in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

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