

Report of the IAS Winter School in Macau

Urban Hybridity in the Post-Colonial Age

16-20 December 2013

Devaka Gunawardena (UCLA) and Lauren Yapp (Stanford)

THIS PAST DECEMBER, the IAS' Winter School on Urban Hybridity in the Post-Colonial Age brought together distinguished professors, trained experts, and selected graduate students from four continents and several disciplines for a lively week of discussion and research in the fascinating city of Macau. Following on the successes of two prior IAS Summer Schools held at the institution's headquarters in the Netherlands, this year organizers collaborated with the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Macau to hold the Winter School at its main campus on Taipa (one of the small islands that make up Macau). This location proved to be the ideal setting for both the participants' intellectual discussions of urban hybridity in the classroom, and our hands-on exploration of it in the streets and squares of the metropolis' diverse neighbourhoods.

The week began with a series of individual presentations by graduate students on their own doctoral research, as well as by the Winter School's three co-conveners – Professor Engseng Ho (Duke University), Professor Akhil Gupta (UCLA), and Professor Michael Herzfeld (Harvard University) – each a world-renowned scholar in the field of anthropology. In the true spirit of the Winter School's stated themes, the students' work proved to be extremely diverse, with PhD projects ranging from studies of protest spaces in Malaysia and 'Chinatowns' in post-war Japan, to histories of immigrant enclaves in Australia and modernist city planning in Pakistan, to ethnographies of youth heritage activism in Indonesia and urban beautification projects in Sri Lanka. The co-conveners not only offered insightful comments on all of these projects, but also began each day's session with lectures based on their own research. In these, they knitted together various issues raised by the student presentations, while also drawing upon their own extensive fieldwork in India, Dubai, Thailand, and Singapore.

In addition, throughout the week the Winter School also facilitated guest lectures from local and foreign experts on the history and architecture of Macau. Presentations by Jeff Cody, a conservator at the Getty Institute; Tim Simpson, a dean at the University of Macau; and José Marques Sales, the last Mayor of Macau under the Portuguese administration, together presented a multifaceted picture of the city and its past. In his presentation, Jeff Cody discussed the role of the built environment, focusing on material changes to Macau over time. He explored the use of particular materials and building styles that both reinforced the trans-local connections between Macau and Las Vegas (the American city to which it is so often compared) while emphasizing the former's unique aspects.

Tim Simpson traced a complex history of gambling and the ever-present question of illicit activities on the islands, producing a humorous yet astounding picture of the massive capital that flows through Macau. Finally, José Marques Sales offered an elegiac portrait of changes to the city from the mid- to late-twentieth century through the lens of a personal biography. He discussed the changing world of a Portuguese creole elite trying to make sense of the growing political influence of China in Macau's affairs. At the same time he stressed the singular position through which Macau is able to maintain its relevance, particularly as an access point for Taiwan and as a demonstration of China's own internal complexity.

Words, history, and the senses

From these presentations, lectures, and our spirited discussions that followed over tea and dan tat (Macanese egg tarts), three major themes arose. The first was a shared effort to rethink the terminology we use to discuss post-colonial cities. Hailing from departments of anthropology, history, media and culture studies, music, and architecture, the graduate students worked together as a highly interdisciplinary group. Throughout our interactions, we found ourselves reconsidering several terms long central to our respective fields; for instance, notions of 'identity,' 'heritage,' 'nostalgia,' and even 'hybridity' itself. While all are undoubtedly useful, in some cases these concepts cannot effectively capture the kinds of complexities in urban physical and social form that each of our research projects aim to understand. Over the course of the Winter School, many suggestions were made of how to re-work this existing terminology (for example, 'hybridities' rather than 'hybridity') in a matter we felt could better reflect the realities we faced in

our fieldwork and allow us to communicate ideas more effectively between our different disciplines. In this vein, Professor Herzfeld himself made a strong case for moving away from the usual talk of 'identity,' a word that often carries with it a false sense of fixity and internal coherence, and towards experimentation with the more nuanced concept of 'positionalities.'

The second theme to emerge from the Winter School was a desire to draw connections between the past and the present of Asian urbanism. Indeed, all of the participants shared a strong interest in historical depth – whether of physical urban landscapes, social relations of city-dwellers, or exchanges between cities within Asia – and in how that depth was represented (or left unrepresented) in contemporary heritage discourses and other public displays of an 'official'

past. Professor Ho, in particular, pointed out that many of the urban centres that served as the field sites of the graduate students' research were in fact port cities with historical linkages to each other that stretched back centuries, and challenged us to consider how these longstanding connections might be being reconfigured or reinvigorated in the present.

Finally, while the Winter School's participants came to Macau from far-ranging countries and disciplines, a strong common curiosity quickly became clear – a curiosity in the spatial, material, and sensory make-up of cities, and in how urban hybridity (or, rather, hybridities) might be understood or observed in these terms. This interest ran throughout both the individual student presentations and the lectures of the co-conveners, from Professor Gupta's characterization of incomplete infrastructure projects in Indian cities as the 'ruins of the future,' to Professor Herzfeld's account of the recent 'spatial cleansing' of Bangkok neighbourhoods to make way for parks and heritage attractions, to Professor Ho's discussion of the impact that the striking architecture of 'global cities' like Dubai and Singapore have on visitors and residents alike.

Experiencing Macau

This shared interest in the material, spatial, and sensory dimensions of urban hybridity in Asia is a theme that the students were able to explore further in the second half of the Winter School. We split into small groups to conduct independent ethnographic and media research projects around Macau using the 'toolkit' of qualitative and quantitative research methods that the co-conveners had presented in the opening meeting of the workshop. Each group was paired with a local student from the University of Macau, who contributed enormously to our brief fieldwork experience in this

multi-layered, and sometimes daunting city. They served both as cultural and linguistic mediators and as theorists in their own right, helping the graduate students to navigate important issues regarding the cultural complexity and history of Macau.

Each group had a condensed time frame in which to pursue their own research project in Macau. This seeming constraint, however, encouraged the participants to develop innovative approaches to their fieldwork and to experiment with new methods. Some participants interacted with local residents, identifying and interviewing key informants in order to understand the history of residential associations in Macau and the role of local trade. Other groups, wanting to understand how the spatial organization and architectural construction of Macau is itself reflective of hybrid cultural dynamics, embarked on walking tours. They paid particular attention to the aesthetic and sensory features of Macau's diverse cityscapes: from the UNESCO World Heritage Site that is its historic colonial core, to the working-class neighbourhoods just off this tourist trail, to the wide avenues of its glitzy casino district.

The result of these explorations into the tangible and social dynamics of Macau was a series of short presentations on the final day of the workshop, each packed with great detail and creative insights that reflected participants' wide-ranging expertise, while also coalescing their shared interests under the general themes of the Winter School. Of the groups that focused on the spatial and sensory aspects of the city, one studied the official celebrations (coincidentally, occurring during the week of the Winter School) commemorating the handover of Macau from Portugal to China in 1999. They concluded that these self-conscious representations of Macanese heritage strategically depicted its Portuguese past as part of a politically benign multiculturalism. Another group of students examined the ubiquitous Portuguese tiles that pave the streets and sidewalks of the historic centre, tracing their historical background and connections to Portugal. They pointed out that despite their importance, today these tiles are relatively overlooked by pedestrians and tourists going about their daily affairs. Still others took a more explicitly sensory approach to Macau, producing field recordings that highlighted the aural landscape of activities concentrated in distinctive neighbourhoods.

In addition to these aesthetic and sensory themes, another set of students addressed the social aspects of everyday life in Macau. One group focused on the material infrastructure of local markets, including questions of zoning and regulation. They linked these back to issues regarding local trade amongst fruit and vegetable vendors and the larger market that has emerged in order to supply casinos. Taking a fine-grained look at the history of associational life in Macau, a final group produced a rich visual and ethnographic portrait of residents' patterns of living. In great detail, their fieldwork revealed residents' long-standing yet evolving relationships with the wider city, particularly their ambivalent engagement with mass tourism.

Overall, the diversity of themes explored by the graduate students offered up a vivid cross-section of Macau and a holistic picture of life in this complex, and sometimes contradictory city. As was the original aim of the IAS in holding the Winter School outside the usual confines of its Leiden office (a logistical feat in itself!), Macau served as the perfect backdrop for participants, both students and professors alike, to think through the larger comparative and theoretical issues that the phenomenon we called 'hybridity' continues to raise in post-colonial cities across Asia.



Photos: (top) Colorful preparations along the route of the parade celebrating the anniversary of Macau's handover to China. (under) Apartment balconies in central Macau (both photos by Lauren Yapp).

Below: Street scene, Macau. Sketched by Nurul Azreen Azlan during the group research project.



Guian T. Miao Temple, Macau

19 Dec 2013 - 19:15