

Visualizing Southeast Asian Cities

Multimodal Writing Pedagogies in a Global Asian University

By Elmo Gonzaga

The Visualizing Southeast Asian Cities class starts with a map of the region, whose parts not every student is able to identify. We look at other maps, of transit systems and tourist trails, through which the infrastructure of knowledge that determines the movements and practices of individuals is revealed.

First taught in early 2014, Visualizing Southeast Asian Cities is the second tier of a two-module writing program called Ideas and Exposition, which forms part of the core curriculum for students of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) new residential colleges.¹ My iteration of the module explores how urban spaces across Southeast Asia have been imagined and articulated through what I call "spatial images" such as maps, paintings, photographs, postcards, blueprints, monuments, ruins, skyscrapers, films, advertisements, and websites. After being introduced to the module's themes through assigned readings, students spend more than half of the semester writing a research paper that is an analysis of the workings of spatial images in their chosen Southeast Asian city.

With the aim of providing a more immersive university experience for students, NUS President Tan Chorh Chuan heralded the new residential college program as part of its vision to be "a leading global university centered in Asia, influencing the future." Differing from many universities in the United States, NUS evolved from a vocational system without any core liberal arts curriculum. For the most part, students take modules within their faculty (school) and graduate within three years if they do not qualify for an honors thesis. Aside from the intimate learning environment, which is unique in an educational institution of approximately 20,000 undergraduates, the selling point of the residential colleges is the seminar-style approach of their classes. In these small-sized classes, capped at twelve, students are able to interact regularly with students from other faculties for two hours twice a week. Envisaged as a hub for innovative ideas and collaborations, the residential college system exposes NUS students to diversity. The intention is to create a dynamic learning environment that will produce graduates who will not only be cosmopolitan citizens in an increasingly globalized world, but enterprising leaders of the twenty-first-century information economy.

As part of the Ideas and Exposition program, my module Visualizing Southeast Asian Cities has the following general objectives: to equip students with the necessary academic writing skills and to foster critical thinking among students. Over the semester, the module requires students to submit three writing assignments: an annotated bibliography for six sources with annotations of 100–150 words each, a 750- to 1,000-word research proposal, and a 2,500- to 3,000-word research paper. Its more specific objectives include teaching students to uncover the premises of arguments, assess the credibility of sources, formulate arguments of their own, and support these arguments with evidence. For me, critical thinking does not simply involve evaluating sources or identifying fallacies but interrogating outworn assumptions and frameworks. My module aims to furnish students with the analytical tools for studying the meanings of images in relation to their production, circulation, and reception within an urban milieu. Over the semester, students also learn more about the important issues of urban space and prevailing conditions in Southeast Asia.

Other Ideas and Exposition modules feature innovative topics such as Ethics in Outer Space; English, Singlish, and Intercultural Communi-

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cation; and Blood, Death, and Desire: Interpreting the Vampire. While the modules are based on a rudimentary template for teaching academic writing and critical thinking, each lecturer has the freedom to develop the content of the module according to his or her area of interest and expertise. Especially due to the focus of the second tier of the program on research paper writing, lecturers must often rely on an extensive knowledge of a range of sources on the topic of their module to be able to advise students on their papers.

The module's multidisciplinary orientation is meant to acquaint students with different perspectives and methodologies. In designing the syllabus, I selected readings that offered a variety of themes or trajectories representative of key areas of inquiry in Southeast Asian studies and Asian urban studies. Students could choose to pursue several themes in their research papers, assured that this variety introduced them to the major cities in the Southeast Asian region. My reading list includes the following texts:

1. Part 5 of Norman Owen's *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), which provides background knowledge about the prevailing social and economic conditions of nations in the region.
2. The chapter "Cities, People, Language" in James C. Scott's book *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), on how urban planning assumes a "God-eye's view," which disregards the everyday use of city spaces. This chapter is good introductory reading because urban planning is one of the most obvious examples of a spatial image. It acquaints students with the concept of legibility, which enables the state to administer its domain with order and effectiveness.
3. The chapter "Landscapes of the Imagination" in Karen Strassler's *Refracted Visions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) discusses how the urban backdrops of studio portraits have enabled Indonesians to imagine alternate possibilities of identity in a modernizing world.
4. Benedict Anderson's essay, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast," from the anthology *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011) is on the contrasting reactions of urban and rural residents to Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's elusive 2004 film *Sat Pralaat (Tropical Malady)*, about a shape-shifting were-tiger.
5. The chapter "Indigenous Space and Ancient Maps," from Thongchai Winichakul's seminal work *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988) is about the genealogical shift in the basis of mapping from religious cosmography to geographical science. This chapter offers a methodological example of tracing historical change through a comparative analysis of two sets of images. Using its

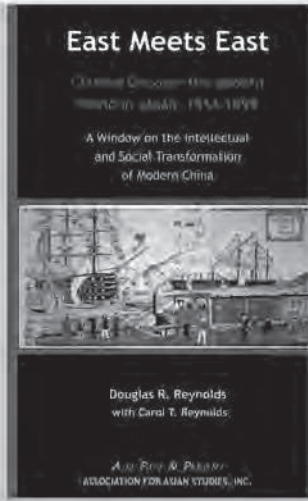
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definition of cartography, the class looks at how the configurations of territorial, road, transit, and tourist maps are based on varying constellations of symbols.

6. Aihwa Ong’s article, “Hyperbuilding,” from her coedited volume *Worlding Cities* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) discusses how monumental buildings function as icons of a global city. Analyzing landmarks found in postcards such as Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Twin Towers and Jakarta’s *Monas* (National Monument), the class examines how distinct modes of city branding for tourists and investors emphasize particular urban characteristics.
7. Chua Beng Huat’s popular essay, “Nostalgia for the *Kampung*,” attributes the increase in nostalgia among Singaporeans to the aggravation of their stress from the city-state’s rapid economic progress. Its conception of nostalgia acts as a springboard for an analysis of memory blogs such as *Remember Singapore* and *Good Morning Yesterday*, and historical documentaries like *Old Places* and *Old Romances*, which aim to record vanishing spaces in Singapore through a nostalgic visual style.
8. Focusing on Manila, the chapter “Slum Ecology” in Mike Davis’s controversial book *Planet of Slums* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), opens a discussion on the ethics and efficacy of “poverty porn,” or media with an exploitative portrayal of the poor and marginalized. Charitable organizations use poverty porn to depict urban poverty in order to solicit funding. The class explores how, in contrast to the East Asian city’s embodiment of the urban future, the Southeast Asian city epitomizes underdevelopment. For instance, Hollywood movies set in Bangkok like *The Hangover Part II* and *The Beach* typically picture it as a den of sin.

Working in pairs, students are required to give a presentation on one of the assigned readings, for which the pair receives a group grade. At the end of the presentation, further discussion of the text is done in small groups in order to stimulate the exchange of ideas, especially among the more taciturn students who might be less self-assured about sharing their thoughts in public. I believe that this seminar-style approach is effective in enabling students to become equal partners in knowledge production in the classroom.

Situating their paper against the arguments and methods of existing scholarship, students must present a thesis about how spatial images operate within a network of forces specific to an urban milieu. This expectation cultivates a historical consciousness in students by causing them to form connections between text and context. I use an expansive definition of the spatial image that refers not only to a visual representation of social conditions but also to the sculptural features of a physical structure. I assign my students to submit annotations for their first writing assignment in batches over a four-week period in order to entice them to conduct extensive, exploratory research on a possible topic before settling on a definite one. Familiarizing themselves with the relevant scholarship, they become semi-experts on their topic. I believe that the process of developing a research paper instills a sense of ownership in the students, especially when they must defend their findings before their peers during the final presentation.

Since the evaluative criteria for the research paper requires that it be distinguished from existing scholarship, students exert conscious effort to work on a unique topic. In the two semesters I have taught the module, students have endeavored to focus on different Southeast Asian cities, including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Hanoi, Manila, Da Nang, and Luang Prabang. Topics have included:

- The changing depiction of political dynamics among state,

religion, and citizenry in prominent photos of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon from various historical periods.

- The Chiang Mai municipal government's reconfiguration of indigenous Lanna culture through publicity photos and national monuments.
- The psychological operation of documentaries about Democratic Kampuchea, such as Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, in presenting Phnom Penh as an alluring destination for "dark tourism" (tourism to sites of death and disaster).
- The artifice of realism in a video game featuring the *angkot*, an informal mode of public transportation in Bandung.

In my classes, I incorporate lessons and activities on visual analysis because a large majority of my students have little grounding in close reading. I start the semester by showing students how paintings by the Filipino artists Vicente Manansala, Arturo Luz, and Emmanuel Garibay visualize the city in different ways. Highlighting these dissimilarities instills in the students the idea that images are not a transparent window to reality but instead depict reality through the conventions of their medium. To emphasize that communication is not a unidirectional process, I discuss the contrasting perceptions of Southeast Asian cities that circulate globally. As an example, I show how a Google image search with the word "ruin" and the name of a Southeast Asian city can yield different results: decaying temples for Bangkok, post-World War II devastation for Manila, and postapocalyptic illustrations for Singapore.

After introducing them to a suggested framework of analysis from David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen's textbook *Writing Analytically*, I demonstrate how it could be modified for use on three types of spatial images: photographs, maps, and films.² The students can then adapt the framework to the particular types of spatial images they will focus on for their research paper. For instance, the class views Tran Anh Hung's 1995 award-winning film *Cyclo*, which features the entwined struggles for survival of impoverished residents in Ho Chi Minh City. Studying first the generic conventions of *film noir* (a genre of hard-boiled crime film) and the city symphony, the discussion focuses on the visual and auditory elements in *Cyclo* that contribute to an authentic evocation of the urban environment. The class asks if its portrayal of Third World reality fits the definition of poverty porn.

Many of my students treat the arguments of authoritative sources as dogmatic truths to be embraced without question. I strive to inculcate in them the ability and self-confidence to formulate their own ideas without turning to their teacher as an omnipotent source of knowledge. Working with images permits students to encounter ideas on their own terms through media with which they are more familiar. Because arguments derived from visual analysis depend on textual evidence, the strength of their arguments rest on how persuasive they are able to make them without the aid of facts or statistics. I see visual analysis as a fruitful venue for critical thinking because it compels students to examine a text carefully before arriving at an interpretation that would be defensible in public. Because they are accustomed to dealing with easily proven, ready-made ideas from lecture classes or slideshow presentations, students find themselves thrust out of their comfort zones. Exposed to the range of meanings implicit in an image, they become conscious of diversity.

The module is important for exposing students to diversity, which is a vital aspect of the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Students encounter diversity in the classroom by being acquainted not only with cultures from other Southeast Asian nations and approaches from other academic disciplines but also with the multiplicity of interpretations pos-

sible in an image. Even while the university produces skilled graduates for the professional workforce, it lives up to the ideal of the university in affording spaces where ideas can be created and tested. As the university serves as a site where they can encounter the unfamiliar, students learn to interrogate the normative categories and frameworks with which they apprehend disparate realities.

As a synthesis activity, I ask my students to map out the readings we have discussed in class in the form of a city, and then to situate their topic within this city. Through my module, I hope that students are able not only to reiterate an assortment of facts regarding their location on a map but also to recognize the network of forces shaping their experience of the world. ■

NOTES


1. For more information about the Ideas and Exposition Program, see <http://tinyurl.com/cwr6ffc>.
2. David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen, *Writing Analytically*, 7th ed. (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015).

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