

CONTEMPORARY ASIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

CONTEMPORARY ASIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPES: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: In every cultural geographer there is a latter-day Isherwood, seeking what can be understood in what can be observed. In East Asia this quest is, for many, made difficult by a wall of misunderstanding fortified by language and culture. The difficulty is compounded by the rapid and palpable pace of change in Asia's more developed regions, and by evident differences in societies' predilection for borrowing, adaptation, and retransmission of cultural traits. Thus the New Asia's cultural landscapes embody an amalgam of influences that variously suggest deeply held cultural values, a growing Asia-Pacific homogeneity spurred by technology and shared environmental context, and a proclivity for western practice molded to Asian taste and local constraints of space and living standards. This paper explores these themes in what amounts to a photographic essay based on recent extended travel in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Chinese coastal cities. Themes explored include: the landscape's expression of self-image, socially determined norms of movement, the streetscape of recreation, the articulation of urban space, and attitudes toward the environment. The close of the twentieth century affords a brief but important opportunity to assess the ways in which the New Asia is shaping a range of cultural landscapes attuned to deeply-held values and recently acquired tastes and aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

For many years my research has explored the visible imprint of folk and popular culture on the American human landscape, especially its architecture. No geographer engaged in that sort of work can neglect photography as a research and educational tool. Cultural geographers are latter-day Isherwoods, seeking what can be understood in what can be observed. Naturally the geographer tends to accumulate a photographic record quite at odds with the visual trophies shot and mounted by the typical tourist.

As teachers, we all face the same dilemma: the questions aimed at us are often impossibly general when all we can often offer are specific experiences that tend to presuppose at least some knowledge of Asia on our listener's part. Each of us must decide how to cope with horrendous questions which take the typical form "What is Hong Kong like?". Questions like that, for any Asian setting, ignore several hard realities. One is sheer scale: few can claim to have thoroughly 'seen' China, for example. And travelling the length of Japan's main islands is equivalent to journeying the North American Eastern Seaboard. A second hard reality is access -- few of us pass beyond tourist attractions and the streetscape into homes, businesses, schools, or farms. A third factor is that of comprehension -- it is hard to scale a wall of misunderstanding when it is fortified by language and culture. Thus for many of us a grasp of Asian societies is often at best that of a wide-eyed deaf-mute. And a fourth factor, critical but hard to pinpoint, is the way in which we all personalize experience. So our retained images are mirrors, an exercise not in description but in self-description. Snapshots, for example, always seem to say more about the observer than the observed.

For now, I will suspend these misgivings about the legitimacy and meaning of the images I have carried back to the United States. It seems to me that broad themes do fix and frame the character of Japan, the New China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Illustrating these themes will put to use some of the four thousand or so photographs taken during a week in Taiwan, a month in Japan, and a dozen trips to China. The Taiwan images focus on Taipei and Kaohsiung, the world's fourth busiest container port. The Japan travels spanned the broad region between Tokyo and Kurashiki, west of Kyoto, as well as Kagoshima and southern Kyushu. Journeys to China took in Shanghai, nearby Suzhou, Guangzhou, and the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. The Japan I have seen is a mature, technologically advanced society shaping some very old traditions to meet the challenges of a very uncertain future. A lens on China captures a headlong pace but narrow orbit of change; China is apparently as yet unprepared to resolve the many inconsistencies change has brought about. Taiwan and Hong Kong seem especially equipped to combine their legacy of cultural borrowing with a facility for adaptation and retransmission of hybrid traits as a new commonplace for the New Asia.

SELF IMAGE

In Kagoshima, Japan, eighteen students are forever transfixed in work and contemplation. These pre-Meiji era pioneers were sent to Europe and America in 1865 as the vanguard of southern Japan's resolve to absorb Western science and technology. Earnest in bronze, they remind us that Japan's accession to the ranks of the Great Powers took place when industrialization and the modern nation-state were still infant facets of most of Europe and North America. Those Japanese students were no older than Germany, Italy, or Canada, or American States disunited by a four-year Civil War. Much of what was 'new' to Japan was less than a generation 'old' in Europe or North America. But there, Fin de Siècle modern came and went, shattered by the social upheaval of the Great War. In Japan, however, it remains a style protected by nostalgia and by enduring facets of Victorian values alloyed with much older yet oddly similar Japanese traditions of status made visible. Thus, turn-of-the-century style still pervades the 'look' of contemporary school or railway uniforms, mundane objects such as mailboxes, and of expensive interior furnishing.

Late Ching xenophobia and Great Power bullying left no such fin-de-siecle legacy in China. Granted, China's former treaty ports feature examples of imposed European taste, but the European patina of Shanghai's Bund or French Concession still looks uncomfortably forced and colonial, not absorbed, and certainly not cherished. Trappings of the Socialist experiment are still everywhere, but now even Marx and Engels busts seem as bewildered as their attendant cadre as the new urban China casts off the dour egalitarianism of shared deprivation. So the new self-image in the cities is the steel, glass, glitz and neon of China's limited market economy -- and its dangerous and profound disparities of wealth and privilege. The statues of this latest transition are the icons of global popular culture -- Santa Claus, Colonel Sanders, Ronald McDonald, Mickey Mouse. True, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong are no less freighted with such roadside shrines to mass consumption. Yet it is in China that one senses that their impact is greatest because they have filled such a palpable void in human awareness and experience of consumer society.

Much the same point applies to advertising. In Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan roadside advertising and business signs reach levels of visual clutter and blight unmatched in the United States since we all but abolished pedestrian throngs on our city streets. In China the hand-painted sign is still a lively commercial art form, and expediency tends to rule durability and taste. In all these Asian societies the English language plays a role in advertising reminiscent of the commercial use of French in the English-speaking world -- its associations of status transcend any other purpose except, perhaps, sheer visual impact in a blizzard of Chinese characters.

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GETTING AROUND

The Japanese drive on the left, do so with caution and civility, and make all forms of public transportation an emblem of the national penchant for an obsessively efficient marriage of time and motion, with a dash of adventure and often a dollop of elegance. As a result, getting there is quite commonly all the fun in Japan, for sheer weight of numbers at popular destinations make some attractions decidedly less attractive than they might otherwise be. Traditionally, movement has always been an art in Japan. Thus, modern movement is modern art.

Taiwanese society has held on to some of culture traits introduced by Japan and cultivated there for a half-century until 1945. Those traits include some derivative sense that movement should be designed, regulated, and conducted with a sense of the common good. But a fierce individualism and talent for improvisation make Tokyo and Taipei streets a study in contrasts. In particular, the individualistic streak is unleashed in Taiwan through the universal use of scooters as cheap transportation and habit of laissez faire parking oblivious to the pedestrian.

If Marco Polo crossed China today, his journey would entail unspeakable danger from motor vehicles. And in sufficient density, the common bicycle is a dangerous weapon too. It is sobering to think that in a few short years those bicycle armadas will be replaced by motorized scooters, yielding a nightmare mirror of present-day Taiwan. It is I think one of the great paradoxes of China that a society nominally so ruled by official constraints of public order and security offers neither on its roads. And as the roads improve, the driving worsens, or at least speeds reach levels of heightened risk. One senses in Chinese bus drivers a manic energy and affirmation of manhood. In China's Wild South and equally wild metropolitan East, car, bus, and lorry all echo the symbolic role of the horse in nineteenth-century America.

CULTURE AND RECREATION

In each Asian society there is an amalgam of spending and wasting time that combines old and new, sublime and mundane, cerebral and mindless, casual and intense. Cultural values are a fundamental backdrop to recreational pursuits, but each society is a study in internal contrasts that dwarf international comparison. And it is too simplistic to attribute these internal contrasts to mere differences of taste and refinement, or class and income. Thus, the land of tea ceremony and flower arrangement is slave to Pachinko parlors and Karaoke. And what little Taiwanese sidewalk space is bereft of parked scooters is routinely filled with video-games and arcade miniature crane grabs. Yet the Japanese esthetic that accepts the Juke-box-like facade of the Pachinko Parlor also lavishes astonishing attention to the stylish elegant wrapping and presentation of even mundane shop-bought articles. In China one is repeatedly struck by the odd survival of pre-revolutionary 1930s moderne taste and manners. If Hong Kong society is the modern cruise ship moored permanently at a Guangdong dock (and indeed the roughly half million passengers do enjoy a life-style worlds removed from the six million crew members) then Shenzhen and Guangzhou are old ocean queens where dancing, service, and even modes of dress show a lag of many decades. And it is instructive to observe in People's Parks an attention to perfecting dance steps that are old as well as exercises and art forms that are much, much older. For now at least, the Jazz band plays on in Shanghai's Peace Hotel much as it has since the city's gilded age.

URBAN SPACE

In Japan, one is rarely far from a map, and rarely far from lost. The low-rise, high density neighborhood is the indistinct but socially vital base element of urban living. Common responsibility for neighborhood security and cleanliness is evident. Chronologically (not geographically) assigned street numbers make finding a specific address specifically hopeless for many non-residents and almost all Gaijin. Small shrines in older districts mark the sanctity of space as well as a millennium-old blend of small-scale living in large-scale cities. Somehow these gems of faith and meaning work, overwhelmed as they are by the clutter of poles, wires, and signs. Urban space, for any purpose, comes at a premium in Japan, and acceptance of troglodyte subterranean life and wildly stacked business premises to about eight floors (more in Tokyo) is well-entrenched. Note that Hong Kong's extremes of high-rise residential living are not matched by much vertical extension of its shopping, restaurant- or night-life -- all of which remain mostly anchored to the all-important street level. In China, and Taiwan too, to experience the street is to experience the city, an effect heightened by the enduring tradition of food preparation, craft and light-assembly work completed on the sidewalk or in open storefront spaces.

Japanese imaginative use of space is an extraordinary feature of its urban and rural landscapes alike, whether applied to parking a car, or conceiving a garden. Repeatedly one is reminded that 'small' and 'large' are relative terms subject only to the limits of human creativity. The New China seems repeatedly to aim for large-scale grandeur, for axes and spaces which transcend a human scale of reference in the tradition of the Forbidden City or even Tienanmen. Shenzhen highway-based sprawl is a modern inheritor of this tradition of grand design, and so is Shanghai's newest Pu River Bridge, soaring an astonishing 300 meters in the dawn light.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The point that environmental protection and conservation are luxuries of economically advanced societies is distressingly well illustrated by East Asia. Shanghai's Pu combines riverbanks thronged with industrial polluters with apparently no concern for the impact of waste discharge. Guangzhou's waterfront is a regatta of flotsam. Shenzhen construction is apparently always initiated by a scouring contest, with devastating future consequences for erosion and run-off. Suzhou canals are open sewers cheek-by-jowl with standpipe wells for the boat people and shanties I saw in its poorest southern quarter. Meanwhile affluent Japan, sometimes over-confident Japan, can contemplate the volcano Sakurajima and lavish an extraordinary array of environmental engineering and protective measures to secure the life of the quite small communities that nestle at its base. Environmental Studies are emphatically not my area of expertise, but I would anyway argue that coming to terms with the natural environment is an Asian challenge that can no longer be set aside in the interest of rapid economic development.

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CONCLUSION

Last April, I watched Russian sailors navigate the Manila harbor entrance using compass, sextant, and chart -- precisely the tools of Magellan five centuries ago, and -- happily-precise too. The "Zhukov", a container ship, had departed from Vostochny and was bound for Melbourne, a western Pacific Rim voyage it completes in less than a month. For those Russian merchant sailors the Asia-Pacific World Region is no mere abstraction, and yet their sense of its constituent cultures is understandably limited to the narrow if colorful world sailors in ports have enjoyed for millennia. I left Asia with the all-too-clear sense that the landscapes I observed and recorded were really only a little more representative of East Asia's entirety than those sailors' narrow niche of experience. The cultural geographer who is absolutely certain is, usually absolutely wrong. So I left Asia with the firm resolution to return and redress the sins of commission and omission you have seen and heard today. Thank you.