

EDITORIAL

# Imperial Negotiations: Introducing Comprador Networks and Comparative Modernities

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The comprador classes of the 19th- and early 20th-centuries were critical agents of global capitalism. As ‘middle men’ in the colonial enterprise, they enabled the development of imperial trade networks, negotiated the supply of labor that extracted profit from the local landscape, established new patterns of consumption and taste, and facilitated cultural as well as economic exchanges that were critical to the growth of Asian cities. In diverse treaty ports and colonial entrepôts like Singapore, Batavia, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, compradors drew on a diverse vocabulary of intra- and trans-regional architectural forms, labor, materials, and construction techniques to build homes, offices, godowns, factories, and infrastructural networks that were legible to both European corporations and local populations. The travelling, sojourning perspective of the comprador allows historians to critically examine the fractured, multi-scaled geographies at play across global networks as well as what Raymond Williams has described as ‘the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals’. This special collection examines the role of comprador patrons and architects as active participants in the production of the global modern built environment in the 19th and 20th centuries. The articles aim to create an understanding of treaty ports, colonial cities, and free trade zones not only as sites of local and foreign interactions but as incubators of new ideas about architecture and modernity in the global capitalist economy.

## Introduction

In the 19th and 20th centuries, compradors were critical agents in the development of global capitalism and the modern built environment. The term ‘comprador’, from the Portuguese word for ‘buyer’, referred to the agents of commercial enterprises based in Europe and North America and operating primarily in East, South, and Southeast Asia as well as Africa and South America. In Southeast Asia, compradors were mostly migrants from the linguistically diverse south and southeast China coast, often from the same impoverished regions that produced much of the labor that built imperial wealth in metropolises like London, Amsterdam, and Paris. Unlike the ‘coolies’ and indentured and convict laborers who arrived en masse in the 19th and 20th centuries, the stories of compradors follow a familiar ‘rags to riches’ narrative while neatly skirting the moral contradictions of exploiting their kin (Pieris 2017; Loh et al. 2013). Already inhabiting the moral shadows of the colonial economy, the term ‘comprador’ (Chinese: 買辦), and those to whom the term was applied, took on particularly pejorative associations in the post-independence era, signifying those local bourgeoisie whose privilege derived from foreign monopolies and whose vested interests supported colonial occupation (Ashcroft, Tiffin, and Griffins 2001: 55; Kwame 1992: 62–63; Mao 1926: 13). It is perhaps this ambivalent position that makes the comprador a critical figure for better understanding the ethically fraught

history of the modern built environment, a history that is not driven by individual architect- or planner-heroes and in which the development of the architectural profession was entwined with uneven geographical development and the exploitation of racialized labor and natural resources (Wallerstein and Balibar 1991: 79).

Compradors occupied a particularly ambiguous racial, social, and political position in the colonial hierarchy. While not exactly ‘native’ to the cultures in which they operated, neither were they completely alien to them. Barred from early European social spaces, they eventually created their own form of ‘high society’, that included ostentatious parties in their villas and private clubs (Lim 2015: 15–17). Many grew wealthy trafficking in the commodities that were produced through the exploitation of both their adopted and ancestral ‘homes’, including, notably, opium (Wong 2015: 35–39; Trocki 2009). These so-called middle men of the colonial enterprise enabled the development of imperial trade networks that brought diverse colonial regions into the orbit of metropolitan centers as peripheral zones, negotiated the supply of labor that extracted profit from the local landscape, established new patterns of consumption and taste, and facilitated cultural as well as economic exchanges that were critical to the growth of modern cities.

Skilled at moving across different strata of colonial society, the comprador operated within and against the commercial networks of imperial capitalism. Examining these networks, which were conduits of capital, commodities, and labor, has been useful for decentering both the colonial metropole and the postcolonial nation-state

as the primary subject of historical narratives in area studies (Thongchai 2004; Duara 1995; Chatterjee 1993; Tagliacozzo 2007). For example, while the port cities in which comprador businesses flourished have been conventionally framed as outposts of European empire, recent historical scholarship allows us to understand them as the nodal points of overlapping webs of business interests forged by wealthy families as well as 'secret societies' and inter- and sub-racial partnerships that controlled important sectors of transnational and interconnected business activities. Historian Wong Yee Tuan, for example, has argued that these networks knit together surrounding states as one economically unified geographical region that transgressed imperial borders (Wong 2015: 2). For scholars of the built environment, studying these complex networks allows us to understand the diverse vocabulary of intra- and trans-regional architectural forms, labor, materials, and construction techniques at play in the production of architectural and urban modernity (Bremner 2016: 9). The similar appearance of cities as diverse as Xiamen, Macao, Singapore, Penang, and Medan derives partly from the migration of building labor through colonial cities and 'treaty ports'. These ports were opened to European and North American trade through the Unequal Treaties that sovereign Asian states were compelled to sign under military threat in the 19th and 20th centuries (Kohl 1984: 20). Just as important to the cohesive appearance of these ports were the ways that compradors of the region contested top-down European planning approaches, typologies, and architectural tastes. Treaty ports and colonial cities were thus not simply 'laboratories of modernity' but 'contact zones' or 'contested terrain', in which the aesthetic regimes of the modern were, and continue to be, forged through processes of communal and individual contestation, negotiation, and mediation (Wright 1987; Pratt 1992: 2; Pratt 2002: 4; Yeoh 2013: 9). The essays in this collection critically examine the fractured, multi-scaled geographies at play across global networks as well as what Raymond Williams has described as 'the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals' (Williams 1989: 47). Although engaged with distinct imperial archives (Portuguese, Dutch, and British), these articles share three common areas of investigation: the comparative study of modernity and its uncritical associations with the so-called 'West', the spatialization of race, and the figure of the architect in the production of the built environment.

### Comparative Modernities and the 'West'

Working in the polyglot colonial milieu of the 19th and 20th centuries, compradors not only translated across the diverse languages of empire, but also rendered the meanings and aesthetic modalities of erstwhile regional ideas like 'modernity' into terms that were advantageous to their commercial interests. Numerous studies have noted both the impossibility of perfect translation as well as its fundamentality as a method for understanding and creating across multiple languages that form part of a universal society (Derrida 1967; Paz 1991: 152–154). The translatability of an idea like modernity speaks to its universality but also speaks to its mutability. Japanese lit-

erature scholar Christopher Hill has persuasively argued that as concepts moved around the world in the 19th and 20th centuries, they experienced multiple mediations. These included translation into other languages and mass reproduction in the form of textbooks and other forms of publication that disseminated as well as transformed the concept of modernity. Mediation and abstraction allowed the 'universalization' of concepts like 'modernity' and 'society' as if they were valid in all places at all times. Hill uses the paradigm of 'intercrossing', from the work of Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, to understand the ways that two or more concepts or bodies of thought are modified through mutual contact. In contrast to linear trajectories of influence and diffusion that studies of conceptual transfer suggest, 'contact' affects all parties in an exchange even if the resulting transformations may be asymmetrical (Hill 2013: 135, 146). This observation is particularly helpful in understanding the heterogeneity and complex transformation of modern architecture in diverse locations. It argues against conventional histories of the modern as a story of diffusion from Europe to peripheral locations and engages the importance of local actors in the 'universalization' of its aesthetic norms.

Compradors engaged in translation not as a passive act of reproducing European models of modern architecture and urban planning, but as a mode of self-fashioning in which tradition was a constituent element – rather than the antithesis – of modernity. Comprador portraits of the period often depicted them in both mandarin attire and European finery. It is little surprise that Zhang Bishi (also known by his Teochew and Hakka names, Thio Tiaw Siat and Cheong Fatt-tze) (Figures 1 and 2) was referred



**Figure 1:** Zhang Bishi 張弼士 vice-consul of the Qing imperial court and comprador in mandarin finery. Ca. 1890. Wikimedia Commons.



to as Southeast Asia's 'first capitalist and last mandarin', (Loh-Lim 2002: 4; Godley 1981: 93). A similar act of translation can be seen in Homestead, Lim Mah Chye's Penang mansion. While the road-facing façade has been described as based on Palladio's Villa Valmarana Scagnolari Zen (1563, Liseira) (**Figure 3**), a pediment on the sea-facing



**Figure 2:** Zhang Bishi in top hat and tails. Ca. 1890. Wikimedia Commons.

façade features a Chinese geomantic device, or *ba gua* 八卦, nesting within neo-classical swags (**Figure 4**) (Lim 2015: 99–103). Translation practices like these were a form of investigation that allowed the local character of urban society and modernity to assert itself against an otherwise totalizing vision of 'the West' as the locus and model of modernity (Chen 2010: 244). In the Dutch East Indies, compradors experimented with forms that were symbolic of colonial authority. This experiment resulted, as Pauline van Roosmalen suggests in her article, in new approaches to European revival styles that depended on the translation of those idioms through local labor, expertise, and materials. Often, as in the case of Singapore's mixed-used godowns that Ian Tan discusses in his article, builders reproduced images of European architecture from paintings to create a temporally and geographically dislocated form of Palladian architecture in the tropics. In late 19th-century Macao, as Regina Campinho points out in her article, the commercial ambitions of the comprador were an important factor in the transition from an informal, laissez-faire approach to urban planning to a more centralized, formal grid.

Comparative modernities, like the ones examined in these articles, engage with the specter of 'the West'. Indeed, 'the West' haunts conventional narratives of 'multiple modernisms' or 'other modernisms' as much as it does histories of colonial cities like Batavia and Singapore (Chakrabarty 2000: 7; Chakrabarty 2002: xvi; Gaonkar 1999; Loos 2006: 20–21). The question of space to which the temporal category of the modern refers – at least in anglophone histories – has long been taken for granted (King 2004: 66–67). It exists in such historical narratives less as a geographic location than as a spatial metonym for modernity itself. Without unpacking this conflation, the colonial built environment remains the product of an



**Figure 3:** James Stark and John McNeil, Homestead, mansion of comprador Lim Mah Chye, Penang, 1919–22. Façade facing Northam Road. Photo by Lawrence Chua.



**Figure 4:** Tympanum on beach-facing façade of Homestead, featuring Chinese geomantic symbol or *ba gua* 八卦. Photo by Lawrence Chua.

external logic, a top-down process of urbanization, rather than an arena of conflict between social classes that have different vested interests in the city (Yeoh 2013). These articles begin to better frame ‘the West’ as a discursive construction, a ‘name always associating itself with those regions, communities, and peoples that appear politically or economically superior to other regions, communities, and peoples’ (Sakai 2008: 154). This allows scholars to better understand the historical development of the ‘modern city’ as equally applicable to cities like New York and London as much as Singapore and Hong Kong.

### Racialization of Space

Historians of colonial cities have long struggled to understand and analyze their diverse social and class dynamics (Taylor 1983). While some have used the term ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘hybrid’ to describe them, J.S. Furnivall’s formulation of ‘plural societies’ seems most accurate in explaining the racialized milieu in which compradors operated in the 19th and 20th centuries:

In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian, and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labor along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations. (Furnivall 1948: 304–305)

As van Roosmalen points out in her article, racial categories often contradicted inter-communal alliances that were more often than not predicated on linguistic, religious, trade, and commercial alliances. Colonial cities often attempted to spatially rationalize this ethnic division through the imposition of an urban grid (Pieris 2017: 205). While not always successful, the colonial city was nonetheless the primary incubator of race, even as its inhabitants transgressed racialized categories of identity in their daily lives. Campinho and Tan likewise point out the mutability of these modern categories as well as the emergence of new categories like Macanese, Peranakan (or Baba-Nyonya), and Straits Chinese to describe the inter-communal *metisage* of 19th- and 20th-century migrant and indigenous communities. By the late 19th century, comprador families often sought to identify themselves as at least on par with the European community. Writing in 1879 of the Peranakan community in Malacca, the English lawyer J.D. Vaughan remarked:

One may see in Malacca *Babas* who claim no connection with China for centuries, clad in long jackets, loose drawers, and black skull caps, the very counterparts of Chinese to be seen any day at Amoy, Chusan, or under the walls of Nankin. Strange to say that although the *Babas* adhere so loyally to the customs of their progenitors they despise the real Chinaman and are exclusive fellows indeed; nothing they rejoice in more than being British subjects. The writer has seen *Babas* on being asked if they were Chinamen bristle up and say in an offended tone ‘I am not a Chinaman, I am a British subject, an Orang putih’, literally, a white man; this term is invariably applied to an Englishman. They have clubs of their own to which they will admit no native of China. At these clubs



they play at billiards, bowls, and other European games, and drink brandy and soda ad libitum; yet they adhere strictly to the Chinese costume – the queue, thick soled shoes, mandarin dresses, and conical hats on state occasions, and the manners and customs of those people who otherwise they have no sympathies with. (Vaughan 1879: 4–5)

Vaughan's observation speaks not only to the complex contradictions of racial identification in colonial society but also to the ways comprador families sought to navigate its spatialization through the creation of their own architectural idioms and urban culture. A more nuanced understanding of the mutability of race within asymmetrical power relations during this period allows historians to understand the colonial encounter and the production of the built environment as not simply a binary dialog between colonial might and subjugated peoples.

### Division of Building Labor and the Figure of the Architect

The papers in this special collection examine the figure of the comprador as an important but overlooked figure in the global history of modern architecture. For historians of architecture and the built environment in the Global South, studying comprador influence creates an aperture with which to experiment with the biographical mode of historical writing in a way that does not center on the figure of the professional architect. It also contributes to a growing body of scholarship, pioneered by feminist architectural studies, that allows for a better understanding of the ways non-architects have historically participated in the creative process of place-making and design (Friedman 2006: 28; Cheng 2011). In colonial cities, this creative process was marked, as it often was in many canonical examples of modernist architecture, as much by discord as by collaboration. In his article in this collection, Tan notes that Singapore's architecture was 'a product of both collaborations and contestations between different communities under colonial rule: government administrators, Western agency houses, regional merchants, and migrant workers'.

The architect emerged in colonial cities amidst the reorganization of the building trades and the influx of migrant construction labor. Compradors played an important role in the historical development of the modern architect, as van Roosmalen demonstrates in her article on three Chinese-Indonesian figures in the development of Medan and Semarang, by patronizing the nascent professionals. Similar scenarios unfolded across the region, as older, guild- and secret society-oriented forms of building labor and colonial military engineering were gradually displaced by the emergence of professional architects who were trained in the architectural schools of the metropole (Lim 2015: 2). By attending to the role of comprador tastes, these articles allow us to better understand the ways the profession engaged with other strata of colonial society in the contested formation of the built environment.

### Structure of the Collection

The articles in this collection allow scholars of the built environment to better understand the transregional and transnational circulation of forms that engendered modernity and its aesthetic regimes, and to *begin* to understand the role that not only patronage, but ambivalence, resistance, and labor played in the production of colonial architecture and urbanism. The articles speak to the impact of comprador entrepreneurs at multiple scales: thus far, the city, the building, the typology. Campinho looks at the ways older ad-hoc practices contested top-down colonial models of urban planning in 19th-century Macao. In her article, 'Modernizing Macao, the Old-Fashioned Way', she focuses on the role of the Macanese developer Miguel Ayres da Silva and his Chinese partners in developing the colonial port's riverfront. Although da Silva's efforts sought to deploy modern planning principles and were in line with the colonial administration's efforts to promote a modern European model of urban governance, his disregard for government regulations during construction resulted in a succession of patched up settlements that allowed these older approaches to community to assert themselves in the planning process.

In 'Sugar and the City', van Roosmalen looks at the ways three Chinese-Indonesians from different generations contributed to the development of the Dutch East Indies cities of Medan and Semarang. Although Tjong A Fie, Oei Tiong Ham, and Liem Bwan Tjie all deployed architecture in their self-fashioning, it was only Liem, the descendant of a successful manufacturing family, who became a professional architect, catering mainly to a Chinese-Indonesian clientele. Transgressing colonial categories of culture and community, the three played a critical role in negotiating approaches to architecture and town planning in the Dutch East Indies.

Ian Y. H. Tan's article, 'The Colonial Port as Contact Zone', excavates an alternative genealogy of the *godown*, usually thought of as a warehouse particular to Asian treaty ports and colonial cities. A hybrid industrial and commercial space that combined processing and storage, the *godown* was critical to the commercial development of the imperial economy. In spite of its stylized appearance and its liberal use of Palladian motifs, the Singapore *godown* was more than a European typology imported into the tropics. Tan argues that it was unique to the city and integrated the skills, materials, and building traditions of the migrant communities that constituted thriving port cities like Singapore.

These articles form the beginning of a collection that uses the figure of the comprador to interrogate the complex and uneven development of colonial cities and global modern architecture. Further investigations might explore not only the areas outlined above but also some of the following questions: How did comprador tastes shape the circulation of regional idioms? Did comprador building projects preserve local 'traditions' or accelerate the development of modern approaches to construction and design? How did comprador agents cultivate or weaken building expertise? How did comprador patronage support the growth of the architectural profession? How did comprador building projects intervene on the growth of new cities? How were compradors able to translate, across

diverse social circumstances, building communities, and cultural tastes? How did comprador tastes appeal to both regionalist and nationalist tendencies? We welcome additional contributions that examine these questions and continue to explore the ways compradors in diverse regions of the world capitalist economy of the 19th and 20th centuries shaped a conversation between formative iterations of European and Asian architecture.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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