Urban Property Development in Malaysia: The Impact of Chinese and Malay Conceptions of Space

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Defining the Issue

In the past 30 years Peninsular Malaysia has undergone rapid urbanization from 34% urban population in 1980 to 71% in 2010. This has created an unprecedented building boom, leading to the rise of large construction companies. Population density in urban areas has increased and the townscape is now dominated by rows and rows of semidetached houses, high-rise buildings of over 20 stories high, and gated communities. High rise buildings have often been interpreted as symbols of modernity and progress (Goh Beng-Lan1998:168), but the question, by whom is grossly neglected. The housing estates and condominiums have been overwhelmingly designed and built by Malaysia’s big property developers, huge companies with international connections and international capital. Government agencies, like UDA (Urban Development Authority) and government linked companies with Bumiputra part ownership like Paremba have also impacted on the cityscape. Though ownership and shares may be distributed between Chinese family conglomerates and Malay government connected elites, management and construction work is firmly in Chinese hands (Gomez 2011, Evers and Nordin 2012).

This chapter is going to argue that next to the political economy of ethnicity the cultural conceptions of space will have a decisive impact on the process of urbanization (Evers and Korff 2000). The physical city-scape of Malaysian urban areas in turn will determine the everyday life and the employment opportunities of all Malaysians.

Malaysian society is multiethnic and countless observers have drawn attention to the unequal geographical distribution of its two major ethnic groups, Malays and Chinese. Overall population statistics of Peninsular Malaysia clearly show that the majority of Chinese live in urban areas, whereas Malays are still concentrated in rural areas. Malays have, however, increasingly migrated into urban areas. In Kuala Lumpur there is now (Census 2010) an almost equal number of Malays and Chinese, but in Georgetown, Penang there are three times more Chinese than Malays. A few major towns, particularly on the east coast have a majority of Malays, but even here the central business district tends to be inhabited and owned mostly by Chinese. Those ecological areas of towns that convey a typically "urban" character are Chinese, whereas there are still Malay areas that maintain a typical "rural" appearance. It is not without justification that Malay areas within Malaysian towns are usually called kampung, whereas Chinese areas are given place names and street names,

or are in some cases just called Chinatown. There are also Chinese villages with a predominantly agricultural population, and single Chinese families in Malay villages. But even then Chinese houses tend to have a more urban appearance. They tend to be built of stone more often than of timber and they sit squarely on the ground, whereas Malay houses are often raised on stilts, built of planks, and covered with corrugated iron sheets. Housing estates and high-rise buildings are increasingly dominating the urban landscape and tend to be ethnically diverse.

The rural character of the Malays and the urban mode of living of the Chinese have often been noted, described and explained. Malays always have been, so the argument goes, a rural people, who have adopted their style of life to the tropical climate of torrential rains and to paddy agriculture. Chinese are immigrants and had to find an ecological niche left by the Malays. They came into Malaya with the expansion of modern capitalism, partly even before colonial rule was firmly established. It was left to them to extend markets, to provide labour for tin mining and for the capitalist plantation economy, and to found and settle the communication centres of the new political and economic system, namely, the towns and cities. Thus a colonial plural society emerged with a division of labour based on ethnic lines. All these reasons given for the unequal geographical distribution of Malays and Chinese are true, but not necessarily sufficient to explain present-day urbanization taking place under changed circumstances. This is because the cultural aspect has so far been neglected and the ideological superstructure disregarded. Even if the basic socioeconomic structure changes, even if the present development policy of rectifying the racial imbalance within the occupational and residential structure meets with success, Malays are unlikely to change their way of life immediately. Even those Malays that have been lured into the cities by the efforts of the Malaysian government to open up urban job opportunities for rural Malays appear to be still maintaining a rural ideology. Malay politicians are known to have admonished Malay civil servants to stay in town after retirement instead of returning to their home villages. Even within cities, areas with a concentration of a Malay population tend to preserve their rural character in at least a symbolic fashion.

It could be argued and statistically "proven" that the economic, educational, and occupational differences between Chinese and Malays are non-existent if one keeps place of residence (rural or urban) constant. Consequently, there are said to be no real differences between Chinese and Malays except place of residence. If Malays move to the city, differences between them and Chinese would disappear. This argument is, of course, nonsensical and based on a misunderstanding of both the political economy and the culture of Malaysia.

British colonial policy has created a socioeconomic base on which a cultural superstructure could flourish, creating, selecting, and maintaining traditional Chinese and Malay values that otherwise might have vanished. Soja (1971:9-10) has drawn attention to the fact that "conventional western perspectives on spatial organisation were powerfully shaped by the concept of property" and that "property has become rightly and territorially defined". This is
certainly true though rigid territoriality is by no mean an exclusively Western concept, as we are going to argue in the Chinese case.

In the following paragraphs we will explicate an important aspect of Chinese and Malay cultural values, which appears to be a most relevant factor in shaping the process of Malaysian urbanization and the ecological structure of Malaysian urban areas.

**Differing Conceptions of Space Land and Landownership**

The Chinese conception of space differs greatly from that of the Malays or other ethnic groups in the Nusantara (Evers 1977). On entering a Chinese village one is sure where it begins and where it ends. Whereas Malay houses stand on stilts and are suspended above ground. Chinese houses sit squarely on the soil. There tends to be one main footpath or street passing through the village, which in most cases is usually clearly discernible even on a cadastre map because plots of land tend to be small but regular. Members of a Chinese family will be able to tell exactly where their land ends and the property of their neighbours begins. Quite often a fence is put up creating an inner yard attached to the house.

Whereas Malays tend to add the names of family members as owners of a plot of land on intestate inheritance, Chinese tend to subdivide or sell land. Working on land registry data we often came across plots of Malay-owned land that were divided into shares of one seventh, one twelfth, or up to several hundredth shares. Islamic law is partly responsible for this, but the fact remains that effective individual ownership is no longer possible. Though joint ownership is also common among Chinese, it seldom extends to unmanageable proportions.

Upon entering a Malay rural or urban kampung (village) one is faced with the problem of orientation. There is usually no main street. no plaza or main square, but only an apparently arbitrary system of winding footpaths leading from house to house becoming narrower at times or ending in blind alleys. There appears to be no clear pattern, no "readability" of the urban or rural scene, which according to Kevin Lynch’s well-known study on “The Image of the City”, is so important for the landscape of a town or settlement (Lynch 1960). Malay houses themselves are built according to a clear pattern. They have a veranda (serambli), a main room (ibu rumah) from which one or two sleeping rooms may be divided (bilik), and a kitchen attached to the back of the house (dapur). The veranda usually (but not necessarily) faces the east or south to keep it cool in the afternoon, but in addition there are no rules or regulations about how houses ought to relate to each other. There appears to be a tendency to keep them apart as far as possible and in such a way that the view is never blocked by houses alone. This creates an impression of a wide-open space even if villages become more densely settled due to growing population and the rule of neo-local residence after marriage. Boundaries between the house lots are in no way demarcated, and residents find it difficult to point out the exact shape of the plot of land on which the house is built. Importance is only attached to the usufructuary rights to coconut trees or fruit trees; otherwise, boundaries do not seem to matter, though Malaysia has had, since British times,
a fairly well-organized cadastre system. Malay villagers quite often do not bother to register changes in the ownership of their housing lots. If new settlers come in from other areas or new families are created by marriage, permission to put up a house is fairly easily granted by the owner and no rent is charged for the land (Evers and Goh 1978). Houses, however, are rented or sold separately irrespective of the National Land Code which does not allow for a legal separation of land and building structures, except for newly introduced strata titles in high-rise buildings.

The nature of the conception of geographical space or land is demonstrated by a case from a village in which I resided for some time. A man moved into the village to earn a living as a sate vendor. He asked an absentee landlord whether he would be allowed to put up a house on his lot of land, and permission was easily granted. After the house had been built the absentee landlord visited the village and found to his surprise that the house was established on a lot adjacent to his. The actual owner on learning of the situation reacted only by exhibiting the common "never-mind attitude" (tidak apa-apa). Discussion with villagers to verify boundaries on cadastre maps proved to be very difficult and often futile. There appeared to be no clearly developed conception of bounded space and of clear-cut boundaries in general.

The same attitude is found when trying to delineate the boundaries of a kampong or village. A kampong is usually defined by the relationship of its inhabitants to the mosque or prayer house. As Clarke (1976:63) pointed out in an analysis of the spatial order of Kota Bharu, Kelantan, “most areas have a central identifying physical feature and from this the area radiates in various directions. Boundaries are indistinct..." All those taking part in the election of the mosque committee belong to one kampong, irrespective of where they actually live. The kampung is therefore in essence not a residential group in the sense the term is defined in sociology text books. The definition of the village as a territorial group is based on the European image of a settlement and is strictly not applicable to the Malay situation.

Boundaries in the rice fields are more clearly defined, as rice fields are divided by dams and irrigation channels. But even here the conception of space or area is rather diffuse. Originally, the size of a paddy field was measured in sowing extent (i.e., according to a fixed measure of rice that was used to sow a plot of land, which could vary in size according to the availability of water and the quality of soil). Nowadays traditional Malay measures of rice land have their equivalent in English measures (acres, usually), but the equivalent acreage varies from area to area or from state to state. It is only in the area of small holding rubber plantations that fairly fixed conceptions of areas are maintained.
Conceptions of Religious Space

Among the Chinese the importance of the ownership of land and the concomitant clear-cut conception of geographical space is further emphasized by the fact that Chinese have developed a special science of boundaries, namely geomancy. The measures of a plot of land and the direction a house should face were traditionally determined by a ritual specialist, a geomancer. Though his services are not necessarily employed anymore, there is still a rudimentary knowledge of the science of geomancy (feng shui) and a clear understanding of the importance of spatial arrangements. Great attention is still paid to the direction of the main door and the positioning of houses in general. On occasion the outlay of cities and the fortune of their inhabitants are related to geomantic principles. One informant even tried to explain the initial success of British rule over Malaya by pointing out, in terms of geomancy, the most appropriate position of the living quarters of British residents and district officers, which tended to be located on hills turning their back to mountain range.

The difference between Chinese and Malay conceptions of space becomes particularly visible when comparing Chinese and Malay graveyards. Chinese attach a great importance to the exact location and the boundaries of a grave, which are as long as the family can afford it, indicated by strong walls surrounding the tomb. Ritual specialists are employed to measure and determine a good location for an ancestral grave. Chinese graveyards are therefore spatially highly structured and permanent. A Malay graveyard is in contrast very loosely structured. The two boundary stones put on each grave are scattered and extend into the surrounding areas as long as building regulations in cities have not made this impossible. No great importance is attached to the location of the grave. Wherever there is some space left the burial can take place. The only exceptions are graves said to possess magic powers (kuburan keramat), the graves of royalty and the mosques themselves, which have a clearly defined ritually pure areas.

But even here the Malay conception of space has made inroads. A frequently found form of holy grave in Malaysia is the so-called kuburan panjang (long grave). The holy man buried here is said to have grown, thus pushing the boundary stones of the grave down. The grave stones have to be re-erected from time to time, extending the length of the grave in the process. Again, space is variable, has no permanent boundary and can be extended.

Even in the area of no orthodox religion the differences between the Chinese and Malay conceptions of space become apparent. The Chinese attach great importance to the earth goddess. Villages or town quarters tend to have a local guardian deity, a Datuk. Malay ghosts, however, are not attached to particular places of worship. Though the Malay also
know guardian ghosts whose power emanates from a certain place, their power does not apply to a clearly defined area; they do not rule defined territories.

Our analysis of the differences between Chinese and Malay conceptions of geographical and religious space can also be extended to conceptions of social space.

Conceptions of Social Space

With very few exceptions the population of the Malay Peninsula consists of immigrants. This holds true both to Malays, many of whom originated from Sumatra, Java, or other Indonesian islands, and to Chinese and Indians. Nevertheless, Malays would attach very little importance to their place of origin. Migrants from Sumatra or Java are quickly acculturated to a uniform Malay society. Second-generation migrants usually do not speak the dialect or language of their parents anymore and would claim, on being interviewed, that they are local people. On being questioned further, they might have some hazy conceptions of where their ancestors came from but will usually not know or be interested in the exact place of origin. Exceptions to this general rule tend to be people of Minangkabau origin, as long as they live together in close settlements and maintain a system of matrilineal descent (Evers 1975a).

In contrast, Chinese tend to have a very clear conception not only of their general area of origin in China but even of the exact name of the village from which they originated. This knowledge is to a certain extent still transmitted from generation to generation. Whereas Malay identity is established by social and cultural facts — namely, by being a Muslim, speaking the Malay language, and being in very general, locally undefined terms a “bumiputra” (son of the soil) - Chinese determine their ethnic identity primarily by their dialect and their place of origin in China. A strict system of patrilineal descent, lineages, and clans defined by common ancestors, common geographical origin, and common localized places of worship is based on an identity between social and geographical space.

The localized bias in the Malay conception of social space could also be demonstrated in a study of the "mental maps" of Malaysian students in a northern town (Gould and White 1974:167-169). On being asked where they would prefer to find employment, most Malays gave the name of their current place of residence and to a lesser degree the surrounding area, whereas Chinese students preferred various urban centres along the west coast as far south as Singapore.

The Chinese mental map was clearly focused on major urban areas whereas the Malay one was cantered on the primarily rural home districts. These differing conceptions of space form in a general way the basis of another culturally defined complex, namely, the image of an urban area, a town, or a city. It is the combination of the conception of space and the image of an urban area that, I submit, still influences the urbanization process and the urban ecology of Malaysia.
Conceptions of Political and Urban Space

Through most Chinese immigrants to Malaysia came originally from rural areas in Southern China they nevertheless brought with them the image of a rural life cantered on the city. As Skinner (1964) has pointed out in a lengthy study, Chinese rural social structure cannot be understood without reference to towns. Clusters of small villages surrounding a locally important town formed a discrete social and areal unit, which Skinner terms a "standard marketing area." Occupational and religious associations as well as kinship ties combined to turn this area into a tightly knit socio-political unit. Chinese social life, even in rural areas, was cantered on the city and it is likely that this image of the city was also brought over to Malaysia by southern Chinese migrants. At least Chinese secret societies that dominated Chinese society in the Straits Settlements and the Malay states perpetuated the urban image and enshrined it in their most important ritual, the initiation of new members. These rites were held in a Chinese temple, representing "an imaginary walled city through which the candidate was to take a symbolic journey" (Purcell 1956:165). A Chinese city itself was a highly structured spatial entity with definite boundaries, directions, and functional areas (Wheatley 1971). Though no walled Chinese city was ever built in Malaysia (unless one wants to count the barbed wire-fenced "new villages" during the Communist uprising as such), the concept of dense urban living in bounded, and clearly defined space was certainly known and utilized as a "mental map" or blueprint to Malaysian Chinese urbanism.

In contrast, the Malay perception of political space and of the city was quite different. It seems to go back to, or at least to show great similarity to, Nusantara predecessors. In the empires of Majapahit and Mataram "territory was concerted as radiating in three concentric circles with the Kraton of the prince at the centre: (1) the negaragung or core regions, (2) the mantjanegara, or neighbouring regions and (3) thapasisir, or coastal provinces" (Siddique 1977). The spatial perception is centrifocal and the centre is the palace of the ruler rather than the city. The Malay conception of political space appears to have been quite similar.

The centre of political power in the Malay states was the palace of the king or sultan. The istana was, and in some occasions still is, surrounded by royal villages, inhabited by retainers and craftsmen serving the royal court. Market places were usually physically separated from the palace by some distance. It is here that cities developed primarily through Chinese and Indian immigration. Up to recently the Malay image of the town (bandar) was one of the market place rather than a residential area. In fact, bandar means, strictly speaking, a port or harbor. Kota, another term frequently connected with town names in Malaysia, means fort or stockade. There is no precise Malay expression for town or city. Malays ideally live in villages (kampong), even if these villages now administratively fall within the boundaries of a municipality. Even if most urban Malays now live in terrace houses or flats, the kampong remains an ideal type of urban living. When a kampung is scheduled for destruction and to
be replaced by high rise buildings, like Kampung Tanjung Tokong in Penang in 2011-12, resistance and public protest flares up.

In contrast to Chinese conceptions of the spatial structure of society, Malay life was focused on the istana and the mosque, but not on the city. It is therefore not so much Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, but the national mosque, the Masjid Negara, and the king, the Yang di Pertuan Agong, elected from among the sultans of the Malay states that form the focus of Malay national sentiment and identity. In his effort of nation-building, Prime Minister Mahathir created a new Malay national capital, Putrajaya and a knowledge city Cyberjaya (Evers and Nordin 2012), though he and his urban planners used Middle Eastern rather than Malay architecture to symbolize the new Bumiputra Malay image of a capital city. The move of the government from Kuala Lumpur, seen as a predominantly Chinese city to Putrajaya, the new Malay metropolis with Putrajaya and the new national university Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in its vicinity was a not entirely move to change the Malay conception of space.

In the ecological structure of some of the Malaysian cities the principles of an Islamized and Malayanized image of the Indian city of ancient Southeast Asia are still to be seen. A central square (padang) opens toward the sultan's palace (istana) and the living quarters of the sultan's extended family and their descendants. The main mosque is found next to the padang in the immediate proximity of the istana, whereas the market and the Chinese settlement are some way off the centre of religious and political power. Kota Bharu (Evers and Goh 1976; Clarke 1976) and Kuala Trengganu conform very much to this pattern. But whereas some Javanese cities up to the 16th century were still surrounded by a wall, the Malayanized town consistently exhibits the centrifocal conception of space. The centre (padang, istana, and mesjid besar) is clearly defined, but beyond this area the spatial structures peters out and becomes less and less clear. The town is in cultural and social terms not a bounded area and it is absolutely undefined where the town ends and the villages begin.

Even among the modern Malay urban middle class, consisting of civil servants and professionals, the original conception of space and of the city is still maintained, whenever a chance is given. It is first of all expressed in a certain uneasiness and reluctance to move into the new middle-class housing estates and high-rise apartment blocks that are springing up in all Malaysian cities. A massive increase in Malay urban population living primarily in these estates has started in the Federal Territory surrounding Kuala Lumpur, but is extending into other urban areas and “new towns” as well. This may signal a change, but still the housing estates and condominiums are normally designed by Chinese architects, built by Chinese contractors, and conform to the Chinese cultural conception of space and housing. Most of these housing estates consist of modernized versions of the Chinese shop house, where the shop is replaced by a parking space for a small car. Mostly these houses are semidetached or row houses with a narrow back lane and very small backyards surrounded by a wall. The maintenance of boundaries is very important and clearly expressed in iron gates and stone
walls. Not so in Malay areas designed and constructed by Malays themselves; here still kampong type houses are found, though the lower, formerly open part tends to be walled in and used by younger or newly married children of the family. But still, wherever possible, the boundary to the neighbour’s house is not marked by a fence or a stone wall but is left open. If there are hedges or fences at all, they tend to have holes or passages, not so much from neglect, but maintaining such a visible boundary does not conform to Malay conception of space and reciprocal relations with neighbours.

This point is very clearly documented in a detailed ethnography of Kota Bharu, the capital city of the state of Kelantan. According to this study "a neighbour is one who makes himself available to other neighbours when he is at home. One of the most significant features of this is that a neighbour's house should be both visible and accessible to other neighbours who may wish to call. Informants frequently relate that persons they consider to be rich people (orang kaya) build houses which are surrounded by fences with bolted gates and lots of shrubbery. Persons classed as rich people are not neighbours" (Clarke1976:167).

Conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate that Malays and Chinese exhibit two different concepts of space. Whereas the Malay conception of geographical, social, religious, and political space is centrifugal, the Chinese conception of space is bounded. Chinese, even rural Chinese, have a clear-cut image of the "city" and of urban life, whereas Malays centre their spatial attention on central institutions like the istana or the mesjid, both of which are not necessarily urban or connected with urbanism. Malay living quarters are still defined as kampong (villages) even if they happen to be part of a city.

I hope to have shown that the two differing conceptions of space are consistent and can be traced in different aspects of social organization and culture of Malays and Chinese (Evers and Nordin 2012). Rather then essentializing Malay or Chinese culture, which has been criticized in the “orientalism” debate, recently summarized by Wan Zawawi Ibrahim and Noor Shaw (2012:165-200), I look at conceptions of space as a “Tiefenstruktur” of long-term cultural processes. Such consistent socio-cultural patterns reinforcing each other account for the persistence of culture over long periods of time. This also means that they are difficult to alter even if the underlying socioeconomic system changes. This poses a dilemma.

The policy of the Malaysian government under the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the Second and Third Malaysia Plan has been to draw more Malays into urban occupations and to "urbanize" the Malay peasant. The 10th Malaysia Plan and the “Economic Transformation Programme” of 2010 stresses urbanization as a driver of growth (p.125). As most urban centres have long been Chinese in terms of inhabitants and in terms of culture, the attempt to urbanize Malays could amount to a policy of Sinicization of parts of Malay culture. This is, of course, not the intention of the present Malaysian UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) dominated government. What were the alternatives? The alternative was the development of an image of a Malay or at least Malaysian city in which Malay conceptions of
space are translated into urban planning (Bunnel 2002). The new administrative capital of Putrajaya appears to be a not totally successful attempt in this direction, neither is the image of Cyberjaya, the Malay-Malaysian knowledge city (Evers and Nordin 2012). So far local and foreign architects and urban planners have either copied Western or Middle Eastern models or provided slightly modernized versions of the Chinese shop house city (Bunnell 2004).

Legal provisions and building bylaws, enacted by local councils under the influence of Chinese developers, are usually detrimental to possible Malay types of buildings and Malay use of space. Thus the utilization of timber is often prohibited, subdivision is done to conform to the size of standard Chinese shop house lots, roads and back lanes are laid out (by Chinese city engineers) to conform to Chinese rather than Malay concepts of space. The Chinese concept of bounded space is furthermore turned upside down and has resulted in high-rise buildings often higher than 20 levels. Bounded conception of space is extended high into the third dimension. The highly speculative land market is, again, dominated by Chinese construction companies and low-cost housing schemes, promised by government authorities, tend to turn out to be again middle-class priced and built for a Chinese style of life.

Economic forces thus tend to maintain the present urban system in Malaysia, reinforcing the cultural superstructure of Chinese and Malay conceptions of space. It can thus be argued with some justification that the creation of a truly Malaysian city depends eventually on a change in the urban economy and a change in the urban political structure.

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