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# Modern spaces, wild places and international hinterlands

*The cultural economy of decoupling and misrecognition*

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**JOHAN  
LINDQUIST**

*Johan Lindquist is a PhD candidate at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. He is currently Visiting Fellow at the Department of Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School.*

This article concerns certain aspects of the relationship between the city-state of Singapore and the Indonesian island of Batam<sup>1</sup> to the south of the Straits of Malacca in the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle.<sup>2</sup> In the first part, I take sociologist John Meyer’s work on the spread of world cultural models as a starting point, in which he points out that no nation-state today is imaginable without a certain form of institutional set-up. In so-called developing countries, the institutions that organize development are a particularly obvious world cultural model. Meyer’s concept of ‘decoupled structuration’ is here helpful in understanding the gap between world cultural models associated with the nation-state, in this case development, and the actual failure to implement this model in particular. I will show that on Batam the breach between models of development and their actual implementation leads to the creation of spaces and relationships that are defined as ‘not-yet-developed’ or ‘wild’. This leads me to the second part, where I will discuss how these spaces ironically and somewhat unexpectedly allow certain Singaporean men to live out fantasies of nostalgia and desire, which in turn speak back to a Singaporean model of modernity.

In 1990, a handshake between the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the Indonesian President Suharto took place on Batam. This gesture symbolized not only the emergence of an international growth triangle between Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, but also the shift of Singapore’s economy into ‘post industrial city mode’ (Macleod & McGee, 1996). Through this agreement, Batam was identified by the Singaporean government and other international observers as a site where Singaporean capital and inexpensive Indonesian labour would create a ‘comparative advantage’ in a zone with low taxes and close proximity to Singapore. The transformation of Singapore into a regional ‘information hub’ depended on the relocation from Singapore of low-level manufacturing and other services to places such as Batam. Most importantly, the growing ease with which Singaporean citizens and capital were allowed to move into Batam came along with an increasing closure of the Singaporean border to Indonesian citizens, which makes suggestions of a post-national order seem premature.

The relationship between Batam and Singapore is by no means unique and is reproduced elsewhere in the international division of labour in the global economy. While



Advertisement for Hongkong Bank, suggesting the Indonesian Batam island is now incorporated into the more developed Malay-Singapore Peninsula.

1. Batam is located 20 km from Singapore in the Indonesian Riau archipelago and is 415 sq. km. in size.

2. The Growth Triangle concept was initially suggested by Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1989. B.J. Habibie, the chairman of the Batam Industrial Development Authority at the time, suggested the acronym Sijori (Singapore Johor Riau) in response.

A chapter was published entitled 'The Singapore-Riau-Johor Growth Triangle: an extended emerging metropolitan region' in *Emerging world cities in the Asia Pacific* by Fu-Chen Lo & Yue-Man Yeung (Eds) (United Nations, 1997).

It should be noted that the initial plan to make the Malaysian province of Johor part of the triangle has not materialized.

'Wild' squatter housing in direct sight of an abandoned housing development.



Singapore is constantly being compared with Hong Kong, the other world city of the region, officials from the Batam Industrial Development Authority (or BIDA) make trips to Special Economic Zones in China, such as Shenzhen, which occupies a similar structural position as Batam.

Since B.J. Habibie took over as the head of BIDA in the late 70's and until he was forced to step down for political reasons last year, his vision for Batam has focussed on the development of high technology, rather than on the utilization of low-wage labour and inexpensive land. Habibie has thereby attempted to deny the position Batam has been given in the international order by Singapore and organizations such as the World Bank, and instead attempted to model the island on Singapore.

Like Singapore, Batam has a development authority that has created a series of Master Plans. These define how each part of the island will be developed by the year 2007. Several of the plans present visions of the island as a new Singapore, with shopping malls and suburban homes that could be imagined anywhere from Tokyo to Los Angeles. An international airport, which remains almost strictly domestic, opened with much fanfare a few years ago, and there have long been plans to build a harbour for cargo containers that could compete with Singapore.

The modern imaginary of development on Batam that circulates in media, brochures and master plans produced by BIDA (as well as in political discourse), presents itself as a kind of nostalgia for a Singaporean form of modernity. This vision becomes almost a caricature in relation to the reality of an island that is still largely covered by jungle and where half of the population lives in squatter communities behind the ruins of suburban-style houses, never finished or used. Batam has rapidly become a booming 'frontier' area with a population of almost 500,000, compared with 3,000 less than thirty years ago. Along with the factories and jobs in the formal economy has come a major sex industry based in the karaoke bars and discos centered in the main town of Nagoya, as well as more than 50 squatter settlements that

house approximately 40% of the island's population.

It is in this context that Meyer's concept of 'decoupled structuration' becomes relevant. This decoupling, in which there is a lack of fit between the world-cultural model of the state and the way it functions locally, explains why it is often easier 'to plan for economic development than to generate capital or technical and labor skills that can make development happen' (Meyer *et al.*, 1997: 154).

Within the discourse of BIDA, the squatter communities around the island are 'not-yet-developed' areas, identified as 'wild houses' (*rumah liar*). Indonesians who are suspected of pre-marital cohabitation are accused of living in 'wild marriages' (*pernikahan liar*), and prostitutes who operate on a freelance basis outside the confines of brothels or karaoke bars are considered 'wild'.

The discourse of 'not-yet-development' thereby retains the temporality of BIDA's imagined modernity that is 'like' Singapore and identifies the 'wild' as something temporary that will eventually be displaced.

At this point, I want to shift my attention away from this recognizable system of difference and focus attention on how the individuals and spaces that are identified as 'wild' or 'not yet developed' on Batam become sites for Singaporeans to live out fantasies, which in turn can be understood as commentaries on Singaporean forms of modernity.

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Pak Haji is a former Singaporean police inspector who made the pilgrimage to Mecca in the mid-1980's. He first came to Batam looking for business opportunities in the early 1990's. At once disillusioned by the modern lifestyle in Singapore and proud of his role in its success, he felt immediately at home on Batam, which seemed almost 'like Singapore was thirty years ago'. Increasingly estranged from his wife and her desire to be modern and have her own career, he decided to marry again, this time to a Javanese woman whom he met on Batam and would take care of the household and fulfil his wishes for a more 'traditional' wife. He built an inconspicuous house in a squatter settlement, with a freshwater well as his only luxury, for 1,000 Singapore dollars ('In Singapore I could not even build a toilet for that price'). But unlike his neighbours, it was not economic restraints that necessitated his choosing the settlement; rather, it was a sense of nostalgia for the *kampung* (village) life that he remembered from his childhood in Singapore. 'When I was young, I loved the *kampung* but within a matter of years it was lost, wiped out by Singapore development. Now it's just flats. You can't even see the stars because of lights.' These days, he goes back to Singapore only once per month to retrieve both his pension cheque and supplies unavailable on Batam and to visit his children.

I could usually find Pak Haji sitting on his porch without a shirt smoking a cigarette. On the dirt path leading up to the community's mosque, which he had helped finance, he would watch his chicken and geese wander around. He would frequently point out, 'In Singapore I could never do this, sit without a shirt, throw my cigarette on the ground and wait for the rain to wash it away, or let these chickens run around'. 'In Singapore nothing is authentic; everything is planned'. As he was the only person in the *kampung* who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, he also became the religious authority in the community. He complained that 'Singapore has lost its religious feel, it is too modern'. 'Here I can still wake to hear the sound of the mosque in the morning'.

Andi, a Malay Singaporean man in his late twenties, works in retail and still lives with his parents. He has been coming to Batam for several years, frequenting karaoke bars, where he usually books prostitutes for the night. Since he can't reveal to his parents that he goes to Batam, owing

Batam Center, Batam's planned retail district, purported to be the 'new Orchard Road' (the main shopping area in Singapore).



to its reputation, he usually tells them he is going to spend the night at a friend's house or that he is going fishing for the weekend. On Batam, he has developed a relationship with Sri, a Javanese woman in her mid-twenties, and he decided to buy her out of the bar and set her up in a household in the main city of Nagoya. He comes to Batam once or twice a week and stays for a couple of days, sometimes just spending time in the small room he rents for her, watching TV and ordering food, or going to a disco. On Batam he can experience 'total enjoyment', which means 'doing ecstasy, listening to good music and having a woman', things he claims he could never do in Singapore. 'If you take the drugs there and get into the music, everyone will turn and look at you... There are police everywhere.' Here he spends about 1 million rupiah (at the time about 200 Singapore dollars) during a weekend, while in Singapore a prostitute alone would cost 200 Singapore dollars. 'Batam is like fantasy, Fantasy Island, while Singapore is like reality.' Sri wants to come and visit him, but Andi says that it was difficult for him to explain that he had to maintain a separation between fantasy and reality.

He tells me that she says that she cares about him, but he complains that she seems to care more about the money. He tests her sometimes by not bringing money, and this makes her angry. Nevertheless, he says that he enjoys his role of being her *tamu* (client), and that he might consider marrying her if he ever determines whether or not her feelings for him are true. 'In Singapore I am already too old. Most of the women will not even look at me.'

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Over the last ten years, a discourse of 'Asian values' has famously emerged in Singapore, with Lee Kuan Yew as its primary author. Necessarily ambiguous and oppositional in relation to 'Western' individualism, its basic tenet is that the family is the primary building block of society. While in Singapore, Asian values function both as a way of disciplining or managing the population in the face of globalization and of positioning it as a part of the Asian economy, especially in juxtaposition to Western capitalism, the Indonesian version of Asian values does not work as intimately. This is especially true on Batam, where BIDA's identification of certain kinds of spaces and individuals as 'wild' accepts that they are outside of the state's system of values.

While T-shirts in Singapore present it as a 'fine' city,

where one can be fined for such transgressions as not flushing the toilet, t-shirts on Batam claim that it is 'free', more or less explicitly showing that drugs and women can be bought at no risk, thereby creating 'comparative advantages' located beyond the official discourse of the Growth Triangle.

For Pak Haji and Andi, the 'wild' and 'not-yet-developed' spaces and relationships on Batam, as BIDA defines it, create an escape from Asian values, and expose it as contested and contradictory. Batam thereby becomes a transnational alternative to a Singapore, which has become 'too modern' and 'too organized'. It can be a 'fantasy', as Andi sees it, where he can do ecstasy and buy sex outside the reach of the Singaporean state, or it can be a space where you can live 'just like it was in Singapore thirty years ago'. Not only does Pak Haji say that it feels like the *kampung* of his youth, but his wife on Batam does not embody the 'negative' form of modernity that his wife in Singapore does.

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I have noted that discourses of development and its failures are engrained in systems of difference on Batam and between Batam and Singapore. BIDA's fantasy of development regards Singapore as a model for Batam, while Singapore views Batam as part of an Asian hinterland, where low-level manufacturing and other services can be relocated as the city-states transforms itself into a global city.

In BIDA's discourse of development, the 'not-yet-developed' and the 'wild' become metaphors that misrecognize the process of development as being located somewhere in the future; they are, in fact, effects of what Meyer calls 'decoupled structuration', namely, the lack of fit between the model of development that is imagined and the actual capabilities of producing this model.

Through this process, new forms of 'comparative advantages' emerge, for which neither Singapore nor BIDA have planned. These 'wild' spaces are reimagined by Singaporean men as 'free' of state control or as located in an idealized historical past. However, the structures of economic and gender inequalities that make these experiences possible in the first place remain unrecognized or are displaced. In short, then, the shifts in the Singaporean economy that have led to the constitution of a discourse of Asian values and the emergence of new international hinterlands have created the space and incentive for the transgression of these values. □

This article is based on a paper given at the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting in Chicago, 17 November 1999. The author is currently writing his dissertation entitled 'Frontiers of desire: development, migration and AIDS along the Singapore-Indonesia border'.

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