Modern spaces, wild places and international hinterlands

The cultural economy of decoupling and misrecognition

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This article concerns certain aspects of the relationship between the city-state of Singapore and the Indonesian island of Batam1 to the south of the Straits of Malacca in the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle.7 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
Asia Pacific
Emerging world cities in the
metropolitan region' in
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titled 'The
Johor Riau) in response.
acronym Sijori (Singapore
time, suggested the
Batam Industrial
Habibie, the chairman of the
Deputy Prime Minister Goh
Chok Tong in 1989. B.J.
the more developed
Indonesian Batam island
initial plan to make the
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British
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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.
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
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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 cov-
ered 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
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 uti-
lation 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 organi-
izations such as the World Bank, and instead attempted to
model the island on Singapore.

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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 gen-
terate capital or technical and labor skills that can make
development happen’ (Meyer et al., 1997: 154).

Within the discourse of BIDA, the squatter communi-
ties around the island are ‘not-yet-developed’ areas, iden-
tified 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 fulfill 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 necessi-
tated his choosing the settlement; rather, it was a sense of
nostalgia for the kampung (village) life that he remem-
bered 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 authentically, 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
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 the actual capabilities of producing this model. 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 actual capabilities of producing this model 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.

I have noted that discourses of development and its failures are engraved 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.

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