

Thursday, 14 June
9.00-11.45

Track: Comparative Modernities
Room: *National Library, Corner Hall (Nurgasaal)*

COMPRADOR NETWORKS AND COMPARATIVE MODERNITIES

Session chair: Lawrence Chua, Syracuse University / Albert-Ludwigs-Universität

The comprador classes of the nineteenth and early twentieth 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 diplomat and entrepreneur Cheong Fatt-tze, for example, deployed ironworks from the Scottish Macfarlanes factory as well as Teochew ceramic ornamentation from the southern China coast to articulate a mansion in British-colonial Penang that could be identified as the home of both a mandarin official and a modern capitalist. His neighbor, Khaw Sim Bee (Phraya Ratsadanupradit Mahitsaraphakdi to the Siamese crown), meanwhile, built nearby Asdang House in a neo-Palladian idiom that marked him as a member of a cosmopolitan class that circulated freely across national and imperial borders. 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 panel 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 panel aims 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.

PAPERS:

Building Cosmopolitanism: Reconsidering the Comprador as Contractor in the Formation of Shanghai's Lilong

Nora Boyd, Hunter College

Before the Bund and before Pudong, Shanghai was a city of undulating stone and tile *lilong*, a building type unique to the city and integral to its cosmopolitan and mercantile culture. While the type is often fit into narratives about the 'semicolonial' nature of the city, as invented and disseminated by English and American merchants, it was the comprador who built these complexes. Engaged to solve the problem of housing single men and then small families, entirely new social units in China, the compradors looked to regional forms and employed them to serve the mercantile project of rent collection. The resulting type, the *lilong*, became the hallmark of Shanghai's built environment, housing three-quarters of the city by 1949, and shaped generations of migrants, sojourners, and opportunists into cosmopolitan Shanghainese. While English and American merchants are named and quoted, reified into positions of importance in Shanghai's history, compradors are discussed in generics. Cheng Jinxuan and Silas Aaron Hardoon, originally compradors who worked for Sassoon and Co., became extremely wealthy men. Though Hardoon would not traditionally be called a comprador, he arrived in Shanghai destitute and was, unlike other Baghdadi Jews, invested in Chinese language and culture. Using his knowledge and comfort with locals, he turned his lowly rent collecting into a booming real estate business. By foregrounding Cheng and Hardoon, we see the comprador as the translator both literally and culturally, an active agent in the creation of the city's physical

fabric, its spaces of interaction, and thereby its unique systems of life. This study seeks to reorient the narrative of Shanghai's *lilong* complexes, situating Shanghai as a place of generative translation and production rather than as a receiver of Western types, and establishing the compradors as both products and producers of modernity.

The Twentieth Century Godowns Along the Singapore River

Tan Yuk Hong Ian, University of Hong Kong

The first Western agency house in Singapore was established in 1820, just a year after the founding of the British trading port. Others followed suit, facilitating the exchange of manufactured goods from Europe and raw materials from Asia. A significant contributor to the agencies' success came from their association with local compradors. They were influential business leaders in their ethnic communities who served as intermediaries between local businesses and agency houses. The relationship between comprador and managing agency was akin to mutual partnerships. During the twentieth century economic boom, the overlapping business domains of compradors and agencies built Singapore into a thriving entrepôt.

This relationship is expressed spatially at the Singapore River. There are three distinct urban patterns: Commercial Square (now Raffles Place) dominated primarily by Western companies and agency houses, shophouses at the mouth of the river occupied by Chinese traders and the godowns buildings upstream owned by both agency houses and compradors. While the neoclassical buildings in Raffles Place and the ubiquitous shophouse typology are well-studied, godowns have been woefully neglected. A lack of public interest has led to the demolition of godowns without much attention.

This paper aims to further an understanding of godowns vis-à-vis the ebb and flow of entrepôt trade. My study will focus on the godowns' technological advancement through the early adoption of modern structural materials such as iron, steel and concrete. It draws on a series of archival building plans submitted to the Municipal Council in the 1900s, supplemented with on-site survey, business records and archival materials.

Sugar and the City: The Contribution of Three Chinese-Indonesian Compradors to Modern Architecture and Planning in the Dutch East Indies, 1900-1942

Pauline K.M. van Roosmalen, TU Delft

To explore how compradors contributed to the development of architecture and town planning in the Dutch East Indies, this paper will examine the life and work of three key Chinese-Indonesian protagonists: Semarang's sugar king Oei Tiong Ham, Medan's leading businessman Tjong A Fie, and Chinese-Indonesian architect Liem Bwan Tjie.

Thanks to their wealth, predominantly acquired through trade, Oei and Tjong not only gained a civil status equal to Europeans, they also interacted and adopted a 'western' lifestyle in 'western' surroundings. To shape these surroundings, Oei and Tjong often sought the services of architects. Liem, who was raised in the colony and professionally trained in the Netherlands and China, seemed every affluent Chinese-Indonesian's favourite in the interbellum. His ability to blend modern formal European principles with Chinese philosophical ideals, gained him a substantial clientele.

To date, scholarly research addressing the role of Chinese-Indonesian compradors like Oei, Tjong, and Liem is insignificant when compared to the number of studies that focus on entrepreneurs and architects who originated from Europe. Although there are pragmatic reasons for this incongruity – linguistic barriers being one of them – the status, position, and influence of Chinese-Indonesian compradors in the Dutch East Indies does not account for it.

By exploring the ways that the private and professional lives of Oei Tiong Ham, Tjong A Fie, and Liem Bwan Tjie cut across western and Asian cultural barriers, this paper will

take their lives and works *pars pro toto* to illustrate how Chinese-Indonesians were instrumental in not only introducing new idioms and approaches to architecture and town planning from Europe but also in changing the outlook of two important coastal cities in the Dutch East Indies.

Modernizing Macao, the Old-Fashioned Way: Macanese and Chinese Entrepreneurship in the Colonial City

Regina Campinho, Universidade de Coimbra/Université de Lorraine

In 1877, Councilman Miguel Ayres da Silva and his Chinese partners were authorized by the Governor to reclaim and urbanize a large portion of the city's riverfront. Coming from an old-established and well-respected family, Silva was one of the first in his generation of 'native-born Portuguese' (as the aspiring aristocratic mixed-blood Macanese called themselves) to drift away from their traditional employment in the administration or military and make a name for himself as an entrepreneur and landowner. His project, in line with the government-promoted harbour renovation, put forward the modern principles of development and sanitation, as well as adopted a regular pattern of well-aligned streets, blocks, and plots, setting the tone for a new age of centralized urban planning in Macao.

This would be the first urban extension plan to be carried out under the supervision of the newly-appointed Public Works Department, commissioned to bring order, regularity, and elegance to the city. From 1870 on, the Public Works engineers sought to implement the Portuguese government's claim of full sovereignty over Macao, managing the urban landscape so as to effectively end the ancient practice of 'divided sovereignty' between Portuguese and Chinese local authorities which, from the modern point of view, had resulted in a disorganized organic pattern and an insalubrious city.

However, Silva's blatant disregard for government regulations in the construction process, as well as the patch-up settlement reached after the work was completed, resonated profoundly with Macao's century-old tradition of autonomous space appropriation. Through an analysis of the project's plans and related contemporary Public Works reports, we see that the transition from bottom-up city building to the 19th century top-down model was a contested process, reflecting both the ambitions and contradictions of colonial Macao.