The Myth of the 'Squatter'
and the Emergency Housing Discourse in Post-war Southeast Asia and Hong Kong

by LOH KAH SENG

Lee Kong Chian Research Fellow
National Library

Before anger was expressed over "slum" in Danny Boyle's popular, multi-Oscar winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (*New York Times*, 21 February 2009), representations of informal housing (otherwise known as "squatter" housing) played a much more prominent role in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong after World War II. Boyle's film depicted the dwellers of an Indian slum to be both criminal and cosmopolitan, although critics focused on the former.

After the war, however, metaphors of contagion, crime and communism were commonly used to depict informal communities in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. Framed by both the colonial and post-colonial states, these representations were much more discursive and invasive than their cinematic equivalents in *Slumdog Millionaire*. The post-war metaphors were a key part of an emergency housing discourse which conveyed no love for the slum, only a great anxiety to control them.

The very nature of informal housing was inimical to the states of Southeast Asia and beyond. James Scott has written about "high modernist" governments which embrace a robust "self-confidence about scientific and technical progress…and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws". These states desired cities to be organised according to subscribed scientific-rational principles. In their view, the city, when seen from the air, should reveal itself as a "legible map", whose "beauty" and "order", it is argued, are expressed visually in the form of straight grid lines and clearly defined zones of planned building and infrastructure development (Scott 1998, 4-5).

The classic informal settlement in post-war Southeast Asia and Hong Kong was anything but that. They were the unplanned products of a massive population boom and various forms of transnational, rural-urban and intra-urban migration of low-income families after the war (Yeung and Lo 1976, xviii). By 1961, there were an estimated 750,000 informal dwellers in Jakarta (constituting 25% of the city's population), 320,000 in Manila (23%), 250,000 in Singapore (26%), and 100,000 in Kuala Lumpur (25%) (McGee 1970, 123).

The informal house was typically built without planning approval and with light semi-permanent materials such as wood, attap and zinc. The numbers of such housing grew rapidly after the war at the physical and administrative margins of the city: in war-damaged sectors; on steep hillsides, unused cemeteries and rooftops of existing shop houses; along railway tracks, dried up riverbanks and canals; in boats, foreshore areas and parks; and over swampy ground, disused mining land and rubbish dump sites (Sendut 1976, Johnstone 1981, McGee 1967, Dwyer 1976, Giles 2003, Dick 2003, Laquian 1969, Stone 1973). The peripheral locations of informal settlements caused the state much anxiety. They were spaces where official control was weakest and where, as the state feared, any social change could profoundly alter the character of society (Douglas 2002, 150).

A young community in Klong Toey, Bangkok, Thailand
Image reproduced from Chira Sakornpan et al. (1971). *Klong Toey: A Social Work Survey of a Squatter Slum*. Pg 9
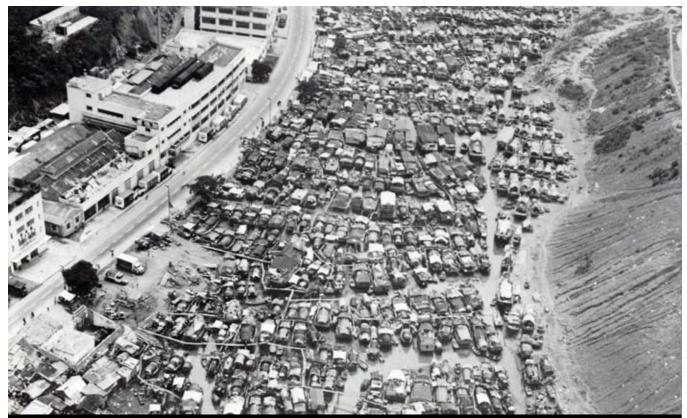
Informal dwellers living in boats in Hong Kong
Image reproduced from Golger, O. J. (1966). *Squatters and Resettlement: Symptoms of an Urban Crisis: Environmental Conditions of Low-standard Housing in Hong Kong*

The official fear of informal housing did not arise merely over housing form or geography. It was deeply reinforced by how their residents, far from being disorganised and marginal, like the housing, formed dynamic social communities. On the one hand, as scholars in other contexts have observed, informal housing dwellers were well-integrated into the politics and economy of the city and country (Perlman 1976, Castells 1983). On the other hand, the dwellers possessed their own networks of mutual self-help, much of which was frowned upon by the state.

There were numerous gangs based in the settlements, which recruited from among its youthful, under-employed residents. But in Manila, for instance, informal dwellers viewed their community as safe and harmonious, while also organising volunteer fire brigades and anti-crime patrols to safeguard their basic interests (Laquian 1971, 196-7). In short, the informal communities challenged the formal authority of the state. They constituted "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary" or the growing strength of "the weapons of the weak" (Bayat 2004, 90, Scott 1985, 1990).
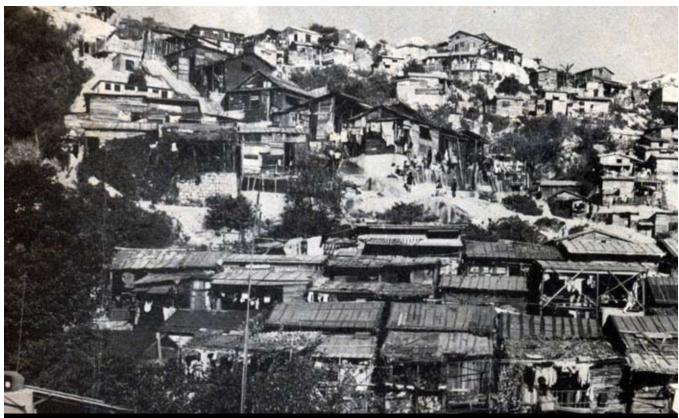
It was in such a context, in which the balance of state-society relations was being redefined by the growth of the informal settlements, that the governments of Southeast Asia and Hong Kong created an emergency housing discourse. Governments in the region sought to bring informal housing under official regulation or even completely replace it with modern public housing. The basic aim was not just to change the form of shelter – it was, more ambitiously, to socialise semi-autonomous informal dwellers into becoming model colonial subjects and, subsequently, citizens of the high modernist state.

DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION: CREATING THE 'SQUATTER'

The first discursive act of the Southeast Asian state was to criminalise informal dwellers as "squatters". The term conveys an instant impression of both illegality and social inertia and forges a powerful sense of social crisis. As Greg Clancey has argued, the colonial state in Singapore forged a controlling emergency discourse, which empowered it with the moral authority to intervene robustly in the everyday lives of ordinary people (Clancey 2004, 53). In fact, most Chinese informal dwellers were not squatters but rent-paying tenants, having settled in autonomous housing as migrants from China and Malaya or from the overcrowded shop houses in the inner city after the war.

The Singapore Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party of 1955, in fact, rejected the term "squatter", as it had been "a long established custom in Singapore for owners of land not required for immediate development to rent out plots on a month-to-month basis and for the tenant to erect thereon a house" (Singapore 1956, 2, 3). But its use persisted into the post-colonial period.

This criminalising discourse also appeared in post-war Thailand. Here, only a small minority of the informal dwellers were technically squatters. Like in Singapore, the majority were renters who had been granted permission on a temporary basis by landlords to build houses on their lands (Giles 2003, 213). In Manila, too, many informal dwellers confidently viewed themselves not as squatters but as rent-paying tenants. In 1962, when the Philippine government sought to clear informal dwellers in Singalong and took them to court, the residents argued that they were not

Informal housing built on hillsides in Hong Kong
Image reproduced from Dwyer, D. J. (1975). *People and Housing in Third World Cities: Perspectives on the Problem of Spontaneous Settlements.* **Plate 8 between pg 36 and 37**

squatters but "lessees who had been paying rentals". Such an assertive self-perception was rooted in the popular belief among Filipinos that public land in the country was not the possession of all but belonged to no one, and could be freely occupied (Cited in Stone 1973, 40-3, 71-3, 80).

In Hong Kong, the illegality of "squatters" was based on a complicated official distinction between building land and agricultural land. This stipulated that residents could erect buildings only on the former. The distinction was made at the beginning of the 20th century and had been hotly contested. It could even lead to the criminalisation of residents who had built unauthorised houses on their own agricultural land. The legal distinction made it difficult for the private sector to satisfy the requirements of the complex building regulations to convert agricultural land into building land. The construction of informal wooden housing became illegal (Smart 2003, 212-3).

The use of a criminalising discourse of illegality and social inertia to provide the state with a powerful mandate to re-house unauthorised housing dwellers in public housing in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong did not simply aim to represent. Rather, it sought to depict the "squatter" as the liminal Other who needed to be eliminated so that the city can be re-created in the political and public imagination (Mayne 1990, 8-9). Scholars in India have contended that the notion of illegality was, really, a fabrication since the laws of the state served chiefly the interests of the powerful. Cities, they argue, had always been built from the bottom up until recently; the poor had the right to build their own housing if the government was unable to provide for them (Desrochers 2000, 17-22, 27).

TRANSNATIONAL ROOTS AND WESTERN ADVOCATES

The discursive vocabulary of "squatters" was common in official statements on housing in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong because it had strong transnational links and advocates. The 1951 United Nations Mission of Experts, which visited informal settlements in Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaya, Pakistan, the Philippines and Singapore as part of its survey, reported that "squatting on somebody else's land has become an art and a profession" in the Philippines (United Nations Mission of Experts 1951, 157). Charles Abrams, an influential American urban planner in the post-war period, warned that informal housing dwellers formed a "formidable threat to the structure of private rights established through the centuries", the rule of law and the basic sovereignty of the state (Abrams 1970a, 11, 1970b, 143, 1966, 23).

Abrams and other Western urban planners such as Morris Juppenlatz frequently advised Southeast Asian governments on housing and urban planning after the war. Juppenlatz was a United Nations town planner who had worked in post-war Manila, Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro. Drawing from the stark, powerful metaphors of disease and contagion, he represented informal housing as "a plague" and an "urban sickness". Juppenlatz reveals his highly modernist mind in expressing his distaste for the physical appearance of informal settlements, where "[t]he outward appearance of the malady, the urban squatter colonies, when viewed from the air, from a helicopter, is that of a fungus attached to and growing out from the carapace of the city".

He blamed many of the cholera outbreaks in Philippine cities on the physical environment of the informal settlements and the social habits of their residents. The basic solution, Juppenlatz

Informal housing built on both sides of a railway line in North Harbour, Manila, Philippines
Image reproduced from Juppenlatz, M. (1970). *Cities in Transformation: The Urban Squatter Problem of the Developing World.* Pg 111

urged, was to organise the residents' integration into the state as tax-paying citizens. In this, the government's role was pivotal and needed to be "based on the scientific method and planned urban development throughout the entire nation" (Juppenlatz 1970, 1-5, 41, 104, 212). Abrams had also warned that the "diseases of housing rival those in pathology" (Abrams 1965, 40).

'DETRIMENTAL TO CRIME AND MORALS': CONTAGION AND THE GANGS

British officials in the colonies fully endorsed these abject views of informal housing. In 1948, the British housing authorities in Malaya represented the "mushrooming" informal housing as being "temporary buildings of a very inferior type, erected without regard to the elementary requirements of sanitation, light and air" (Cited in Johnstone 1983, 298). In Hong Kong, similarly, the connection between the clearance of informal housing and state intervention into public health matters was similarly strong: informal housing became illegal when British colonial officials ruled it to be unhealthy for habitation (Smart 2006, 32). In Singapore, the 1947 Housing Committee also reported that the unplanned urbanisation and development of slum and informal settlements in the city after the war were "detrimental to health and morals" (Singapore 1947, 11), and in literally being "schools for training youth for crime" (Singapore Improvement Trust 1947).

The likening of informal housing development to the spread of disease in official and even academic discourse underlines the social and moral danger the residents were alleged to pose. They were regarded not only as a threat to themselves but also to the fabric of society at large. Many official and academic commentators also did not fail to point to the alleged prevalence of crime and gangsterism in the informal settlements. Juppenlatz emphasised that the Oxo and Sigue Sigue – organised criminal gangs in Manila – were based in informal housing areas (Juppenlatz 1970, 107). In Jakarta, groups of *djembel-djembel* ("vagabonds"), also based in slums and informal settlements, gained a reputation for being responsible for much of the crime in the city (Cited in McGee 1967, 159).

In Malaysia, increased overcrowding in the cities produced "a mood of urban anxiety", with which not only the state but also the middle class viewed their values to be coming under severe threat (Harper 1998, 218). The Ministry of Local Government and Housing depicted informal settlements in Kuala Lumpur in 1971 as "seedbeds of secret societies and racketeers" (Malaysia Ministry of Local Government and Housing 1971, 42).

In Singapore, too, the government portrayed slum and informal housing as "breeding grounds of crime and disease", noting that "[t]he incidence of tuberculosis is higher here than anywhere else on the island, as is the incidence of crime and gangsterism." (Choe 1969, 163)

MASSES AND MOBS: ANGLO-AMERICAN FEARS OF COMMUNISM

Another international dimension of the emergency housing discourse was related to the Cold War and the attempt of Western planners to determine the character of post-colonial societies in Southeast Asia. Informal residents, understood to be resistant to resettlement, were seen to constitute "a potentially dangerous mass of political dynamite", wherein lay the deadly possibility for anti-establishment and revolutionary politics (McGee 1967, 170). Abrams acutely feared that the rural-urban migration was leading many Asian cities to relive the unfortunate history of Western cities:
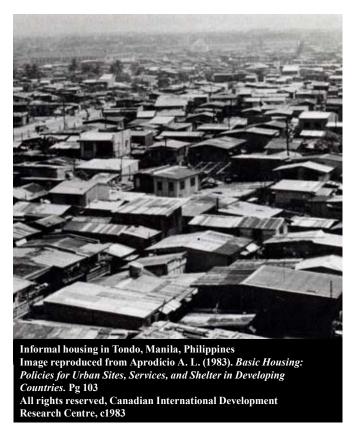
"[Asian cities] have become the haven of the refugee, the hungry, the politically oppressed. The Filipino hinterlanders fleeing the Huks pour into Manila, the Hindus escaping the Moslems head into New Delhi, and the victims of Chinese communism head into Hong Kong." (Abrams 1966, 10).

In Malaya, the British perceived locally born Chinese of the first generation, who did not speak English and whose fathers were immigrants, as a great menace to peace; their numbers were "expanding in labour forces and squatter settlements … [and] nothing can be done to convert them into Malayan citizens" (Britain, Colonial Office 1948). The post-colonial Malaysia state, which won with British support the counter-insurgency struggle against the communists, also maintained that the clearance of informal housing was "not only in the best interests of Kuala Lumpur as a capital city but also to foster economic growth, improve social standards and improve security, thereby making for greater political stability" (Malaysia Ministry of Local Government and Housing 1971, 29).

In 1968, political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote of how an enforced programme of urbanisation in South Vietnam offered an important way for the anti-communist regime to defeat the Vietcong insurgents based in the countryside (Huntington 1964, 648, 652).

The fear of communism was deeply embedded in the minds of Western, particularly American, urban planning experts. It forged a strong link between their ideas and practices and the re-housing programmes which emerged in post-war Southeast Asia. As Abrams warned, unlike the institutional and cultural buffers which existed against communism in Europe, Asian countries were openly vulnerable to the spread of communism. The "housing famine", he cautioned, could easily encourage the ascendancy of Marxism, where "today's masses" could turn into "tomorrow's mobs".

Such an ideological view of urban housing reflected Abrams' belief that the city was the frontier in the post-colonial struggle

Informal housing in Tondo, Manila, Philippines
Image reproduced from Aprodicio A. L. (1983). *Basic Housing: Policies for Urban Sites, Services, and Shelter in Developing Countries.* Pg 103
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Informal housing built along a railway track in Jakarta, Indonesia
Image reproduced from Dwyer, D. J. (1975). *People and Housing in Third World Cities: Perspectives on the Problem of Spontaneous Settlements.*
Plate 6 between pg 36 and 37
All rights reserved, Longman, 1975

to establish peaceful, democratic and stable societies in the less developed world. Asian cities were not only sites of great social and demographic growth; they were also politically explosive places, where the housing crisis represented a serious threat to both national development and global stability (Abrams 1966, 287-8, 296). The 1962 United Nations Ad Hoc Group, which Abrams chaired, likewise believed that housing and urban development were activities in which "social and economic progress meet" (United Nations 1962, 1, 9-19).

CONCLUSION

In post-war Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, powerful emergency housing discourses were forged by the colonial regimes and subsequently embraced by their successor states. But only the city-state of Singapore and Hong Kong successfully adopted policies of social governance which approached the "high modernist" model. The governments of Singapore and Hong Kong overrode organised opposition to replace superficially "messy" informal settlements with visually legible modern housing estates. Both governments possessed the will to transform their subjects into model citizens towards achieving broader developmentalist goals.

One was a non-representative colony which did not have to contend with democratic politics, while the other was an elected post-colonial government which tolerated little opposition and dominated domestic politics. Both also launched their public housing programmes in the context of major states of emergency occasioned by the outbreaks of great fires in settlements of informal housing (Castells et. al 1990, Smart 2006, Loh 2009).

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, both the colonial and post-colonial governments were unable to integrate semi-autonomous informal communities into the formal structures of the state (Dwyer 1975, Ooi 2005). The post-colonial state was typically the

patron of the citizenry, including the informal communities. They usually failed to obtain the requisite political hegemony to push through unpopular housing reforms.

In the Philippines, informal dwellers, local politicians and senior administrators held too much political influence for the state to carry out a sustained campaign of eviction and resettlement. By contrast, the Thai, Indonesian and Malaysian states were not genuinely democratic. But they were also too reliant on patronage politics for political legitimacy to ignore the importance of votes found in informal settlements at the margins of the city (Dick 2003, Stone 1973, Laquian 1966).

In Manila, both national and local politicians were bound up in a mutually beneficial relationship: both needed each other to win elections. They also aligned themselves with informal dwellers to win votes, while the residents themselves made use of such patronage to resist eviction and win lawful tenure of their occupation from the state (Laquian 1966, 54, 118). The result of these complicated tangles of state-society relations was that most Southeast Asian states usually embarked on limited, short-term and visible "prestige projects". T. G. McGee has observed that "national prestige, more than national concern for the social welfare of squatters, has been the most active force leading to their shift in these two cases", but this, in the final analysis, merely maintained the status quo (McGee 1967, 169-70).

The region's states floundered in tackling the informal housing issue in characteristic ways: forming numerous public agencies to disguise a lack of political authority and commitment, without being able to coordinate these agencies, and lacking comprehensive planning, sufficient resources and proper legislation and bylaws (United Nations Mission of Experts 1951, Sicat 1975).

Nonetheless, despite the failure of most Southeast Asian states to remove their informal settlements, it remains crucial

to highlight the role played by the accompanying emergency housing discourse. Compared to the actual dis-housing efforts, the discourse was much more invasive. By representing informal dwellers as criminal, inert, unsanitary and, above all, dangerous populations, high modernist states were framing these part-autonomous, part-integrated communities of people as the Other. Such discursive views of "slum dwellers" and "squatters" have entered into popular consciousness and are uncritically accepted as "common sense" truisms, even before the making of *Slumdog*

Millionaire. In the process, the states have been able to establish political hegemony over matters of what constituted modern, healthy housing and living and what the character of the model citizen was to be in post-war Southeast Asia and Hong Kong (Gramsci 1992).

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