

Unsettling Absences: Urbanism in Rural Malaysia Eric C. Thompson. National University of Singapore Press, Singapore, 2007, pp. 255 (ISBN 10 9971-69-336-4) (pbk).

At a cursory level, one could view Eric Thompson's monograph on the lifeworlds of his subject Malay kampung Sungei Siput (located in rural Perak) as continuing the genealogy of 'village studies' conducted over several decades by human geographers, political scientists and social anthropologists on Malaysia. The illustrious works of Syed Husin Ali (1975), Peter Wilson (1967), Ronald Provencher (1971), James Scott (1985), Shamsul A. B. (1986), Maila Stivens (1996), Aihwa Ong (1987) and Janet Carsten (1997) are some that come readily to mind.

However, what sets this work apart is Thompson's explicit decentring of the 'rural village' as a hermetically sealed entity in the rural–urban spatial and conceptual binary. Thompson does this by examining the *conditions* rather than the *causes* of human migration, a research trajectory sparked off by attempting to answer a deceptively simple question: 'why had all the young people left Sungei Siput?' (p. 4).

Thompson deploys to good effect the theoretical mileage of the 'structures of feelings' (Raymond Williams, 1977) and 'uneven edges' (Ernesto Laclau, 1990) in order to show a double articulation of place and movement which intertwines city and rural Malay village existence in contemporary Malaysia. Flagged textually as a conjunction between apparently disparate worlds, Thompson posits that 'Kuala Lumpur-and-kampung are simultaneously differentiated, bound together, and ultimately a system of meaning and practice that exceeds the sum of these places' (p. 4). Thus, in Sungei Siput, the discourses of urbanism represent the kampung as a site of absence which then 'unsettles' the subjectivities of the rural populace into leaving and migrating into cities. Thompson is also not content in privileging the discursive tyranny of urbanism by portraying Sungei Siput as a static and essentialist village entity. Instead, his monograph sets out to nuance his subject village as a living site, open to ongoing transformative projects, 'real-and-imagined'.

The monograph is divided into three main sections. Part One provides a historical and conceptual revisiting of the spatial entities of 'Kuala Lumpur' and 'the kampung'. Its combined effect is to underscore these places as socially and culturally constituted spaces, albeit of different scales, geographical and temporal. Part Two, entitled 'Practical Urbanism', continues this plotting by ethnographically fleshing out the social, economic and other processes through which the structure of feelings of urbanism has been enacted and lived out in Sungei Siput – ranging from the changing patterns of commodity trade, in/outmigration of peoples and occupational shifts to social interactions within the kampung. The final section, equally engaging, looks at the imaginative processes in which urbanism is mediated in three sites – the school, television and migrant narratives.

In the case of the first site, Thompson argues that a 'curricular urbanism' (p. 142) is being implicitly schooled through the manner in which didactic imageries of city life, nationalism and modern development are being featured in textbooks and other learning activities. By contrast, the kampung is often portrayed as a 'site of return' and refuge for urban characters in the moral economy of spaces. A similar imaginary is found in the cultural work of television, where even as the urban is made familiar to rural Malays through the myriad (Malay) teledramas and comedies on offer, the kampung is rendered a static and residual rural idyllic place. Finally, in the stock of migrant narratives gathered by Thompson, what is suggested is an ambivalence in the conflictual interplay between the benefits and risks of simultaneously inhabiting both city and kampung

worlds. Whilst the expansive world of the city offers a reprieve from the strictures of kampung public surveillance (of for example sexual norms), kampung life is also relatively free from a catalogue of moral dangers usually associated with living in culturally complex and cosmopolitan cities. Experientially and discursively they feed off one another.

On a broader canvas, Thompson's finely balanced monograph – based on his doctoral fieldwork conducted largely in the mid-1990s – takes issue with both the master narratives of state discourse and scholarly work that either project or accept at face value the marginalization of the kampung in the nationalist imaginary of urbanism and upward mobility, especially for the Malay-Muslim population. Thompson counsels instead for a critical and fine-grained look at how this sense of 'absence' imputed onto the kampung is produced and 'incited' at various levels and by different social actors. He does this in the best tradition of ethnographic fieldwork by tracing sensitively the subject formation of his (largely male) research subjects in the face of wider and enduring cultural and social processes engendered by other agencies. However, an aspect hinted at but not fully explored in the monograph, but which Thompson acknowledges as needing more scholarly attention, is the spatiality of Islamic discourse and the diverse ways in which this intersects with the equally spatial imaginaries of urbanism.

Notwithstanding this point, *Unsettling Absences* is a much welcome contribution to urban studies and village studies in Malaysia, lending new and thoughtfully provocative insights to both realms of research. Thompson's monograph well illustrates how by deciphering the overt presence of rurality in his research site, one is at once also uncovering the spectral absence of its cultural binary other, the urban.

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Yeoh Seng Guan

Monash University, Sunway Campus, Malaysia