

## Reading: Channels of Change

Pre-colonial SEAE had many urban communities – autonomous societies, centers of government and officials, of religious and intellectual activity, and of commerce – inhabited by a population detached from the land; townsmen rather than countrymen.

Malacca of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was a center of a great Malay commercial empire. The wide paved streets of the town's business section, lined with tiled or thatched wooden dwellings and warehouses and thronged with residents and traders from all over Asia, sat across the narrow canal-like river from the fortified precinct that overlooked and commanded it, and within which were the palace of the Malay sultan, the court and its environs, and the houses of the Malay nobility and retinue.

Bangkok, which like its predecessor, Ayudhya, was laid out in concentric circles. The innermost circle was dominated by the palaces of the king and later the massive buildings that served as headquarters of the major ministries. The next ring of settlements comprise the Thai portion of the city, the homes of princes and government officers and their households, retainers, families. And beyond that was the Chinese mercantile quarter surrounding the inner core and edging off into the countryside.

19<sup>th</sup> century Hue was similar but rigidly divided like all Vietnamese cities. Some old towns were transformed by this process, many were simply bypassed, receding in political and cultural importance like Hue and its court, which lost place in the 1880s due to the colonially dominated and economically burgeoning areas of Saigon-Cholon and Hanoi-Haiphong. The population of Rangoon swelled to nearly a quarter of a million in thirty years and Mandalay started to shrink.

Most of the new towns were focuses for new or intensified economic energies and new or changing social groups. Virtually all these towns produced for export, not for local consumption. To facilitate trade, great seaports arose, funneling tin, rubber, rice, and other primary products into world markets.

Finally in listing all the kinds of economic activity that gave rise to the new cities, mention should be made of industrialisation, the force behind so much urbanization elsewhere. Because the economies of colonial SEA were primarily, if not entirely, extractive, few of the towns could be called manufacturing or industrial towns. The main functions of the cities and towns were to serve the ends of alien trade and commerce by draining out primary products and pumping in consumer goods. Most urban areas also developed as important communications and administrative centers for the surrounding countryside. Though the interactions between town, communications and administrative systems and countryside were complex, they can for simplicity be represented as a two-way flow. From the town moved carriers of metropolitan values and urban culture and in the other direction, large numbers of people from the villages and rural society poured into the town, carrying with them ideas and habits to throw into the urban crucible. Each side of the transaction fed and reinforced the other, making the city one of the most important single agents of change in modern times.

Most people came for economic reasons and not all forays into the town were permanent. There were differing reasons for migration. In most of the new cities, like before, people of one ethnic

origin/language group dwelled together in the same part of town. Although the quartering was initially for administrative conveniences, the people also preferred it as it assured them neighbours whose speech, religion and habits of life were shared and understood.