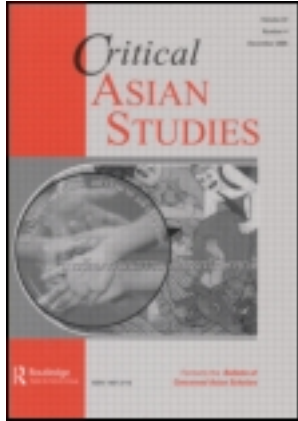


This article was downloaded by: [Orta Dogu Teknik Universitesi]

On: 24 March 2013, At: 12:43

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Critical Asian Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcra20>

ASIA UNDER LATE CAPITALISM

Toby Carroll

Version of record first published: 28 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Toby Carroll (2013): ASIA UNDER LATE CAPITALISM, *Critical Asian Studies*, 45:1, 133-152

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2013.758824>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

PHOTO ESSAY

ASIA UNDER LATE CAPITALISM

A Refocus on Reality

Toby Carroll

ABSTRACT: The hubris over the “rise of Asia” obscures the complexities, contradictions, and struggles that actually characterize the region. Given the economic tumult that has enveloped the West, it is not surprising that we find politicians, pundits, and market players enamored with Asia as a source of economic growth. However, this skewed reading of the region, which regularly dovetails neatly with self-interest and resurgent forms of nationalism, belies material realities. On this count, the region remains home to the majority of the world’s poor, increasing levels of inequality and vulnerability (even within “the success stories”), social, political, and racial intolerance, and massive environmental degradation. Moreover, Asia’s much-vaunted “charm” (often shorthand for the region’s cultural, historical, and natural allure) has been seriously threatened by the accumulation at all costs of late capitalism. The author’s photographic work over the past decade has attempted to grapple with and communicate some of these realities—a humble intervention to bring down to earth perceptions of the region in which he lives.

Around 1985, when I was about ten or eleven, my parents took my brother and me to Hong Kong. My parents were in the fashion industry and—on at least two occasions—combined trips to Hong Kong for product development and sourcing with the rather irregular family holiday. Coming from one of the most remote cities on earth (Perth, Western Australia), Hong Kong seemed truly amazing—an impression that began with the infamous approach into the old Kai Tak Airport. Between the mandatory visits to the Peak (after taking the Star Ferry across to Hong Kong Island from Kowloon), swimming at Repulse Bay, and floating restaurant banquet dinners with business associates, my parents

would drag us by the latest shop windows. I can still vividly recall how the latter glistened in a way that made the offerings back home look distinctly bland, an impression that was no doubt embellished by the shop assistants who would angrily confront my father for taking photos of the impressive displays on offer. My parents also took us to visit a factory run by their business associates. Here my brother and I encountered the reality of production in Asia for the first time, which in this case took the form of a shuddering multistory building full to the brim with machinery and workers toiling in the most miserable of conditions. The contrast between the glitz of what seemed like the height of modernity—embodied in the shops, the underground train system, the malls, and the hotels of Ocean Terminal—and this reality jarred in a manner that continues to resonate with me strongly.

More than twenty-five years later, much has changed in Asia, although a great deal has also remained the same. For the tourist from the West, the media pundit in the international press, and the politicians (also Western) in rapture, Asia is variously held up for its rapid acquisition of modernity and its cultural, historical, and natural endowments. Yet for those of us who live lives deeply enmeshed within the region, venturing beyond the now-common cocooned enclaves, another more complex, contradictory and often fraught picture emerges. For the critical eye, the neon vistas of Akihabara and the escapism of *kawaii* (cute) culture in Harajuku nestle with diminishing opportunities for the young and, indeed, rising levels of poverty in what in a technological sense is perhaps the world's most advanced city, Tokyo. In downtown Jakarta—one of the epicenters of “emerging market” euphoria—a narrow but sizeable and highly visible middle class occupy malls that house Audi dealerships and many other goods that are the preserve of the truly affluent, while a short distance away beggars and workers regularly engaged in highly unproductive forms of work coexist alongside the ever-stagnant traffic. In Singapore, one of the world's richest countries by per capita gross domestic product (GDP), the *karang guni* are a common sight outside blocks in the vast public housing estates, eking out an existence collecting cardboard and dismantling old appliances. And even for the more solid “big middle” living in those same estates (where the majority of Singaporeans live but which are an unknown quantity to non-Singaporeans) the increase in the cost of living and competitive pressures on livelihoods generally have tightened their grip. In Cambodia, a veritable Wild West of the East, children play a highly visible role in an economy in which many are scrambling at all costs to reap rewards while subsistence living is the norm.

The point here for me as a photographer and a researcher is not to cast Asia as other—something that has been done by touters (nationalists and romantic orientalists, for example) and detractors alike for generations. The point, rather, is to render plausible and legible the complex and contradictory reality of an important, diverse, and interesting geographic space in a globalized world. Doing this in Asia, as with anywhere, demands asking questions of “uniqueness” and “cultural exceptionalism,” of rhetoric versus reality, of empirical importance versus irrelevance, and of course, of politics. These sorts of questions, both implicitly and explicitly have indelibly impacted my photographic and academic

work. However, on the photographic front, such questions become crucial in a very immediate, though often unconscious sense when taking photos. If I really think about what pushes me to photograph a particular subject—that moment when the light coming through the viewfinder is deemed deserving of pressing the shutter release to commit that light to film or digital memory as the case may be—it normally accords with a question located in one of the categories above. And in Asia under late capitalism there are potential frames of relevance to be captured everywhere; the “heartlands” of Singapore; the contrasts on Jakarta’s streets; the JR Line in Tokyo; the alleyways of downtown Taipei; Tonlé Sap in Cambodia. Indeed, ambling around Asia provides the socially and politically conscious photographer an abundance of important material that deserves to be framed, captured, and rearticulated to audiences. The potential for presenting contrasts, for cataloguing important trends, for documenting Asia’s particular material realities—as partial corrective for local and nonlocal audiences—is seemingly everywhere. For, despite all the current talk about Asia’s stature in a new “multipolar world” and a focus on the region’s impressive growth (which is nothing new for many countries in the region), the challenges of social justice have hardly disappeared. As I recently wrote in an introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Asia*:

While gross national income (GNI) in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries sits at around US\$41 trillion (world GNI is just under US\$60 trillion) or just under US\$35,000 per capita, the GNI for all of East Asia and the Pacific is just under US\$12.5 trillion or US\$5,953 per capita [around one-seventh that of OECD countries]. To some, these figures might seem high, but the numbers are a little deceptive and are brought into sharper relief if OECD members Japan and Korea are removed. Indeed, Japan and Korea account for only 175 million people—or 8 percent—in a region of 2.1 billion people but account for over US\$6 trillion of the regional GNI. Removing these two economies drops the regional per capita income to around US\$3,334. Even this figure masks the much lower per capita incomes in, for example, Laos and Cambodia, with per capita GNIs of US\$880 and US\$650, respectively.¹

And of course none of this is to say anything of often highly asymmetrical growth, with China—often held up for its poverty-reduction achievements—having seen its Gini coefficient rise from 0.28 in 1983 to 0.473 in 2009.² Notably also, in 2011 the OECD began its annual assessment of Korea with a dramatic warning about rapidly increasing inequality in that country, pointing to, among other things, low social spending and a poor redistributive tax system for addressing poverty.³

The photos in this essay draw on work from the last decade. Some of the material was shot during fieldwork for my research work on development, which has focused on the work of the World Bank and the impact of neoliberalism in

1. Carroll 2012, 353.

2. Selden and Wu 2011, 3, 6.

3. Kirk 2011.

Southeast Asia. Other images were made under more relaxing circumstances—walking about my current hometown (Singapore) on weekends, or simply when inspiration (and a crucial subject) grabbed me during visits to Taiwan or Cambodia, for example. Consequently, despite being consistently motivated by the concerns detailed above, the reader will find some diversity in the images presented. There are the Blade Runner–esque cityscapes of Taiwan and Tokyo, portrayals of the lives of the “petit petit” bourgeoisie (street traders and hawkers), street life generally, the family unit, shifting modes of transport, inequality, and of political struggle. The reader will notice that I have also avoided photos of monks, lotus flowers, temples, and Buddha—although I should confess to having photos of all of these in my archives!

The photos were shot largely on black and white film (usually Kodak Tri-X), a medium I like for its capacity to force the eye to concentrate on the noncolor information within a particular frame. Despite the appealing aesthetic qualities of black and white film, in particular its tones and grain, it would seem appropriate that a process of shedding the distraction of color be applied to the task of portraying Asia under late capitalism. For it seems that many are, however briefly, captivated by that which is easily fabricated and manipulated—often disingenuously—in abundance and then consumed and forgotten with alacrity, much to the detriment of the crucial subject at hand. This is a subject whose interpretation needs to be wrested back from the misleading and the spurious, for it is pivotal to all.

References

- Carroll, Toby. 2012. Neo-liberal development policy in Asia beyond the post-Washington Consensus. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42 (3): 350–58.
- Kirk, Donald. 2011. OECD warns Korea of inequality challenge. Available at www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MF28Dg01.html (accessed 7 September 2012).
- Selden, Mark, and Jieh-min Wu. 2011. The Chinese state, incomplete proletarianization and structures of inequality in two epochs. *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. Available at www.japanfocus.org/-Wu-Jieh_min/3480 (accessed 11 December 2012).



Above: South Asian workers lining up in Little India, Singapore, on a Sunday to remit money. Deducting resident labor force (2.08 million) from total labor force (just over 3.23 million) puts Singapore's nonresident workforce at a little more than 1.15 million people, or slightly under a third of all workers. Many of these foreigners work as domestic workers or in the construction and maintenance of the built environment.



Left: For countries such as the Philippines, overseas workers—many working as low-paid domestic helpers—comprise an important source of income. In 2010, just under 9.5 million Filipinos, or around 11 percent of the population, worked overseas on either a permanent, temporary, or irregular basis. In 2009, overseas Filipino workers remitted US\$17.34 billion to the country of just over 100 million people. This image shows Filipino women taking a break on Sunday next to Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road in Singapore. The location is a popular weekend hangout spot for workers, with Lucky Plaza also offering many money remittance agents.



The urban environments of East Asia under late capitalism often exhibit a Blade Runner—esque quality to them, in part conferred by the abundance and scale of dramatic advertising. *Above left:* Taipei. *Above right:* Tokyo
Below left: Suncheon, South Korea. *Below right:* Tokyo.





Above: The visual contrasts on offer are generous on Hanoi's streets, with the emerging middle class—riding new and higher-end motorcycles and in cars—co-mingling, however fleetingly, with the rest. In Vietnam per capita gross national income has risen from US\$410 in 2001 to US\$1,260 in 2011, with the country on target to meet all of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Below: A similar picture of traffic can be seen in Jakarta, one of the new epicenters of emerging market euphoria. Jakarta has now become particularly infamous for its traffic, which was predicted in 2010 to comprise 12 million vehicles (not including 860,000 public transportation vehicles) by 2011. This image shows a street food vendor, overseen by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (on the right of the poster), navigating a crossing.





In Singapore, one of the world's richest countries by per capita GDP, the overwhelming majority of people live in public (Housing and Development Board, HDB) housing. In recent times, there has been a move toward more tiered public housing developments with condo-like complexes being built to meet advancing expectations. In 2011 the record price fetched for an HDB apartment was reportedly SGD\$900,000, with median prices (depending on apartment type and area) transacting in the second quarter of 2012 between around SGD\$308,000 and SGD\$680,000. *Top*: "The Pinnacle@Duxton" complex just outside of the Chinatown area (in the foreground). *Below left*: Older flats in the Chinatown district. *Below right*: One of the older estates in Toa Payoh.





Above left and right: Despite the material gains in Vietnam in recent years—the country, which is still run by a communist party, was highlighted in 2007 by former World Bank president Robert Zoellick for achieving one of the fastest improvements in living standards in the world—labor-intensive activities and petty trading are plentiful. Many champions of Asia, often implicitly channeling a simple version of modernization theory, see this reality as a phase, while talk is also common in “development” circles of the “middle-income trap.” *Below:* As with many cities in Southeast Asia, one of the quickest (though certainly not the safest) ways to get around Hanoi is on the back of a motorbike, with “service providers” everywhere.





Above left: A version of this scene from Hanoi can be seen in many parts of Southeast Asia, with street traders and providers of older modes of transport now (often literally) confronted with new competitors. *Above right:* Jeepneys in Manila.

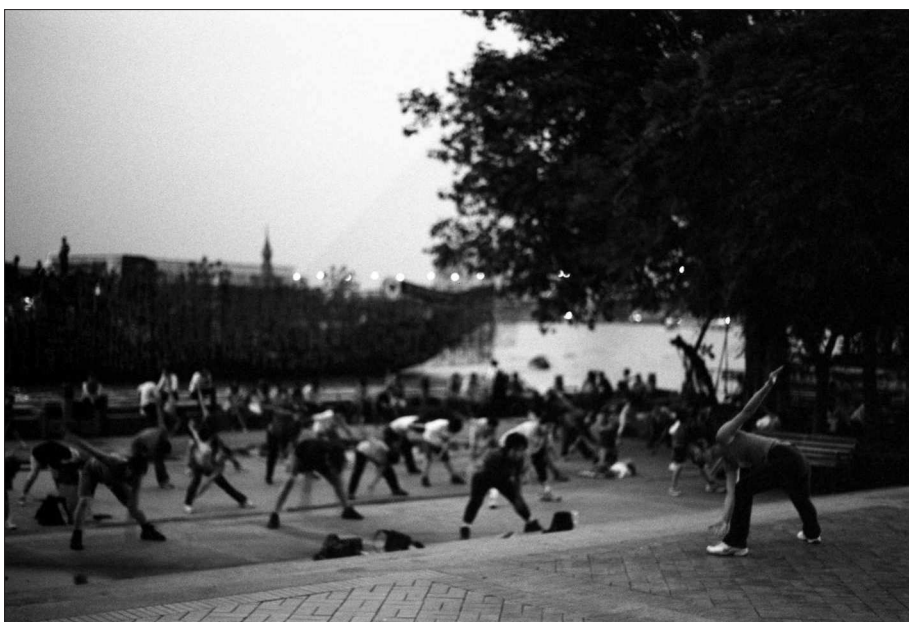
Below: The High Speed Rail (HSR) train—capable of speeds over 300 kilometers per hour—runs between Taipei and Kaohsiung.





Above: The Tokyo subway—the world's most extensive mass rapid transit system—outside of peak hour. The system has 274 stations, with 8.7 million people using it daily.
Below: The small but extremely busy Harajuku station on Tokyo's JR Line.





Above: As has been the case elsewhere, competitive social pressures and increased health consciousness have led to a proliferation of organized and commercialized exercise.

As with many things in the region, there is often a highly tiered structure to exercise, ranging from elite and expensive gyms to outdoor classes, such as this one in Bangkok.

Below: The projection of status has gone to a whole new level under late capitalism in Asia. In 2008 the region accounted for 37 percent of the US\$80 billion dollar luxury goods market. The image below shows four of the many high-end fashion chains in Singapore, some of which regularly have queues outside of them.





Above: This image from a downtown Singapore alleyway captures a *karung guni* and another man servicing a bike the *karung guni* likely used for the collection of materials for recycling—often cardboard and newspapers. Both in the inner city area and in the massive public housing estates in which an overwhelming majority of Singaporeans live, the *karung guni*—who are often older people—are a regular feature, operating in informally established territories. Below: Cardboard collectors in Seoul, as others take a stroll during winter.





Above and below: Kawaii culture in Harajuku, Tokyo. Areas such as Harajuku and Ikebukuro have become firmly institutionalized as hang-out zones for the young and not-so-young who are attempting to escape from the norms of often rigid social structures.





Above and below: Despite all the hubris over “emerging” and “frontier” markets in Asia, in many countries in the region subsistence or near-subsistence living remains common. In Cambodia around 70 percent of working people rely on subsistence farming. These images from the edge of Tonlé Sap illustrate some of the material conditions common in Cambodia, a country in which children often play a prominent role in economic life.





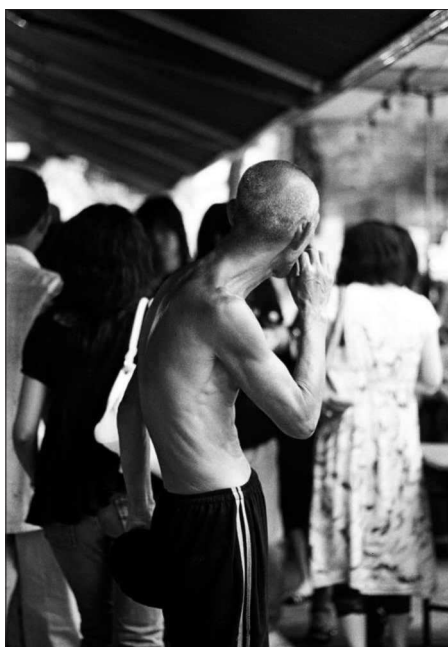
For a region famous for political opacity, patrimonialism, and authoritarianism, the end of the “New Order” in Indonesia and the transition currently taking place in Myanmar are important events. This said, at the same time there are trends toward accommodating conservative Islamic elements in Indonesia and highly hierarchical, strong, and/or authoritarian political control remains common within the region. The rise of inequality and increasing social pressures generally, however, have placed more pressure on many of the region’s political systems. *Above left:* A mass demonstration by an Islamic party in Jakarta. *Above right:* Chee Soon Juan, head of the Singapore Democratic Party. *Below left:* A demonstration against the U.S.–Thailand free trade agreement in Bangkok. *Below right:* A demonstration outside the World Bank offices in Manila calling for multilateral debt cancellation.





Above and below: The family unit—an institution regularly deemed central to understanding Asia—has faced significant pressures of late, as rising costs of living have put pressure on adhering to social norms. Many countries in Asia face declining birth rates, ascending divorce rates, increased postponement and avoidance of marriage, and rapidly aging populations. For example, in 2011, the Singaporean media reported that the fertility rate in the country had fallen to a record low of 1.16—almost half the replacement rate. In 2008, four of the world’s ten fastest aging countries—Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong—were in Asia.





In 1993 the World Bank released a famous report on the “Asian miracle” that not only celebrated the region’s impressive economic growth but also pointed out that this growth had in some instances been more equitable than normal. However, rising inequality, often alongside increasing prosperity (and indeed affluence), is now a stark reality in much of Asia. In 2010 the Labor Ministry in Japan—long seen both inside and outside as a rich though equitable society—announced to a shocked population that one in six people (or approximately 20 million people) in the country lived below the poverty line.
Above left: Bangkok. Above right: Singapore. Below left: Seoul. Below right: Tokyo.





Home to 2.1 billion people, the region retains many of the world's largest and most population-dense cities, with all the complications—environmental, social, and political—that this entails. *Above left*: Slum housing in metropolitan Manila, which in 2010 was a city of just under 12 million people. *Above right*: Taipei from Taipei 101 (the third tallest skyscraper in the world). *Below left*: HDB housing in Singapore, ranked the globe's third most densely populated city. *Below right*: Shilin night market, Taipei.





Despite rapid urbanization and the industrialization of countries such as Japan and Korea, many of the region's economies are still characterized by their labor intensity and dependence on low value-added production processes. *Above*: rice cultivation in Bali, Indonesia. *Below*: workers on the back of a truck in a rice-growing area of central Java.

