



Johor Bahru's response to transnational and national influences in the emerging Straits Mega-City Region



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A B S T R A C T

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A booming economy and a growing concern for sustainable development is driving many cities in the Asia-Pacific region to progressively redefine their social and physical landscape. A new Straits Transnational Urban Region is emerging as a result of two distinct dynamics: (1) the spill-over of Singapore investments into its surrounding region, and (2) the daily transnational travel of workers, visitors and school children from Johor Bahru, Malaysia, into Singapore. At the same time, the city of Johor Bahru is influenced by Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, through political, administrative and government funding structures.

This study compares the linkages and exchanges between Johor Bahru and Singapore with those between Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur. It will investigate the prevalent and potential impacts on Johor Bahru brought about by both transnational urbanisation and local forces emanating from the urban hierarchy within the national system.

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Introduction

Johor Bahru (JB) is a city of half a million located at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia; the wider JB metropolitan area has a population of about 1.3 million. It is the second largest metropolitan area in Malaysia after Kuala Lumpur (KL).¹ JB metropolitan area is an industrial and commercial hotspot of the South Johor Economic Region (SJER), boasting the presence of branches of a wide range of major commercial and industrial brands.

JB's urban form reflects more spontaneity than planned regulated growth. Speculative and massive estates of more than 15 storeys mushroom randomly from a formerly low rise built environment made up of linked houses and two/three storey buildings. From our elaborations, in 2010 the average population density was only 5.8 inhabitants per hectare compared to neighbouring Singapore's almost 70. The Causeway, built during British colonial rule to link Singapore to the rest of Malaya in 1919, is a vital artery that connects JB to the global economic hub of Singapore by facilitating the transit of important volumes of people and freight. From our elaborations about 15,000 public transport commuters transit

between JB and Singapore everyday (see Section 5). The Comprehensive Development Plan for Iskandar Malaysia (see Section 4) doubles this figure as it considers both private and public transport.

JB sits between two powerful regional hubs, KL and Singapore, the former its national capital and the latter its transnational neighbour. This reflects JB's natural locational advantage as a gateway between these two South-East Asian (SEA) global economic powerhouses. On the other hand, Barter (2006b) has highlighted the historical reasons and found evidence of JB's peripheral position against the rising centrality of the island-state Singapore that, according to him, has long since lost its "islandness". The centrality of KL in national policies and the quest to display the modernisation of Malaysia has further compounded JB's position (Bunnell, 2002). These developments could be creating tensions for planners, city administrators and politicians caught between two sets of influences – national and transnational – and the demands of each.

The aim of this paper is to position JB in relation to the zones of influence of the regional hubs/global cities of KL and Singapore. Following this introductory section, we review literature to critically discuss global city hypothesis and the role of the nation-state in Asian urban development in Section 2. Section 3 establishes the hypothesis concerning the emergence of a Straits Mega City Region stretching from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore to include Johor Bahru and several other medium-size cities. Section 4 presents an example of powerful State intervention in urban development through reports on Iskandar Malaysia, an ambitious plan to push JB into the

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¹ The Klang valley, the metropolitan region surrounding Kuala Lumpur, has about 7 million inhabitants. Singapore, on the other side of the Johor Straits, has about 4.6 millions (2009).

global economy. Moving on, we use empirical evidence in Section 5 to argue that despite the influences of nation-state over JB, dynamics in this city are still affected by Singapore transnational interests, thus reaffirming the importance of Global City Theory and the Growth Triangle model in framing our case study. Finally, in Section 6, we suggest policy recommendations to harmonise potentially dangerous effects of Singapore–KL competition on JB without sacrificing the positive effects of Singapore and KL investments in the region.

Literature review

In describing transnational regions such as that envisioned originally by SIJORI (Singapore–Johor–Riau) (see Section 5) that provides the context for JB, we briefly look into possible distinctions between the terms ‘transnationalism’ and ‘globalism’ as reported by Yeoh and Chang (2001). Transnationalism processes refer to networked practices that develop across national borders. Transnational practices and networks of capital, labour, business and commodity markets, political movements and cultural flows are all seen to be both “the products of, and catalyst for contemporary globalisation processes” (Transnational Communities Programme, 1998 in Yeoh & Chang, 2001: 1025). Yeoh and Chang (2001) further suggest that transnational communities are both created in response to, and at the same time sustain and fuel, the process of globalisation” (2001: 1025–1026). Due to the closely intertwined dynamics of the forces driving the two processes, this paper will treat them as being similar.

Also transnationalism can be the result of colonialism. For centuries the islands spreading between today’s Indonesia and Malaysia, including Singapore, have been inhabited by indigenous fishermen communities sharing the same religious background, language, and lifestyle. The case portrayed by Chou (2006: 112) of the *Orang Suku Laut* (Malay words for “tribe of sea people”) community today divided among three nations (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore) is indicative of the “conflicting demands on resources” across national borders. As result of Portuguese, Dutch and British expansion policy in the far East Asia these communities have been divided to better serve the needs of the foreign rulers. After independence from European countries, indigenous communities of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia have been affected by several waves of nation building policies which have progressively erased their shared cultural milieu to fit the new super-imposed national identity of their respective countries. However, in our research we have found resistant indigenous communities of *Orang Asli* living marginalized from mainstream Malaysian society and stripped of basic civil rights and form of representation.

Global/transnational connections

While striving to integrate into the global economy, a business district may become more closely connected to and influenced by a business district situated in another country, rather than to adjoining districts within its own city (Ascher, 1995; Castells, 1996). Globally networked spaces can thus “... cease to articulate in any meaningful way with parts of their local hinterlands or districts, backed up by processes of urban restructuring, the widespread ‘fortress’ impulse, architectural and urban design strategies, police practices, etc.” (Graham, 1999: 932). Similar phenomena can be observed on a wider scale as well, thus making “... traditional notions that cities, regions and nations have any necessary coherence as territorial ‘containers’ extremely problematic” (Graham, 1999: 931). In suggesting that territory should be seen as relationally produced rather than bounded and static, it is argued that “... the image of political-economic space as a complex, tangled mosaic of superimposed and

interpenetrating nodes, levels, scales, and morphologies has become more [analytically] appropriate than the traditional Cartesian model of homogeneous, self-enclosed and contiguous blocks of territory” (Brenner, 2004: 66 in McCann & Ward, 2010: 177).

It is possible, therefore, that KL is more prone to respond to decisions made by global players in Singapore due to its shared global networks and partners, than it is to JB. On the other hand, the Growth Triangle sees potential interdependence between JB and Singapore, while KL – as the national capital – could exert political influence over JB.

The different “faces” of globalisation

The term Globalisation refers to those cross-border processes that integrate and connect agencies scattered around the world (Hall, 1992). The concept is connoted by two spatial dimensions (McGrew cited in Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 13): “scope” (the stretching of political and social activities across the globe) and “intensity” (the deepening interdependences between states of the world-community).

The main feature of globalisation, the strengthening of integrated global networks, could also be seen as the weakening of national government functions. Beall (2002, 41) refers to John Gray’s claim that “... economic globalization had developed to the extent that social democratic policies are no longer viable and that national governments are powerless in the face of global economic integration and neoliberal deregulation”. Economic globalisation is widely blamed for the “demise of social democracy and the modern welfare state” by those who point to global competitive pressures that force governments to reduce state spending and market interventions (*ibid*).

On the other hand, Mowforth and Munt (2003: 16) note that the real “face” of globalisation is that of “uneven and unequal development” rather than cultural homology and erosion of the sovereignty of nation states. For them globalisation is an “interesting story” (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 21) but a poor basis for analysis because, amongst other flaws, globalisation “... fails to acknowledge which places and peoples are included in this process and which are excluded” (Mowforth & Munt, 2003: 17). Moreover, Mowforth and Munt (2003: 21) argue that the term of globalisation has been used by western politicians, businessmen, and scholars to impose the inevitability of westernisation of the world rather than to explain the complexity and unevenness created by worldwide integration.

Martin and Schumann (1997) state that the “Asian boom has little to do with the laissez-faire capitalism of most OECD countries”. Without exception, the rising economies of the Far East adopted a strategy “... (of) massive state intervention at every level of economic activity” (143). Chu (2008) similarly observes that the nation-state in Asian developing countries remain concerned with shaping the global markets. Both Singaporean and Malaysian governments follow clear globalisation strategies of providing incentives to private enterprise that include the use of government institutions and resources. However, this presents a dilemma to national governments as they promote market forces while also intervene in the market to ensure social equity. Potentially, they could turn local market conditions less attractive for global investors and also fail at ensuring social equity for those not served by the market. In Malaysia, for instance, Bumiputera (Malay word for “son of the soil”) share capital in corporate sector (see 1970 NEP–New Economic Policy, Doraisami, 2012: 41; Hang, 2010: 124–125), is exempted if the activity is located within special economic corridors such as Iskandar Malaysia, in contrast with Malaysian politicians’ promises that Iskandar Malaysia benefits shouldn’t go to outsiders (Hang, 2010: 131, 134).

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