AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SHAPING OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF SINGAPORE: REading Chinatown
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt to comprehend the urban phenomena in Singapore through the analysis of the urban landscape and its transformation. The analysis focuses on the (re)development of Chinatown.

The hypothesis in this investigation is that the urban landscape at any point in time represents a confluence of various forces. Although the dramatic changes Singapore has undergone were largely the result of direct state action through planning and development, other factors like the physical topography of the land, the social and cultural aspects of the people, the changing economy and international relations, also played a role in shaping the urban environment. Using Chinatown as a case study, the various forces ranging from political and economic to geographical and socio-cultural would be investigated and the role they played in the growth and transformation of the district analysed. The physical impacts that these factors had on the urban fabric would also be explicated.

The investigation involves historical research as well as the study and mapping of the various transformations revealed in the survey maps from different time periods. These transformations were mainly located within the context of the political and economic changes, and the pressure for spatial change, experienced between 1959 and 1999. However, the development of Chinatown during the colonial period from 1819 to 1959 would also be examined to understand the formation and growth of the urban structure.

The dissertation begins with the founding of Singapore and the subsequent establishment of the Chinese community south of the Singapore River. It focuses first on the forces that lead to the layout and urban structure of Chinatown, and secondly on the impacts that the SIT and HDB housing efforts, URA Sales of Sites programme and the incessant infrastructural improvements had on the area. The paper next examines the conservation of Chinatown and the impact that this had on the urban fabric before concentrating on the current efforts of STB to thematise the area and the likely ensuing physical transformation. In short, the paper attempts to understand the various forces leading to and the complex process of urban transformation of Chinatown.

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