Majority time: operations in the midst of Jakarta

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Abstract: Across many cities of the so-called Global South, the primary responsibility for constructing spaces of inhabitation has fallen largely to residents themselves. Although these cities have been largely remade through the intensive segregations precipitated by property markets, many substantial traces of the continuous incremental renovations and readjustment of everyday life remain vital. It was not just a matter of households building their own homes. Affordability meant density. Densification was not just of bodies of techniques necessary to provide an array of affordances. This meant the intermixing of measures, angles, calculations, impulses, screens, surfaces, soundscape, exposures, folds, circuitries, and layers, as instruments for associating things, bringing things into association, where things get their ‘bearings’ by having a ‘bearing’ on each other. But these associations required their own rhythm and time. Focusing on different heterogeneous districts in inner city Jakarta, the paper explores these mixtures of temporality and how they are materialized in local built and economic environments.

Keywords: Jakarta, local economy, incremental temporality, urban development, built environment, social infrastructure

The time that works

In the fields of urban development and change many assumptions are made about the capacities of residents to bring about improvements in the conditions of their lives. This is particularly the case for residents living in rapidly expanding urban mega-regions where complex rearrangements of life outpace the ability of policy-makers and institutions to always manage these transformations. The bulk of these assumptions centres on various organizational imaginaries – that is, the capacities of residents to organize in ways that identify and secure their collective interests and rights. If only residents were better able to pool their time, efforts and assets into more proficient investments and organizational capacities, then, the assumption goes, would they be better able to make the city something that works for them (Boonyabancha, 2009; Boudreau, 2007; Eckstein, 2000; Holston, 2008; Lindell, 2010; Walton, 1998).
But what are the criteria entailed in these notions of ‘what works’ and ‘for them’? Additionally, given that the city is a constantly mutating intersection of materials, things, bodies and immaterialities only partially regulated or predictable, why don’t residents take advantage of the multiplicity of collectivity possibilities embodied by urban life? Again, behind this question lurks some kind of optimal spatial solution, some format or calibration capable of generating synergistic effects that maximize the productivity of urban life (Elden, 2010; Gandy, 2006; McFarlane, 2009; Thrift, 2005).

We work in a lot of different districts in Jakarta, and mostly on issues of local urban economic development. People in these districts undertake a wide variety of different trades and livelihoods, largely outside of formal employment. The work that people do largely provides a basic income, but usually not much more. As a result, there is vast scepticism about the practices of local economy, and concern that people should be doing something different, more substantial and at larger scales. For example, there is a tendency to create employment opportunities only by subcontracting out to the lowest level of production activities and by creating ‘firewalls’ among activities rather than developing integrated approaches. New enterprises may be created, for example, in the textile sector, but usually these opportunities remain heavily dependent upon ‘big players’ who continue to dominate access to capital and machinery. This dependence is often reflected in very narrow market channels – in other words, the ability of new enterprises to explore various market opportunities is severely restricted because of these dependencies. Also, by separating out functions – such as the delivery of materials, the unloading of materials, and the retailing of these materials – each function develops into a specific zone of authority and pricing that often seeks to protect itself before thinking about the overall market of which it is a part.

Additionally, people within a trade are usually unable to put together new forms of economic association that cut across ethnic group or territorial affiliation. While, for example, ethnic-based developments of economic activities can be useful mechanisms to ensure inclusion of a wide range of people – both as workers and customers – they also reproduce the situation whereby certain actors continue to dominate the high end of each sector. It also limits the development of new practices and product lines, as well as the capacity of neighbourhood-based sectors to produce at scale. The expansion of investment savings and market share would seem to require new ways of explicitly articulating different businesses and facets of production activity within a sector.

A sense of timing and the becoming of an urban majority

What is often neglected in these discussions of urban movements and collective organization is a sense of timing – of what is the right time to do things, or how people pace themselves over time as a way of creating evidence for what they do or creating conditions that enable them to discern just how they affect the city and how the city affects them. These considerations go beyond calculations of
risk – of just how much can be risked with what one has access to – or of savings, of deferring certain decisions or consumption to a future time in order to maximize abilities, impact or scale. Rather, they entail the very conditions of living in the city themselves.

The majority of urban residents in many cities of the postcolony remain outside of the 'count' – not in terms of their demography or occupations, but in terms of how little their lives and how they organize them have been taken into account. How much do we really know about the ways in which artisans, civil servants, storekeepers, drivers, market sellers, small-scale producers, teachers, service workers, repairers and police live their lives in today's megacities, and how they shape them? Yet, the capacities of such residents to operate as a majority – a site through which livelihoods could be constructed that simultaneously depended upon and circumvented waged labour, that consolidated particular territorial and occupational identities in a specific place but yet largely used them as a platform from which to engage in highly flexible, provisional and mobile relations with many different ‘walks of life’ – also depended upon being kept out of the count. They depended upon circumventing measurement and clear ascription or sites of political objective (Chatterjee, 2004; Fawaz, 2008).

The count is avoided precisely because the majority operates at those sites of urban life most maximally capable of facilitating the simultaneous negotiation of such different walks of life (Bayat, 2009; Benjamin, 2008; Elyachar, 2005; Goldstein, 2004; Haber, 2006; Konings et al., 2006). Thus, they live in a time where their own consolidation as ‘the majority’ – a self-recognized cohesion of interests and practices aimed at taking power – is not the political ideal, not the objective of their efforts (Badiou, 2006). At the same time, while residents may seek to maximize their potentials to remake themselves in multiple ways along the ever-changing trajectories of urbanized interactions, they also know that eventually they must at least act accountable as ‘one thing’ – as a coherent, visibly self-managed entity.

Using Meillassoux’s (2007) discussion of Bergson and Deleuze and the countervailing trajectories of becoming, we are reminded that living is not so much reflective of a process of interested choice but rather the mobilization of disinterest in the real. This disinterest constitutes the basis of perception. Here, only specific segments of what takes place, of what ‘matters’, constitutes the entirety of what is perceived. Choices are made among various options, but only following the action of the body which rules out the availability of an infinity of images; which has already screened out a wide range of images at various temporal and spatial scales. If reality and matter have ‘all the rhythms of duration, then perception is the selection of one of the rhythms of a matter-image which contains each and every material quantity’ (2007: 81). Matter is intercepted in that it becomes superficial as it is enveloped in perception. Within perception, matter does not cease to be itself but rather is subject to a ‘detour’, a ‘break’, a means through which a non-organic past is constituted for the procession of the living being.
For the living being to mobilize itself within a given environment, for it to act within it, requires what Deleuze (1986) calls a ‘disinterested interest’ – a way of engaging the world that has no recourse to ‘step out’ of the flow of events, and therefore must always be willing to affect and be affected by all that surrounds it; yet, at the same time, not to be ‘carried away’ with the flux of that environment. At the same time, something is always happening in a person’s world; something is always interesting, always repositions all that exists in ever-changing relationships. Thus these trajectories of both active and reactive becoming are the conditions of any choice or calculation – that is, where do I put my body, who will I pay attention to, how will I use what resources I have? All of these dimensions have to be perceived and decided upon in city life.

Operating in the city requires a surfeit of affect to navigate the multiplicity of ways in which things, spirits, information, materials, bodies, spaces, techniques, forces and differentials pass through each other – come and go, circle and transverse, accumulate, dissipate and fold. To select, cut off, disconnect and screen out the reality that one is fully immersed in and constituted by does not in and of itself constitute spaces of refuge and withdrawal; for a person is fully within this complex concave reality at ‘all times’. The question then becomes: how does one ward off being dissipated in the experiencing of all things ‘at once’ in the uninterrupted flood of communication (Terranova, 2004)? This is then a matter of timing, of time not ‘all at once’, but of breaks and detours, of disattention and disinterest, of looking here and not there, of orienting a body to a sense of ‘here and there’ that requires a ‘passing away’ from an incessant passing through (Meillassoux, 2007).

This time is not one of development stages, where momentary consolidation of self or collective then provides the ‘answer’ for what will come next. It is not the deployment of memory that contracts space by putting together images and precepts into story lines in order to constitute a present moment that can be managed. It is not the engineering of some ‘critical distance’ from the flow of events so that there might be time to read them as a certain progression embodying causation and meaning. Nor is it a process of time being ‘bought’ so that something more real or ideal can eventually emerge; where someone has in mind just what is to come or should come. Rather, the timing talked about here refers to a continuous process of becoming with and within the city, of living on the cusp of that difference – that is, moving with the city in all of its shifts and also organizing a means of inhabitation, something recognizable as a base within all of the flux (Latham and McCormack, 2004). A place, as Deleuze (1986) suggests, where one can ‘set out again’ – where the ‘where’ is not prescribed or always knowable, but where the uncertainty does not foreclose the capacity to act in new ways.

**Taking on just enough: tempeh producers in Kampung Rawa**

While there has much been discussion about how local economies need to ‘scale up’, it is not clear whether the benefits are unequivocal. In the sub-district of
Kampung Rawa in central Jakarta, the artisanal production of bean curd tempeh has been key local economic activity for decades. It is a business that requires the continuous turnover of production given the value placed on keeping preservatives out of the mix. The vast majority of local producers, with some 80 of the city’s 700 located in a contiguous series of small lanes in Kampung Rawa, come from a single city, Pekalongan. Production is usually sold in small neighbourhood markets and in street stands at various strategic locations, as well as in orders from caterers. A wide geographic region in the city is covered through this plurality of small producers, with profits accumulated by households concentrated near their workshops. These households are often related through kinship, at the same time that kinship in this sector is rarely a basis of entrepreneurial consolidation. Related small entrepreneurs pursue their businesses individually with little explicit coordination regarding market location or share.

Coverage, as a reference to both product distribution and the overall social welfare of producer households, is something more implicit in the entrepreneurial practices that are deployed. While producers are organized into sub-district and city wide cooperatives, the primary objective of this work is to secure inputs within an affordable price range. This means putting pressure on governmental bodies to curtail the power of a small number of importers who exert a de facto monopoly on the import of soybeans into the country. As there exists substantial price manipulation by the small number of soy wholesalers, cooperatives are engaged in the arduous process of attempting to politically curtail this power. The attitude on the part of cooperative leaders is that they will always have markets and the important thing is to guarantee the possibility of reproducing their present capacities.

Continuous turnover is not only a function of the short ‘shelf-life’ of the product but the dependence upon sales as usually the only capital available to keep the operations going. No matter how long the success of an individual producer, there is little investment capital available to upscale production and very little social or economic incentive for producers to work out standardized procedures that would be a key criterion for the agglomeration of enterprises. This is reflected in past temporary attempts to supply larger supermarkets or restaurant groups where supplies are paid for only thirty days after delivery and where a proportion of the costs entailed in unsold items have to be absorbed by the producers. Producers see the risks entailed in this jump in scale as excessive and prefer to carve out their own limited market niches, which usually also involve strong relationships with workers and retailers, often housed by the producers themselves.

So instead of an explicit and organized harmonization of quality, markets, production techniques, and business relations, a more implicit coordination occurs through the extensive circulation of information facilitated through kinship and the close proximity in which producers reside. At the same time, each producer operates with his or her own autonomy and sets their price. While many would not be adverse to securing larger market shares or expanding the...
scope of production, few are willing to relinquish their relative autonomy or to assume the risks or indebtedness that such expansion would entail. A limited sense of sufficiency thus prevails, with producers able to gradually improve their living conditions over time and use their long-term endurance as a platform on which to attain positions of local leadership that also are converted into various economic opportunities.

This sense of gradualism has been widespread across the districts of central Jakarta – the incremental improvement of living conditions, enterprises, individual capacities and status over time. Each attainment does not usually open exponentially a larger range of aspirations; residents expect to take their time over a long period of time to make modest changes. In part, this practice ensues from the absence of investment capital or its availability through participation in patronage systems which curtail individual or neighbourhood autonomy. But it also ensues from the evidence generated by others whose risks or naivety wiped out years of effort and available resources. The persistence of politics as essentially a game of money – a game accessible to only those with money and a game dedicated primarily to the extraction rents and payoffs – is reinforced by a widespread popular belief that personal efficacy has to be demonstrated through concrete works and that the safest, most assured way of accomplishing such works is one step at a time. While big political operators might construct fancy houses and throw money around in favours and charity, there are more numerous examples of those who have played the game and not accomplished anything. Evidence for this popular opinion is indeed widespread, but does not necessarily rule out some individual efforts to effect a more ‘productive’ engagement with local politics.

Knowing when to move and what to take on: the ‘conductor’ of Pasar Nangka

Abay is a 49-year-old father of two of the best heavy metal musicians in Indonesia and a guy who largely grew up on the streets cajoling and hustling for every little opportunity. The big payoff would come in his organizing a defence of local market, Pasar Nangka, with its highly strategic location straddling five different kinds of neighbourhoods. He expelled gangsters who were using the market to gamble and sell drugs. While the struggle was protracted, his key decision was to keep the market open around the clock, organize clear thoroughfares and generally make it a place where everyone could safely come at all hours. To keep the market open around the clock, Abay trained and organized a ‘night staff’ made up of some the most marginal ‘losers’ in the area, giving them a chance for steady employment, even if at a cut-rate wage. Widespread use of under-invoicing and direct contacts with farmers – avoiding the use of middlemen – ensured that prices were lower than any other market in the region, thus guaranteeing a high volume of turnover, a percentage of which he and his ‘staff’ extracted for various services, such as cleaning and security.
Instead of pocketing all of the proceeds he bought up property in the surrounding area for a variety of ancillary businesses to take advantage of proximity to the market and developed opportunities for the wholesaling of rice in a partly successful effort to break the hold of long-established monopolies. Part of these new expansions was used to house traders in the market, as well as his staff. He also lobbied for the placement of an official police post at the entrance of the market, literally subcontracting out security to those who are legally culpable for enforcing it. All of these efforts cemented a great deal of loyalty, and loyalty in turn generated financial rewards.

During the entirety of this process, Abay had no formally sanctioned role in the market, which officially fell under the purview of a municipal association of small enterprises and as such, was not even registered as a market. This manoeuvre which kept the official market authority, Pasar Jaya, out of administrative control, and thus the extraction of service fees and taxes, entailed a modicum of dissimulation on the part of both Abay and the traders as certain infrastructures usually associated with markets had to be kept in abeyance and the general appearance one of marked informality – even as trading and transportation were highly organized.

Such success engenders jealousy and, therefore, Abay must always be conscious of protecting his position, which accounts for his involvement in party politics – that is, to keep himself visible as a force to be reckoned with. While Abay has over time acquired a cleaning service business and owns several properties, he has no real political ambitions himself. He has his niche and has used this niche to make steady but gradual improvements in his life conditions and status. Rather politics, for Abay, is performance art – always making it seem as if something is taking place, whether its alliances, conflicts, coalitions or campaigns, when they are not yet in operation. It always seems that Abay knows something that everyone else doesn’t know but feels that they should know and thus can’t act as if they don’t know it. Concretely, this ruse translates into a game where Abay receives ‘consultant fees’ from various ministries for bringing together different actors from his district of Kemayoran for workshops, capacity building sessions, and so forth, and where each participant collects an honorarium for their participation – a process that further endears Abay to a wider range of people. With wider connections and acquaintances, Abay can also play as an intermediary for those who need masses in the candidacy for public office.

It also helps that Abay plays the part of a kind of gregarious ‘fool’ who continuously disarms people by his ‘ingenuous’ forthrightness. But Abay is certainly no fool, and part of this is that he has always been careful never to overreach, never to take on too much, and thus not to owe anyone anything. He talks about how many of his close peers he grew up with have gone on to important positions in ministries and enterprises, but also indicates how obligated and thus confined they have become, always careful about what they say and do, whereas he feels he is basically free to do what he wants.
The heterogeneity of time: managing lives as projects

What do urban residents experience as the heterogeneity of time? Increasingly, the operations of developers, attempting to maximize ground rent through the large-scale production of uniform living space, convey a message of equal access for residents to a 'larger world'. As more residents situate themselves in large-scale apartment blocks, serviced by shopping complexes with their array of conventional retailers and a standardized menu of amenities, the idea is that whatever histories residents may bring to the superblock, the scale offered has the capacity to absorb these diversities. Absorption in this instance becomes a modality of neutralization rather than a capacity to use these histories as a resource in unfolding particular economies and residential practices.

In cities like Jakarta, this promise of detachment can be attractive to an emerging or aspirant middle class that realizes that flexibility in affiliation, taste and commitment is necessary for successful careers. As the residential offerings of the superblock are tailored for nucleated families, residence within them also serves as a way to mitigate having to respond to kinship obligations, even if in many instances improvised adjustments are made to house multiple generations. The residential infrastructure, along with the emphasis on religious renewal, lifestyle and regimens of constant training and re-skilling across many cities, reiterates the message that for the individual to be eligible for success they must attenuate parochial orientations, family obligations and preoccupation with narrowly drawn social and personal identities. Superblocks thus become forms of erasure; they are not so much marketed in terms of what they are in and of themselves, but what they permit – that is, physical and social mobility, convenience, personal autonomy, security, managerial authority and proximity to critical resources.

Many residents who choose superblock residence have grown up in highly dense and mixed districts where former practices and institutions of social solidarity are waning and where local economies are increasingly overcrowded, resulting in the expansion of insecurity and illicit livelihoods. While having neighbours with different backgrounds, capacities and schedules may avail households to various supports and inexpensive services, the maintenance of functional relations may entail more frequent and arduous negotiations. Demands are increasingly viewed as excessive. Parents worry more about ensuring a 'good' environment for raising children. As more economically successful households move out of these districts, pressures are compounded by introducing new, more 'footloose' residents. These residents usually reside temporarily in houses that have been converted into short-term rental accommodation – most often by owners who have relocated elsewhere – or by wealthier residents who buy up property so as to construct new homes or businesses. In each case there is an infusion of residents who are usually less interested in participating in local solidarity practices and are only interested in the specificities of the district as
being close to work, as an opportunity to construct at a scale not possible elsewhere, or for speculation.

Nevertheless, there remain significant areas in cities like Jakarta where a profusion of heterogeneity persists. The form of this persistence is probably less identifiable through forms of economic cooperation or social solidarity and more in the contiguities of scores of ‘material projects’ – from the maintenance and repair of existing infrastructure to new construction that proceeds at various speeds and scales. Districts may have specific genealogies. For example, they may have ensued from state initiated projects to allocate land to civil servants from particular ministries or have become the domain of workers in a particular industry or sector. Economic or residential corridors may have developed along specific transportation routes, public land, or at the periphery of planned developments. These genealogies may account for how households gained access to basic residential opportunities but often do not tell us much about what households eventually did with this access.

As such, districts which were founded with a certain commonality of population base, land certification and economic development 20–40 years ago usually undergo marked internal differentiation. They become replete with stories of accumulation and loss, of expansion and contraction. These stories are embodied in the shape of land disposition and the built environment. Households beginning with similar platforms of residency have pursued different forms of calculating and concretizing opportunity. For example, investments may have been made in consolidating contiguous plots into facilities which combine residential and economic activities. In other instances, plots may have been subdivided to accommodate expanding family size or sold off with residential expansion developed along a vertical trajectory. Original pavilions may not have been altered since their construction, while neighbouring plots have ‘witnessed’ several projects, owners and occupiers come and go. Single streets are often the inventories of discordant values embedded in the very selection of materials used to sustain or remake built projects. The selection of roofing, tiling or frontage – such as ceramics, wood, tin, steel, cinder block, aluminium – not only reflect differences in affordability and assessment of environmental conditions, but also social status and commitment.

Some residents aim for a ‘summation’ of their residence – that is, they wait until they have the financial resources, certification and permits to realize their project all at ‘one go’. Others may ‘take their time’, construct things in stages, aiming to instantiate ‘facts on the ground’ – that is, additions that aim to secure a fait accompli in terms of particular claims to land use or economic activity. They may not have yet secured permission to build or operate but select ways of ‘going ahead’ that convey the sense that erasing what has been done will be too complicated for everyone involved. Yet if eviction does happen, the particular materials used and ways of trying to ‘implant’ these facts will not incur a debilitating financial loss or loss of prestige. Still others may simply build slowly...
over time, adding some increments to a basic frame or multiplying the use of particular asset or space.

While Jakarta law specifies that no substantial changes can be implemented to a resident’s plot without the permission of neighbours living on both sides, this is rarely enforceable or even taken seriously by anyone. Thus, household projects are highly individuated and uncoordinated. Conflicts and negotiations may come from excessive consumption of collective resources, such as water, power and sanitation. But again, these projects are rarely elaborated at a scale that would register substantial disjunction in the resources consumed. While neighbourhoods will be full of talk about who is doing what and comparing resident access to money and opportunity, the most ‘accomplished’ of projects – in terms of the size or money spent – will not necessarily stand out, either as the concretization of what is to be aspired to or as the exemplar of efficacy. What is important is the sheer diversity of time-lines, that it is possible for so many different kinds of projects of the built environment to exist in close proximity to each other and that this diversity has been generated by people who still manage to know each other, and provide each other the basic elements of space and solidarity.

Whereas participation in specific sectors of the local economy, such as printing, textiles, furniture, automobile parts and repair may be largely a matter of ethnic affiliation, and whereas each household network, neighbourhood or ethnic group may aim to make sure that they are involved in each facet making up a sector, the shape of individual built environment projects seems to break with such patterns. A given ethnic group may prefer a certain style or organization of space, but there are no lesser or greater diversities in these projects when ethnic affiliation is factored into consideration.

This is heterogeneity that goes beyond negotiation and planning. As it reflects the diversity of individual narratives – of work, networks, personal decisions, institutional belongings – it shows just how the city opens up a plurality of life trajectories and that this plurality need not be an impediment to co-inhabitation in densely populated spaces. This is not to say that in such districts there are no conflicts or structural dynamics that disentangle long-term relationships of collaboration and solidarity. It is clear across cities everywhere that the forms through which we have relied upon in the past to think about collaboration are probably no longer salient or available. Instead of viewing the plurality of projects – often seemingly hodge-podge, without adequate planning or regulation – as a deficiency in need of better coordination, it may be the very evidence of a deepening of possibilities for livelihood within given spatial parameters, as well as a basis to think through new forms of economic cooperation and scale. Efficiencies in service provisioning systems do require forms of harmonization, but too often the language or coding systems through which harmonization is recognized as operative require excessive homogenization of the visual landscape. There is often limited appreciation as well for the ways in which very different looking built projects manage to adjust themselves to the lines of basic standards.
Weighing confidence and caution: or how to operate under the radar

If stories are a particular spatialization of ways in which people connect to each other, then what kind of stories buy people time to attain some level of confidence in what they are doing? When do particular stories come to dominate collective imaginations in ways that seem to foreclose the possibilities of people doing different things with each other, of ‘taking charge’ of their lives in new ways? Do certain stories come to the fore that attribute histories and capacities to particular actors which may be a functional abbreviation of complex events but also leave many things out? Are the capacities and events left out – seemingly marginalized by these stories – at a disadvantage in terms of what they are able to actually do by virtue of being left out? Or, for the ‘time being’, is such occlusion a beneficial tactical manoeuvre? In other words, does everything that happens in a locality – whether it is a neighbourhood, economic sector or network of institutions – attain a wider range of possibilities by being included in the stories that come to represent it?

In the locality of Bungur in the Senen district of central Jakarta, just down the road from Kampung Rawa, the accelerated growth of the printing industry during the last ten years has substantially changed the character of the area. It has enfolded former residential areas as extensions of commerce and drawn in local households to the lowest level of subcontracting. While artisanal printing has existed in this area for a long time, in part due to its proximity to one of the city’s major transportation hubs, the extensive agglomeration of designers, lithographers, cutters, finishers, maquette producers, plate makers and digital operators is a more recent phenomenon. The consolidation of a district that encompasses all facets of the printing industry, as well as its ability to service almost any customized order in a short period of time – given the wide range of artisanal production centres that co-exist with larger scale, but more standardized operations – enables it to dominate the printing market across the country. This is also made possible by its ability to peg pricing to its management of a broad range of trans-shipment opportunities, so that quick turnarounds can be actualized through linkage of the district to various air freight services. Economic efficiency is evidenced in the fact that yearly growth of the sector in the district has tripled the previous year’s expansion in each of the past five years.

Still, local officials and residents widely bemoan the loss of their district. Perhaps more importantly, they feel that there is little they can do to either secure some benefit from the industry or to engage it as a mechanism to pursue their own particular development agendas in Bungur. To a large extent these concerns are completely legitimate. There are few environmental controls to deal with increased volumes of toxic waste and local authorities have few jurisdictional powers to enforce specific regulations dealing with commercial and employment practices. Local opportunities are largely defined in terms of hiring residents to manage parking or to perform low end tasks such as page compilation or binding. Most of those who populate the sector are designated as...
having come from the outside; many artisans indeed apprenticed with firms that were once located elsewhere and the printing business has integrated those having relevant skills, which in most cases have not included local residents whose primary economic activities were in other sectors.

But the key story told over and over again about changes in the district centres on almost absolute dominance of the printing industry by Indonesians of Chinese descent. Ten Indo-Chinese firms are seen as controlling almost every aspect of the industry, to the extent that their supposed control of market access, information, and orders gives them the capability to define how the hundreds of differentially scaled workshops and factories in the district are articulated. So even though the vast majority of actual producers may come from a broad range of Indonesian ethnic backgrounds, the ways in which they are connected along a series of forward and backward linkages – in terms of who gets orders in terms of volume, specialization and frequency – is represented as the purview of these ten firms.

It is true that the capital investments entailed in the technology of preparing photographic plates are usually only available to Chinese entrepreneurs, and thus their concomitant ability to control this essential aspect of the industry automatically propels them into a commanding position. This is often translated into an ability to function as the key intermediaries steering the sequence of the production process through artisans specializing in one or more aspects of it.

Still, anyone, no matter how big or small along the chain of the production process can serve as an intermediary. You can take a job to the smallest of artisans with the guarantee that he or she will steer the job through the system. Though it may be infrequent, each artisan maintains his or her own relationships across a wide network of others; they know what each is capable of doing; they know that they have considerable latitude in negotiating a final price or in delivering reciprocal favours so as to broaden their access to a potential market. While they may largely depend upon the capabilities of the Chinese firms to secure a steady market share for themselves, this does not foreclose their own abilities to map out and negotiate their own ‘pathways’ through the production process. Unlike the Chinese firms with their large sunk costs and their tendencies to transfer significant profit shares to larger ethnic-based entrepreneurial groupings, these artisans are not obligated to act as intermediaries and rather sometimes use the position as a means of ‘experimenting’ with different ways of articulating themselves to other actors in the printing sector.

While local residents rather than artisans are usually the ones responsible for the attributions of Chinese dominance, small artisans have little interest in making visible any countervailing evidence. While they may not doubt their potential ability to pool resources and organize to circumvent the power of the Chinese – as reflected in their control of essential yet expensive machinery – they also know that the risks incumbent in such a move are too great. The willingness to accede to these popular stories about the Chinese can thus act as a screen, not only to project the concerns and worries of a community in transition, but also as a means to be off the radar screen. In other words, they have the space to
experiment as intermediaries in a highly competitive business where success at the top requires the ability to include a broad range of small artisan producers within a company’s orbit and to find ways of setting them against each other so as to keep costs as low as possible.

When small artisans offer to play as intermediaries they usually have a different motivation in mind: to explore relationships that can find their own pace, that need not be reproduced time and time again as a means of protecting a high risk investment, and that potentially can lead to other things having little to do with the printing business per se and its schedules and exigencies. These efforts are not to be construed as a business challenge or a means of consolidating greater sectoral control. This is why the majority of such artisans tend to leave the Chinese alone and let them play the part of some essential overseer.

What is troubling in the use of this story line, however, is the apparent inability of the local residential community to ‘see through it’; to see a way of getting through this story in order to take some greater advantage of the presence of this growing economic sector. Too often they seem to absolve their responsibility by turning themselves into victims. But given the dissatisfaction that many residents had in the character of their conditions separate from the growth of the printing business, even this performance of being victim may, as one imam at a local mosque told me, function as a kind of a ruse. According to him, community residents have been looking for ways out of the community for some time but were reluctant to make final decisions given the way in which land values were rising and felt that they should hold on a little longer. But with this story line of Chinese dominance and their own inability to do anything about it, residents can disentangle themselves from this dilemma, feel free to finally decide to leave, and with the increasing demands for commercial space, can sell and move on.

**Conclusion: anticipating the common**

Given the uncertainties and frequent hardships of city life, residents can be risk adverse and sometimes lack confidence in their abilities to create new opportunities. Sometimes it can seem as if entire districts are basically pursuing the same limited strategies of accumulation. Still, livelihood remains largely contingent upon a politics of anticipation – of not only canvassing the actual initiatives of others, but sensing what could have been done, what could have taken place. It isn’t that what doesn’t occur is necessarily ruled out, blocked or neglected, but is rather suggested, made possible by virtue of not having been decided, of being almost left to others. Anticipation may then ‘traffic’ in ways of doing things that may go unnoticed, provide cover for others, or provoke a wide range of varied responses. All of this buys time for residents trying on different initiatives for ‘size’, without having to make definitive commitments or to find ways to fit them into whatever is established.
Anticipation is not directed to a final known outcome or a specific objective, but rather a way of applying whatever is attained at a given moment to a set of different possibilities. Rather than working to coordinate a series of clear objectives and capacities, the practices of inhabitation in central Jakarta continue to emphasize the cultivation of ways of building, living, making money, calculating and deciding that do not necessarily fit well together or make explicit reference to each other. Nevertheless, they provide evidence of a certain efficacy for highly individuated practices of urban living. Thus the commonality of residents is not so much located in negotiated mutual understandings but in the stretching of the parameters of what can count as viable without having to assign any particular course of action with a counted value. New residents, money and ideas are pouring into these districts, just as long-term residents adamantly find ways to reiterate a sense of continuity. Time is then something that happens in between registration, between the count — that is, in between different trajectories of change and continuity, different experimentations and cautions, and where each singular path expands that which can be taken as common.

References

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