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# The Golden Mile Complex: The Idea of Little Thailand in Singapore

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The Golden Mile Complex is one of Singapore's first shopping malls, built as part of the postcolonial government's plan to expand and redevelop the urban center. Barely a decade into its existence, Thai eateries, shops, and remittance centers sprang up at the complex, which became known as 'Little Thailand' among Singaporeans. For some Singaporeans, Little Thailand suggests the 'exotic' or 'mysterious'; for others, it is simply dirty, dangerous, and disorderly – a likely result of unflattering descriptions in official statements, press reports, and opinion pieces. This article proposes to examine Little Thailand as an idea and social construction. It explores how Singaporeans have seen Little Thailand and how they have distinguished themselves from the Oriental 'other' through their own cognitive, racial categories. Little Thailand expresses the experiences and values of Singaporeans more than it expresses those of Thais. By treating Little Thailand as an idea and a social construction rather than as a physical location (i.e., the Golden Mile Complex), the article uncovers a broader relationship between place, racial discourse, and public perceptions in postcolonial Singapore.

**Keywords:** Golden Mile Complex; Place; Race; Singapore; Thailand

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## INTRODUCTION

Completed in 1973, the Golden Mile Complex is one of Singapore's first shopping malls. Built as part of the postcolonial Singaporean government's plan to expand and redevelop the urban center, the complex houses both commercial and residential units. Serving as a transportation hub from which long-haul coaches and tour buses depart for Malaysia and Thailand, the Golden Mile Complex hosts numerous Thai eateries, shops, and remittance centers, and has become the 'Little Thailand' of Singapore. This article suggests that Little Thailand is a social construction "with a cultural history and a tradition of imagery and institutional practice that has given it a cognitive and material reality" (Anderson, 1987, p. 581). Many businesses at the complex are owned by Thais catering to Thais, and what they do, see, or experience, as well as how they use distance, movement, residence, space, and territory to "build up collective representations which have communicative value" (Suttles, 1972, p. 7), could certainly reveal their sense of place and active role in shaping the functions and transformations of the complex and their

own consciousness of being Thai. Nevertheless, regardless of how Thais define themselves and one another, whether by age, language, or place of birth in Thailand, Little Thailand is considered by Singaporean society through Singapore's own cognitive categories. Without requiring the acceptance or acknowledgement of Thai migrants and residents in Singapore, Singaporeans enact in their own minds a boundary between their territory and the 'exotic,' foreign domain that is Little Thailand.

Therefore, rather than present empirical fieldwork (be it through interviews or ethnographic data), this article identifies the themes or, as described by Tan (2014),

dominant images and stereotypes that have come to be the unavoidable lenses through which [Singaporean newspaper readers] view, interpret, and generalize their world – largely through the exaggeration of otherness – and through which they justify their actions so that they might be normatively acceptable to themselves and to others. (p. 160)

Little Thailand, this article argues, is an unintended product of colonial racial categories – Chinese, Malay, and Indian – that the postcolonial state has inherited to govern its citizenry. By preserving the colonial ethnic precincts – Chinatown for the Chinese, Kampong Glam for the Malays, and the Serangoon Road area (Little India) for the Indians – for domestic and global consumption of racial heterogeneity (Kong & Yeoh, 2003), the state remains mentally colonized, having internalized and “reproduced Orientalist tropes in the popular and quotidian Singaporean view of [Southeast Asia] as mysterious, sensual, backward, dangerous, and exotic” (Yew, 2014, pp. 31-32).

At the Asian Civilizations Museum curated by the state, Orientalist ethnography is in full display. In its Southeast Asian gallery, Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities are simplistically categorized for visitors to uncritically associate them with the region. The museum performs two main functions through Orientalist logic: (1) the touristic, in which it self-Orientalizes to pander to tourists' expectations; and (2) nation-building, in which it reinforces Singaporeans' impression of their ethnic identities and civilizational origins (Yew, 2014, p. 34). The museum is also an example of how Singapore orientalizes other Southeast Asian nations that, despite having possessed their own civilizations, are now perceived to be less 'developed' and lack the resources that Singapore can muster to speak for and represent themselves as a region.

This article applies geographer Kay J. Anderson's insights into the power of placemaking on the formation of arbitrarily defined racial categories to interpret articles from English-language newspapers as an alternative way of understanding the construction of Thais at the Golden Mile Complex. Anthropologists, architects, geographers, and sociologists have studied the complex in some detail, addressing the relationship between its architectural design and nation-building in Singapore, Thai migrants' engagement with affective placemaking (Guan, 2020; Wee, 2019; Zhang, 2005), the renegotiation of gender identities by Thai men in an emasculating environment (Pattana, 2013), the submission of Thai women to Confucian patriarchy through marriage migration (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013), and the gendered division of labor of Thai migrants (Platt, Baey, Yeoh, & Lam, 2017; Yeoh & Huang, 1998). But almost all existing studies have conflated Thai migrants' identity with their

nationality and Little Thailand with the Golden Mile Complex without distilling the idea from the concrete or physical. They also tend to focus more on Thai migrants' placemaking and coping strategies than on Singaporeans and their attitudes toward Thai migrants.

Rather than assuming the Thai population as a fixed, given category of foreign nationals who frequent the businesses of the Golden Mile Complex, this article examines how the policing of Thais at the complex by state institutions – according to modern regimes of crime prevention and public health – as well as the reporting of news media both shape and reflect Singaporeans' association of the complex with the idea of Thainess. It also suggests that the activities and operations taking place at the complex, as reported in the news media, constitute a repertoire of images and meanings for Singaporeans to form negative, stereotypical impressions that exacerbate the complex's aesthetical and functional decline into an 'eyesore' in Singapore's choreographed modernist landscape (Guan, 2020; Wee, 2019; Zhang, 2005). For Singaporeans, the Golden Mile Complex is a lived museum of mobile exhibits that offer an experiential or interactive experience of otherness. Their trips to the Golden Mile Complex, undertaken either mentally through reading the newspaper or physically through visiting the structure itself, assume the form of ethnic tourism, in which Singaporeans encounter an alien culture and identify Thais and their practices as objects of interest (cf. Trupp, 2014, p. 346; Wood, 1984, p. 361).

An analysis of accounts in English-language newspapers – a mutually intelligible platform allowing Singaporeans of all the legally prescribed races to articulate their views – has provided longitudinal data with which to examine public perceptions and hence the social construction of Little Thailand, which resides outside the racial geographies defined by the state and those widely accepted by the citizens. This article is the result of an interpretive content analysis of newspaper articles, editorials, and opinion pieces of English-language papers in Singapore. Non-English newspapers were not included in the sample because they do not report on Thais or on the Golden Mile Complex as frequently as English-language ones; and when they do, they offer little in terms of new or alternative content.

More importantly, although English is only one of the four official languages in Singapore (along with Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), it has been the dominant or hegemonic language in business, government, and schools since independence. Since 1965, the state has promoted English, an Occidental language, as one that unifies the different races in communication and expression. As sociologist Beng-Huat Chua (2011) suggests, English also affords ready access to the language of individualism, "reinforced by the ideology of meritocracy which justifies subjective rights, desires, and demands" (p. 17), so abstract values such as the highly personal opinions of 'the other' are primarily expressed in English. English-language newspapers are thus the preferred medium to understand elite or more privileged Singaporeans' sense of superiority over Thai migrants in Singapore.

Newspaper articles were examined from the period of the late 1960s, when plans for constructing the complex were unveiled, to the present. Articles were pulled from the newspapers' online source and physical copies, and the keywords 'Thais AND Golden Mile Complex' were used to locate items. Hundreds of editorials, opinion pieces, and news reports were read in chronological order. Through this method, it

became clear that a history of the idea of Thainess among Singaporeans provided an alternative way to interpret the disposition, policymaking, and public discourse on the complex. Mainstream newspapers such as *The Straits Times* uphold current hegemony, including hegemonic gender and immigration regimes (Artz & Murphy, 2000). The interpretive analysis of their articles not only confirmed this argument but also suggested that the racial regime affects Thai migrants as much as Singaporean citizens and longer-term residents.

In other words, this article is interested in uncovering symbolic meanings attached to the manifest content. It considers the newspapers more as an object of knowledge than as a source of facts. By adding a racial dimension to the existing literature on affective placemaking by Thais and other migrants in Singapore, the article suggests that some of the latent content is racialized, even when ‘ethnicity,’ ‘race,’ or similar words do not appear in the text. As a Singaporean who can speak basic Thai, I can corroborate what I read in the newspapers with my own on-site observations and casual, unstructured conversations with proprietors of Thai origin at the complex, which I visited almost every month from the late 1990s to the early 2010s. This article also draws from sources available at the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore, and reports released by the Parliament of Singapore.

Beginning with an outline of various concepts of space, the article sketches the history of the construction and intended functions of the Golden Mile Complex. It then discusses the conceptualization of Little Thailand as an urban migrant landscape and explores the shifting images and recent developments of the Golden Mile Complex in Singapore, all the while mindful of how race is intertwined with space to create Singaporeans’ stereotypical images of Thais at the complex.

### SOCIAL AND TRANSLOCAL SPACES

Little Thailand has never been courted by the state for its perceived ‘Thainess’ under the aegis of multiculturalism. It is an “arbitrary classification of space” (Anderson, 1987, p. 583) that assumes the physical form of the Golden Mile Complex. A social space by both mental construction and material design, it is predicated on the post-colonial ethos of modernization, capitalist-industrial skills, and what sociologist Eric C. Thompson (2006) calls “economic-developmentalism” (p. 185), which has been a key tenet of state policies since independence. Cognitively, Singaporeans adopt the criteria of development and industrialization to assess the characteristics of their own nation and those of other Southeast Asian countries.

According to a survey conducted from 2003 to 2005, Singaporean university students considered Singapore more developed than, and, hence, different from, the rest of Southeast Asia (Thompson, 2006). Their idea of Singaporean exceptionalism is the result of both a comprehensive structure of cultural knowledge and formal education, and the wider mass-mediated environment in which they have grown up (Thompson, 2006, p. 186). Given that the ruling elite of Singapore has successfully legitimated its rule by claiming to be a competent and talented body that has made Singapore an exception among its neighbors, or “an exemplar of success and progress in a sea of mediocrity” (Barr, 2016, p. 1), the survey findings are perhaps unsurprising. Independence and rapid economic growth during the early postcolonial period, as

in India and other former colonies, connected Singapore with the nationalist vision of modernist planning and linked the project of nation-building with democratization and development, which were often presented as signaling a break with colonial government, even if the continuities were stronger than implied (McFarlane, 2008, p. 486).

Therefore, although the postcolonial state and citizens have agreed that Singapore needs to stay cosmopolitan and global for economic progress, they have also distinguished their educated and skilled selves from the contract migrant workers from so-called less developed countries such as Thailand in the construction, manufacturing, and domestic services sectors. Singapore's foreign labor policies are thus bifurcated, providing skilled entrepreneurs, investors, and technocrats with incentives to entice them to stay, while denying contract workers job security and opportunities for advancement to segregate them from society (Yeoh, 2006). The split labor-immigration regime has caused the bifurcation of public spaces. Places patronized by globally mobile and marketable expatriates are considered high-end and sophisticated, while those frequented by transient laborers are regarded as dangerous and dirty – a perceived manifestation of their undesirable qualities. Seen through such bifurcation, Little Thailand could hardly be a desirable space.

Singapore's Little Thailand calls for comparison with other similarly marginalized spaces both within and outside the country. Political scientist Leong Yew (2014), through the Singaporean architect William Lim (2005), has proposed seeing Little Thailand, 'Little Indonesia' (City Plaza), 'Little Myanmar' (Peninsula Plaza), 'Little Philippines' (Lucky Plaza), and the like as "spaces of indeterminacy," which are "revivified spaces that have emerged out of 'properties' assumed to be defunct, such as buildings on the verge of 'demolition and reconstruction'" (p. 24). Chungking Mansions, likewise a dilapidated commercial and residential building in downtown Hong Kong, is characterized by anthropologist Gordon Matthews (2011) as a ghetto,

in the sense that the minority groups who stay there (all but the whites and Hong Kong Chinese) are to at least some extent economically blocked from Hong Kong as a whole and are socially discriminated against through racism or fear of the developing-world unknown. (p. 15)

However, because many Singaporeans also eat, shop, and mingle at the Golden Mile Complex, the complex might more closely approximate what sociologist Mark Abrahamson (1996) calls an urban enclave, or a "concentration of residents who do not have the same ethnic or minority status in the conventional sense, but who share a significant commonality based on wealth, lifestyle, or a combination of these attributes" (pp. 1-2). A ghetto is an ethnic residential area without an internal, functional economic system controlled by the ethnic group, whereas an urban, or ethnic, enclave operates as an economic and social complex within its own boundaries (Li, 2006, p. 12). And yet, another concentration of Thai consumers and retail operators, found during the weekends, defies a neat classification of the Golden Mile Complex – where Singaporeans reside 'permanently' at the upper levels and Thais gather 'temporarily' in the commercial or retail block – as either a ghetto or an urban enclave. The concept of spaces of indeterminacy does not capture entirely the rhythm and movement of Thai migrants

and their activities at the complex either. In conclusion, the Golden Mile Complex might be most accurately regarded as a translocal space, “composed of multi-layered social fields that are anchored at different localities and constituted by the networks of actors and their embedding in societal structures” (Peth, Sterly, & Sakdapolrak, 2018, p. 457). A space more relational than discrete, Little Thailand is more than a symbol of class and an “alien island of the developing world” (Matthews, 2011, p. 15).

Drawing on geographer Kay J. Anderson’s insights into Vancouver’s Chinatown (1987) as a productive framework to study the construction of Thainess among Singaporeans in Singapore, this article does not rely upon a discrete Thainess as an implicit explanatory principle for two key reasons. First, not only Thais, whether by choice or constraint, patronize the Golden Mile Complex; Singaporeans and foreigners, seeking ‘real’ Thais, also visit it to buy products of Thailand and experience an ‘authentic’ taste of Thailand. Second, the term ‘Thai,’ like ‘Chinese’ and others, tends to express an uncritical classification of attributes defined arbitrarily as biological or cultural (Anderson, 1987, p. 581). Historian Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) canonical work on Thainess and, more broadly, on the discourse of nationhood, explains that Thainess, or any kind of national essence, is almost certainly imagined rather than real. Thainess is never clearly defined and is subject to interpretations not only by Thais who are born and raised in the geo-body of Thailand but also by non-Thais who claim the scholarly and even legitimate authority to represent Thainess by living among Thais or in Thailand itself. As a result, many Thais and non-Thais ‘feel’ rather than explain Thainess, assuming it to be a given reality rather than ascertaining its veracity (Thongchai Winichakul, 1994). Thongchai notes that Thainess operates on the principle of negative identification, which allows Thais to define the domain of non-Thai in order to confirm their own identity as fellow nationals. By the same token, non-Thais – in this case, Singaporeans – can refer to Thais as the foreign other, however broadly defined it may be.

In his treatise on Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) has suggested that discourses on foreign others are more a manifestation of power relations that reinforce the superiority of ‘us’ over ‘them’ than an accurate documentation of the other. For him, Orientalism involves an element of prejudice against others. But as Anderson (1987) suggests, “It is not prejudice that has explanatory value but the racial ideology that informs it” (p. 581). The prejudice of Singaporeans against Thais in general, and Thais in Singapore in particular, has both social and economic roots. At the macro level, Thailand is viewed as being on a lower rung of development than Singapore. Neoliberal market logics, by which Thailand supplies low-paid workers to fuel Singapore’s developed economy, has reinforced this perception. Singapore’s migration regime has created gendered streams of labor among the lower-skilled occupations of Thais, most of whom are men working in the construction sector. At the micro level, Thai construction workmen are not only burdened with debt after paying for their passage to Singapore but are also denied the statutory rights enjoyed by citizens and longer-term residents. Removed from their usual social support networks, they are dependent on the grace of their Singaporean employers and are vulnerable to exploitation. As for the smaller number of Thai women, present either as wives and putative maids to Singaporean men, or as sex workers serving both Singaporean and Thai men, they are dependent on their husbands or male patrons for either income



or residency. They must thus contend with both Singaporean and Thai gender expectations in their familial and professional roles (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013; Pattana, 2014, pp. 75-90; Platt et al., 2017). Most of the Thais whom Singaporeans encounter in everyday life are construction workers, foreign wives, and sex workers, who are not held in high esteem in Singapore's capitalist-consumerist society where income is equated with status. Moving beyond an analysis of gendered, immigration, and labor regimes, this article continues the discussion on unequal power dynamics and their social consequences by examining Singaporeans' impressions of Thai migrants at the Golden Mile Complex. By racializing placemaking, it explores the construction and spatialization of a foreign other and uncovers the broader relationship between public opinion, racial discourse, and urban space in postcolonial Singapore.

### A NEW COMPLEX IN A NEW NATION

In the wake of Singapore's independence from Malaysia in 1965, its leaders tried to develop the economy by boosting export-oriented manufacturing. Thanks to its educated workforce, political stability, and strategic location, Singapore managed to attract multinational corporations (MNCs) of the developed world to invest in the manufacturing and financial services sector. The Central Business District (CBD), where major banks and regional headquarters of the MNCs are situated, developed out of the colonial city center, relegating old buildings and shophouses to a secondary heritage role. Modernist planners embraced a 'slum psychology' to demolish structures deemed lacking in either commercial or historical value and those associated with poor hygiene and high crime rate, however they were defined (Guan, 2020; Wee, 2019).

Singapore's rapid economic growth soon outpaced the capacity of the city center, and the surrounding areas, which shared the housing, industries, and infrastructure of the urban core, were redeveloped to meet the CBD's demand for land. Recognizing the market's need for more retail and residential space, the government decided to build the Golden Mile Complex near the downtown district. The 16-story shopping complex would have an entertainment deck, offices, luxurious flats, and penthouses. In the end, a total of 409 squatter families, 74 small factories, 17 motor workshops, 26 shopkeepers, and 81 warehouses and stores were displaced for the proposed complex, approved for construction in 1970 as part of the government's long-term plan to release more nationalized "State Lands" for "private development to meet a wide range of high-quality development" (all figures are cited from Parliament Report [hereafter PR], 1967b; 1968). But the construction suffered from a lack of tenders due to the huge capital required, estimated at SGD 10 to 15 million (PR, 1967a). Singapura Developments, a privately owned real estate company, eventually took on the construction.

Founded in 1967, Design Partnership (DP; later renamed DP Architects) won the bid to design the Golden Mile Complex. Its founders and chief architects were to contribute in their own ways to the Singaporean nation (Koh, 2012, p. 13). They programmed the complex as a self-contained 'vertical city' with residential communities situated above a commercial center and a sky garden terrace for recreation and socializing. The architecture "responded to site conditions, climate, view and sun orientation, and



circulation” (Anderson, 2012, p. 26). The complex became the first mixed-use building in Singapore, “fundamental in setting standards for the nation’s modern architectural movement and the design of civic spaces” (Anderson, 2012, p. 26).

Completed in 1973 and spread over Beach Road and Nicoll Highway, both of which led to the CBD, the Golden Mile Complex offered residents a panoramic view of the seafront (PR, 1971). Its design included stepped-back terraces to increase ventilation and natural light. Comprised of 360 units, which included shops, kiosks, department stores, a supermarket, and coffee and snack bars, the complex was meant to resemble a vault to provide full visibility from different floor levels of the merchandise on display (Mok, 1970).

As both Singaporean and foreign architects suggest, the Golden Mile Complex was intended for people to live, work, and play without having to leave it. The complex was a collective form that propagated Japanese Metabolist ideas of high-density usage and diversity. The Brutalist-style vertical neighborhood stood in contrast to homogenized cities where functional zoning restrained almost all signs of vitality. Conceived as a prototypical environment of life and lights, the complex was where high-intensity Asian urbanism and the linear city model converged. With offices, shops, and two-story maisonette penthouses, the complex was a communal concourse supporting the idea of a revitalized city (Wong, 2005, p. 162-165). On its 10th anniversary in 1984, the Golden Mile Complex was hailed as an achievement of city planning and renewal by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) (“Success Has Not Been”, 1984, p. 13).

In the heyday of the Golden Mile Complex from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, air travel remained expensive for most Singaporeans, who preferred to spend short vacations and weekend getaways in nearby countries such as Malaysia and Thailand. The complex was a terminal for buses plying the Singapore–Hat Yai (in southern Thailand) route, which served mostly Singaporean tourists and Thai workers. Operated by both Singaporean and Thai proprietors, travel agencies specializing in tours to Thailand sprang up. Some diversified their businesses to include restaurants and stalls selling Thai delights to passengers and vacationers who lingered at the complex waiting to depart on buses and taxis (Zhang, 2005, pp. 118-122).

The first batch of Thai workers, approximately 500 of them, arrived in Singapore in 1978 to work in its new electronics and textile factories. The import of semiskilled and unskilled workers continued into the 1990s, which helped sustain the construction industry boom and public housing program in Singapore (Pattana, 2014, p. 12). Initially, strict controls on the import of Thai workers were relaxed as industrialization went into full swing, resulting in large numbers of unskilled Thai laborers in the construction and manufacturing sectors (Yeoh, 2006, p. 27). Singapore has never disclosed the number of Thai migrant workers in the country, and the statistics reported by the Thai Ministry of Labor Affairs are too broad to establish the exact number of Thai workers present in Singapore at any given time. But according to sources and rough estimates, since the 1980s, Singapore has maintained the highest degree of continuity in Southeast Asia for hiring Thai laborers. By the first half of the 2000s, approximately 50,000 Thai migrants were working in Singapore (Pattana, 2014, p. 13-14).

In tandem with this labor flow was the emergence in Singapore of a middle class interested in exploring Thailand on site or experiencing Thailand at home, and a variety

of businesses catered to this new trend at the Golden Mile Complex. Singaporeans thus came to associate the complex with Thailand and Thais. By the 1980s, when most Singaporeans had achieved middle-class status in terms of how they could earn and consume, the Golden Mile Complex had developed a reputation for offering authentic Thai food, “like a street corner in Haadyai [Hat Yai]” (“Like a Street Corner”, 1986). The restaurants hung photographs of the Thai king and queen, and their menus were written in Thai on blackboards; no English translation was available. Proprietors also sold assorted Thai goods, from food ingredients to magazines and newspapers. A trading company was founded and became the exclusive distributor of Thailand’s popular Singha beer. On Sundays and public holidays, hundreds of Thais would gather at the complex, drinking beer, reading Thai-language publications, listening to Thai music on cassette tapes, and sitting around chatting (Wong, 1985). Along the corridors and the concourse, chairs and tables were scattered in front of eateries and food stalls, as if a food court had moved into the complex. The informal and haphazard arrangement allowed Thais to develop a sense of home – an unintended consequence of the architectural design (Chan, 1988; “Like a Street Corner”, 1986).

In no small measure, the Golden Mile Complex helped popularize Thai cuisine in Singapore. Singaporean businessmen set up Thai stalls at food centers across Singapore, but unlike the food establishments at the Golden Mile Complex, the quality of the renditions at those Thai food stalls was low. Most of them were not helmed by Thai chefs, their menu was limited, and they lacked, as one journalist described, “the ambience, tinkling music, and gracious satin-clad waitresses” of the Golden Mile Complex (Chan, 1988). This same journalist elaborated on this in her feature article: “For the real taste, and the atmosphere, one must go to Golden Mile Complex [where] food is unabashedly spicy even if the stallholder obligingly tones down the chili when he notices the Singaporean customer” (Chan, 1988). A magnet of comradeship, observed other journalists, drew Thai workers to the complex, where they could visit remittance companies, enjoy Thai delights, use card phones to call home, and socialize with one another; a new subculture had formed around the Thais at the complex (Tan & Leong, 1989).

Like other semiskilled and unskilled foreign workers, Thai laborers in the construction and manufacturing sectors were on short-term work permits, were not allowed to emigrate to Singapore legally, and were not allowed to bring their families. The great gender imbalance made it impossible for the predominantly male Thai transient-worker population to create self-perpetuating communities in Singapore. But as with many minority groups elsewhere in the world, when the number of Thais in Singapore reached a critical mass, businesses and professional services catering to them, such as restaurants, grocery stores, remittance counters, and travel agencies, became available. As Thais became more visible and Thai-related businesses prospered at the Golden Mile Complex, it attracted newly arrived Thais as well as Singaporeans craving an ‘authentic’ feel of Thailand at home (Li, 2006, p. 14; Pattana, 2014; Yeoh, 2006; Yeoh & Huang, 1998). Thai retailers, whom geographer Wei Li (2006, p. 19) calls “ethnic entrepreneurs,” added Thai flavors and signatures to their products and services and transformed the Golden Mile Complex into an ethnically specific commercial entity. By the late 1980s, journalists and many Singaporeans alike had begun to regard it as Little Thailand (Ahmad, 1989).

The emergence of the idea of Little Thailand indicated that Thais had become a culturally distinct and ethnically visible minority in Singapore. Thais brought with them particular traditions that shaped their activities at the Golden Mile Complex. They drank Thai beers, hummed Thai tunes, and “had plastic bags of bamboo shoots or raw papaya” (Supara, 2002). They celebrated and put up decorations for their own holidays such as Songkran (the Thai New Year; Pattana, 2014, p. 28). At the same time, as anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa observes, the boundaries of the Golden Mile Complex were fluid and expansive, with Thai workers occupying much of the available space at the complex during peak business hours on weekends. Footpaths and small vacant spots in front of the complex were used as meeting points. Corridors on the ground floor and the parking lot, as well as the void decks of public housing flats opposite the complex on crowded weekends, were sites of leisurely activities. The nearby Kallang Riverside Park was yet another popular spot among Thai workers for relaxation and recreation. As Pattana (2014) suggests, most Thai workers held balanced views of the Golden Mile Complex on their “labor migration map” (p. 54). On the one hand, the complex was the only public space in Singapore where they could feel at home. On the other hand, it was there where their attempts to reconnect with Thailand (or, specifically, the Isan region in northeastern Thailand where most of them came from) were simplistically construed as ‘Thai’ in ethnoculturally pluralized Singapore (Pattana, 2014, p. 56). The categorization and depiction of ‘Thais’ at the Golden Mile Complex in print reinforced the image of Thailand as part of Singapore’s Orient as much as immigrant policies and law enforcement did. Little Thailand was thus an essentially artificial, imposed form of segregation. Residents, visitors, and their shared characteristics became “distinctive earmarks which the residents, outsiders, and external organizations seize upon to sort one another out for selective treatment and the extension of already defined policies” (Suttles, 1972, pp. 15-16).

Intended as a contrived community by a handful of architects, bureaucrats, and developers with a limited set of objectives in mind (Suttles, 1972, p. 106), the Golden Mile Complex grew out of its functions to become a translocal space that drew Thai ‘outsiders’ into the mix. Officials planned and built the Golden Mile Complex, and journalists created and propagated the idea of Little Thailand. Institutional practices and public opinion unwittingly endowed the Golden Mile Complex with a bad reputation that it did not entirely deserve, to which we shall now turn.

### **SANITARY, MORAL, AND AESTHETICAL DIMENSIONS OF LITTLE THAILAND**

Which came first, a dilapidated Golden Mile Complex or its popularity among Thai migrant workers in Singapore? It might be difficult to answer this question conclusively, but what is of interest here is how the complex came to symbolize Thailand and an Orientalist terrain that was “mysterious, sensual, backward, dangerous, and exotic” (Yew, 2014, pp. 31-32) and how negative descriptions of it became intertwined with ethnonational stereotypes of Thais.

In the early 1980s, the Golden Mile Complex housed 719 units, 69 of which were residential, while offices and shops made up the rest (Chia, 1984). The management of the complex had incurred a large deficit, and the utilities board had threatened to disconnect water and electricity supplies if an SGD 110,000 deposit was not paid.

Low maintenance charges had resulted in the deficit; income failed to cover expenses by SGD 25,000 a month. The insulation of pipes carrying cool air, as required by building regulations, also ran up to SGD 250,000. The developer, Singapura Developments, had transferred the responsibility of maintaining the basement car-park and swimming pool to the managers, compounding the latter's financial woes. When the complex was under construction, defective floor tiles were used and had to be replaced at the cost of SGD 216,000 (Ang, 1983). Tenants complained about water supply breakdowns and the lack of general upkeep. Ceiling boards had rotted away, and corridor lights were either missing or dysfunctional (Ang, 1983). Dissatisfied with the managers, many sub-proprietors refused to pay any fees, leaving the management even shorter on funds (Chia, 1984).

Then, as the Golden Mile Complex slipped in maintenance and appearance, even its positive reputation as a haven for lovers of Thai food came into question. Health officials, as cited in the news media, claimed that its vendors were "indifferent to hygiene standards" in preparing and serving their food (PR, 1989). The "toilets of shame" at the complex fell in the "Roll of Dishonor" (Goh, 1988). For deviating from official standards of cleanliness, the complex had become "Beach Road's darker side" ("Beach Road's Darker Side", 1999). Singaporeans identified littering and overcrowding as problems, urging the authorities to improve conditions at the complex (Rahim, 2002). Sociologist K. E. Y. Low interviewed some Singaporeans who thought that, while Thai food was pleasant, the strong smell of Thai spices was barely tolerable if not utterly repulsive (Low, 2009, p. 107). Those Singaporeans' unflattering 'pluri-sensorial' description of the complex not only illustrated that this comprehension of place resulted from the "simultaneous workings of the senses of smell, sight, and hearing," but also revealed that sensory judgment of the complex carried a negative if not racist connotation (Low, 2009, p. 107). Complaints and letters of concern in the press offered health officials the pretext to monitor the operators and tenants. Although no food poisoning or outbreak of disease had ever occurred, messages or announcements broadcast in Thai – clearly intended for Thai customers – requested that they not, amongst other things, smoke in the air-conditioned complex, litter the floor, or urinate on the stairs (Pattana, 2014, footnote 8, p. 146). The mutually reinforcing ideas of place and race gave Little Thailand its "coherence as a discrete place in the social consciousness of its representers" (Anderson, 1987, p. 589), even though at a deeper or more analytical level, it was an idea that arose from the encounter between Singaporeans and Thais and the perceived asymmetry between an unknowing Occident and an imagined Orient.

Matters of hygiene were often only part of the vocabulary out of which ideas of the exotic or Orient transpired; equally significant and perhaps more effective were moral associations and dimensions (Anderson, 1987, p. 589). Besides being perceived as unsanitary, Little Thailand was for many Singaporeans a lawless, ungovernable spot on the fringes of the financial center. Gang fights and illegal assemblies had taken place at the complex ("Man Jailed", 1986; "Thai Dies", 1986; "Thai Worker Charged", 1986; "Thai Worker Dies", 1988). Shopkeepers reported that heavy drinking and brawls among Thai construction workers were common on weekends and public holidays – many went unreported to the police and by the press. Some Singaporeans began to blame foreign workers, many of whom were Thai, for the general rise in crime

rates and for a host of social problems in Singapore (“Rise in Crime Rates”, 1989). In response, law enforcers and immigration officers intensified their crackdown on undocumented Thai immigrants and detained Thais suspected of illegal entry into Singapore, overstaying, or holding forged work permits, whom they believed were the ultimate troublemakers at the Golden Mile Complex (Lim, 1989). Patrol and security officers subjected Thai workers to greater scrutiny and harassment. Occasionally, after a series of raids and repatriations, the authorities would triumphantly declare that the complex was “no longer a trouble spot” (Ahmad, 1989). Policemen also exhibited few qualms about firing warning shots to break up fights at the complex, though they were loath to use their guns elsewhere in Singapore for fear of having to justify their actions in lengthy reports and investigations, and of causing undue panic and casualties (“Police Fire Warning Shots”, 1995; “Policemen Fire Warning Shots”, 1994). The discriminatory and repressive measures painted a grim picture of chaos, crime, and violence at the complex, which officials called a “congregation area [of lawlessness]” (Lee, 2014). Lawlessness became a metaphor for ‘the other.’

Finally, aesthetically, Little Thailand gave city planners and grassroots organizations “a minor headache” (Rahim, 2002). As more and more Thai contract workers flocked to the area around the Golden Mile Complex, the ‘surplus’ visitors began to crowd the corridors and five-foot-wide walkways in the surrounding Housing Development Board (HDB) estates. As littering and overcrowding became a problem, some residents in the area petitioned the authorities to encourage Thai workers to adopt alternative meeting places (Rahim, 2002). In response, the Little Thailand Working Group, a local volunteer group founded in 2001, assumed the responsibility of patrolling the Beach Road neighborhood every week and advising the workers to relocate to Kallang Riverside Park. The Little Thailand Working Group was comprised of representatives from Singaporean ministries; no Thais were involved. By working to divert the human traffic away from the complex, officials hoped to appease Singaporeans who were bothered by the presence of Thais (Rahim, 2002). But Thai workers were reluctant because the complex had become a “second home” to them (Rahim, 2002). To some Singaporeans, the complex was becoming a “vertical slum” and “national disgrace,” as Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Ivan Png suggested. For him, its appearance “must create a terrible impression on foreign visitors”:

Each individual owner acts selfishly, adding extensions, zinc sheets, patched floors, glass, all without any regard for other owners and without regard for the national welfare. The result is market failure. Unless we take resolute measures, other strata buildings will go that way. (PR, 2006, March 6)

Other Members of Parliament (MPs) echoed his sentiments either by highlighting the deplorable conditions of the complex and its bus terminal or by giving owners of the complex their blessings to plan an en bloc sale of the property (Leong, 2007).

But not all proprietors and tenants appreciated a heavy-handed approach to the complex. Some feared losing their business if Thais were discouraged from coming or were made to feel unwelcome. For them, media reports on fights among Thai workers exaggerated their frequency and intensity. They vouched that their customers were “generally well-behaved” (“Sellers: Rosy Days”, 1989). They credited Thai

migrant workers for having “revitalized the shopping complex,” which had been close to becoming a ghost town years before they arrived (“Four Favorite Haunts”, 1989). They also defended those who had overstayed and become illegal immigrants, attributing such behavior to exploitation by employers and a general lack of information. A particular Thai worker, for instance, was working 18 hours a day and 7 days a week, and he did not know that he should have gone through a recruitment agency and registered at the immigration center before seeking employment in Singapore (“Shock at Police Station”, 1989). For proprietors more receptive toward the presence of Thais, renovations and financial support from the state, rather than legislation and infrastructure neglect, could help improve the state of affairs at the complex.

Some Singaporean architects, including those from DP Architects, who had been involved with designing the complex, expressed regret over the proposed sale of the property because they considered it an iconic building in the nation’s past. They argued that the complex was built when URA restrictions had yet to be fixed, and its ‘ugly’ yet organic balconies and interlocking residential units made it unique in the architectural history of Singapore. As one of them suggested, “such artistic flourishes have all but disappeared these days in the face of strict rules” (“FARM: The Art”, 2006). Their reactions reflected a “growing disenchantment with the modernizing state and prospects of urban opportunity and justice” (McFarlane, 2008, p. 481). They suggested that the government should instead consider ways to preserve historic and iconic buildings, develop public appreciation and respect for such buildings, and educate people about “how hard it was to build something [in the wake of Singapore’s independence]” (“FARM: The Art”, 2006). For them, the Golden Mile Complex was not a vertical slum because it not only symbolized a milestone in architectural history, but also presented a teachable moment for the nation-building project. In anticipation of the complex’s demise, some architects organized ‘ArchiTours,’ which would make architecture accessible to the public by guiding visitors on a tour of buildings constructed after independence, which included the Golden Mile Complex (Martin, 2007).

That the Golden Mile Complex seemed dirty, dangerous, and disorderly set it apart from the rest of Singapore – save for the ethnic enclaves and so-called congregation areas. Little Thailand became a counter-idea to which qualities thought to be in opposition to the Singaporean ingroup were attached (Anderson, 1987, p. 589). The complex, while culturally and socially vibrant on its own merits, was many Singaporeans’ sole or perceived window onto Thailand, especially for those who had not visited Thailand, the imagined source of the complex’s ‘authenticity.’ For officials eager to discipline citizens and champion the successes of national development, Little Thailand provided an example of how things could go awry without effective planning and policing. Slowly but surely, the officials began to attribute the dilapidated conditions to “individual owners” (PR, 2006, March 6), and deemphasized the role the state had played and should now play in maintaining the complex. Brawls, gang fights, and the odoriferous toilets and exotic spices provided damning evidence against the state’s logic of order and progress. Journalists and writers of complaint letters and opinion pieces were opinion makers, commanding an audience sympathetic to residents who had to suffer the inconveniences of living with foreign others. Violence and unsanitary conditions were certainly present at the Golden Mile Complex. But the point is that Little Thailand was a ‘shared characterization’



constructed and distributed by Singaporeans, who arbitrarily conferred outsider status on Thais at the complex. In doing so, they were “affirming their own identity and privilege” (Anderson, 1987, p. 594). A question remains – what was the context in Singapore that had led to the racialization and spatialization of this outsider status?

### RACE AND SPACE IN SINGAPORE

In postcolonial Singapore, preexisting racial categories became connected to state discourse. Race can arise from practice; “racializing” suggests ongoing, everyday processes in which both the state and people are actively involved in race making (Low, 2009, p. 86). While it is more a translocal space than an ethnic enclave, the Golden Mile Complex, or what has occurred at the complex, reveals the creation of racial boundaries mediated by processes of inclusion and exclusion and the cleavage of locals from foreigners in Singapore.

For Singaporeans, only the Chinese, Malays, and Indians are ‘local’ races, as defined by colonial administrators of the past and the postcolonial state of the present. This racial paradigm pervades everyday life via compulsory education, the allocation of units in public housing estates, and food varieties at food centers and wet markets. Many Singaporeans thus refer uncritically to the labels of Chinese, Malay, and Indian when defining and relating themselves to others (Low, 2009, pp. 89-90). Spatial boundaries are an extended metaphor for racial identities. By claiming that the Golden Mile Complex is smelly, Singaporeans contribute their readings of foreign others to the racial discourse. Spatial boundaries are reconfigured based on the polarities of locals versus foreigners, where smellscape differentiate the in-group from foreign others (Low, 2009, p. 111). In other words, sensory perceptions and semi-informed judgments such as those expressed in the newspapers transformed places into sites of inclusion and exclusion through everyday practice. As Low (2009) suggests, “the foreign other is routinely eschewed, owing to the heightening of us-versus-them dynamics within physical landscapes like racial enclaves” (p. 119). Conceptions of space and social others are seldom separate from issues of class, nationality, and race. Because boundaries are often challenged or transgressed, the Golden Mile Complex has remained a translocal space where identities are fluid, unless cogently defined and enforced.

In many ways, the state has become a victim of its own successes. Having reinforced the racial paradigm over time, officials have found themselves pressured to reduce the increased public dissent that has followed the creation of translocal spaces, which are located within established residential communities in land-scarce Singapore. The translocal spaces expand with the continuous influx of foreign workers and are maintained because officials have to isolate those workers from self-avowed ‘clean’ and ‘sanitized’ locals and contain them. That the workers thrive only at the margins, geographer Leo van Grunsven (2011) writes, implies “systematic exclusion from access to social facilities linked to their transience” (p. 77). And that residents of nearby neighborhoods consider foreign workers’ use of translocal spaces an ‘invasion’ renders such exclusion understandable. Attitudes advocating the segregation of foreign workers are “powerful ways in which processes of ‘othering’ become written into space” (Ye, 2013, p. 148). Measures to keep foreign workers within tightly controlled spaces widen

the landscapes of exclusion against them, which heightens the constraints in mobility experienced by those workers in their everyday lives (Ye, 2013, p. 148). This explains why Thais continue to frequent the Golden Mile Complex, which provides them with most of the social facilities they need, despite the bad press and poor public opinion.

### GOLDEN MILE COMPLEX IN RECENT YEARS

In August 2018, more than 80% of unit owners at the Golden Mile Complex signed the agreement to launch an en bloc sale because they no longer considered it to be economically profitable. Within weeks, architects and architecture enthusiasts lobbied the government to consider conserving the building for national heritage. In response, officials promised to facilitate conservation (“Golden Mile Complex”, 2018). The en bloc tender marked the first time in Singapore that a building being studied for possible conservation was simultaneously listed for collective sale. Both officials and architects agree that the complex is “important to the public memory of Singapore” and that its iconic design can “bring value to the sense of place and identity of development” (“Golden Mile Complex”, 2018). But throughout their discussions, little was mentioned about its unique function as an enclave of Thais who have contributed to the Singaporean economy or as a translocal space of interactions between Singaporeans and Thais. For Singaporeans, value in the complex lies more squarely with its heritage than with its translocality (“Golden Mile Complex”, 2018).

The URA has set a list of regulations to which potential buyers and developers must adhere when taking over the Golden Mile Complex. Its planning advice for the site states that the building is subject to conservation, which means that it cannot be demolished and that its exterior must be left intact. The conservation clause makes the complex a tough sell, and two tenders have closed without a buyer (Wong, 2019). Despite official efforts to preserve the complex, some architects and Singaporeans who like it the way it is claim that it will not be the same even if the exterior is kept. As the construction workforce has begun to rely less on Thai nationals and taken in cheaper workers from Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam, the Thai crowd at the complex has declined in size. As a tenant suggests, “You can’t create another ‘Little Thailand’. It must come from the people’s culture. . . . It’s built over time” (Lim, 2019). This gradual unfolding of events suggests the incompatibility of heritage conservation and asset or financial value in postcolonial Singapore. Heritage is mapped onto landscapes, which are manipulated by the state as spatial expressions of ideological objectives. Heritage is thus partial and deemphasizes aspects that are not aligned with dominant or national narratives (Muzaini, 2013, p. 26).

But the falling number of Thai migrant workers has not led to a complete loss of translocal moorings and local structures such as the Golden Mile Complex. Retailers have already responded to the changing migration flows. The Thai supermarket has begun to stock more Vietnamese products as more and more Vietnamese workers join the labor market, although they have yet to make the complex their gathering spot. Shops and restaurants have also adjusted well to the reduced number of Thais as they have successfully retained the Singaporean clientele. But small remittance firms specialized in sending money to Thailand are closing down; only the large, transnational ones have been able to adapt (Peth et al., 2018, p. 469).

## CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Golden Mile Complex into Little Thailand is intimately linked to the urban development of postcolonial Singapore. The expansion of the city center gave rise to the complex on its outskirts, but it was the organization of HDB estates into precincts, divided from one another by roads, which actually turned the complex into a translocal space. The urban layout allowed the state to spatially contain any insurrection and create controllable urban populations (Guan, 2020, p. 56), but affective placemaking by Thai migrants has disrupted the narratives and temporalities of state planning. The unintended consequences of the Golden Mile Complex's financial difficulties and poor maintenance were lower prices and costs of business operations, which allowed Thai migrants to occupy and use it as a "partial, fragmentary space" among the neat roads and high-rise housing blocks of HDB estates (Guan, 2020, p. 55). And while migratory movements have created translocal spaces and moorings, it is quotidian mobility and the rhythms of everyday practices that influence their persistence and decay (Peth et al., 2018, p. 469), and determine whether the complex will transform into 'Little Vietnam.'

Like other translocal spaces in Singapore, such as City Plaza (Little Indonesia), Peninsula Plaza (Little Myanmar), and Lucky Plaza (Little Philippines), the Golden Mile Complex experienced a decline in function and aesthetic appeal due to bad press, low tenancy, and poor maintenance. It became trapped in a cycle of deterioration and lacked the funds for makeovers, renovations, or structural improvements. But the complex's crisis created opportunities for businesses seeking to profit from its being a transport hub serving Singapore-Thailand routes, which could operate more cheaply than elsewhere in the city and cater to a stable flow of Thai customers. The complex then sprang back to life as 'Little Thailand'. However, being Little Thailand created a similar set of problems, which, in no small measure, reflected and resulted from Singaporeans' prejudice against Thai migrants. By an ironic twist of fate, the complex has been spared from demolition for bearing an iconic architectural design that symbolizes nation-building. Unlike the other translocal spaces, then, the Golden Mile Complex is not only subject to the issue of race and the logic of market competition in its decline; the idea of Little Thailand also sits uncomfortably with the concept of nationhood, creating diverse groups of Singaporeans ranging from enthusiasts of Thai culture and proprietors benefiting from the Thai clientele to residents concerned about bad migrants and citizens perceiving migrants as perpetual outsiders of the nation.

Most importantly, Little Thailand is an idea of race signifying traits that distinguish Thais from Singaporeans – their so-called unsanitary and morally aberrant ways, flavorful food, exotic spices and smells, and so on. It embodies Singaporeans' value systems and sense of difference that separates them from their Orient. That Singaporeans reaffirm their own identity and privilege through the idea of Little Thailand attests to "the importance of place in the making of a system of racial classification" (Anderson, 1987, p. 594). Little Thailand is an isolated terrain of stereotypes and negative representations understood through the language and logic of the state's health regime, law enforcement, and changing attitudes toward national heritage. A negotiated and more complex social process, not "apparently neutral-looking

taxonomic systems of census districts” (Anderson, 1987, p. 594), undergirds the idea of Little Thailand, which reveals more about Singaporeans than it does about Thais.



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