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"Flow of Sand": The macro-micro research dialogue in a documentary on environmental impacts and infrastructural politics in Malaysia

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"When a person destroys something replaceable, he is called a vandal. When somebody destroys something that is irreplaceable and made by God, he is called a developer."

This log line of the film, with which "Flow of Sand" begins, sets the critical tone of the documentary shot in Malacca and Johor in 2018 and 2019. It also sets the stage for a "micro- macro" dialogue between disciplines using different methods revealing micro-macro connections. This is one of the aims of the research project which has also generated this film.¹

Linguistically, "micro" and "macro" are derived from Greek; μικρός (mikrós), "small", "little", "short" and μάκρος (mákrōs) meaning "long", "far" or "distant." Therefore, "micro" and "macro" are often associated with *scale*; the former denotes the smallest unit, while the latter stands for the largest one.

The interactions between processes at municipal level (micro) and national or regional developments (macro) have been analysed in numerous studies from various disciplines. In social anthropology, for example, such interactions were observed more closely in the 1970s, even though the number of studies conducted in urban environments was still small at that time (Prato, Pardo 2013: 94). This does not mean, however, that a micro-macro dialogue has lost its value. Rather, it remains a challenge for researchers to leave their comfort zone and approach a topic from different angles to highlight the relationality between different levels.

In "Flow of Sand" the representation of the micro-macro dialogue can be grasped with the help of a metaphor. Metaphorically speaking, the terms macro and micro may be used to describe the process of zooming out, viewing an object from a bird's eye view, or zooming in for a detailed view. The further away something is, the less tangible it appears, and the closer you focus on something, the more concrete it becomes. It is this process of zooming in and out that comes into play when developments from the transnational to the local level and their integration are shown. The documentary addresses the repercussions of the rapidly changing decisions regarding land reclamation projects at the transnational or national level on the local people. It also shows what opportunities the residents seize to improve their own position.

This working paper is divided into three parts. I will first discuss the challenges involved in the realisation of "Flow of Sand." Then I will share how I have implemented the micro-macro dialogue and conclude with a reflection on the scholarly output.

Challenges

There were several challenges in making the film. One of them is directly related to the task of creating a micro-macro dialogue. As an individual scholar one tends to pursue either macro or micro methods, but not both at the same time. As an anthropologist, I am familiar with qualitative, grassroots research methods, but I do not use macro methodology. In keeping with the dialogue-oriented approach, I discussed macro-political developments in Malaysia with colleagues in political science. Since the realisation of a film was a new challenge for me, I chose a feedback-oriented approach. Specifically, I made a short version of the film available for early discussion to gather feedback from colleagues at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) of the National University of Singapore (NUS), where I was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow from May to September 2019. I incorporated some of the suggestions, such as a comment made by a Visiting Senior Research Fellow to address how local communities deal with heritage and identity issues. (Arnez 2020)

The creation process of the film resembled that of a one-year journey, the end of which was not yet certain at the beginning. I developed the film treatment from my observations on location, which I

¹ <http://crisea.eu/>

had filmed in 2018 together with Markus Müller. I formulated the goal of looking at land reclamation projects in the context of different scales and their interactions, from global to local. I worked closely with my editor Uli on the realisation of the film. I selected the material and the music and created editing lists, the technical realisation of which we then discussed, viewing it together in a screensharing session.

A further challenge was to bring the micro-macro dialogue into a form suitable for the category "web documentary." A documentary film should be as authentic as possible. My presence and role as a researcher doing fieldwork with her family involved is part of this authenticity. Therefore, I decided to divide the shooting between my husband and myself. I commented the images sharing my own reflections and recorded my voice in the recording studio of the National University of Singapore for the voice over.

It is important to appreciate the potential of the film as a sensory experience. The film evokes emotion in the viewers. As MacDougall stressed, our film experience is based on the fact that there is a congruent sensory experience among the audience (MacDougall 1998: 52). He links this to "the quick", which "not only provides an analogy to the film experience but has a physical basis in the filmmaker's vision. Just as "the quick" implies the touching of surfaces, so the filmmaker's gaze touches - and is touched by - what he sees" (MacDougall 1998: 50). If the appeal to "the quick" had a goal, he argues, it would be the sense that others have of being themselves (MacDougall 1998: 52). He points out that it is through this sense that we construct and affirm our own self-understanding and identity by having an analogous consciousness in others (MacDougall 1998: 52). The film subjects, viewers and the filmmaker are therefore connected via sight, touch, and the idea of a corresponding consciousness in others.

In "Flow of Sand" the audience will probably identify most strongly with the people with whom I had the most intense exchange during my field research in 2018 and 2019, namely with members of the *kristang* community of Portuguese and Malaccan (Malay) descent in Malacca. They represent the micro-level in the film. The viewers perceive their perspective on land reclamation, sense their emotions expressed through gestures, such as the hand-on-heart gesture with which Flora backs up her statement that they feel very hurt by the land reclamation. Such gestures, addressing the viewers directly, make an emotional appeal to the viewers.



Fig. 1 Flora's emotional response to land reclamation, Screenshot *Flow of Sand*, 9:25

Another example is smell. Two community members state that they associate the dried-out area in front of their settlement, close to the land reclamation site, with repugnant smell. Peter, the former village head (*regidor*) of Ujong Pasir, regards the stench as something unbearable. According to him, the area has become so smelly that "eventually, even the residents down here won't be able to tolerate the smell." (*Flow of Sand*, 07:47-07:48). This comment may strike a chord with the viewer setting in motion a process that Pink describes as establishing the connection with the other's sensory experience by drawing on one's own senses, personal memories, and ideas. (Pink 2015: 124)

The audience will hardly develop such emotional reactions versus the representatives at the transnational, national and state level who are advocating and building land reclamation projects. One obvious reason for this is my own distance to these people. From my position as a non-Malaysian female researcher it is hardly possible to establish a similar closeness to national political leaders as to the members of the *kristang* community in Malacca. Moreover, the developers were unapproachable; no representative of the Melaka Gateway Master developer KAJ Development Sdn Bhd (KAJ Development Incorporated) responded to my interview requests.

Trying to integrate different levels in micro-macro debates, "Flow of Sand" shows connections and fault lines between the transnational, national, state and local levels. It reveals how the disputes surrounding two land reclamation projects, "Forest City" in Johor and "Melaka Gateway" in Malacca on the west coast of the Malaysian peninsula, can be understood against the background of decision-making processes at and across different levels, from global to local.

"Forest City" is a US\$100 billion project on four man-made islands, whose implementation was launched in 2014. It is developed by the Chinese Country Garden Group and the Malaysian company Esplanade Danga 88, partly owned by the Sultan of Johor. Expected to accommodate 700,000 people on four artificial islands in 2035 it is aimed at people with high expectations who are looking for a high-tech, sea-view flat with quick access to Singapore, entertainment and excellent educational and medical facilities.

"Melaka Gateway," a US\$10 billion land reclamation project, was also launched in 2014 as part of the Maritime Silk Road. It is located on the Malacca Strait, through which a large amount of oil is transported to China. The main developer KAJ Development Sdn Bhd (KAJ Development Incorporated) joined forces with Power China before the latter withdrew from the project. There are plans to build three artificial islands and extend a natural island, Pulau Panjang. Upon completion, these islands will house residential units, a financial center, a cruise terminal, and a deep-water port.

The film reveals how both large infrastructure projects and their social and environmental consequences are influenced by decision-making processes at different, yet intersecting levels and how they can be understood against the background of the controversial ideas of stakeholders about the relationship between land and sea. While both land reclamation projects are addressed, the focus of the film is on "Melaka Gateway", where I carried out fieldwork in 2018 and 2019 among members of the *kristang* community.

Implementation of the micro-macro dialogue

Zooming out

The transnational dimension comes into play in the two land reclamation projects themselves; both infrastructure projects being part of the Maritime Silk Road, China's huge project to create new massive infrastructure projects along the southern sea routes of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The macro level is viewed from a bird's eye view, in accordance with the greater distance of the researcher to institutions and persons at this level and their less tangible nature. Nevertheless, these do not appear without a "human face". I have chosen to target individuals as representatives of these different levels, including Chinese President Xi Jin Ping, Mahathir Mohamad, who was Prime Minister of Malaysia when the film was shot, and Najib Razak, who had just been voted out of office as Prime Minister of Malaysia. Moreover, certain musical motifs are linked to this level to support the narrative. The choice of music is important to create a certain atmosphere. Together with my editor, for example, I have selected "To The Beauty Of Life" by Andi Labes with sparkling piano and strings to provide musical background to images that show how political decisions by the

government of Najib Razak have determined the land reclamation project Melaka Gateway (*Flow of Sand* 11:10-11:45).

"Flow of Sand" captures abusive features of Najib Razak's rule, during which "numerous infrastructure projects were implemented, most of them under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)." (Arnez 2020) It shows that prior to the elections in 2018, Prime Minister Najib Razak sealed deals for many large-scale infrastructure projects with Chinese investors, including the Melaka Gateway. The picture of the handshake between Xi Jin Ping and Najib Razak during the opening ceremony for the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on 15 May 2017 refers to these deals.



Fig. 2 Handshake between Najib Razak and Xi Jin Ping, *Flow of Sand*, 11:35

The film portrays the Melaka Gateway as part of a larger package under BRI in which representatives of the Chinese and Malaysian governments concluded deals worth \$7.22 billion in May 2017 (*Flow of Sand*, 11:26-11:45). It also shows that this positive attitude towards China was expressed in public places, for example in museums. An example of this is an exhibition at the Museum of History and Ethnography in Malacca in 2019, which was dedicated to the relations between the two countries from 1974 to 2014.

On the national level, the film addresses developments spanning the period of one year, from August 2018 to August 2019. Two persons represent this level: two prime ministers, Najib Razak (incumbency: 2009-2018) and Mahathir Mohamad (incumbency: 1981-2003 and 2018-2020). In May 2018, after a spectacular electoral victory, the Pakatan Harapan coalition, replaced the Barisan Nasional Coalition, which had ruled for more than 60 years. At the same time, Mahathir Mohamad took over as prime minister. His predecessor Najib Razak had lost popular support for his alleged involvement in a corruption scandal and the misappropriation of funds from the 1MDB state investment fund.

The 1MDB scandal is considered one of the world's biggest financial scandals. By investing in new markets, it was originally intended to promote Malaysia's economic growth. However, much of the money was diverted via dummy companies - and then spent on luxury real estate and expensive works of art, among other things. Goldman Sachs, an American investment banking and securities trading company headquartered in New York was involved in the scandal, and had to pay back \$ 2.5 billion to the Malaysian state in July 2020 because of corruption and fraud by two of its employees (Peer 2020).

The film does not explicitly deal with this scandal but presents political discourses on infrastructure and Chinese investment and sheds light on the changing attitudes of two former Malaysian prime ministers towards China-backed infrastructure projects. The loss of confidence in Najib Razak gave Mahathir Mohamad a significant boost ahead of the 2018 elections. He took advantage of this in his election campaign by declaring that after taking office he would fight corruption and stop China-backed infrastructure projects, including large- scale land reclamation projects. Specifically, he doubted the necessity of Forest City in Johor and Melaka Gateway in Malacca.

In his comments about Forest City, Mahathir played on existing concerns in the population about

China's growing influence. To reveal Mahathir Mohamad's critical attitude towards foreigners who wish to acquire property and live in Forest City, the film shows a short extract from an interview with Mahathir Mohamad from September 2018 in which he made the following statement: "They can buy the property. But we won't give them visa to come and live here." (*Flow of Sand*, 14:36-14:41).

The device of juxtaposition is used here to illustrate that Melaka Gateway, similarly to Forest City, also came under pressure. Following the interview with Mahathir Mohamad, I show drone pictures of Melaka Gateway, which are supplemented by explanations with my voice over. I explain that the Transport Minister Anthony Loke withdrew the master developer's port-operating license due to allegations of delayed development. As a result, the developer initiated a judicial review before the High Court for breach of contract, respondents being the Malacca Port Authority, the Transport Minister, and the Malaysian government. They withdrew this review after the Minister of Transport assured in May 2019 that he would restore the licence for the cruise terminal and the deep sea-port (*Flow of Sand*, 14:43-15:52).

I have included another excerpt of an interview with Mahathir Mohamad to show that this decision was made at a time when he was changing his rhetoric on Chinese-financed infrastructure and the relationship between Malaysia and China. After temporarily putting important infrastructure projects supported by China on hold, Mahathir Mohamad successfully renegotiated some of these deals with China. A case in point is the reduction in the cost of building the ECRL, a rail link from Kuantan port to Port Klang, from \$15.8 billion to \$10.5 billion, which was sealed during Najib Razak's time as Prime Minister. Mahathir became much more positive about China's influence after having renegotiated this deal. His shift in rhetoric is captured in the film when showing his statement made in June 2019 that Malaysia, which has a 2000-year history of relations with China, would benefit from the opening of the Chinese market (*Flow of Sand*, 15:54; 16:32). He also said that he is less concerned about China than Europe because "China never conquered us", but "two years after they (the Europeans) came here, they conquered us" (*Flow of Sand*, 15:58).

These parts of the film staged at the macro level serve to illustrate how the changed relations of Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad with China have affected major infrastructure projects by giving them tailwind, putting them on hold and allowing them to move forward again.

The perspective of the developers is brought into the film by showing their material manifestations from the construction site, the high-rise buildings in Forest City, the sales gallery and the beach area. Advertising materials are also shown, demonstrating what Forest City should look like once completed.



Fig. 3 The developer's vision of Forest City, Screenshot *Flow of Sand*, 13:51

A short cross-fading with sand art introduces Forest City. Together with my editor Uli we chose Dominik Heer's "Reality is now Logo" with wooden drums, strings and synthesizer, as musical support. Forest City is presented by taking a bird's eye view of the then partially completed apartment complexes and making quick panning shots from various perspectives through the retail gallery, pool area and Phoenix Hotel.

Within the visual narrative, these images exemplify the ambitions of the project.² When completed, the project is expected to cover 150 million square feet, three times the size of Singapore's Sentosa Island.

The developer describes land reclamation projects as a way to create a future-oriented economy and to improve connectivity. Health care, education, IT and eco-engineering facilities with direct access to the sea are part of such modernist visions of the land-sea nexus. In Forest City, material manifestations of these imaginaries are a health care centre, an international school, and high-tech, and sea-view flats with quick access to Singapore.

The subsequent scenes provide an explanation of why such projects have been criticised. A criticism of Forest City, which I have also heard several times in the context of my field research, is articulated in the film by Charles, an NGO activist. According to him, land reclamation projects have an impact on local residents, especially fishermen, and the coastline. When he links the disappearance of the sea cow (*dugong*) to land reclamation, I show pictures of this species (*Flow of Sand*, 12:53-13:49).

In "Melaka Gateway", plans for a deep sea-port and a cruise ship terminal are part of modernist fantasies of development. Moreover, Malaysian developer KAJ Development praises this project, which is to be built on 1366 acres of sea sand, emphasizing its advantages for the city. On a banner close to the construction site they say that, once completed, these four islands will contribute to the city's higher GDP, job creation and the transformation of Malacca from a weekend to a 365-day economy.

Zooming in

At the micro level, the film shows that it is these configurations that are challenged by several members of the *kristang* community in Ujong Pasir on the Malacca coast. They have alternative visions that are rooted in spirituality, identity and livelihood. They are based on their desire to preserve their community, including their physical environment.

Musically, the insights about this community and its view of the problems of land reclamation are linked to certain pieces of music. I use "Portugal", a piece of music by Michael Jarosch that uses acoustic guitar, for example, in the pictures showing the Portuguese community at the San Pedro Festival, a festival dedicated to the patron saint of fishermen (*Flow of Sand*, 03:24- 03:54)

I introduce this community with images showing how fishermen are preparing their boats for the upcoming San Pedro Festival, how men of the community are playing cards in the shade of a tree, and how community members are chatting casually. The camera then pans over the replica of Cristo Redentor, the statue of Christ in Rio de Janeiro built on the Portuguese square and work on this statue by members of the "Portuguese construction team." Aerial views of the land reclamation project serve to illustrate its proximity to the Portuguese Settlement (*Flow of Sand*, 01:54-02:48).



Fig. 4 Proximity of "Melaka Gateway" to the Portuguese Settlement, Screenshot *Flow of Sand*, 02:46

² Part of these images are based on Forest City promotional material for which I received permission from SCM Southern Corridor Malaysia to include them in the film.

Their voices are captured by community representatives, starting with Peter, the former village headman, sitting in one of the small restaurants by the sea, who laments that the community will lose its identity if it loses the sea. According to him, fishing is in their blood, and it is impossible to separate them from the sea. He also criticizes that the area in front of the settlement has become silted due to land reclamation works, due to which fishermen cannot pull their boats close enough to the shore anymore to go fishing.

Another voice is Martin Theseira, spokesman of the SPCAC (Save Portuguese Community Action Committee), who says that Malacca would be better off with its natural coastline, pointing to Malacca's long historical connection to the sea. In one scene he says: "What they are doing is just over the limit. It is just driven by greed. So much, so the whole place is gonna stink." (06:31-06:37). Here he refers to the siltation caused by the blockage of the water channel between the land reclamation project and the Portuguese settlement. He also addresses the problems of land reclamation in the past. Standing in front of a pillar that marked the separation between the sea and the seashore when he grew up as a boy in this area, he points out that land reclamation, which began here independently of Melaka Gateway in the 1990s, has led to displacement of the population. Many people had moved away because they no longer found favourable conditions for fishing.

Several community members complement these voices. For example, Shawn, a young full-time fisherman, points out that their catches have decreased due to land reclamation; he mentions problems with dredgers; not only would they have to avoid them, but they would also have to sew their nets more often, as they would be torn apart by stones being whirled up. His statement is illustrated by pictures of an old fisherman sewing a net. It also points out that the decline in fish stocks is causing them to move to the areas of neighbouring fishermen, which is creating tension.

The film shows how individuals have responded to government decisions by alternately capturing external voices and those directly affected by the land reclamation project. It engages with the reverberations that these decisions have on local inhabitants as well as the reactions of individuals who have observed the problem of land reclamation from outside. Johannes Widodo, an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore (NUS), who has guided a community mapping project in Malacca, offers an external expert view here. In a close-up shot in his office, he criticizes the lack of responsibility and morality of decision-makers when issuing land permits. He draws an analogy between decision-makers and heads of families. The former grant permits to acquire land and do not care about the consequences. The latter let 50 people live in his own bedroom or even turn the house into a nightclub while the children have to sleep outside. (*Flow of Sand*, 16:38-17:27).

This is followed by a close-up scene with Edward, a fisherman living on the riverbank and fishing on the coast of the Portuguese Settlement. He expresses pride in the fact that he has always fed his family from the sea. Visually, this is captured in one shot showing that the mussels he fished today are fresh; one sticks to his right index finger.

Yet, he criticises the fact that land reclamation is very damaging to fishermen, and he holds the government responsible. He asks why they are disturbing the sea when there is enough land available for construction projects in so many other places in Malaysia. Here, close-ups of his face alternate with those that refer to his life as a fisherman. They show his shelter, a simple wooden construction on stilts, with nets in one corner.



Fig. 5 Screenshot, Close-Up of Edward's face, *Flow of Sand*, 17:47



Fig. 6 Screenshot, Edward's Shelter, *Flow of Sand*, 17:49

The next sequence has an interview with Charles, interspersed by a panoramic view of the project from a bird's eye view. Charles acts as an outside voice representing an NGO perspective. He paints a dark picture of the future of the fishermen along the coastline, pointing out that the decision-makers do not take their concerns into account, and they probably have no perspective either, because they have learned nothing other than fishing.

The subsequent scene brings another level into play, the Malacca state, represented by the former Chief Minister Adly Zahary, who visited the Portuguese settlement in June 2019 on the occasion of the annual Saint Pedro festival. After showing a few scenes with Adly Zahary and community leaders, the viewer sees the former Chief Minister driving away in his black limousine. I ask Martin Theseira what they have discussed, and he responds that they have talked about the potential revival of a twin city agreement between Malacca and Lisbon. In line with the vision of how to revitalise this twinning agreement, he expresses his hope that Malacca will attract a larger number of tourists and Portuguese wine and olive oil will be imported into Malacca. Martin also mentions at this point that Adly Zahary had proposed to create a cultural centre to preserve their cultural heritage

and that the *kristang* community had given him a souvenir to remind him of their uniqueness in Malaysia, which he gratefully accepted.

These scenes put earlier scenes with Martin Theseira, in which he expressed the negative consequences of land reclamation, in a new light. They capture the community's hope that the Chief Minister's invitation to their settlement will bring new economic perspectives for the inhabitants. The closing statement by Edgar, an elderly fisherman, provides an opposing position by declaring that fishing has no future.

What are the benefits of the macro-micro approach?

On the one hand, this film is a result of my own reflections about the social and environmental consequences of development, but also of those of colleagues with whom I was in contact during the implementation of the film. As I wrote elsewhere: "The film itself becomes part of the co-creation of knowledge between researchers, cameraman, editor, community members and others that, for example in my case, can be easily disseminated." (Arnez 2020)

A documentary film offers the opportunity of a non-linear narrative that would not be possible in an academic paper. It brings together developments at different and across levels through selecting footage and musical background, spatially juxtaposing events that are apart in time. Film-making produces a congruent sensory experience among the viewers (MacDougall 1998: 52), something a purely scholarly paper cannot achieve.

A film captures something that happens in the here and now, and which in this way cannot be repeated by the filmmaker. A facial expression of a person is as much a part of it as the prevailing mood or sounds. Yet, when watching the scenes again, the filmmaker can retrieve these moments, including the associated sensations. For the researcher as filmmaker, this is a way to get a clear picture of himself or herself on location and thus gain access to the footage in a completely different way than in recorded interviews, for example.

Another benefit is the potential of micro-studies to become a reference-point for similar development problems in other parts of the world. When commenting on a micro-study by Marschke on sand mining in Koh Sralao in Cambodia, a project which impoverished many of the inhabitants, Rigg notes that the value of such micro-studies lies in the fact that they are "so common" (Rigg 2016: 186). "Common" refers here primarily to the fact that the phenomenon of impoverishment of village populations due to environmental degradation also occurs in many other parts of Southeast Asia, from coastal regions of Sulawesi to highland minority settlements in Laos (Rigg 2016: 186-187).

In "Flow of Sand" the common denominator is the deterioration of living conditions, which is measured not only in weaker fish stocks but also in the threat to the identity and the way of life of the inhabitants. The tensions highlighted in the film provide insights into the special circumstances of land reclamation projects in Malacca and in Johor linked to developments at transnational, national and state level. On the other hand, it also enables viewers in other regions to engage with the issue. Tensions in the planning and implementation of large infrastructure projects are not an isolated example, but occur rather frequently around the world, and the sensory aspects of the film are likely to make the topic of environmental impacts appealing to a large audience.

I would like to conclude with appeals. One of the target groups of this film is decision makers. The macro-micro perspectives chosen in the film should encourage them to think about improved proposals for solutions to better shape the area between land and sea and minimise negative consequences for humans and nature and to involve the population in the evaluation and implementation process.

The documentary should also bring communities together across ethnic groups and national borders and encourage them to cooperate to tackle the environmental and social consequences of infrastructure projects to build a better future.

Last but not least, I hope that the film will be used by colleagues as an impulse for their own research and as a support in teaching, and that students will deal with it in their work.

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