



Paul Wheatley (1921-99)

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In *The Vermilion Bird: T'ang Images of the South*, Edward Schafer reported that merchants and administrators en route from China to the savage and deadly lands of Nam-Việt had to pass through the Gate of Ghosts, a narrow gap between two crags. So frightening was the experience that it was preserved in a folk saying: "The customs barrier at Ghost Gate: Ten men go out, nine men return." Paul Wheatley so enjoyed this image he entitled a chapter he wrote in *Nâgara and Commandery: Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions*, "Beyond the Gate of Ghosts." Wheatley was in fact like one of these hardy travelers of the middle ages who crossed such gates to explore the lands and the cities that lay beyond the crags that delineate our cultural universe.

Born and raised in England, Paul Wheatley first received a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Liverpool in 1949, then a master of arts degree in 1951, and a Ph.D. in 1958 from the University of London. He received a D. Lit. from the same institution in 1975. He held positions in historical geography at the University of Malaya (1952-58), and in geography and history at the University of California-Berkeley (1958-66). Returning to the University of London in 1966, he became a professor of geography at University College London until 1971, when he made one final move to the University of Chicago to be a professor of geography and social thought. In 1976, he accepted the Irving B. Harris Professorship in Comparative Urban Studies and Social Thought, and in the next year became chairman of the prestigious Committee on Social Thought. He remained in this post for fourteen years until he retired in 1991.

Wheatley's work was widely recognized and he received numerous awards. In 1974, the Association of American Geographers honored him with a Citation for Meritorious Contributions to the Field of Geography for "two decades of productive enquiry ... that develops a challenging

and Commandery: "Une ville ne croyait pas avoir le droit de rien oublier; car tout dans son histoire se liait à son culte. L'histoire de la cité disait au citoyen tout ce qu'il devait croire et tout ce qu'il devait adorer."

Feeling that urban geographers were poorly informing the larger discipline about the traditional non-western city, Paul Wheatley explored the lacunae in our knowledge of urbanization in the Malay Peninsula, where all the civilizations of Asia converge. He published *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500* in 1961. Three years later, he analyzed again the Chinese, Sanskrit, and Arabic accounts of ancient Malaya in *Impressions of the Malay Peninsula in Ancient Times*. He reiterated this tour de force at the subcontinental scale in *Nâgara and Commandery, Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions* in 1983. The two-volume *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital c. 1400-1980*, and *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* were monumental projects that he co-edited with Kernal Singh Sandhu in 1983 and 1989. The attention Wheatley gave to the historical geography of peninsular Southeast Asia may be better understood if we remind ourselves of Tomé Pires' phrase: "Whoever is lord of Mëlaka has his hand on the throat of Venice."

Paul Wheatley's most famous book is, strangely enough, not about Malaya but about ancient China from the Shang state to the Zhou dynasty. *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City*, was published in 1971, eruditely explored the nature of the ceremonial center and defined the ancient city as a "Cosmo-Magical symbol." The book elaborated and applied to early China the ideas Wheatley had presented at his inaugural lecture at University College London in 1967 and which was later published under the title *City as Symbol*. Like Marcel Granet, Paul Wheatley expressed that: "L'Autel du sol... représente la totalité de l'Empire." The second part of *The Pivot of the Four Quarters*, where the early Chinese city is placed in a comparative perspective, has remained influential to this day. Wheatley's concept of "pivot" has known a long fortune since 1971. A figure of the city of Wangcheng from *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* is, for instance, reproduced in the introductory textbook I use in my human geography class. Scholars who study the relationship between place and power have drawn on his city as cosmomagical center for religious, ritual, and political activities. The cohesive force of Wheatley's pivotal "si fang zhi ji" (*The Pivot of the Four Quarters*) can be felt today not only in Shang studies but in the analysis of Aztec cities.

The University of Chicago will publish his last book, *Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, 7th to 10th Centuries*, this year. It will conclude Paul Wheatley's circuit of the urban hearths of Asia's great civilizations that he started four decades ago with the publication of *The Golden Khersonese*. Wheatley examined the development of urban civilization in a comparative fashion. He analyzed the city-state from within

interpretation of the relationships between social structures and urban origins." Wheatley was also a corresponding fellow of the British Academy and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He served on many academic and non-academic committees, such as the Commission for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments in Singapore (1955-58), and the Ford Foundation Committee on Academic Fellowships for Vietnamese Refugees (1975). The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore invited him to co-direct several projects from 1980 to 1993. He was on the editorial board of several journals in Asian and urban history including *Asian Survey*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, the *Journal of Urban History*, and the *Journal of Oriental Studies*. He kept in contact with the geographical community through his frequent book reviews published in journals such as the *Geographical Review*.

Paul Wheatley maintained a complex relationship with geographers. He was a thinker not restricted by disciplinary boundaries but driven by an encyclopedic curiosity served by outstanding linguistic skills. Asia, the largest and culturally wealthiest of all continents, was the only place large enough to accommodate his scholarship. Based on constant references to non-western and historical sources, his intellectual sophistication distanced him from post-World War II urban geography. His definition of the urban origin in largely social and cultural terms did not fit well with paradigms in urban studies that have assumed that economic factors enjoy a natural primacy and that analysis of urbanization should rely largely on quantitative data. Indeed, Wheatley's ambition was to place his work in the great tradition of Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, whose definition of the ancient city is quoted in the opening page of *Nâgara*

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"Great Horned Owl"

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