Colonial Port Cities
Katrina Gulliver

My current research project is a study of colonial port cities. Since early 2008 I have been conducting a comparative study of Malacca (Melaka) and Havana from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Between Malacca and Havana there are obvious (and less obvious) parallels: both were drawn into the European network of trade and control at around the same time (Malacca was captured by the Portuguese in 1511, Havana was established in its current location by 1519). They were key nodes in networks of trade through the East and West Indies, respectively. Malacca offered access to the trade in spices of the East Indies, while Havana, was the geographic centre of the Spanish Caribbean and served as a staging port and storehouse for supply ships from Spain to the Americas. However, both these cities developed vibrant urban identities as well as being strategic trading posts. In terms of population, ethnic diversity, and cultural and intellectual life, each of them became a metropolis while part of a colonial network. These two cities can be seen as key nodes of Eastward and Westward European expansion, as well as key points in global trade. By the nineteenth century, each had its own identity and had developed in ways that were distinct from their origins as trade outposts.

Building on this study, I will expand it by including other colonial cities, founded during the following phase of European colonialism: Pondicherry and New Orleans. All demonstrate the traits of multi-ethnicity and the development of a unique city identity. These identities are reflected in the built environment and popular culture. I focus on the colonial city as the crucible of urban modernity, and its significance for metropolitan development generally. I also analyse the development of specific urban identities and affinities among the cities’ residents. With this project I challenge the notion of colonial cities as outposts of the Metropole by asserting that these particular examples demonstrated their own subjectivity and specific identity separate both from their role in a colonial hierarchy and from their regional locations.

My doctoral dissertation, ‘Creating the Modern Woman in Asia, c.1920-1940’, is a case study looking at four women each in China and Japan, writers and artists whose work reflects different responses to the enormous social changes taking place, particularly with regard to the status of women. Each of these women looked at how they could define modernity for a woman, and what I discuss is how they performed this role as well as depicting it in their work. My research drew on newspaper accounts, art and literature, and the historical discourses on gender and modernity. A major theme is the effect of East-West cultural exchange.

My previous research (for my Masters degree) focused on Australian and Pacific History, examining the phenomenon of ‘going native’ and settler/indigenous relations on the frontier. This involved comparisons with the North American captivity narrative and the discourse of going native in colonial America.