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Asian urbanism

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Abstract: This chapter on Asian urbanism begins by examining how Asian urbanism can be seen as both *actually existing* and *imagined*, taking into consideration the ways in which Asian urbanism has entailed the use of successful Asian cities as reference points for other cities in the Global South on the one hand, and how such referencing practices often entail the rendering of Asian urbanism as imagined models and ideologies that are detached from the realities of the receiving end of the model transfer on the other. The ensuing section examines how Asian urbanism can be situated in the context of state-society relations, with a particular emphasis on the role of the Asian states that exhibited developmental and/or authoritarian orientations in the late twentieth century. The penultimate section explores the socio-spatiality of Asian urbanism, summarising some salient characteristics of Asian urbanism. The final section concludes with an emphasis on the need of avoiding Asian exceptionalism, and also of having a pluralistic perspective on Asian urbanism.

Keywords:

urban geography; urbanization; globalization; critical theory; Asia; urban Asia; Global South; urban studies

Asian Urbanism

Introduction

Ever since the Chicago School of urban sociology has considered Chicago as an empirical site of analysing the 'urbanism as a way of life' (Wirth, 1938), scholarly debates on the production of the urban and urbanism have been largely based on the experiences of a narrow set of paradigmatic cities from the Western advanced economies, which are positioned at the apex of global competition and network of cities (Friedmann, 1986). As Goldman asserts (2011, p.556), the attention to a handful number of global cities has made us blind to those 'significant social dynamics occurring within and among lower-tiered 'other' cities', or in other words, those activities 'working below the radar of the global-cities analytics'. Cities from the majority world in particular are often dropped 'off the map', either excluded from scholarly attention or treated as an exception to the norm (Robinson, 2005).

As scholars increasingly attach importance to shedding light on divergent trajectories of urbanisation across the globe, the experiences of non-Western cities from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East have begun to gain attention, explored for generating knowledge and de-centring urban theories. For practical reasons, among political and economic elites in particular, Asian cities such as Singapore, Shanghai, Shenzhen or Seoul emerge as an alternative source of developmental aspiration for non-Western cities (and at times, for cities in the advanced economies as well), for they provide the potential to function as a less conventional reference point for urban and economic development. Indeed, 'Asian cities are increasingly imagined as global frontiers of urban studies in the twenty-first century' (Bunnell, 2017, p.9).

This chapter on Asian urbanism begins by examining how Asian urbanism can be seen as both *actually existing* and *imagined*, taking into consideration the ways in which Asian urbanism has entailed the use of successful Asian cities as reference points for other cities in the Global South on the one hand, and how such referencing practices often entail the rendering of Asian urbanism as imagined models and ideologies that are detached from the realities of the receiving end of the model transfer on the other. The ensuing section examines how Asian urbanism can be situated in the context of state-society relations, with a particular emphasis on the role of the Asian states that exhibited developmental and/or authoritarian orientations in the late twentieth century. The penultimate section explores the socio-spatiality of Asian urbanism, summarising some salient characteristics of Asian urbanism. The final

section concludes with an emphasis on the need of avoiding Asian exceptionalism, and also of having a pluralistic perspective on Asian urbanism.

Asian Urbanism, actually existing and imagined

It has increasingly become a global practice to use paradigmatic city models as a way to inform urban development (Robinson, 2005), a practice that is akin to 'fast policy transfer' argued by Peck and Theodore (2001; see also Peck and Theodore, 2010). Paradigmatic city models such as Barcelona (González, 2011) have been circulated widely as an established model for export, pursued 'as a fast track' for cities to reach a 'world class status' (Meagher, 2013, p.396). More recently, Asian cities in particular have seen the elevation of their status, becoming active agents of 'worlding' that refers to 'practices of citation, allusion, comparison and competition' between themselves (Roy and Ong, 2011, p.17). Asian cities constitute newly established non-conventional paradigmatic cities in their own right to inform and transplant their urban development experiences to the Global South, and more recently, to the Global North as well.

Asian urbanism is often associated with the success stories of so-called Asian 'tiger economies' including South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, all of which have experienced condensed economic development and accompanying urbanisation. Dunford and Yeung's (2011) study provides an illuminating insight into the degree of condensation of developmental experiences of these leading Asian economies including mainland China. Their study estimated the number of years each economy required to undergo a five-fold increase of their real GDP per capita at the point of economic take-off. While advanced economies such as the UK and Germany took more than 160 and 108 years respectively, Asian tiger economies such as South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, having seen 1966, 1958 and 1960 as the reference years for economic take-off, took about 22, 24 and 26 years respectively. In other words, it required less than one generation (30 years) of their national population to experience such economic development in Asia, while their counter-parts in the West required more than a century. China also took about 25 years since their economic take-off in 1978 to achieve a five-fold increase of their real GDP per capita. During this period, China's urbanisation rate according to the World Bank data increased from 17.9% in 1978 to 38.4% in 2002, while the latest figure for 2016 reads 56.8%. South Korea's urbanisation rate surged from 33.3% in 1966 to 70.4% in 1988, becoming a predominantly urban society. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Asian experiences of economic success were

accompanied by condensed urbanisation, and such success stories add weight to the rise of Asian urbanism as a reference point for emulation and transplantation. To this extent, Asian urbanism can be considered as *actually existing*.

To help export the urban development experiences of leading Asian economies, an active institutional network of domestic and overseas companies as well as governmental players (e.g., state-owned enterprises, government-linked companies) nowadays works closely to put the aspirational Asian urbanism into actionable plans. Satellite cities, industrial parks or other zones of exception (e.g., special economic zones, free trade zones or free economic zones), often located on urban peripheries where land assembly is relatively less constrained, become the sites of accommodating new urban imaginations and modernist fantasies (Bach, 2011), serving affluent populations who have resources to afford the new infrastructure and housing. For instance, Watson (2014, p.221) cites Tanzania's proposal to develop Kigamboni City in Dar es Salaam as an eco-city with the support from 'the current Minister of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements, Anna Tabaijuka (previous head of UN-Habitat and remembered for her promotion of inclusive cities)'. The proposal was to involve Mi World from Dubai-United Arabs Emirate and China Hope Limited, while master plans were produced by LH Consortium, a public corporation from South Korea with decades-long experiences in producing new towns in their country of origin.

Circulation of Asian urbanism entails the circulation of capital and expertise. Percival and Waley (2012) examine an initiative that involves Korean and Indonesian firms to produce middle and upper class enclaves through new town construction in Cambodia, an initiative they refer to as the manifestation of 'intra-Asian urbanism'. The project relies heavily on the contributions by the consortium of Korean development, financial, and engineering firms who have sought profiteering opportunities by making use of their capital, expertise and business network (see also Nam, 2017). Percival and Waley (2012, p.2874) argue that the development of new satellite cities in Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam 'are mainly funded by intra-Asian foreign direct investment', and that the rise of Korean investments in Cambodian real estate markets increased in the early 2000s when Korea's own real estate market was in recession. The latter suggests the possibility of South Korea's surplus capital having channelled into Cambodia in the form of foreign direct investment. A similar situation was experienced in the export of Singaporean urban model in the late 1990s, when Singapore saw the saturation of urban infrastructural development, which then led the city-state's 'urban planning agencies and developers…to look elsewhere beyond the territorial

confines of the country for the realization of new urban development opportunities' (Pow, 2014, p.291). Vanessa Watson's discussion of the rise of 'African urban fantasies' also comes with the speculation that such attention to developing Africa's cities and infrastructure has been escalated, 'as urban land and development move to saturation in Asia and the East' (Watson, 2014, p.215). China's increasing presence in urban and infrastructure development in Africa and Latin America may also be partly explained by the abundance of surplus capital generated by its economic success (c.f. Power, 2012).

While Asian cities act as reference points and an increasing number of experts and companies with Asian origin partake in producing new urbanism elsewhere, it may also be argued that Asian urbanism exists only as *imaginaries* and *ideologies*. Referring to the work of González (2011) on Barcelona, Pow (2014, p.299) states that 'urban models acquire a myriad of different versions as they shift and mutate in specific urban context and are mobilized by different actors'. Creating the same conditions of development and replicating the developmental trajectory of a city would be a fallacy (Chua, 2011). Aihwa Ong (2011, p.15) indeed contends that '[a]fter all, an urban model exported by Singapore has to be inserted into a different set of material and political conditions elsewhere', inevitably going through mutations as they cross borders and move across geographies. Inter-referencing Asian models of Singapore or Shanghai already perceived to have succeeded may help urban political and economic elites to boost 'the possibility of success, and therefore soften political and social opposition' when they try to mimic the success of such models (Shatkin, 2011, p.93). In this regard, Asian urbanism may remain as abstracted development models, aspirational imaginaries and ideologies, sometimes with little room to materialise and only existing on policy documents and masterplans (c.f., Watson, 2014).

Situating Urbanism in State-Society Relations

The condensed industrialisation and urbanisation especially in East Asia were facilitated by the national state that exhibited authoritarian and developmental characteristics especially in the second half of the twentieth century. More recently, such urban processes have been analysed from the perspective of 'developmental urbanism' (Doucette and Park, 2018; Shin and Kim, 2016) as a key characteristic of Asian urbanism, emphasising the influence of the developmental state (and its multi scalar engagement with national and transnational interests) on the making of urbanism. For decades, Asian states had been committing to the economic development while maintaining authoritarian, non-democratic governance systems to quell

opposition voices that would hinder economic pursuit. Pow (2014, p.300) suggests that such an authoritarian nature of urban governance accompanying the success of urban development among leading Asian economies is what makes the Asian models sought after by the urban elites of the Global South. In other words, Asian urbanism as an ideology speaks to the needs of the urban elites on the receiving end. For example, China's preference for the import of the Singapore model over Hong Kong's laissez-faire development model may stem from Singapore's eschewing of the Western liberal democracy and China's advocacy of a single-party rule (see Zhang, 2012). Under these circumstances, the urban become 'an important site in which national developmental politics renders itself visible, in which the national state attempts to render populations legible and governable', as well as being 'a site where ruling powers try to legitimize their power but also accommodate some of the criticisms against it' (Doucette and Park, 2018, p.401).

While the experiences of Asian tigers and China often get reflected in a version of Asian urbanism that builds upon relatively strong presence of the state, although the state is embedded in state-society relations rather than remaining as an isolated entity, critics such as Hogan et al. (2012, p.43) observing urbanisation in Southeast Asia may highlight the prevalence of 'privatism', suggesting that 'most city-building by the rich and poor alike is privately funded and reflects private aims and values'. One of the documented examples may be that of the Philippines (Shatkin, 2008), where the strong influence of large landlords and private developers have pursued mega-scale urban development projects and influenced government planning processes to implement such projects, resulting in the 'privatisation of planning'.

From the late twentieth century, the onset of decentralisation and neoliberal globalisation has shifted the roles of the state, its relationship with the society and the economy, and what this means for Asian cities. No longer perceived as instruments of the developmental state, cities were regarded initially as agents of regional economies' integration with the global economy, and in return, agents of transnational capital (see Douglass, 1988; Rimmer and Dick, 2009). Nevertheless, the sticky nature of the developmental statism continues to play a role in the making of 'post-developmental' urbanism (Park, Hill and Saito, 2012), and there is a continuing challenge for scholars to understand the uneven geographies of urbanism that responds to multi scalar processes of city-making. More recently, there is an emergent emphasis on the importance of locating Asian urbanism in the geopolitical economic contexts as a means to overcome methodological nationalism (e.g., Hsu, Gimm and Glassman, 2018;

see also Hwang, 2016). For others reflecting upon the post-colonial turn of urban studies, Asian cities are increasingly perceived as 'worlding' sites of experimentation and contestation of the global urban hegemony through inter-referencing among themselves (Roy and Ong, 2011; see also Bunnell and Das, 2010).

In light of the heavy presence of authoritarian regimes noted as a key characteristic of Asian urbanism, it would also be crucial to ascertain that the governing strategies of the state oscillates between violent oppression and persuasion, responding to the growing pressure from grassroots contestations and wider social movements (Doshi, 2013; Shin, 2018). In the case of persuasion and co-optation, the accumulation of property assets by individuals provides a material basis for garnering the popular support for the authoritarian state, thus enabling a degree of political stability. Such stability is particularly significant in Asia, where the state has been noted for having nurtured the middle classes as main supporters of the authoritarian regimes in return for guaranteeing access to the fruits of economic development and material affluence (see Ley and Teo, 2011; Lett, 1998; Tomba, 2004).

It is also vital to acknowledge the contradictory nature of Asian urbanism that responds to the societal pressure. This means that there is a discrepancy between what Asian urbanism as an ideology presents to an ideal world and what Asian urbanism exhibits as reality. For instance, while an Asian model of development might be presented as being orderly and planned, an actually existing Asian urbanism would encompass the co-existence of order and disorder, engaging each other in a dialectic way. This would involve extensive contributions made by ordinary people to produce their own cities through formal and informal means (see Korff, 1996; Simone, 2014). Furthermore, the urbanisation experiences in Asia exhibit an abundance of people-led initiatives that testify to their will to survive adverse environments. Solomon Benjamin's (2008) 'occupancy urbanism' in India attests to one such initiative at grass-roots level. In fact, each Asian city would possess a long history of contestation and struggles over whose city they help produce (see Shin, 2018).

Socio-spatiality of Asian Urbanism

Asian economies have been known to invest substantially in the built environment, accumulating immobile assets to attract mobile transnational capital as their economies were inserted in the circuits of global capitalism (Shin, 2007). While the growing importance of property development as a main pillar of economic policy-making has been a key characteristic of the post-industrial cities of the West (Scott, 2011; Fainstein, 2001), it is in

Asia that has seen the heavy presence of property-led development to be central to national industrialisation and urbanisation. Land-based accumulation in particular has turned out to be prominent in economies such as Singapore, Hong Kong and China where state ownership of land prevails (Haila, 2016; Hsing, 2010).

The rising affluence of Asian economies, especially that of the middle and upper classes of Asia, produces spaces of exclusion and segregation as manifestations of increasing socio-economic inequalities. This space of exclusionary enclave urbanism may take the form of gated communities emerging in urban peripheries (e.g., Douglass and Huang, 2007; Pow, 2007) or 'new town' construction only affordable by the affluent class, as is the case of Songdo City in South Korea (Shin, 2017) or Camko City in Cambodia (Percival and Waley, 2012). It is also to be noted here that such spaces of exclusion may also present the rise of a new form of urbanity that reflects the changing socio-spatial relations in a given economy. For example, gated communities in China may be seen as a space of enhanced individual autonomy and place-making by China's new middle classes in a country that is heavily influenced by the presence of an authoritarian state (Pow, 2007). Such a view is in contrast with the views of Zhang and Ong (2009) or Tomba (2014) who attends more to the reflection of governing technologies of the Chinese Party-state in Chinese neighbourhoods.

The intense land use and the drive to maximise returns on investment in Asian metropolises produce vertical forms of urban development or 'vertical accumulation' (Shin, 2011) or what Scott (2011) coins as 'aestheticized land use intensification'. As a result, high-density residential and commercial mega-projects as well as iconic skyscrapers characterise the cityscapes of major metropolises in Asia (Hou, 2012). Such vertical urbanism is merged with 'processes of speculative urbanism, although undoubtedly set to take different forms from those in South Asia and in Bangalore, are beginning to make an appearance on the African continent' (Watson 2014: 216). One of the extreme examples of speculative urbanism at display would be the emergence of 'ghost cities' in China, referring to newly constructed cities that remain hugely under-populated or near empty despite completion (Woodworth, 2012). According to Sorace and Hurst (2016, p.305), such ghost cities are the manifestation of 'phantom urbanisation', arguing that 'China's urbanisation of land and creation of infrastructure far outpace the urbanisation of its people'.

While the rise of Asian cities as reference points owes largely to their economic success, much less known about them is what lies in the shadow of their success. To accelerate the process of urban development, the state endeavours to carry out, albeit with variegated

outcomes of success and failure, dispossession of people's rights to advance capital accumulation, spatial restructuring, and population sorting (Glassman, 2006; Levien, 2011): Asian economies stand out in this respect due to their condensation of development experiences, facilitating the displacement of existing land users as part of pursuing creative destruction to assemble lands and provide a *tabula rasa* condition for development (c.f., Kennedy and Sood, 2016). One of the enduring results is mega-displacement (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016, pp.171-200). The state intervenes to remove developmental constraints such as fragmented property rights and address the 'tragedy of anti-commons', accompanied by the mobilisation of state resources and power to enforce such state actions. Various planning measures such as compulsory purchase and land enclosure take place, resulting in, often forceful, displacement of existing land users. Brutal use of force by the state (Kim, 1999; Shao, 2013) or the use of 'relational repression' (O'Brien and Deng, 2017) is not uncommon to facilitate displacement.

Squatter and dilapidated settlements have often been subject to demolition to make room for public infrastructure in central areas or to remove them from the gaze of elites and for the purpose of making cities presentable to the world. In South Korea, for instance, during the 1960s and 1970s the state pursued large-scale clearance of squatter settlers in Seoul under the name of rationalising land use and civic beautification, and in the 1980s for the hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games (Kim, 1999; KOCER, 1998). Many displacees were evicted overnight, sent to urban peripheries, and allocated public lands for building informal dwellings, producing endogenous forms of gentrification (Shin and Kim, 2016; Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016).

China is another notable example of the state-led urbanisation that accompanies mega-displacement, as the Party-state actively pursue urbanisation as a state project to reorganise space and society (Shin and Zhao, 2018). The result is the uprooted livelihood of millions of urban households and former rural villagers, who were displaced from their homes and neighbourhoods (Hsing, 2010; Lin et al., 2015; Shin, 2014). In this regard, China sees dispossession and gentrification as a state project (Shin, 2016) or 'a mode of urbanization' (Tomba, 2017). Under this condition, state violence to facilitate eviction and displacement in China is more clearly pronounced especially as land-based accumulation and urban redevelopment have become important sources of revenue generation for local governments and a means to realise the visions of the state in their pursuit for modernity and world city-making (Wu and Zhang, 2007). Consequently, urban land assembly, and by extension the

demolition of buildings and displacement of land users, has become an important function of local governments. More recently, this process of city-making accompanying dispossession of citizens and villagers is replicated in India where the neoliberal turn of urban governance pushes for a combination of technological and infrastructural fixes that result in nation-wide plans for world-class city-making and smart urbanism (Das, 2015; Datta and Shaban, 2017).

While the production of *tabula rasa* conditions of development or creative destruction accompanied by mega-displacement would partly characterise the Asian urbanism, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the process of eviction and state-led gentrification has been more complex and nuanced than it may appear. Local residents are heterogenous in terms of their tenure, race, citizenship and so on, and the effect of eviction and relocation has also been differentially affecting local residents (Doshi, 2013). The imposition of speculative urbanism also creates a window of opportunities for the state to co-opt those factions of local residents and wider citizens to support the state project of re-writing the urban landscape (Shin and Kim, 2016). The hegemony of the ruling class gets imposed on the subordinate classes, producing false consciousness as Antonio Gramsci puts it - this indicates that there is a potential for the subordinate classes to share the urban imaginaries and aspirations of the ruling class (Shin, 2018).

Coda: Asian Urbanisms

Is there a version of urbanism that can be referred to as distinctively Asian? Singapore as city-state has been a front-runner in providing the source of 'aspirational urbanism', but 'Singaporean urbanism' cannot be seen as static, as it is constantly in the making across time and space that extends beyond the nation scale. If we shift our attention to economies of a larger geographical scale such as China or India, it would be even more arduous to define a 'national' version of urbanism. While Chinese urbanism can be broadly scrutinised at national scale, this construct would soon be eroded as soon as observers zoom in to gaze at provincial and municipal scales of analysis: Beijing turns out to present different urban stories from those of Shanghai or Guangzhou, and more so from those of smaller regional cities despite their endeavour to emulate China's 'eastern urbanism' (c.f., Gaubatz, 2008). Indian cities also depict variations in their experiences of coping with urban challenges (see Shatkin, 2014).

Nevertheless, discussing urbanism with an 'Asian' prefix may fall in the trap of 'Asian exceptionalism,' which overly emphasises the local contingencies to the extent that theories thus developed cannot be applied elsewhere. This is an argument that is familiar to sinologists

who often confront 'China exceptionalism' (cf. Pow, 2012). To avoid such a trap, I refer to the prudent perspective of Doreen Massey (1999, p.281) who argued for '[a] spatial (rather than a temporal) recognition of difference', calling for the need of 'acknowledg[ing] that "the South" might not just be following us [the North] but might have its own story to tell' and 'grant[ing] the possibility of at least relatively autonomous trajectories'. This is in line with the viewpoint of comparative urban studies (Robinson, 2005; Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016), which advocates the placing of all cities on level-playing fields without privileging the experience of, in particular, world cities from the Global North.

Therefore, Asian urbanism is not to be seen as an exception, but as part of 'a multiplicity of narratives' (Massey, 1999, p.281) that make up the global urban history. At the same time, we are to bear in mind that lumping the divergent experiences of the urban into a singular Asian urbanism risks the danger of homogenising the vast terrain of heterogeneous urban stories into a singular narrative. This calls for the need of seeng Asian urbanism in plural terms such as 'Asian urbanisms' (Hogan et al., 2012) or 'urban Asias' (Bunnell and Goh, 2017). Such pluralistic perspectives would further allow us, as Massey ascertains (1999), to critically think of the multiple, locally attuned possibilities of emancipation and progressive urban futures across Asia.

SEE ALSO [cross-references]

Chinese Urbanism (EURS0042); Cities in Developing Countries (EURS0043); East Asian Urbanization (EURS0084); Southeast Asia (EURS0303); Southwest China (EURS0304); Speculative Urbanism (EURS0317)

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