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Urban Poetics and Politics in Asia

Editorial

Patrick Heinrich, Francesca Tarocco, Daniele Brombal

Why do Asian cities matter? The global relevance of Asian cities is evident already when considering basic urban metrics. Nine of the ten largest urban conglomerations in the world are located in Asia (Shanghai, Beijing, Karachi, Istanbul, Dhaka, Tokyo, Manila, Tianjin and Mumbai). Of the forty-seven megacities worldwide, i.e., urban conglomerates with more than ten million inhabitants, forty-one are located in Asia, with fifteen in China alone (United Nations 2016). Nowhere at any time of history has there been a more rapid and radical urbanisation than in present-day Asia. Asia is hyper-urbanising. While it took roughly one hundred and thirty years for London to grow from one million inhabitants to eight million, Seoul achieved the same growth in just twenty-five years. In light of these facts, this thematic issue of *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* (IQAS), focuses on the politics and poetics of hyper-urbanisation in Asia. We are interested in exploring what kind of issues are identified as urban aspirations or tribulations of various – more or less self-consciously formed – urban collectivities, and analyse how the latter deal with such issues and what resources they draw upon to do so. Further, we investigate the trajectories of such resources; in particular, we look at the urban assemblages that are formed in urban spaces in Asia.

Asian cities are the loci of enormous population growth, and concomitant with this surge in residents, we also find there an increase in resources, investments, innovations and cultural vitality. Asia is the frontrunner of the unprecedented urbanisation processes and agglomeration effects we are witnessing today. It is thus hardly surprising to find that Asian cities do not necessarily follow a Euro-American model of urban development. Asia's urbanisation dynamics today are inspired by Singapore, Tokyo and Shanghai (Gugler 2004), rather than by New York, London or Paris. Much-needed research is required

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to usefully connect with policy debates around social cohesion, integration, multicultural and multiculturalism, and to determine how governments, voluntary sectors and individuals might better understand and support living together in twenty-first-century super-diversity (Roy / Ong 2011).

Urban regions are continuously growing in importance. Half of the world's population now lives in cities and nothing suggests a slackening of urban population growth in the predictable future. As money and people flow into cities, urban areas benefit from a privileged social, economic and political role. Cities are not only connected to their hinterland but to other cities as well. This has important implications on how we understand "urbanisation" today, when no part of the world remains unaffected by urbanisation (Brenner / Schmid 2012). Over the past three decades, research has begun to document key dimensions of the interplay between globalisation and spatial transformations in relation to the growth of very large urban regions in Asia. Seminal writing by McGee (1991) on the emergence of extended metropolitan regions, later termed mega-urban regions (MURs), focused on the daily interaction of metropolitan centres with areas extending well beyond administrative and traditional core suburban agglomeration into rural areas along inter-metropolitan corridors extending upwards of 100 kilometres from metropolitan centres (McGee / Robinson 1995). About sixty per cent of today's global GDP is generated by 600 cities, many of which are located in Asia (McKinsey Global Institute 2011). In China, the region of the Yangzi River Delta has a combined GDP of \$2.17 trillion, which is comparable to that of Italy. The region comprises Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Wuxi, Ningbo and Changzhou. The Pearl River Delta region has a combined GDP of \$1.89 trillion, roughly comparable to that of South Korea. Its cities are Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan, Dongguan and Macao.

The combined forces of globalisation and migration make many large cities "super-diverse". As Kye Askins notes, "living with difference is irrevocably central to 21st-century debates surrounding urban migration and civic life" (Askins 2016). How do we live together in an era of super-diversity? Living a life in a "community of strangers", urbanites have to learn to get along with one another (Valentine 2008). Living in the city requires flexibility and tolerance; it fosters social, cultural and linguistic adjustments. Place continues to matter. It may even matter more than at any other point of history.

A great number of cities are (much) older than the nation-state in which they are located. Sidestepping the city as a level or scale of analysis comes at the peril of projecting a national past onto cities, their inhabitants, cultures and languages, one that does not do justice to their transcultural formation and demographic composition. As a result of this transcultural past, urban spaces are more diverse (in any aspect) than nation-state projections would suggest. Focusing on cities implies by necessity coming to terms with issues of

plurality, variation, contingency and ambivalence in a systematic and functional way (Wise / Selvaraj 2009). Cities are places of innovation and cultural vitality. The so-called cultural and creative industries are located in cities, and these in turn are responsible for creating lifestyles and milieus that attract new residents and tourists. Richard Sennett (2001) writes of the attraction that cities hold for an ever-growing number of people:

Cities can be badly run, crime-infested, dirty, decaying. Yet many people think it worth living in even the worst of them. Why? Because cities have the potential to make us more complex human beings. A city is a place where people can learn to live with strangers, to enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives. Sameness stultifies the mind; diversity stimulates and expands it. The city can allow people to develop a richer, more complex sense of themselves.

Urban space provides for a challenging research object. For instance, urban planning theory and practice has been the subject of feminist critique since at least the 1970s. In particular, gender-blindness in urban planning as well as a lack of concern for local needs have been the subject of many studies. Gender planning theory seeks to solve the problems faced by women in cities, a pivotal aspect of which is the shift in emphasis from a focus on women to one on gender and gender planning. The gender relationship in urban areas is one of the most important dimensions of current urban studies and considers the wider relationship between urban areas and culture. In particular, issues such as gender justice, women's experiences and safety in urban areas, women's citizenship rights and their participation in city planning are today being raised and pursued seriously (Doan 2010).

Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (2011) have argued that Asian cities constitute an alternative to Western models of urbanisation. In fact, studying Asian urban spaces implies an additional challenge as we learn to come to terms with the Western bias in the humanities and social sciences. In concrete terms, we need to address a longstanding preoccupation with Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies (i.e., WEIRD societies) and the tendency to see the rest of the world as reservoirs of raw fact and data (Henrich et al. 2010). The dominant theories of the humanities and social sciences were developed on the basis of European case studies and consequently share the problem that they rest on empirical bases and historical trajectories that are different from those in other parts of the world (Connell 2007). Area studies, by their very nature, are aimed at expanding such a narrow base and to build more comprehensive theories and models. Urban spaces in Asia represent a welcome occasion to do so.

In this thematic issue, we explore the potential of urban spaces to reimagine the everyday. While none of the authors assembled in this special issue is a specialist on urban studies, the chapters in this volume nonetheless explore transcultural urban flows using a mixture of different disciplines, ranging

from religious studies, literary studies, gender studies, environmental studies and philosophy to political science. Our efforts were facilitated by the simple fact that applying a mixture of disciplines is the hallmark of area studies and that we have always worked this way. What is new is simply that we limited ourselves to a scale that is urban, and that we departed from this urban point of entry to study the research objects at hand (sexuality, religion, migration, technological transformation and so on). The way we approached the individual articles is thus rather straightforward. The articles we edited for this special issue are published in two different issues of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* (Urban Poetics and Politics Part I and Part II). While all articles discuss both case studies and theory, the contributions in Part I lean more towards theory, whereas those in the Part II have a more empirical focus. The contributions written by area studies scholars discuss a wide-range of issues such as ecology, health, cultural policies, literature, technology, religion, heritage or gender but also area studies theory and methodology through urban lenses.

For us as editors, to focus on urban spaces across East, South and South East Asia has provided a great deal of insight. Editing the papers and writing contributions for this thematic issue brought a number of matters to our attention, in particular: 1) The societies we are studying as area specialists are quintessentially urban societies. Research objects that are prominent in area studies are also relevant for urban studies (e.g., cultural contact, demographic change, issues of identity, social trajectories, inequality, translation processes, environment challenges). 2) Urban contexts are “culturally thick”. Studying urban contexts requires transcultural and transdisciplinary skills. Precisely these capabilities enable area studies specialists to engage in this type of research. 3) Urban contexts call for a consideration of multiple perspectives. There is no unitary way to experience and live the city. Various voices speak differently about the city. Vulnerable people and issues of marginality or liminality need to occupy a central place in the study of urban space. We believe that urban studies specialists have specific sets of skills that allow them to fruitfully explore these perspectives.

Editing this thematic issue of IQAS made it clear to us that urban spaces matter for area studies and that area studies specialists are often well equipped to engage in urban studies. Given the continuous processes of urbanisation, urban topics should be more frequently addressed in area studies. We wish to extend our gratitude to IQAS for providing us with the occasion to explore a topic that felt somewhat new when we started out and that has now become quite familiar to us as the work progressed. We are very grateful to the general editor Claudia Derichs and to the managing editors Andrea Fleschenberg and Ann Philipp for their continuous support. We truly appreciate their input and that of the anonymous peer reviewers who helped us to improve the quality of

the papers and the depth of the arguments presented therein. Collaborating with everyone has been a rewarding and pleasant experience, and we are planning to continue our joint explorations of urban studies in Asia henceforth.

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