

Transforming Asian Cities

Intellectual impasse, Asianizing space, and emerging translocalities

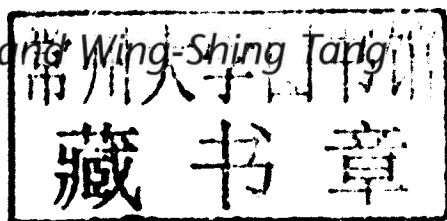
Edited by
Nihal Perera and
Wing-Shing Tang



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The crucial turning point of this work was the conference that we organized together. Prior to this, Perera (1996) had raised the issue of how much we know – and can know – about Colombo in his critical chapter on “Exploring Colombo: the relevance of a knowledge of New York,” later included in the *Global Cities Reader* (2006). After a couple of papers exploring how much we know about Asian cities, and trying to understand these cities from “people’s perspectives,” Perera decided to collaborate with Tang, who was exploring “people’s geography.” As a Fulbright Scholar, Perera spent a year at Hong Kong Baptist University observing “people’s spatial processes” in Hong Kong, which is usually represented in well-lit high-rises. Together, we organized an international conference on *The Transforming Asian City*, in Hong Kong, May 2007.

We invited 20 participants, including geographers, urban planners, and urban sociologists, from 15 different countries in Asia – or working in Asia – and asked them to discuss their own cities from “local” perspectives. They were from East, South, and Southeast Asia. The outcome was mixed, but it provided the base for this book. The conference assured our confidence in continuing to ask: How much can Asian scholars and practitioners of planning and design speak about their own cities from local perspectives?

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INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF ASIAN URBANISMS

Limited visibility and intellectual impasse

Nihal Perera and Wing-Shing Tang

South, East, and Southeast Asia, which we will refer to as Asia in this book, have been undergoing profound social, economic, political, and technological changes for over three decades. This transformation's impact on the world is profound, and many leading scholars, journalists, and politicians call this the "Asian century." Curiously, it is the West, not Asia, that is at the center of globalization. Cities and urban spaces in Asia are – within these narratives – nowhere closer to such a century. They are either lagging behind social, economic, and political transformations or taking different paths, mostly Westernizing. We are skeptical about this urban spatiality.

Informed by various forms of developmentalism, many buildings in Asian cities – quite a few are skyscrapers too – were built to accommodate new manufacturing and service activities. Persuaded by foreign and local urban development consultants, almost every city has erected its image building, which ironically turns out to be similar across cities. This growth process has led to a common practice of demolishing older buildings – some with high historic and cultural value – and obliterating more tranquil and lively neighborhoods, all in an effort to yield land for redevelopment. This sounds similar to urban development ideas, practices, and experiences in the West or those influenced by it. This replication is, as the argument goes, due to the hegemonic relations of knowledge production between the West and Asia.

According to the observations of one of the most influential planners in regard to shaping Singapore, Liu Thai Ker (1998), planning in Asian cities has been conservative, reactive, and piecemeal. Hence, the current urbanization process will require a second round of planning, especially when overlooked problems become critical. As more land is developed, changes to the city's infrastructure and the built environment are bound to involve more demolition of buildings as well as further relocation of citizens, activities, and infrastructure. This will also cost more. In short,

formal changes to the physical environment in Asian cities lag behind social and physical transformations.

According to the mainstream literature on globalization, modernity, global cities, international development, neoliberalism, and their principal opponents, Asian cities are following global models, adapting well within larger Western-dominated urban hierarchies and spatial structures.¹ These authors view the city as a formal-economic artifact: recognize international business districts, corporate headquarters, and chain restaurants; privilege mega projects designed by “starchitects”; and observe the Westernization of cities. Anthony King (2000: 8) captures this “global-gaze”: “Typically, we assume that the spatial manifestations of globalization are in the central business district (CBD), the downtown, evidenced by the appearance of multinational corporation headquarters, international banks or the pervasive sign of franchised global corporations.” As Timothy Mitchell (1991) clarifies in regard to the pyramids in Egypt, just being large, tall, or “modern” alone does not make buildings or a CBD visible; the framing through discourse is highly significant. Asian cities are represented in the “placelessness” and the “unmarked” spaces of “whiteness” found in the “global” spaces of consumerism, the “Disneyfied” localities of tourism, modern/global business districts such as Pudong and Bandra Kurla, and the new differences created within homogenized built environments through mega-projects such as Taipei 101 and the Petronas Towers. While some cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan receive considerable attention in these discourses, Manila, Surabaya, and Vientiane are rarely mentioned.

These narratives are about the West, especially how Western capitalism – or the European world economy – restructures itself, moving through Asia and allowing some Asian actors to play larger roles within it. Although times are changing and many Asian communities follow Western consumption patterns, the intense focus on high-end growth reproduces the narrative of dependent urbanization – urbanization *without* substance. This was previously understood as “urbanization without industrialization,” although urbanization historically predates industrialization. Within these stories, most large cities are primate cities which have become megacities (Evers and Korff 2000; Jones and Douglas 2008). These discourses carry within them “Orientalist” associations, so often used to justify West European colonization (Said 1978). Specifically, they represent the association of the metropole as civilized and the colony as undeveloped. Privileging high-end growth and image building prevents city authorities and planners from observing the marginalizations inherent in such discourses. In addition, it whitewashes the potential offered by complex and nuanced emergences, often occurring in their own backyards, for launching grounded development processes.

Beyond the high-end, other major representations of Asian cities are the low-end and traditional. The low-end includes poverty, slums, squatter settlements, overcrowding, disease, informal economies, underdevelopment, lack of management, and corruption, all of which have been well studied (e.g., Luong 2009). The representation of Asian societies as “traditional” implies that society and culture are static and suggests that the present is an appearance of the past not ruptured by