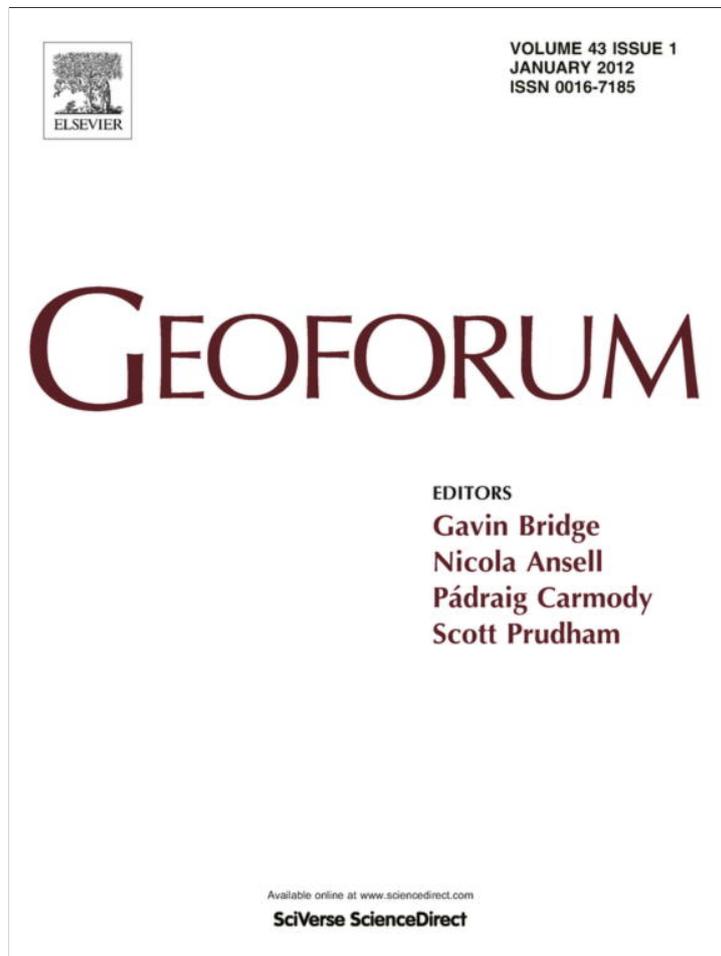


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## Editorial

## Urban aspirations and Asian cosmopolitanisms

The word 'aspirations' is encountered frequently in the public sphere. Urban planners, architects and developers use the phrase to express their work and sell their visions of the city; politicians and activists fight over its shared meanings; and citizens and migrants express it in stories and cultural practices. Aspirations have the power to move and motivate and, as such, it is not surprising that the term has attracted the attention of scholars in various social science disciplines. In this editorial, we examine some of the existing literature on aspirations and their geographies in relation to our own ongoing collaborative work on cities in Asia.

Anthropologists who have been keen observers of the globalization of Asian cities are among those to have picked up on the conceptual significance of aspirations. For Arjun Appadurai, the term makes possible a rethinking of anthropology's core concept of culture and reinvigorates its engagement with development. Culture has long been associated with conservative glosses of pastness—'habit, custom, heritage, tradition'—which have been complicit in maintaining economistic understandings of development and its association with seemingly progressive 'plans, hopes, goals, targets' for the future (Appadurai, 2004, p. 60). It does not help that, with the advent of postcolonialism, critics have approached development armed with culture so as to deconstruct it as a discursive apparatus reproducing neocolonial 'Third World' subjects deprived of historical agency (Escobar, 1995; Chakrabarty, 2000). This is not to deny the importance of deconstructive analysis for clearing away intellectual debris. Once cleared, however, the task remains for scholars to conceptualize the cultural forces that drive people to build and rebuild their worlds in the face of often daunting challenges.

In Appadurai's view, the bridge between culture and development is found in the subaltern 'capacity to aspire'. This is an important driver of urban transformation, usually incrementally but sometimes also in revolutionary ways. Today, when citizens armed only with social media and political will seize city centers to launch democratic revolutions, how else can we explain such effervescent movements except by way of aspirations nurtured in city mosques, tea shops and bazaars? A totemic goddess of democracy appears in Tiananmen Square, gifts of food from street hawkers are smuggled to red-shirt protestors occupying Bangkok, and demonstrators in Manila and Jakarta stage political theater and performance art in the streets: these social things and rituals no longer represent society itself but are *transformative performances* of social aspirations, creativity and energy. A focus on aspirations thus enables us to get at the human driving force of urban change, both radical and mundane.

Urban creativity and energy were at the heart of the Chicago School of sociology that thrived in the interwar period. For Park (1928), for example, cities were great crucibles of human passions and energies. Long before postcolonialism discovered hybridity and the creativity of the Third Space, Park had sketched the 'marginal man' – the migrant or socially mobile urbanite who inhabits the cusp of two colliding cultures, breaking the 'cake of custom' to free him to evolve new enterprises and associations (1928, p. 881). The mere identification of passions and energies, however, does not fully capture their future-oriented temporality and the effect of cultural memories. Aspirations do: they give temporal direction to energies. This can be seen clearly in the narratives of migrant experiences and urban entrepreneurs. Such narratives visibly express where migrants and urban entrepreneurs want to go in terms of social status achievements that are at the same time registered in traditional worldviews creatively reworked for new urban situations. For example, Malay rural migrants to the urban centers of Malaysia use the *kampung* (village) and its communal life and values imaginatively and discursively to shape and make sense of their decisions to improve their social mobility in the city (Thompson, 2002). Narratives are the very 'voice' of the aspirations that inspire and motivate the 'marginal man' – and the marginal woman – to strike it out in the city in search of a better future.

There are also important spatial dimensions to aspiration as a cultural capacity. First and most simply, there is the social space or milieu in and through which aspirations are formed. Part of the point of Appadurai's attempt to 'repatriate' aspirations into the domain of culture is that they are 'never simply individual' (p. 67). Aspirations are part of relationally-constructed systems of understanding and this 'locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about life' (p. 62). Privileged groups in society are more able to connect individual wishes and wants to wider contexts as well as to abstract norms and values. Second, aspiration is described by Appadurai as a 'navigational capacity', one which privileged groups in society have typically had greater opportunity to practice than have the poor: 'relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again' (p. 69). Appadurai's own work shows that the 'navigational' dimensions of aspiration are more than merely metaphorical. International exchanges among the poor women who form part of the Mumbai-centred Slum/Shackdwellers International (SDI) network, for example, allow comparative experience of what the future means to different individuals and groups in other urban and national contexts. Horizons of hope, desire and possibility are thus extended as slumdweller

engage with alternative local 'designs for the future' (p. 75). The spatial experience of elsewhere, in other words, brings into view new ways of being and becoming.

At one level, cross-border spatial practices of groups such as SDI may be understood as a subaltern counterpart to the aspirational routes trodden by policy and planning elites – with their 'study tours' and 'fact-finding missions' – which have begun to attract considerable attention among scholars in geography and urban studies (McCann, 2011; and, in Asia, Bunnell and Das, 2010; Roy and Ong, 2011). However, to map discrete geographies of aspiration from 'below' and 'above' would be to ignore significant intersections and alliances across that divide. The dialectic between the marginalized and the powerful is not socially hardwired. There are times when people who would otherwise be part of the power elite either take the side of the marginalized or mediate the dialectic to produce further alternative aspirations. This is clearly the case for the democratic transformations mentioned above. In the case of SDI too, factions of the middle class – including internationally-networked academics such as Appadurai himself – have played key roles in social mobilization. Aspirations form the cultural terrain over which the powerful and the subaltern battle to shape the city, but are also where new alliances and solidarities among members of these groups are forged.

Consideration of the sociology and geography of aspirations clearly shows that the capacity to aspire is ambivalent. It can be cultivated, usurped and appropriated by the powerful—technocrats, planners, developers, political elites—as much as it nurtures and fuels the civic agency of the marginalized. Based on our ongoing research, three dynamics stand out in Asian cities. First, the developmental state has played a dominant role in the cultivation and management of aspirations for the remaking of cities, in which the memorialization and monumentalization of heritage plays a crucial part. Second, the state is increasingly incorporating or accommodating free market forces for urban renewal, in which middle-class aspirations and the commercial value of heritage are emphasized. An example of how these two dynamics can combine is the Singapore developmental state's reinvention of the creole Chingay Parade, first as a nation-building carnival to promote multicultural public housing in the 1970s and 1980s, and then, in the 2000s, as an international event in the revived downtown civic district to promote Singapore as a cosmopolitan capitalist global city (Goh, 2011).

The third dynamic comes from the other direction, and concerns the new civic networks of middle class and marginalized residents which have emerged in many cities, leveraging shared heritages and aspirations to fight state or market-driven urban redevelopment. For example, in Hong Kong, in response to state-market redevelopment plans for the gentrification of historic Wanchai district, architects, artists, community activists, and academics have stepped in to work with local residents and businesses to propose and implement alternative urban revival plans that would preserve both tangible physical heritage and intangible community heritage. It is this third dynamic, in particular, which we wish to foreground not least because it suggests possibilities for the poor to give voice to their aspirations and 'debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically' in the making of the core values driving developmental projects (Appadurai, 2004, p. 70).

Notwithstanding our focus on the third dynamic, it is necessary for us to outline the complexities of the context in which the aspirations of the marginalized are forged and fought over. Our view emphasizes that the culture of domination involves more than the anthropological binary of skepticism versus over-attachment to the core values of development, where the choices of the poor are limited to either apathy and rejection of development or blind loyalty to developmental regimes (Appadurai 2004, p. 69). Rather we seek to incorporate a sociological concern with the discursive-

disciplinary power of institutions and the geographies of uneven development on a global scale in our framing. In addition, we highlight the complexity of the third 'voice' given shifting middle-class involvement in articulating or mediating opposing aspirations between the powerful and the marginalized. In his adaptation of Taylor's (1994) argument for multiculturalism as the politics of recognition, Appadurai (2004, p. 70) describes grassroots organisations as 'changing the terms of recognition' for the urban poor from below and enhancing their cultural capacity to aspire through local action and global networking. But as Appiah (1994) notes in his assessment of Taylor's argument, any politics of recognition is invariably shot through with the politics of representation and identity. We are therefore as much concerned with the uneven terrain of aspirations intersecting with local and transnational class struggles and alliances as we are with the capacity to aspire.

Charting the terrain of urban aspirations will help us to see the urban futures of Asia more clearly. What this entails methodologically is beyond the scope of this editorial. We conclude with reference to Douglass' (2009) recent suggestion that we are seeing two kinds of globalizing cities in Asia. The 'globopolis' is driven by technocratic urban planning colluding with the commoditization of urban life, where society is merely a field of economic factors and inputs, while the 'cosmopolis' is inspired by participatory urban planning and grassroots democratic processes of urban renewal, where society takes the lead to remake the convivial city open to the world. In our exploration of the complex dynamics of aspirational politics in Asian cities, we are seeking cases in the making of globopolis and cosmopolis, and social actions and formations in between. We are searching for 'dialectical utopianisms' in aspirational practices that integrate both 'social process and spatial form' and operate 'in relation to both space and time' (Harvey, 2000, p. 196). We hope to discover exemplary cosmopolitanisms in urban Asia, and here we join Chen (2010) in treating Asia not merely as a space prone to Orientalist and imperialist designs, but as method. Such an approach recognises 'Asia' as a problematic spatial and historical category but also accepts it as an inevitable category of identification that we need to work with in order to transcend it. Therefore, the aim is not to distinguish ideal Asian types or exemplars from Western counterparts, but to be receptive to new ways of 'border thinking' (Mignolo, 2000) that are reinventing Asian identities along with cities in inclusive and participatory cosmopolitan directions. We will know we have arrived when aspirations from across the ranges and oceans recognize each other and reciprocate their humanity.

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