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What is This?
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Introduction: Asian Urbanisms and the Frontiers of Knowledge

There continues to be a disjuncture between the world’s shifting urban centre of gravity and the location of cities from which knowledge about our increasingly urban world is derived. On the one hand, according to recent UN-HABITAT figures, cities in the Asia-Pacific are now home to around half of the world’s urban population. In addition, 12 of the world’s 21 mega cities (defined as those with populations of 10 million or more) are found in that region (UN-HABITAT, 2010). On the other hand, however, the cities which are taken as paradigmatic (most infamously Los Angeles in terms of post-modern urbanism) or as somehow leading edge (for example, London or New York as world cities in an era of economic globalisation) continue be concentrated in western Europe and North America (see also Edensor and Jayne, 2012). Clearly this is changing following influential calls to take seriously a greater diversity of cities from a wider range a regions in (re)theorising the urban (Robinson, 2006), or to foster ‘new geographies of theory’ (Roy, 2009) in urban studies. This Special Issue is intended as a contribution to such changes in the geography of urban knowledge production, focusing in particular on experiences in/from Asia. How might that region’s position and significance in Anglophone urban studies be made more commensurate with the global distribution of urban settlements and populations?

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Seven of the nine articles collected here were first presented in a workshop which was held at the National University of Singapore’s Asia Research Institute (ARI) in September 2010. The title (of both the workshop and this Special Issue), ‘Global Urban Frontiers’, may be elaborated in three ways. First, casting Asia in terms of urban frontiers is intended to resist the tendency to see cities in the region as following urban routes or pathways already trodden elsewhere. Cities and processes of urbanisation in Asia, in other words, are not reducible to supposed antecedents in North America, Western Europe or any other region. Secondly, use of the plural ‘frontiers’ connotes the diversity of Asia and its cities. Leaving aside the issue of ‘Asia’ itself as a regional construct, we are certainly not positing the existence of some (singular) Asian city model or type. Indeed, it is precisely because Asia includes differences that might ordinarily be held apart—cities of the global South and of the global North, megacities and global cities, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ worlds—that make it such a rich comparative frame (see also Robinson, 2011). Thirdly, and relatedly, to speak of ‘global’ urban frontiers is a move intended to allow extension of insights from cities in Asia beyond the territorial confines of that region. Hence, the studies of cities in Asia that we are interested in are to be differentiated from conventionally bounded understandings of area studies. In line with the wider goals of the ARI Asian Urbanisms research cluster which organised the September 2010 workshop, we therefore cast the diversity of Asia’s cities as a resource for urban knowledges that are of more-than-regional scope, significance and application.

**Relocating Asian Cities in Theory, Practice and Imagination**

Our compilation of papers examines cities in Asia as urban frontiers in three ways. The first has been alluded to already and concerns possibilities for cities in Asia to be sites for theorisation in academic urban studies. One way forward here, following Ananya Roy’s (2009) call to ‘rethink the list of “great” cities’ in which urban theory production has been concentrated (she lists Chicago, New York, Paris and London), is to add or substitute in some Asian cities. In this case, it is important to think critically about the ways in which a city in Asia might be considered ‘great’. To the extent that criteria for qualification follow those that were also deemed to have made London or New York great cities—and it is important to stress that Roy herself is concerned precisely to move beyond established global city and world city hierarchies—new geographies of urban studies do not necessarily unsettle existing theoretical preoccupations or limitations. While inclusion of Shanghai or Mumbai may be welcomed in breaking a Euro-American monopoly on putatively great cities, in other words, this may also continue to privilege a small (albeit more widely distributed) number of metropolitan centres. In this way, hundreds of other cities (in Europe and North America, as well as in Asia and other regions of the world) are left ‘off the map’ (Robinson, 2002), perpetuating a pervasive ‘metrocentricity’ (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). The point, then, is not to seek to identify great Asian cities, but to bring a greater number and diversity of cities from the region into the crucible of global urban knowledge production. In addition, it is important to note that the more-than-regional or ‘global’ theoretical scope of Asian urban locations is not merely a matter of their conformity to expectations of global city-ness or ‘globopolis’ (Douglass, 2009), but also arises from other forms of ‘worlding’ (Roy, 2009; Roy and Ong, 2011; -Simone, 2001), including academic practices of extending regionally situated insights to the theorisation of cities everywhere.
This leads on to a second way in which Asian cities may be understood as frontiers of knowledge, concerning the practices through which they travel as models, lessons or exemplars. While this includes scholarly efforts at theory building from cities in Asia—Ananya Roy’s demonstration of how understandings of urban informality from Asia and other parts of the global South may be applied to all cities, including those in North America, being perhaps the clearest example to date (Roy, 2005, 2009)—a wide range of other urban authorities are also involved. Most prominent in recent social science literature have been policymakers, planning professionals and consultants associated with the mobility of urban best practices (see Peck and Theodore, 2010, and the papers that their journal Special Issue introduces). Such work has brought to academic attention some supposedly leading edge cities that do not normally figure on global city lists—examples include Austin, TX, as a creative city (Peck, 2005) and, as recently detailed in this journal, Bilbao and Barcelona as models of urban regeneration (Gonzalez, 2011). Although most such examples continue to be located in Europe or North America, there is also a growing body of work that recognises cities in Asia as ‘exporters’ of urban policy knowledge: greater Kuala Lumpur as an inspiration for ‘high-tech’ development in Hyderabad (Bunnell and Das, 2010); and Singapore as an urban planning and development ‘model’ (Chua, 2011). Colin McFarlane’s recent work on urban learning, meanwhile, highlights ‘urban learning assemblages’ in the global South and shows that the translocalisation of urban knowledge involves social movements as well as academic, policy and planning professionals (McFarlane, 2011).

Both academic theorisation of cities, and the wider practices through which they travel, arise from, and in turn generate, urban imaginations—the third of the ways in which Asian cities may be relocated as global urban frontiers. Cities in what Malcolm McKinnon (2011) refers to as ‘developing Asia’ have, in common with much of the rest of the global South, conventionally been imagined in terms of problematic ‘third world’ urbanisation. It is, in part, neo-orientalist lenses—restricting imaginings of cities in developing Asia to a stereotypical archive of slums, squalor and overcrowding—that have driven city and national governments to pursue ambitious urban re-imaging strategies (Bunnell, 2004a). Of course, high-rise re-imaging undertaken in a city such as Kuala Lumpur (KL) may, at one level, be understood as an attempt to remake the Malaysian national capital in the image of global city frontiers that lie elsewhere, not least in New York City (Pile, 1999). Yet, irrespective of the success or failure of such ambitions, KL (or any other city) always exceeds prior global city pathways and is simultaneously worlded in a variety of other ways. In terms of ‘worlding from below’ (Simone, 2001), this might include the practices of migrant workers whose hands literally constructed KL’s would-be global city infrastructure and in whose heads imaginings of urban transformation are carried back to cities and villages elsewhere in the region (Nah and Bunnell, 2005). In a very different way, KL has also emerged as an urban centre for the Islamic world, where affluent visitors from western Asia (the ‘Middle East’) can shop in style while never having to look far for halal food (Fischer, 2011). Youths in Malaysia itself, meanwhile, are more likely to follow ‘Seoul fashion’ than trends from Paris or Milan, not least because of the regional popularity of Korean film and television series that both depict and foster geographical imaginations of urban modernity that are not located in Europe or North America (Shim, 2006, p. 29).
Overview of the Papers

At least one of these ‘frontier’ conceptions of Asian cities runs through each of the nine papers that follow. However, the point is not to try to map particular papers, or the cities that they deal with, into one or more of the three heuristic categories that have already been elaborated. The first paper in this Special Issue is one that shows very clearly the complex intertwining of urban theory, practice and imagination. Colin McFarlane’s paper casts urban India as a theoretical frontier from or through which the vast literature on urban entrepreneurialism can be extended and rethought. Yet the cases that he details also reveal the mobile practices of a range of actors—civil society groups and ordinary citizens as well as the kinds of policy élites and consultants who have featured most prominently in the recent proliferation of work on travelling urban ideas and knowledges—and the effects of shifting imaginings of informal settlements in the minds of donors and politicians. Drawing largely upon work conducted in Mumbai over the past decade, McFarlane examines civil society groups as co-producers of forms of urban entrepreneurialism—and of associated models that travel—rather than as merely conduits for their enactment or implementation. Informal settlements are thus brought into view as a “key frontier in the production of contemporary urban entrepreneurialism” (McFarlane, 2012: 2795)—sites from which the management and construction of toilet blocks as well as daily savings schemes emerge as model forms of ‘slum activism’. However, McFarlane stresses that the activities of civil society organisations and slum residents are bound up with, without being reducible to, the (re)production of urban entrepreneurialism. It is this excess which means that slum dwellers’ activities and capacities “can also provide the scope for different possibilities beyond entrepreneurial formulations” (McFarlane, 2012: 2812).

Civil society activities are also a feature of the second paper, albeit in rather different ways from those elaborated by McFarlane in the context of urban India. Yong-Sook Lee and Eun-Jung Hwang provide an examination of creative city programmes in Seoul, South Korea. While cultural industries are a longstanding feature of economic development strategies in Seoul, Lee and Hwang are concerned in particular with the political period that began when Oh Se-hoon became mayor in 2006. Mayor Oh went on study tours to model ‘creative’ cities, mostly in western Europe, and subsequently began to promote Seoul as a model in its own right—mostly for other cities in Asia. However, what might uncritically be read as a creative city model or policy frontier is cast by Lee and Hwang as a largely unmerited quest for political legitimacy. Nonetheless, Lee and Hwang hold out the hope that critique from South Korea’s vibrant civil society can help to redirect Seoul’s creative city strategies away from the current focus on construction of physical infrastructure and making the city attractive to tourists, and towards the realisation of a more open, tolerant and democratic city.

The subsequent two papers each, in different ways, evaluate Singapore as a model for, or leading edge of, global urban transformation. In the case of Erica Yap’s paper, the focus is a giant observation wheel, known as the Singapore Flyer, which opened to the public in 2008. Although the Singapore Flyer (deliberately) eclipsed the height of an earlier wheel in London, Yap shows that it is the London Eye which is more frequently referenced by cities looking to build wheels of their own. For Yap, this connotes a failure of the project to supplant London in global imaginaries, just as Seoul (as elaborated by Lee and Hwang)
has struggled to position itself as a model creative city. Zhang Jun’s paper, in contrast, details a case in which Singapore has been enthusiastically embraced as a model. Shenzhen, itself very much at the leading edge of China’s capitalist transformation, was shaped through dozens of overseas study tours conducted from the late 1970s. Initially, the plan was for Shenzhen to undergo ‘Hongkongisation’, but Singapore gradually replaced Hong Kong as the favourite source of ‘policy borrowing’. Whether or not Singapore should be seen as best practice is a moot point. Zhang suggests that, in the case of Chinese policy elites, Singapore’s allure derived largely from its state-controlled authoritarianism, but certainly this is a case where it is a city in Asia, rather than in Europe or North America, that is deemed to be exemplary.

There follow two papers which examine the recent transformation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Tom Percival and Paul Waley focus specifically on the private-sector development of satellite cities in peri-urban areas. These are differentiated from gated communities (which have also received considerable attention in studies of Asian cities—see, for example, Pow, 2009; Hogan et al., 2012) in that satellite cities tend to be larger and incorporate commercial and leisure as well as residential functions. Significantly, the developments that Percival and Waley describe are being driven by capital and models from within the Asian region. Again, Singapore is involved (in the form of master planning consultants), but the main players in real estate development are from Indonesia and South Korea. In the latter case, Phnom Penh was one of various (peri-)urban frontiers extended by companies which had outgrown the domestic real estate market in South Korea. Willem Paling, in his contribution to the Special Issue, complicates the picture of intra-Asian private-sector-led transformation in Phnom Penh by considering other actors, including international donors and high-level politicians. A French development-aid-funded master plan intended to guide public and private development in Phnom Penh until 2020 has been thwarted by private-sector projects that emerge from opaque—and, it should be noted, very difficult to research—political networks and patronage systems. The private-sector developments that have refashioned the urban landscape of the Cambodian capital, therefore, need to be understood in a wider political context—one characterised by highly centralised decision-making power but also very limited state capacity to guide or restrict metropolitan developmental processes.

State practices and imaginings are also foregrounded in the next two contributions to the Special Issue, on the cities of Putrajaya and Macao respectively. In the case of Putrajaya, Malaysia’s recently constructed federal government administrative centre, Sarah Moser shows how the urban landscape may be read in terms of Malay political elites’ conceptions of Islam and national identity. If the transformation of the skyline of the national capital, Kuala Lumpur, in the 1990s was about projecting an image of modern Malaysia (see also Bunnell, 2004b), Moser understands Putrajaya as an expression of ‘High Islam’ in the form of ‘fantasy Middle Eastern architecture’. The latter is not so much about positioning Malaysia’s main urban region in a hierarchy topped by London or New York, but imaginatively locates Putrajaya (and Malaysia more broadly) in an Islamic world centred in the Middle East. The ‘success’ of the Putrajaya’s High Islam aesthetic is such that it has joined Singapore as a regional model for urban development, with Indonesia’s Island Riau Province boasting of its new provincial capital (Dompak) as ‘The Singapore and Putrajaya of Tanjung Pinang’. In contrast, Chin-Ee Ong and Hilary du Cros
note that the city of Macao has often been referred to as ‘the Las Vegas of the East’. The archetypal gambling city is in the state of Nevada in the US, not a Special Administrative Region of China, despite the fact that Macao’s gambling revenues are now more than double those of Las Vegas. However, Ong and du Cros’ concern is not to invert the comparative gesture—making Las Vegas ‘the Macao of the West’—but, rather, to examine the multiple worlds within which images of Macao circulate. Focusing in particular on the Shanghai Expo of 2010, Ong and du Cros show that the Macao Pavilion was as much about negotiating the Special Administrative Region’s national political position as a recently incorporated part of PRC, as it was about showcasing images for the consumption of would-be investors, gamblers or other visitors.

In the final paper in the Special Issue, Andrew Harris returns to where Colin McFarlane began in the first paper: Mumbai. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that Harris’ paper is a critical reflection on the considerable popular and academic attention afforded to Mumbai in recent years. In academic terms, Mumbai has emerged as one of the cities at the forefront of a ‘Southern turn’ in urban studies. As Harris points out, even Ed Soja—well known for having suggested that Los Angeles is where it ‘all comes together’—has listed Mumbai (along with Shanghai, Delhi and Singapore) as Asian cities from which Eurocentred city studies have much to learn. While the growing attention to cities beyond the Euro-American heartlands of academic knowledge production is to be welcomed, Harris cautions against celebrating Mumbai’s growing prominence in Anglophone urban studies. In particular, he argues that it is important to be mindful of how Mumbai is attended to, engaged with and represented. All too often, Mumbai is apprehended as a global city, with the result that large areas of the city—with associated histories and grounded realities—are overlooked. Put another way, Mumbai is largely engaged with in ways that fit existing Euro-American experiences and Anglophone vocabularies rather than in ways that serve to unsettle them.

Global Urban Frontiers?

There is one minor, but important, difference between the title of the workshop where seven of the papers that follow were first presented—the exceptions being the papers by Erica Yap and by Sarah Moser—and the title of this Special Issue: namely, the addition of a question mark after the main part of the title. This addition is prompted by a questioning of the term’s suitability for the cases that are detailed in the contributions that follow. The paper which questions the suitability of ‘global urban frontiers’ most explicitly is Yong-Sook Lee and Eun-Jung Hwang’s article on Seoul, although they are working with a specific understanding of frontier in relation to the advancement of a particular urban policy type. Lee and Hwang’s own article is evidence that it is possible to advance frontiers of critical urban studies knowledge about creative cities from a contextually rich analysis of a city in Asia, even if the leading edge of creative city policy and practice remains elsewhere. Here, we might usefully evoke Kuan-Hsing Chen’s conception of Asia as ‘method’ (Chen, 2010). In his ‘geocolonial’ critique of Soja’s discussion of Los Angeles, Chen (2010, p. 107) asks ‘what differences might have been produced’ had the reference points of post-modern urban space been Asian cities, rather than LA? For us, this provokes further questions: why specifically Asian cities or only Asian cities? And, which cities in Asia? We can begin to
answer the first of these questions by returning to the notion that Asia remains a relatively untapped region for urban theory production, and one which includes urban diversity that is often held apart by regional or area studies partitioning of the world. Yet we could perhaps point to other frontier geographies, including North America: surely different insights would also have been produced if the reference point was Lexington, Kentucky, rather than LA (see McCann, 2004). In other words, Asian cities may be located as ‘global urban frontiers’, but this is not to suggest that Asia has a monopoly on the resources for urban (re)theorisation.

As for the second question concerning ‘which cities?’, we re-emphasise the importance of acknowledging and embracing Asia’s urban diversity—Asian urbanisms (plural). The point is not to substitute LA with Seoul or Phnom Penh or Mumbai—as Andrew Harris warns us in this Special Issue—but to see Asia’s urban diversity as a shifting theoretical frontier. If Mumbai becomes the new LA, then it may be time to examine elsewhere in urban Maharashtra or cities in other states in India, or in other countries in the region; and then, perhaps, to use these experiences to enable a critical comparative relook at Mumbai itself (see Robinson, 2011). The articles collected in this Special Issue thus form part of an ongoing process of pushing the frontiers by bringing more of urban Asia into the comparative crucible of global urban knowledge. In geographical terms, the frontiers may be extended through examination of smaller cities than most of those that feature here (see also Roy, 2011; Chen and Kanna, 2012), especially given that the majority of the world’s urban population live in cities with less than one million inhabitants (UNFPA, 2007, p. 10). Another way would be to incorporate insights from other parts of ‘Asia’—the post-colonial urban projects of central Asia (see Koch, forthcoming), for example, or the Gulf cities of South-west Asia (Mohammad and Sidaway, 2012). Finally, perhaps the most important frontiers of knowledge from a region in which half of the world’s urban population live, are those which attend to the small, everyday and yet often worldly initiatives of ordinary people (Simone, 2010).

Notes

1. It is in this way that our orientation may be contrasted with earlier attempts to distinguish regionally specific typologies of cities from experiences in the West (for example, McGee, 1967). It is also for this reason that Peter Rimmer and Howard Dick recently made the explicit distinction between ‘the city in South-east Asia’ and ‘the South-east Asian city’ (Rimmer and Dick, 2009).
2. This serves to re-emphasise the point that the region includes not only ‘developing Asia’ and cities that are often framed in terms of the global South, but also cities such as Seoul and Tokyo that are commonly ranked among the upper tiers of global city hierarchies. Of course, many cities in the region – including Kuala Lumpur – may also be understood as straddling such divides.

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