Whither the ‘Asian’ City?

The worlds of Santosh, or Mohammed or the women of Yangzhou cannot be explained by globalization yet that does not relegate them to the category of ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’. They live in kaleidoscope worlds, as does anyone living in a rapidly changing capitalist city. It is a world in which making a living is an erratic, uncertain enterprise; in which faith can be regular observance, occasion for celebration or simply overlooked: in which marriage provides status and security but also carries risks. They are worlds in which ‘of the city’ or ‘being urban’ is the here and now, in which ‘west’ might be no more than a compass point. [p. 107]

Sin Yee Koh

Reviewed publication:

In Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building, Malcolm McKinnon argues that globalization is not the only default explanation for urban transformations in contemporary Asian cities. Instead, he argues that cities in “developing Asia” – which he interprets as the People’s Republic of China, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia [p. 15] - face two processes that “do not affect Western cities in the same way” [p. 3]. These processes are urbanization (i.e., massive transformations of the social, cultural and built environment) and nation-building (i.e., the process through which a population of a particular territory acquires a shared identity). He supports his argument empirically by adopting comparative analyses of a metropolitan centre where “a great deal had been written” [p. 14] with a lesser known provincial or second tier city “with which it was more practicable for the researcher to become acquainted” [p. 14]. These are the three pairings of Shanghai with Yangzhou in China, Jakarta with Semarang in Indonesia, and Bangalore and Mysore in India.

The book is organized into four parts. Following an introduction in Part 1, Part 2 discusses urbanization and cities; chapter 2 focuses on urbanization, defined as “the process by which cities and towns become more populous and more economically significant than rural areas” [p. 37], while chapter 6 focuses on urbanism, defined as transformations in cities as-va-vis traditional areas of life, including “new levels of education, new kinds of occupation, and new opportunities for private space” [p. 71]. Part 3 discusses how various processes in Asian cities relate to nation-building: chapter 4 discusses businesses, i.e., the “building of domestic networks and markets by capitalist businesses” [p. 136], chapter 5 discusses the flows of domestic labour migration; chapter 6 discusses the travel and hospitality industries in cities; and chapter 7 discusses how commercial popular culture articulates a national and global phenomenon in developing Asian cities. Part 4 concludes the book and postulates the future of urbanization, urbanism and nation-building in developing Asian cities.

McKinnon’s broader objective is to question Eurocentric dominance in urban theories that have been conveniently projected upon non-Western contexts. Globalization, taken as the default explanation for late-20th and early-21st century Asian capitalism, results in “the relative invisibility of both urbanization and nation-building in scholarly discussion” [p. 9]. Triggered by his visits to a number of Asian cities in late-1990s and early-2000s, McKinnon questions how globalization has been conveniently interpreted as “symmetrical globalization” [p. 214], arguing instead that globalization pans out “asymmetrically” in different (developing Asia) contexts. Thus, he argues that it is useful to consider “multiple globalizations” [p. 215], as well as how the shift from one type of globalization to another implicates processes at other scales (e.g., regional, subnational, national). However, a casual reader without the benefit of knowledge of recent debates in contemporary urban studies would find it difficult to follow McKinnon’s book unless it gives prominent space to ethnographic accounts and detailed descriptions of urban phenomena in the respective chosen cities. As a consequence, little space is given to explain the theoretical conventions and contexts that underlie its analysis. It is as if McKinnon assumed that readers would be familiar with debates about Eurocentrism and the questioning of globalization in urban studies. As a result, the reader is left to do a lot of work: firstly, to connect the dots between the stories; and secondly, to understand how these fit into the flow of arguments at the broader theoretical perspective.

On the other hand, as an academic researcher and writer, I find it hard to get past two shortcomings of the book. Firstly, while McKinnon has rightly identified that non-Western cities go through processes of urbanization and nation-building that were not similarly experienced in Western cities, his somewhat careless categorising of “developing Asia” repeats the notion of Eurocentric globalization. In fact, the purpose of the book is “to draw out common elements in the urban Asian experience of globalization” [p. 13], McKinnon has somewhat generalized and essentialized the “developing Asia” on a few conveniently selected case studies.

Secondly, although McKinnon has attempted to address issues of bias in his ethnographic methods (e.g., selection bias, language barriers) [pp. 11-19], this appears cursory and lacks further elaboration. For example, no mention was made of what the bias could possibly be. As a result, findings of his fieldwork visit, other than a quick mention that “ethnographic investigation was carried out periodically in the case study cities over six years” [p. 16], without explaining why and what implications this would have on the analysis. These shortcomings, unfortunately, do not do justice to his use of comparative urban research, as recently advocated by urban studies scholars.

There is no doubt that McKinnon’s message is important: cities in “developing Asia” have divergent urban experiences “on the ground” [p. 69], which urban theories developed from the Western experience cannot quite capture and explain. Furthermore, processes and phenomena within a nation-state may better inform our understanding of cities, in addition to globalization and nation-building. Unfortunately, this message has not been fully articulated and/or supported with convincing comparative analysis of both “developing Asia” and “the West”. For the significance of the underlying message contained within, I wish that this book had articulated the message loud and clear, instead of leaving the casual reader lost without a clear sense of how the case studies connect with each other and to a broader debate.

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A few poorly organised men

Indonesia’s transition from Suharto’s authoritarian regime to a more democratic government saw a number of violent uprisings, especially in the so-called Outer Islands. Apart from the separatist movements that sought to establish their own independent states (in Aceh, East Timor, and West Papua), many violent regional conflicts materialized along ethnic-religious cleavages.

Reviewed publication:

The interreligious conflict in Poso, Sulawesi, was Indonesia’s most protracted conflict during the post-Suharto era (1998–2007). While previously a quiet and peaceful locality without any history of interreligious unrest, between 600 and 1000 people lost their lives there due to the outbreak of violence and the many acts of reprisal. Although this number made the Poso conflict less damaging than the deadly clashes in the neighbouring Minahasa taking place around the same time, the events in Poso nonetheless had deep repercussions among the local Muslim and Christian populations. Also, it left a distressing mark on the national recollection.

Based on long-term observations and multiple fieldwork encounters over ten years, Dave McRae has gained unique insights into the local settings in Poso and the socio-political developments that shaped the bloody events. Thus, his book presents the first comprehensive history of the conflict in Poso. Nonetheless, given that the causes and courses of interreligious violence in Indonesia, and elsewhere, have huge numbers of scholars, experts of local conflict histories have to put up with the question of what are the greater contributions of their books to understanding both the genesis of interreligious violence and finding ways to terminate it? In other words, what could be profited from reading a narrow account of just one conflict rather than a more comparative analysis of interreligious violence that takes into account a number of conflicts? There are a number of good reasons, which make Dave McRae’s book an enriching and rewarding reading.

Violent conflicts in Indonesia have often been described as the consequence of the rapid political change after the end of the Suharto-era. This change was characterised first and foremost by democratisation and decentralisation that allowed more people to partake in political competition. McRae, however, makes the effort to study the local dynamics in great detail in order to explain both the onset and the cumulative dynamics of the on-going violence, rather than just assuming that “violence [can be utilised] as political tool in political contestation” [p. 54] when transitioning state authorities (including the security forces) can no longer guarantee law and order. McRae points out the “insufficiency of political interest to account completely for the violent action of the key actors” [p. 64]. As McRae successfully demonstrates, by instigating violence against people of the opposite faith, local conflict leaders had little to gain, but much to lose. Having been found guilty for the instigation of violence, in fact, cost a number of promising candidates their prospect of success in
At one point in his intriguing, provocative and sometimes irritating *A Lover’s Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading*, literary scholar Ranjan Ghosh claims that indigination and dissent “can infuse a sense of discovery to our historical studies.” [p. 79] The phrase, subconsciously perhaps, describes Ghosh’s own work, a work that is not only written in dissent, but cries out in justified indigation.

Paul Doolan


THE ENEMY THAT EARN GSOSH’S WRATH is those scholars and policy-makers who shrunk historical narratives into the pliable political tools of communalists; more specifically, the target of his ire is a Hindu fundamentalism that, thriving on anti-Muslim emotionalism, represents Indian history within a horizon permitting space only for a narrative of Hinduism, cleansed of all outsider contamination.

The heart of the book is an essay, “Reality of Represent- ation, Reality behind Representation: History and Memory” [p. 15] in which Ghosh challenges his readers to reconsider the mytho-history that has coalesced around Ayodhya and has compared the situation in Ayodhya to Jerusalem. He has compared the situation in Ayodhya to Jerusalem. “History is an argument without an end.” [p. 104] Ghosh has sent us from the frontline of the memory wars in India. No end to this argument is yet in sight. This book is a call for tolerance and sanity and doing history responsibly.

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the impending local elections. By studying the most prominent leaders and core combatants, McRae not only disentangles the network of leaders and core combatants, McRae not only disentangles the allegiances and motivations of Indian and overseas. Although these mujahidin brought their arms and took on the Indian government, they were not interested in a confrontation with the government. They were interested in securing their own survival and gaining a foothold in the region.

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