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Urban Poetics and Politics in Asia, Part I

Special Issue edited by Patrick Heinrich, Francesca Tarocco and Daniele Brombal

Editorial

Patrick Heinrich, Francesca Tarocco, Daniele Brombal 5

Articles

Area Studies for Urban Sustainability Research:
Current Practice and Untapped Potential
Daniele Brombal 11

Expatriating the Universal:
A Decolonial Imagination beyond Authentic “Asia”
Aya Hino 31

Tokyo behind Screens:
Participant Observation in a City of Mobile Digital Communication
Florian Purkarthofer 55

A Place of Caring:
Politics of the HIV Testing Centre in the Red House Square, Taipei
I-Yi Hsieh 79

Review Article

Contemporary Studies on Asian Cities:

Mark Pendleton / Jamie Coates (eds), *Thinking from the Yamanote. Space, Place and Mobility in Tokyo's Past and Present*

Dorothy Solinger (ed.), *Polarized Cities: Portraits of Rich and Poor in Urban China*

June Wang / Tim Oakes / Yang Yang (eds), Making of Cultural Cities in Asia:
Mobility, Assemblage, and the Politics of Aspirational Urbanism.
Patrick Heinrich 103

Book Reviews

Ranjit Sen, Calcutta in Colonial Transition
Mahua Bhattacharya 117

Upinder Singh, Political Violence in Ancient India
Annette Schmiedchen 120

Axel Michaels, Kultur und Geschichte Nepals
Nina Mirnig 122

Feng Yanggang, Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts
Barend ter Haar 127

Xu Zhiyuan, Paper Tiger. Inside the Real China
Albrecht Rothacher 133

Christopher J. Shepherd, Haunted Houses and Ghostly Encounters:
Ethnography and Animism in East Timor
Lúcio Sousa 136

Authors 141

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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Area Studies for Urban Sustainability Research: Current Practice and Untapped Potential

Daniele Brombal

Abstract

This paper discusses the potential of Area Studies to inform scientific inquiry for urban sustainability. It draws from two strains of scholarship: the systemic and place-based research on sustainability and the post-1989 reflection on the conceptual foundations of Area Studies. The author starts from the assumption that Area Studies and sustainability research share a similar concern over place(s), shaped over time by human-to-nature and human-to-human relations. He then lays down two pathways for the contribution of Area Studies to urban sustainability research. The first reflects the role of Area Studies in overcoming disciplinary and sectorial barriers, fostering holistic understandings of sustainability. The second relates to the capacity for self-reflexivity inherent in Area Studies, which nurtures critical approaches to the study of sustainability. Once its epistemological and ethical potential is unearthed, Area Studies can become a thriving trans-disciplinary field informing socio-ecological transformations.

Keywords: Area Studies, urban sustainability, place, transdisciplinary research, Asia

1. Introduction

Our epoch is filled with concern about the anthropogenic menace to the survival of human civilisation on Earth (Beck 2011, McNeill / Engelke 2016). Environmental awareness has spurred novel forms of mobilisation (Temper et al. 2018), epitomised by the Fridays for Future and the Extinction Rebellion movements. Academia plays an important role in exploring change for sustainability and informing a caring commitment towards the planet (see e.g. Capra / Mattei 2016, and the German network Scientists for Future, www.scientists4future.org). With over 50% of human beings now living in urban areas (UN 2018), cities play a pivotal role in sustainability innovation. Against this background, this paper explores the potential of Area Studies (AS) to in-

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form scientific enquiry for urban sustainability. The latter is hereby understood as (a) inclusive of environmental, cultural, social and economic dimensions; and (b) informed by values of environmental and social justice (UCLG 2010, Haugthorn 1999). I draw from two strains of scholarship: the systemic and place-based research for sustainability; and the post-Cold War reflection on the theory and practice of AS. The reason why I take the end of the Cold War as starting point for this analysis is that 1989 was followed by a naturalisation of the “Western” mode of civilisation, based on capitalism and (neo) liberal democracy. To a large extent, this cultural process jeopardised the rationale for area-based knowledge and deprived AS of its critical edge. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the idea of AS as a repository of technical expertise with no theoretical significance, subservient to social sciences and instrumental to economic interests, became widespread (Ludden 1997, Wang 2010). In fact, AS has often been instrumental to the ideology of globalisation, depoliticising its inherent inequality (Wang 2010). On the other hand, these processes have opened windows of opportunity to debate the role of AS as a critical form of knowledge.¹ This paper seeks to contribute to this debate.

In the first section, I reframe the definition of AS based on the notion of place. I also illustrate how AS and sustainability research may share a common concern about socio-ecological interactions unfolding in places. In the second section I lay down two complementary pathways of AS contribution to the study of urban sustainability. The first reflects the practice of AS in multi- and interdisciplinary research on sustainability. This is common currency in many academic organisations seeking to integrate contributions from different strains of scholarship. However, its practice remains fragmented, due to the lack of a shared ethical and cognitive framework. The second pathway has to do with the potential for self-reflexivity of AS. The latter can be an important resource for a deeper comprehension of human-nature relations and of their global significance, as well as for the promotion of a radical rethinking of socio-ecological patterns. In the concluding section, I summarise the key messages of this paper and their relevance for sustainability research and politics. In the paper I bring examples of AS scholarship relevant for sustainability, also based on first-hand experience in inter- and trans-disciplinary² projects.

1 An important contribution in this respect has been made by David Palumbo-Liu, with specific reference to ethnic studies. The latter, he argues, provide a locus for “a critique of the ideological apparatuses that distribute power and resources unevenly among the different constituencies of a multi-cultural society” (Palumbo-Liu 1995: 2, in Wang 2010: 422).

2 Unlike interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity “challenges the entire framework of disciplinary thinking and seeks to assemble new approaches [. . .] using materials from existing scholarly disciplines for new purposes” (Bernstein 2015, n.p.). Moreover, it is intrinsically open to the integration of informal knowledge (e.g. indigenous knowledge).

2. Area Studies, Place and Sustainability Studies share similar concerns

2.1. A definition of Area Studies

In *The Politics of Knowledge*, social anthropologist David Szanton defines Area Studies as a heterogeneous group of fields, sharing a commitment to: (a) intensive language study; (b) field research; (c) the comprehension of local histories, perceptions, materials and interpretations; (d) elaborate grounded theory by means of in-depth observation; and (e) the integration of complementary disciplinary approaches (Szanton 2002). The field of AS is therefore understood as an exemplar of interdisciplinary intellectual work (Calhoun 2017, Ludden 1997) with a distinctive territorial nature. In fact, AS subfields are divided into areas whose geographical boundaries may vary based on historical facts, political factors and particular interests (Ludden 1997). Ideally, these subdivisions embed scientific taxonomies, modelled on different patterns of human civilisation. This allows AS to generate knowledge attentive to context, i.e., sensitive to geographical, historical and cultural variation (Khun 1984; on the notion of context see also Geertz 1973).

Self-reflexivity is another important feature of AS. This can be understood as the researcher's awareness of the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the production of knowledge; and of his/her own position and role with respect to such processes (Lee 2001). Self-reflexivity translates into the recognition that any given approach employed in research is by definition limited (Jacobs 2015, Blackman / Featherstone 2015). This rejection of claims of universality derives from the daily scientific practice of AS scholars, which exposes the inadequacy of narrow epistemologies and sharp separations between disciplines (c.f. Wallerstein et al. 1996).

This position is also rooted in the experience of the precursors of Oriental studies in the XVI and XVII centuries. Back then, no rigid disciplinary compartments existed and the euro-centrism that would characterise modern techno-scientific thought had not yet fully emerged. The Jesuit missions in China and Japan, for example, are revealing in this respect. Despite being primarily remembered for their contributions in the humanities, Jesuits were engaged in a complex variety of scientific practices, encompassing also natural philosophy (Harris 2005). The same applies to other Europeans working in Arab countries, such as Jacobus Golius (1596–1667) (IBTTM 2019). This versatility was instrumental to confessional, political and economic goals, whose attainment was facilitated by the function of these scholars as knowledge brokers (Harris 2005; Brombal 2018). And yet their holism resonates with the contemporary debate on the scientific and societal contributions of AS.

The key element of interest for the purpose of this paper is the potential of AS to produce knowledge that enables our comprehension of a core driver of human civilisation, i.e., the interaction between human beings and nature (Schäfer 2010). In the next two sections, I put forward a few concepts that are useful for reframing AS in a socio-ecologically aware fashion. I will start by introducing the notion of place and its potential for establishing a connection between AS and sustainability studies.

2.2. The notion of place as a key entry point to AS for sustainability

Despite being often defined spatially, the theory and practice of AS can be better understood by employing the notion of place. Rather than being defined by physical boundaries, place is made of relations that both shape the physical space and permeate it with subjective and collective meaning(s) (Doreen 2004, Cheng et al. 2003). Such relations consist of interactions among human beings and between human beings and more-than-human entities,³ be they living or inanimate. The essence of place is therefore both social and ecological. It encompasses the interdependency between human communities and natural environments (Marsden 2011), thus overcoming the anthropocentrism that informs most conceptualisations of space, to start with that of Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). The importance given to interrelations – rather than boundaries – also implies that place-making processes are highly context-dependent. They consist of systemic interactions among cultural, social, political and biophysical elements, peculiar to a certain place at a certain time in history.

Due to its context-sensitive and multi-faceted nature – cultural, linguistic, political and ecological – the category of place is of great relevance to AS (LIAS 2013). At the same time, AS is ideally positioned to contribute to scholarship about places, by drawing from a vast cumulative knowledge, acquired through an intimate and prolonged relation with cultures and societies. This relation nurtures AS scholars' *Fingerspitzengefühl*, i.e., their capacity to intuitively comprehend places to which they have devoted their studies (Schäfer 2010). Besides being an analytical tool for AS practice, the notion of place unearths the reflexive potential of AS. Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty made an important – albeit probably involuntary – contribution in this respect. In his volume *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Chakrabarty forcefully states the importance of place in his intellectual journey:

3 This expression encompasses all non-human entities on Earth. It defies the human-nature dichotomy and endorses the obligation to care for the planet (Brombal 2019).

It was thus incumbent on me to demonstrate from where – what kind of a place – my own critique issued, for this being-from-a-place is what gave the critique both its charge and its limitations. I needed to think through forms of life that I knew with some degree of intimacy. (Chakrabarty 2009: xviii)

By departing from the assumption that “thought is related to places”, Chakrabarty rejects the placelessness of Eurocentric modernity and defies scientised claims of truth that uphold its edifice (Calhoun 2017; see also Wang 2002). Based on this rejection of homogeneity, Chakrabarty endorses the necessity to shift our focus from the normative concept of the “transition” to modernity to the one of “translation”. Modernity then becomes an open-ended process, iteratively shaped within places and by their interaction with global trends (Chakrabarty 2009). This is consistent with the idea that indigenous knowledge(s) can help us in envisioning socio-ecological patterns, casting off modernist and pro-development biases (see Norman 2017). It is also of fundamental importance for AS, because it resonates with the idea that places – and hence languages, cultures, social structures, landscapes and ecosystems – play a role in shaping civilisation, by translating locally the global drivers of change and civilisational challenges. In the epoch of the Anthropocene, this means first and foremost tackling the troubled relation between humans and the natural environment (Crutzen 2002).

2.3. The city as an important locus of study for place-based sustainability

Urban studies has long employed the perspective of place and place-making. This approach has been further elaborated in the field of environmental sustainability (Simon et al. 2008). In fact, urbanisation is shaped over time by the interaction between people and biophysical elements. It is therefore of clear socio-ecological interest. The importance attributed to cities in sustainability research is reinforced by the fact that they epitomise the interaction between socio-ecological systems at different scales. Cities are at the same time at the receiving end of global cultural, socio-economic and environmental trends, and potential agents of institutional and technological change for sustainability (Brombal et al. 2018). Also, cities can be seen as in-between-nodes within wider networks, where different forms of knowledge and practices are exchanged and brokered.

Although environmental quality and health have been for centuries an important issue in city planning, the debate about urban sustainability has been mainstreamed only in recent decades. A milestone was the 1992 UN Rio Conference on Environment and Development, which streamlined concepts of sustainable territorial planning and management. The process opened by the Rio

Conference eventually resulted in a specific framework for urban intervention, the Local Agenda 21. The Agenda called for a comprehensive approach to sustainability, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects, to be pursued by means of meaningful consultations with the public. A number of different positions have emerged on how to translate these objectives into reality. Despite their heterogeneity, we may subdivide them into two overarching groups. On the one hand, there are visions of the future inspired by the norm of weak sustainability (Scoones 2016, Gutiérrez 1996, Martínez-Alier 1995). They share a faith in the capacity of technology and economic capital to mitigate the anthropogenic destruction of the planet and if necessary to repair – or replace altogether – ecosystems vital to human life. This approach sees nature as instrumental to human needs and tends not to bestow any intrinsic value upon it. Very often, this translates into actions and narratives informed by viability – combining economic growth and environmental quality – rather than comprehensive sustainability, inclusive of social aspects (Brombal et al. 2018). Projects of smart/eco/green(er) cities – and the narratives underlying them – are typical expressions of such faith in technology and money to promote a more efficient relationship between mankind and nature. One of the main reasons for the popularity of these projects among technical and political elites lies in their scalability and replicability, facilitated by the possibility to measure their results according to standardised parameters and quantitative metrics (see e.g., Riegler 2017).

On the other hand lies strong sustainability, which acknowledges the irreplaceability of natural capital and posits that technology cannot make up for the disruption of ecosystem services. Moreover, it attaches importance to social justice and its interconnection to unequal access to resources (Gutiérrez 1996, Martínez-Alier 1995). Strong sustainability implies both the inclusion of social and cultural elements and a more comprehensive understanding of prosperity, often encompassing the well-being of more-than-human entities living with us on the planet. By highlighting the need to include other dimensions and entities, this vision reframes the kind of change we would need in order to pursue sustainability. Building on the tenets of system thinking, it highlights the importance of cognitive and emotional attitudes as leverage points for radical, transformative change. This makes it more open to embracing the contribution of indigenous movements and bottom-up participation. Mobilisation for the urban commons, community-based regeneration and resistance to gentrification are just a few examples of urban practices that draw from this conceptualisation.

By substituting technology with culture as the primary locus of change,⁴ this vision endorses difference over homogeneity. In fact, change generated by this

4 This does not mean that it eliminates the role of technology altogether, however.

approach is hardly measurable by standardised parameters, both in terms of processes and outcomes. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that such processes are much more context-dependent – and therefore fuzzier and unpredictable – than those based on the adoption of advanced technology. In other terms, they embrace the idea that place is crucial in reframing and responding to global challenges, echoing Chakrabarty's proposition illustrated in the previous section. As we shall see, both of these visions underlying urban sustainability can encompass the role of AS.

3. Area Studies and Urban Sustainability Research

3.1. The relevance of AS to sustainability research: key themes and trends

In a nutshell, one reason for the relevance of AS to sustainability research lies in its capacity to advance the understanding of place-based values and norms driving socio-ecological relations. Seen from a systemic perspective, AS is concerned with those patterns, structures and mental models that run deep within societies and which translate into biophysical modifications of the natural environment. There are plenty of examples in this respect.

In the sub-field of Chinese Studies, the most notable example is provided by sociologist and Sinologist Karl August Wittfogel. In his volume *Oriental Despotism* (1957) he provides an *ante litteram* socio-ecological account of the norms of political power in Asia. His idea is that a close relation exists between the establishment of irrigation systems over large territories, the pervasiveness of political power and the development of societies.⁵ Despite being heatedly discussed among historians (Perry 1988), Wittfogel's thesis still stimulates debate among researchers in the field (Bichsel 2016).

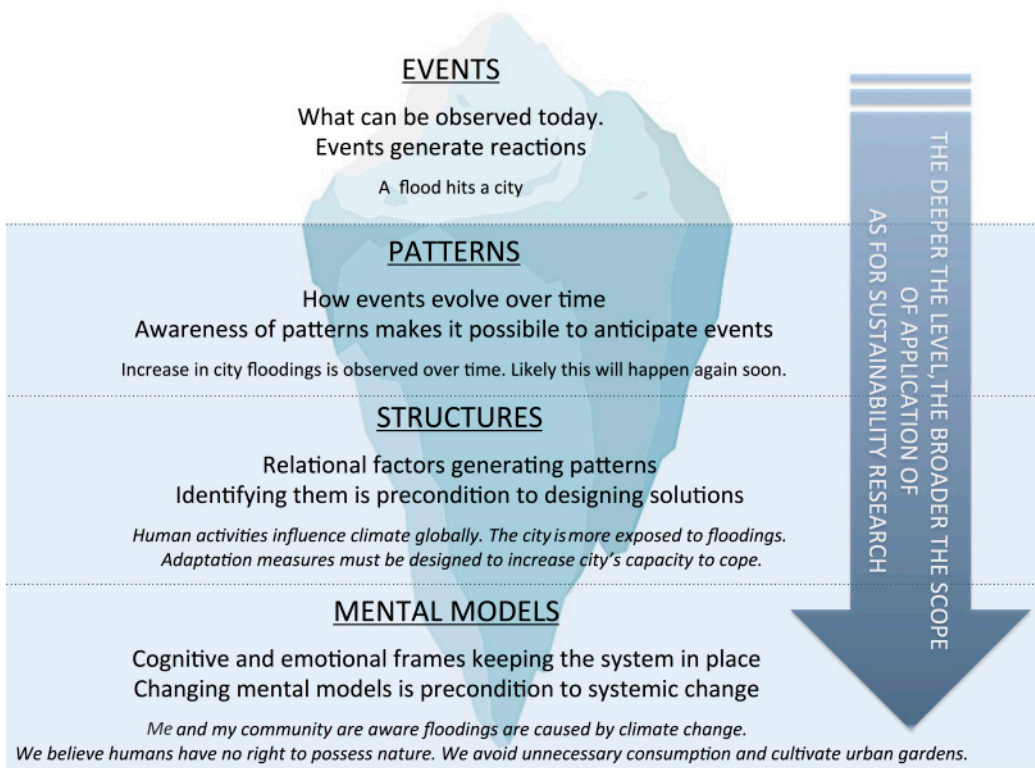
While Wittfogel's focus was very much skewed towards the vertical, top-down dimension of political dynamics shaping human-nature relations, more up-to date scholarship has stressed the importance of horizontal structures and multi-scalar decision-making. An important example is provided by proponents of fragmented authoritarianism – Kenneth Lieberthal, Michael Oksenberg and more recently Andrew Mertha – whose works all devote particular attention to water resources (Lieberthal / Oksenberg 1988, Mertha 2009). With regard to sustainability, the value of their work is twofold: on the one hand, they expose hegemonic norms of development; on the other, they inves-

⁵ Hence the definition of so-called “hydraulic societies”. On the nexus between agricultural production, transportation and water infrastructures in China's densely populated areas, see also the work by Daniels and Menzies (1996), published in the series *Science and Civilisation in China*.

tigate avenues for actors traditionally excluded from the political arena to influence policy-making.

Other contributions have focused on the science–society–policy nexus. Susan Greenhalgh’s *Just One Child. Science and Policy in Deng’s China* (2008) is a milestone contribution in this respect, as it unveils the instrumental use of technological discourses to remove diverging voices from the political arena. Her findings have clear implications for political ecology in China and elsewhere, as the use of Science and Technology narratives is very often employed to justify developmentalism and to curtail the possibility of envisioning possible alternatives, particularly in city development. This strain of research has been pursued also by other scholars of Chinese language and society such as Michael Schoenhals, who studied the subtle mechanisms that cause the scientific and rational to be identified with the positions of those in power (Schoenhals 1992). This is echoed in another well-known contribution to the study of China’s political ecology, *Mao’s War Against Nature* by Judith Shapiro. The book is an account of policies and discourses that led to widespread environmental destruction during Mao’s years in power (Shapiro 2001).

Figure 1: Systemic thinking and Area Studies



Source: Compiled by author, based on The Donella Meadows Project 2019

Finally, another strain of sustainability-relevant research covered by AS is religious and spirituality studies, in particular when focusing on the capacity of traditional thought to inform a re-adjustment of socio-ecological relations (Goldin 2005). An important project in this respect has been the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology,⁶ founded in 2006 by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim to promote the creative use of religious legacies to find comprehensive solutions to environmental problems. Another important contribution has been made in recent years by James Miller with his work on Daoism, ecology and the quest for sustainable futures (Miller 2017; see also Weller 2012).

Despite these valuable examples of commitment, AS scholars have seldom framed their work in terms of contribution to the sustainability debate. This may be due to institutional limitations, lack of awareness or to the absence of commitment towards nature and the environment. Sometimes, this may also be caused by the fear of accusations of being instrumental to the agenda of other disciplines. To overcome these limits and expand AS boundaries, the field should be framed more accurately in terms of its contribution to sustainability research. In the next two sections, I try to do so by employing two complementary frames, relevant to (a) methodologies employed for the study of urban sustainability; and (b) different conceptual approaches to socio-ecological relations.

3.2. AS, multi- and inter-disciplinary research for urban sustainability

Multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches are common currency in urban sustainability studies, due to the multidimensional nature of socio-ecological relations in densely populated territories. Despite often being used interchangeably, these approaches are different with respect to processes and intended outcomes. Multi-disciplinary research collates inputs from different disciplines, without a unified analysis or synthesis. It does not question normative assumptions inherent in specific fields. Inter-disciplinary studies are a step forward in integrating disciplines employed in the process of research. They pursue a holistic knowledge of the issue at hand (Bernstein 2015).

Urban sustainability assessments employ multi- and inter-disciplinary research. Often carried out to support evidence-based policy making, sustainability assessments usually focus on the visible outcomes of human-nature and human-human interactions in cities and the formal institutions – rules and policies – that affect and govern these relationships. They are therefore primar-

⁶ A retrospective on the work done by Tucker and Grim within that project is available here: <https://environment.yale.edu/news/article/20-years-of-the-yale-forum-on-religion-and-ecology/>. On Tucker's and Grim's work, see also the Emerging Earth Community website.

ily concerned with measuring the evolution of tangible phenomena (e.g., pollution, economic growth, poverty, etc.) vis-à-vis human decisions influencing such trends in cities.⁷

The contribution of AS to this field focuses on the collection, collation and analysis of urban policy materials, either via desk research, the study of archives or fieldwork. The knowledge of local languages plays a fundamental role in this respect. Perhaps more importantly, AS scholars bring into play their awareness of dominant discourses embedded in sectoral jargons, a resource scarcely available outside AS. The Chinese expression *kexue faxhanguan* 科学发展观 provides a good example of the role of AS scholars in this respect. Translated literally as “scientific outlook on development”, the expression became popular in the early 2000s in China’s political jargon to describe a shift towards sustainable development. The term “scientific” (*kexue* 科学) is often employed in China to characterise political decisions. It entails the notion of a both rational and well-pondered choice, reflecting a “scientific” reality and therefore not debatable (Schoenhals 1992). Any policy review informing urban sustainability assessment lacking this awareness – rarely available to scientists outside of AS – would miss a critical element. First, because it would overlook sources of information labelled with *kexue faxhanguan* 科学发展观. More importantly, because it would miss a core ideological trait of political processes concerning sustainability, i.e., the instrumental use of science to remove issues from the arena of public debate (Greenhalgh 2008).⁸

AS also plays an important role in relating localised, place-based phenomena to wider global trends. AS scholars often play a role similar to that of their predecessors centuries earlier, brokering different scientific and institutional mindsets. This can be seen especially during the theoretical modelling of sustainability appraisals, when researchers are faced with defining the conceptual frame of their analysis. Concepts such as green development, ecological city and smart city are often charged with diverse meanings in different contexts. The same applies to analytical criteria of relevance for urban governance and appraisal, such as wellbeing and social capital. When engaged since the very beginning in collaborative groups, AS scholars can strengthen the researchers’ awareness about these diversities, establishing a common language across components of the group.

A less common but equally important contribution made by AS scholars to sustainability research is the retrieval of information on the state of the environment and society from sources that are usually inaccessible to natural and social scientists, such as historical records, artwork, etc. These texts allow experts to extend the availability of environmental monitoring data back in time. A notable example is the way data about locust outbreaks reported by

7 See e.g. the work of the Urban China Initiative, <http://www.urbanchinainitiative.org/en/index.html>.

8 This also impacts processes of public participation, which we will touch upon in the next section.

local officials and laypeople in pre-modern China are used to feed climate models (Tian et al. 2011).⁹

To sum up, AS scholars contribute to multi- and inter-disciplinary urban sustainability research in a number of ways: (a) they can retrieve data and information that others can hardly access and supply them to sustainability assessment models; (b) they can translate concepts, data and information in ways that are understandable and useful for the common endeavour of the research group; (c) they can unravel scientised discourses that may jeopardise the accuracy and reliability of the research.

This said, despite AS being a field where boundaries between scholarly traditions can be overcome (Ludden 1997), contribution to multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research is often perceived by many AS scholars as instrumental to the agenda of other research fields. This position shows a lack of awareness about the reasons why we should pursue disciplinary integration and a lack of ethical commitment. In fact, multi- and inter-disciplinary research is not about parochial interests, but rather about how to bring together expertise to solve complex issues of common interest. As we shall see in the following section, this close interconnection between epistemology and ethics – the way we generate knowledge and why we should contribute to this – is even more intimate in trans-disciplinary research. It is in this respect that AS can make the most critical contribution to sustainability studies for urban sustainability.

3.3. Trans-disciplinary research, sustainability transformations and the untapped potential of AS

In 2013, conservationist and former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Gus Speth told a journalist:

I used to think that top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. (Hunt / Marlow 2019: 7)

Speth's words echo the tenets of strong sustainability, i.e., that meaningful and durable change for sustainability originates from a deep reflection over values. Such a position is held to be true also by the recent scholarship in system thinking, which places importance on the role of soft institutions in generating sustainability transformations.¹⁰ While inspirational in showing the need

⁹ Other examples are more localised, as in the case of Venice, where the line of seaweed visible on old paintings on bridges and *fondamenta* is employed today to understand the trend in sea level rise in recent centuries (Zaggia 2019).

¹⁰ See Capra 1982, The Donella Meadows Project 2019, Capra / Mattei 2015, Nørgård et al. 2019, Feola 2015.

for sustainability transformations, Speth's words also show the limits that have often undermined efforts in this direction. Claiming that "scientists don't know how to do that", he endorses the epistemological separation between (natural) sciences and culture that has long driven our approach to sustainability. Overcoming this dichotomy between humans and nature is the precondition to radical ruptures from the socio-ecological status quo. Methodologically, this requires restructuring the ways we pursue and use knowledge. Trans-disciplinary research provides a conceptual framework to embark on this challenging journey. Besides pursuing the integration of different disciplines – as in inter-disciplinary studies – trans-disciplinary processes legitimate sources of knowledge that are usually excluded from science-making. These include actors and organisations outside the field of institutionalised science, who may nonetheless contribute to the common endeavour of generating knowledge for socio-ecological change (Schäfer 2010, Brombal 2019).

Another feature that is common in trans-disciplinary research is the outright rejection of rigid, disciplinary-based normative assumptions. This rejection is often ethically grounded. Researchers who embrace it renounce claims of objectivity, positioning themselves and their work consistently within the pursuit of a declared goal of societal interest. This attitude must not be misunderstood as an expression of anti-scientific spirit. To paraphrase ecologist Garret Hardin (1968), it rather means finding moral solutions to civilisational challenges recognised by the scientific community (Toynbee 1972, in Capra 1982: 26, Capra / Mattei 2016, Brombal 2019).

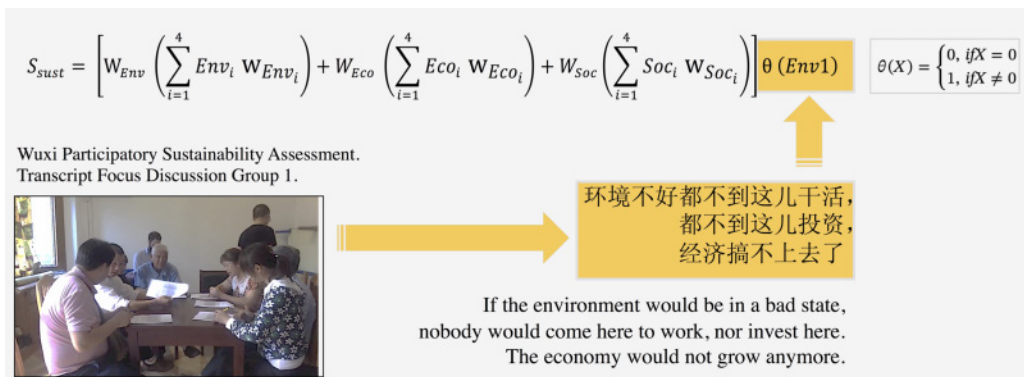
On a conceptual level, two main factors explain why AS is relevant for these efforts. The first lies in the concern of AS for places and therefore for the interaction of the human and the natural in shaping human civilisation. This attitude is aligned to the project of bringing to an end the epistemological dichotomy between humans and nature (Wallerstein et al. 1996, Ludden 1997). The second reason lies in the possibility to engage in mutual learning with communities and laypeople, a corollary of Chakrabarty's place-based translational agenda (Chakrabarty 2009).

In the field of urban sustainability research, AS can support these efforts by: (a) enabling a critical debate on the tenets of sustainability, deconstructing technocratic claims to placelessness and revaluing place-based solutions to global environmental issues; and (b) by unearthing and sustaining mental models useful for triggering radical change for strong sustainability. In consideration of the current debate on urban sustainability, largely informed by weak sustainability and driven by powerful economic interests, both of these aspects require engaging and empowering marginalised voices.

The concrete practice of AS for transformative sustainability research in cities is generally about establishing avenues by which local communities can meaningfully contribute to research and envision alternatives for a sustainable

future. Generally, the earlier this involvement takes place, the more transformative the potential of research is. A concrete example is provided by the involvement of laypeople in multi-criteria-decision-analysis (MCDA), a set of modelling approaches commonly used in urban sustainability research (Munda 2005). Consultations with individuals and communities are often employed in MCDA to define which criteria should bear more importance in the assessment carried out by researchers. Participatory practices can also be used to sharpen the political edge of the analysis, by translating radical statements made by people about the need to prioritise the attainment of a certain sustainability goal over others. The example below – taken from a case study in the Chinese city of Wuxi (Jiangsu) – nicely illustrates this aspect. The equation calculates a “sustainability score” attained by the socio-ecological system of the Lihu lake basin, based on 12 attributes (four for each of three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, socio-cultural and economic).

Figure 2: Participatory research in MCDA modelling for urban sustainability assessment – an example of engagement of AS scholars, Wuxi (Jiangsu), China.



S_{sust} is the sustainability score of the assessed program, in a specific point in time; W_{Env} , W_{Soc} , and W_{Eco} are the weights of the environmental, social, and economic dimensions; Env_i , Soc_i , and Eco_i are the scores of each criterion; W_{Env_i} , W_{Soc_i} and W_{Eco_i} are the weights of each criterion. Compiled by author (see also Brombal et al. 2018: 58).

In the first phase, Focus Discussion Groups (FDGs) were conducted, where participants defined the weights of criteria and attributes. During an ex-post qualitative analysis of transcripts, AS scholars, including myself, who had been coordinating the FDGs realised that the local residents had expressed a very strong preference for the attainment of environmental quality, not entirely reflected in the weights chosen at the end of the FDG. The research group (see Brombal et al. 2018) therefore opted for the inclusion of a veto function (θ) in the equation, associated with the attribute constituting the major reason for concern among the local community and policy makers, i.e., water environ-

mental quality (*Env1*). This way, researchers tried to ensure the model's responsiveness to the local socio-cultural and political context. In fact, in the event of a poor performance of the attribute "water environmental quality", the outcome of the model would be equal to zero (null), regardless of any possible improvement in other areas.

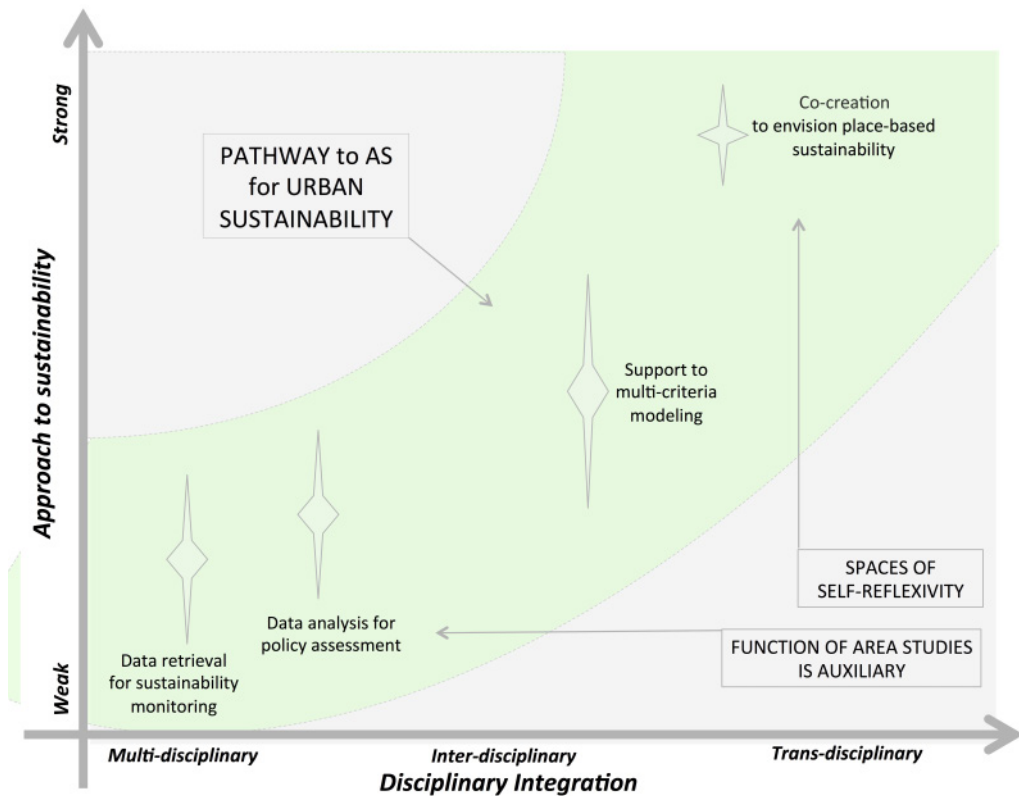
Apart from modelling – which largely relies on quantitative methods – qualitative approaches offer ample room for involvement of AS as well. According to the specific objective of the research, they can take different forms, ranging from collaborative workshops about pressing issues to co-creative exercises aimed at envisioning the future of communities and the urban environment they inhabit. Co-creative approaches are informed by the idea that places are made of linkages of communities to ecological processes. Therefore they de-value top-down approaches and engage people to question dominant assumptions about cities, first of all the idea that they are largely isolated from eco-systems. A promising approach is the use of art-based methods to envision sustainability, often combined with the embodiment of other entities, such as trees, birds, buildings, water, etc. This can support the evolution of societal understandings of urban sustainability beyond their current, largely anthropocentric boundaries. Moreover, it can help in stretching the time horizon of reflection, something very useful when talking about sustainability: a tree in a public square, the theatre next to it and the hill upon which they stand have a much longer life-span than human beings (Pearson et al. 2018). To date, there is no evidence indicating that this approach has been used consistently within the AS community working on urban sustainability.

However, it was recently tested during a study retreat coordinated by AS scholars in Cansiglio forest, located in the Italian Alps. The retreat involved a group of international researchers and practitioners investigating socio-ecological scenarios involving the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a China-led project that promotes the establishment of infrastructural ties across Eurasia (Ca' Foscari News 2019). Given the centrality of built environments in the BRI, one-third of participants came from the disciplines of architecture and urban studies. In crystallising desirable scenarios for human-nature interactions, participants made full use of embodiment techniques. Scenarios resulting from this reflection differed in substantial ways from the mainstream narratives about the BRI obsessed with economic growth. Participants envisioned the relationship between built environments, human beings and more-than-human entities in ways that resonated with value-laden ideas of coexistence, ecological integrity and a caring relationship with places (Brombal et al. 2019).

Both in quantitative and qualitative trans-disciplinary approaches, the sensitivity to context inherent in AS and its capacity of relate and feel deeply about places is an important resource. And yet the expertise available to AS scholars is very seldom employed in this respect. Besides institutional fragmen-

tation and the lack of incentives and commitment already mentioned above, the scarce engagement of AS in trans-disciplinary research is due also to the low level of cross-disciplinary scientific literacy. In fact, while in multi-disciplinary research scholars can focus on their individual contribution without worrying too much about the general picture, trans-disciplinary research requires a much closer interaction. The entire research process can be seen as an iterative translation of cognitive frames among researchers and between researchers and the public. This requires at least some degree of fluency in diverse disciplinary, sectoral and cultural background, something that requires considerable commitment and time.

Figure 3: Current role and untapped potential of AS for Urban Sustainable Research



Source: Compiled by author

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to establish categories through which the contribution of AS to urban sustainability research may be framed and acted upon. The most general of such categories is the idea of place, useful for bridging the sustainability debate with the scientific practice of AS. The latter can contribute to place-relevant knowledge and to understanding long-term interactions between human beings and the natural environment they inhabit. AS also offers ways to counteract technocratic approaches to sustainability that jeopardise socio-ecological connections by not recognising the relations between a place's ecosystem and its historical, cultural, spiritual and communal significance. The major potential of AS for sustainability lies in its capacity for criticising claims of universality found in development norms that characterise late modernity, including those which inform mainstream sustainability. This potential is still largely untapped and should be further explored. It may offer resources for imagination and change that are badly needed to cope with the current crisis in human-nature relations, epitomised by the unchallenged growth of urbanisation. The practice of AS can unearth mental models and collective norms that promote a caring attitude towards places, inclusive of human and more-than-human entities alike. The importance of this process can be hardly underestimated, because it moves the deepest leverage points for socio-ecological transformation: what we value most, and the way we want our future to be.

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Expatriating the Universal: A Decolonial Imagination beyond Authentic “Asia”

Aya Hino

Abstract

In the field of urban studies, there has been a call to develop “new geographies of theory” to accommodate “Asian” experiences of urbanisation in theory-building practices, which are said to have been based largely on “Western” experiences of urban space. In thinking about possibilities of a theory from “Asia”, this article, instead of arguing from within the field of urban studies per se, problematises the conventions of knowledge production today, including the division between the disciplines and area-centric research in the institutional formation of knowledge production, the separation of universal from particular forms of knowledge, and the isomorphism of “the West” with the universal and of “Asia” with the particular. In doing so, the author argues for the need to move beyond the notion of authentic “Asia” as an alternative locus of enunciation vis-à-vis “the West” and to expatriate the universal from the territorially bounded place. A theory from “Asia” should embody the liminality of “Asia” and “the West” and express the universal not as the transcendence of the particular, but as the manifestation of the multitude of alterity.

Keywords: Asia, the West, theory, knowledge production, urbanisation, modernity

Off the map

This article has emerged out of a series of theoretical questions that has begun to manifest itself through my recent engagement with works produced in a field of knowledge that has become increasingly popular – urban studies of fast-growing cities in “Asia”. Is urban theory inherently and dogmatically Western-centric, only reflecting urban experiences in a limited number of cities located in the trans-Atlantic region? If so, what does it mean to utilise such theory as an a priori positioning of our understanding of the unfolding of urban space in “Asia”? How can we adequately address the unique experiences and locality of urbanisation in and of “Asia” in our theorisation of urban space? What does a theory from “Asia” entail? And, more generally, why does theory matter?

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Though admittedly my reading of those works produced in the field of urban studies is limited, and therefore, only scratches the surface of the very complex scholarly field, it has become obvious to me that the central theoretical concern of the studies of urbanisation in “Asia” parallels the similar concern that has long been prevalent in the scholarly fields I am much more familiar with, that is to say, in the fields of postcolonial and decolonial reflections on coloniality of knowledge generally, and critical area studies more specifically. The central concern I am referring to here is a deceptively simple one – how to integrate spatio-temporally specific experiences of “Asia”, the geographical and anthropological Other of what is axiomatically defined as “the West”, into theory-building practices that are often said to take place within “the West”. This call for crafting “new geographies of theory” is not necessarily unique to urban studies per se, but reflects the much broader problematics about the institutional and epistemological structure of knowledge production, which manifests itself as the division of labour within the contemporary academy between the disciplines and area studies,¹ and as various oppositionalities – albeit appearing somewhat problematic to our intellectual sensitivity today – within historical knowledge between universal theories and knowledge of arcane features of the local, the theoretical and the empirical, “the West” and the rest, *humanitas* and *anthropos*, all of which derive from the overall valorisation of the Hegelian ontology that persistently reproduces the chasm between the universal and the particular.

As I understand it, there are two strategies for responding to this call for crafting new geographies of theory. One is to provide a comprehensive survey of urban studies organised in places that remain rather unfamiliar to most of those who occupy and operate from within the hegemonic centres of modern knowledge production on urban space. Japanese scholarship on urban space, for instance, is an interesting case here. Though urban studies, in particular urban sociology, in Japan has been significantly influenced by American urban sociology, and thus many canons of Japanese urban sociology reiterate theoretical debates in the American academy,² there have also been some interesting conceptual inflections that reflect particular historicity and unique qualities of urbanisation in Japan. Eitarō Suzuki, who was central in developing a systematic methodology for both urban and rural studies, had proposed the concept of *Kessetsu-kan* (“nodule” institutions) as the realm of human relationality specific to urban areas in Japan (Suzuki 1957). Tadashi Fukutake of-

1 Insofar as my reflection here is on the narrowly defined concepts of “universal” and “particular” that refer to the validity of knowledge claims based on the epistemological model of social sciences, by “disciplines”, I mean to suggest specifically the disciplines of the social sciences. The humanities, in contradistinction, occupy a curious place. In so much as the notion of *humaniora* refers rather to the “feeling” of the universal, to the multitude of human experiences as manifestations of human universals, the humanities are built upon the attention to the particular, and are thus separated from the disciplines of the social sciences.

2 See, for example, Fukutarō Okui’s *Gendai daitoshi ron (Theory of Modern Mega-city)* published in 1940 and Eiichi Isomura’s 1953 work entitled *Toshi shakai gaku kenkyū (Studies of Urban Sociology)*.

ferred a critical analysis of urban space and regionalism in Japan by means of mediating urbanism and urbanisation through a Marxist sociological understanding of agrarian societies (Kitakawa et al. 1962). Masamichi Shinmei provided us with a coherent theoretical perspective to disentangle the complex layers of structures characteristic of industrialised urban areas in Japan (Shinmei et al. 1959). And yet, such a strategy of introducing some theoretical and conceptual developments found elsewhere into our discussion, though undoubtedly important, has its limitations. Even without noting that my observation of these scholarly developments in Japan – and other cases from other geographical areas, for that matter – only touches upon the surface of a very complex and diverse scholarly field, this strategy of offering multiple narratives of urban space and pluralising the realm of theory does not necessarily address the fundamental conceptual matrix of the universal and the particular that separates the realm of theory-building from the realm of area-centric research.

Therefore, I instead pursue here the second possible strategy, a mode of reflection that addresses the prevailing problem of the universal / the particular, which tends to represent “Asia” and “Asian” cities as interesting, anomalous, different, unique and esoteric empirical cases, and thus hinders scholars on and from “Asia” from participating in theory-building practices. If problematisation already embeds within itself a possible schema of thought, to problematise the universal / the particular is to reveal: 1) how theory claims a mode of abstraction and generalisation applicable to the multitude of human experiences irrespective of locality and historicity, a mode of transcendence that goes beyond the immediacy of such experiences, and thus positions itself in the realm of the universal; and 2) how “the West” has established itself as the locus of enunciation for such a universal, while simultaneously “Asia” and other geographical Others of “the West” are represented as the locus of the particular, of the mere immediacy of human experiences. In revealing this, I wish to provide a way to dislocate our historical knowledge from the prevailing Hegelian folds, that is, to expatriate the universal from a territorially bounded location, from “the West” that has been established as a central locus of theory, and to provide an understanding of the universal, not in the Hegelian sense of transcendence of the particular, but in its aporetic nature, as something that we all *partake* of its (re)articulation.³

3 Perhaps some words of caution must be mentioned here. As much as I and this article have been influenced by the postcolonial and decolonial traditions of dislodging certain universal imperatives from their privileged place, I am aware of their inherent limitations. Beyond their claims for the colonality of knowledge and being, these intellectual traditions exhibit, albeit paradoxically, a tone of resignation, that one will only be able to combat the problematic of knowledge by becoming integrated into it. Being critical is one thing, but going beyond that which one is critical of is another matter. To this end, those critical and indeed influential engagements may appear in a way as the discourse of the moment of defeat, a moment that has not yet been overcome. This certainly opens a space for oversaturation of the polemics, whereby rather excessive intellectual victim consciousness is fostered through indulgence in the reproduction of hierarchised oppositionality between “the West” and the rest. Surely, such polemical claims would serve an

As a form of preparation, let me enter some qualifications here to set the stage for my discussion. The point of departure is rather a simple one. The idea that all beings are situated in space has been prevalent in intellectual debates for more than a century. From the mid-19th-century Chartists, Marxists and Fabians who challenged the stewards of the expert-led bureaucracy of urbanisation projects, to the late-19th-century historians and archaeologists whose works expanded our understanding of “community” as the locus of spatial practices of the collectives, and to the early-20th-century social historians, art historians and literary scholars who ethnographically documented various “worldviews” that manifested the ways in which the collectives brokered their relationship to and in space, a number of scholars have produced various academic – also at times, political and ideological – discourses on space. More recently, the works of French theoreticians, including Foucault (1977, 2008), Lefebvre (1991, 1996a), De Certeau (1984) and Virilio (1997), emphasised specifically the notion of power implicit in our understandings and experiences of space, providing us with conceptual vocabularies, such as “abstract space” and “symbolic place”, to expand the horizon of our scholarly perspective.

This so-called “spatial turn” and its spatial impulse took a deeper hold especially in the human geography tradition, and those vocabularies were elaborated further – in conjunction with Durkheim’s (2001) and Simmel’s (1971) works on the social – into theories of power/space. Notable conceptualisations include Sack’s “human territoriality” (1986), Massay’s “power geometry” (2005, 2007), Harvey’s “space-time compression” (1989), Soja’s “thirdspace” (1989, 1996) and Castells’s “variable geometry” (1987, 1989). These theoretical developments have indeed rewritten the old concerns for space, with a renewed attention to capitalism, globalisation, surveillance and power that extends much beyond the realm of social history. These new theoretical categories have moved us well beyond the hitherto conventional notion of space as a fixed, stable, a priori enclosure, as a locus in which history, culture, progress and social relations occur and can therefore be analysed. Instead, these scholars emphasise, *contra* statist, that space and spatiality are, in fact, social, cultural and even quasi-material productions, produced through the complex

emotional end, effectively reducing any forms of Western-centrism to the manifestation of the xenophobic and dogmatic Western imperialism of the imagination. However, the point I want to emphasise is that my attempt to reconsider the prevailing division between “the West” and the rest, and understanding the universal in its aporetic nature as something we all partake of, is to articulate a possible way of moving beyond the very opposition that polemics often exploit. All the more so to negate polemics. It is important to recall at this juncture that postcolonial and decolonial undertakings are not narrow polemics that only reflect upon the ideological practices of “the West” in the rest of the world. One must thus recognise that their undertakings have made the locus of knowledge of the Other rather precarious, even if such undertakings are organised within the same epistemological terrain that they are critical of. Thus understood, to follow the postcolonial and decolonial intellectual sensitivity to the power/knowledge nexus, especially decades after its inception, is not only to make a radical rupture with various oppositionalities embedded within modern knowledge regimes through an alternative understanding of the universal, but also and importantly, to create an instance of epistemological inflection by that very rupture from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions. See Said 1983a, Gasche 1987, Derrida 1992, and Hall 1992 (pp. 275–331).

layers of human interactions and modalities of human existence. It is to this end that many of them also argue for the importance of understanding not merely space per se, but space-time, in order to account for the processual, ever-changing, non-representational nature of space. And, in so doing, these scholars, along with many others in the social sciences and humanities, have turned specifically to urban space as the microcosm of contemporary everyday life and of complex processes of being and becoming, and simultaneously as the macrocosm of global flows and increasing interconnectedness.

In this context, “Asian cities are increasingly imagined as global frontiers of urban studies in the twenty-first century” (Bunnell 2017: 9). Indeed, scholars have recognised, to an increasing extent, the importance of rapidly growing cities in “Asia” as an alternative source of aspiration for development, modernisation and urbanisation that exhibit divergent trajectories of human experiences of and human relations in urban space. And yet, this growing attention to the cities in “Asia” has simultaneously revealed some impediments of the existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks available in the field of urban studies – impediments that are said to have derived from the fact that the hegemonic knowledge regimes of urban studies have revolved around a handful of Euro-American urban spaces. Ever since the Chicago School of urban sociology brought our attention to the city of Chicago as the epitome of “urbanism as a way of life” (Wirth 1938), and thus, as the object of knowledge for investigating “the process of civilisation as it were, under a microscope” (Park 1929: 890), the canons of urban theory have largely developed as narratives of urban space, of urban change and of space-time (re)configuration, having emerged from a narrow set of paradigmatic cities located in the Euro-American advanced capitalist economies that occupy the position at the apex of global capitalist competition and at the centre of the global network (Friedmann 1986: 71–72).

To be sure, this is not to say that scholars have been completely blind to urban development elsewhere. For instance, Rozman argued for the importance of developing a comparative orientation to shift our “attention away from the single city and toward the urban cluster”, because “although concentration on single cities may, on occasion, offer intriguing glimpses of persistent patterns, it fails to provide a representative sample of settlements for systematic approach” (Rozman 1978: 65). His works were particularly significant in expanding the horizon of urban studies in both a geographical and historical sense, as he integrated cases of urban development in pre-modern societies of Russia, China and Japan and developed a systematic perspective for addressing complex networks within and among these societies (Rozman 1971, 1973). Sharing a similar concern for offering multiple narratives of urban space was Skinner. Focusing specifically on the city and urban development in late imperial China, his works brought the study of historical Chinese cities, hitherto

analysed under the obscurity of conventional Sinology, into the orbit of broader, comparative urban studies (Skinner 1977). The inclusion of one of the most prominent “Asian” cities in her analysis was also one, among many, contribution of Sassen’s seminal work on global cities, which successfully introduced Tokyo, along with New York and London, as one of the emblematic sites for the increasingly complex entanglements of world economy and urban experiences (Sassen 1991). Through a thorough comparative analysis, Sassen developed a coherent framework for understanding urban life vis-à-vis the spatial dispersion of economic activities and the reorganisation of the financial industry in the context of globalisation.

Their individual contributions to area-centric knowledge of pre-modern Russia, China, Japan, imperial China and contemporary Japan notwithstanding, it is important to recognise here that these opuses together have directly challenged the long-held assumption of urban studies: that “to speak of towns [...] is to speak of the bourgeoisies” (Balazs 1964: 66), and therefore, of the self-regulated, autonomous, market-based urban social structures in Euro-American cities. Hence, they opened up a new scholarly space, not merely for developing a new intellectual movement epitomised by the so-called California (or Los Angeles) School that diverged in its focus and conceptual orientation from the hitherto dominant Chicago School, but more importantly, for problematising dominant theories and practices of theory-building.

Yet a sense of dissonance in Euro-America research, between theory-building practices and urban experiences of geographical “Others”, does not seem to have been adequately reconciled. To say so is not necessarily to deny the importance of those scholarly works that call for expanding the horizon of our perspective beyond Euro-American cities by pluralising the narrative of urban space and urbanisation. The dissonance remains persistent precisely because those works fall into the common rubric of the first strategy I mentioned earlier. That is to say, while offering detailed analyses of urban space in “Asia” as either an alternative or a comparative model for theorisation, those works do not necessarily reflect upon the complex conceptual and philosophical matrix that determines and justifies the separation prevalent within the contemporary knowledge regimes, between theory and area-centric knowledge, between “the West” and the rest, and between the universal and the particular. Thus, as Goldman (2010) observes, theory remains somewhat imperceptive of “significant social dynamics occurring within and among lower-tiered ‘other’ cities, [...] working below the radar of the global-cities analytics” (Goldman 2010: 556). In a similar vein, Roy argues, geographical “Others” – not limited to Asian cities, but also cities in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Eastern / Southern Europe – can appear only as “‘mega-cities’, cities of underdevelopment, on the margins of the map of global capitalism” (Roy 2014: 13). She even goes so far as to claim that “although considerable empirical research

and robust analysis was being conducted in the context of such cities, this work had not necessarily entered into the annals of what constitutes Theory, of the authoritative canon of the discipline of urban studies” (ibid.). Comaroff and Comaroff have made a similar observation when discussing cities in Africa, discontentedly noting that “the non-West” comes to be represented “primarily as a place of parochial wisdom [...] of unprocessed data [...] as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories” (Comaroff / Comaroff 2012: 114).

To this end, the kind of sentiment that Robinson expressed more than a decade ago seems to have remained still relevant: among urban studies scholars, urbanisation and experiences thereof, when occurring in or relating to those geographical “others”, are “off the map” of the urban theoretical register (Robinson 2002: 531). This being the case, the field of knowledge production on urban space has been one, among many sites, that still manifests a coloniality of knowledge, and hence, is – or more precisely put, still remains – at a decolonial juncture. Thus the question of new geographies of theory will benefit from an engagement not with another case of geographical Others, but with the conceptual and philosophical matrix that regulates knowledge production of such geographical Others, so as to recalibrate theory itself.

Oppositionalities and isomorphism

On theory, James Clifford once wrote:

“Theory” is a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance. To theorize, one leaves home. But like any act of travel, theory begins and ends somewhere. In the case of the Greek theorist the beginning and ending were one, the home polis. This is not so simply true of traveling theories in the late twentieth century. [...] In the late twentieth century the community, the polis, of the Greek traveller-theorist loses its centrality as a “home” base. It is more and more difficult to ignore what has always to some extent been true – that every center or home is someone else’s periphery or diaspora. (Clifford 1989: 1–2)

To theorise, as I understand this analogy of “home”, is to move beyond our embedded experiences, that is to say, the locality (spatial specificity) and historicity (temporal specificity) of our being, with a conviction in the generalisability of the local and the historical. What differentiates the contemporary practices of theorisation from, say, that of the ancient Greek, is that the product of leaving our “home”, the product of dislocating the embeddedness of our being – a theory – no longer ends only back at our “home”, but instead is also utilised to understand someone else’s “home”, to have recourse to someone else’s embedded experiences. A theory does not merely travel and return,

but it also migrates, or sometimes intervenes. Invariably, this intellectual osmosis that reveals the power/knowledge nexus, and by extension, the inadequacy of theoretical imperatives has become the locus of contestation (Said 1978; Chakrabarty 2000).

Theory is no longer naturally “at home” in the West – a powerful place of Knowledge, History, or Science, a place to collect, shift, translate, and generalize. Or more cautiously, this privileged place is now increasingly contested, cut across, by other locations, claims, trajectories of knowledge articulating racial, gender, and cultural differences. (Clifford 1989: 2)

And yet, despite this intellectual sensitivity – now widely shared – towards provincialism, or else, located-ness, of theory, the institutional formation of knowledge of “Asia”, of “the Other”, that is to say, the position of area-centric research vis-à-vis the disciplines and their practices of theory-building, remains as that which to some extent hinders such sensitivity.

This separation of area-centric research and the disciplines is all too familiar. At the onset of the institutional formation of post-war area research, Wagley observed that “at any rate, if there be a provincialism within these disciplines, it will be quickly revealed when the expert applies his formulations to alien cultures,” and thus, “area studies brings comparative and concrete data to bear on generalization and theory” (Wagley 1948: 6–7, 9). It is precisely to this end that the division of labour between the disciplines and area-centric research was deemed necessary to “the development of a universal and general science of society and of human behavior” (ibid.: 5). This observation seems to have remained pertinent for some decades. As Taylor suggested, although the separation of theory from area-centric knowledge and the division of labour between the disciplines and area research are rather artificial and even “unfortunate because there is no basic antagonism between the two,” nevertheless, “the full development of theory depends on the accumulation of comparable data from all available sources” (Taylor 1964: 9). From the perspective of the disciplines on the other end of the institutional spectrum, Morgenthau (1959) argued in a similar vein:

Contemporary area studies assume that the key to the understanding of a foreign area lies in the investigation of the specific phenomena that make up that area. [...] Yet might it not be said that, in order to understand China or France or any other area, it is first necessary to understand mankind, of which all areas are but particular manifestations? [...] If you know something about man as such, you know something about all men. You know at least the contours of human nature, which, when superimposed upon a concrete situation, may get blurred here and there and which always lack specific content and color. It is for area studies to provide an empirical check upon their correctness and that specific content and color. (Morgenthau 1959: 134)

Since then, there seems to be a slight inflection in scholarly debates, emphasising more the potentiality of area-centric knowledge as able to directly contribute to – rather than to “check upon [the] correctness” of and to add “specific content and color” to – the disciplinary practices of theory-building. Bates maintained that “the combination of local knowledge and general modes of reasoning, of area studies and formal theory, represents a highly promising margin of our field. The blend will help to account for the power of forces that we know shape human behaviour, in ways that we have hitherto been able to describe but not to explain” (Bates 1997: 169). Szanton envisaged, by the same token, the role of area studies as follows:

When successful, Area Studies research and teaching demonstrates the limitations of fashioning analyses based largely on the particular and contingent histories, structures, power formations, and selective, and often idealized narratives of “the West”. [...] Area Studies can provide the materials and ideas to help reconstruct the disciplines so that they become more inclusive and more effective tools for social and cultural analysis.” (Szanton 2004: 2)

The significance of this increasing attention to the potentiality of area-centric knowledge notwithstanding, the presumed separation between the disciplines and area research, and by extension, the disciplinary theories and area-based empirical knowledge, remains central, not merely for legitimating the division of labour within the academy, but also as the very condition of possibility for such criticisms.⁴ To put it another way, both Bates’s and Szanton’s claims are possible only by presuming the a priori separation of the disciplines and area research. Thus, my assertion here is that this separation is rooted in something far beyond the institutional make-up of the contemporary scholarship on “the Other”, but in the realm of the conceptual formation that determines what constitutes an “area” as the object of knowledge, as “the Other”, as “the non-West” and its relations to “the West”.

As we all know, the peculiarity of “the non-West” is that it is not quite a cartographical distinction. It is a collection of “areas” – Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Eastern / Southern Europe – to which the principle of inclusion into “the Western world” cannot be applicable. It is those places that cannot be identified with a sense of familiarity and the consanguinity of trans-Atlantic fraternity. The logic for such inclusion and exclusion is ostensibly simple. On the one hand, “the West” is said to share a social, cultural, historical and intellectual affinity, meaning that it is not foreign, and hence its

⁴ Area specialists have long been described as holding “dual” citizenship. They must equip themselves with disciplinary methods through graduate training, while simultaneously possessing competence, both scholarly and linguistic, in a particular area of their choice. And yet, the importance of these two requirements respectively does not seem to be considered with equal measure, and “in general the area training” remains “supplementary” (Bennett 1951: 4). Graduate training is said to be based on the idea that “all advanced work must be associated with a degree in a traditional discipline”, which is generally translated to mean “that disciplinary work is intellectually superior to area-oriented work” and that if overly tainted with an area specialisation, such works may be regarded as lacking disciplinary rigour (Pye 1975: 9).

knowledge is always of *itself*. In contradistinction, an “area” refers almost unequivocally to a distinctive anthropological culture, hence is a priori different from and out of bounds of the “Western” knowledge of itself, and is thus objectified as the locus of anthropological knowledge.

Though this is a rather familiar narrative of the conceptual formation of “the non-West” vis-à-vis “the West”, it is important to recognise here that this conceptual demarcation has raised an inevitable methodological question about what constitutes appropriate ways to understand the multitude of differences, of the distinctive, bounded, anthropological cultures of all that is subsumed under the single label of area research. And, it is precisely this methodological question that predetermines the mode of inscribing area-centric research into its specific institutional existence. The fact that area research requires a universally applicable theoretical framework for having recourse to the realities of the Other is what preordains area research’s relation to the established theories of the disciplines and its contributions to the production and reiteration of universal forms of knowledge.

This conceptual matrix of “the West” as the subject of knowledge of itself and “the non-West” as the object of “Western” knowledge, and the separation of as well as the specific relationship between the theory-building disciplines and area-centric research, ultimately bring us back to the question pertaining to the distinction between universal and particular forms of knowledge. Universal forms of knowledge, here, are understood as those which go beyond the immediacy of human experiences by way of abstraction and theorisation that are – supposedly – applicable to the whole, while particular forms of knowledge are those which remain in the realm of immediacy. And indeed, from the Cartesian dichotomy of “I” and the world, to Kantian transcendental philosophy and finally to the Weberian discourse of disenchantment, Western philosophy seems to have been preoccupied with the determination of who craves knowledge in the form of the universal, and who is indeed capable of such a pursuit. For these philosophers of the Enlightenment, it is “man as such” who equips himself with a kind of self-consciousness as a necessary quality to pursue the universal. Such a postulation raises a number of questions.⁵ The point, however, is that this notion of self-consciousness is precisely that upon which the disciplinary claims for universal knowledge are predicated. Insofar as the disciplines have been developed as knowledge of *humanitas*, as knowledge of the self, in contradistinction to knowledge of *anthropos*, of anthropological Others, the disciplines have always been understood as the manifestation of

5 For instance, who is this “man as such” that has been promoted to the ranks of, say, Plato’s demiurge, Aristotle’s unmoved mover or Christianity’s Creator? And what exactly is this “self-consciousness” that regulates the cognition of “man as such” and allows him to position himself on the vantage point for transcendence? My tentative suggestion is to look into the discourse of disenchantment and how the position of “man as such”, as the knowing subject of modern knowledge, is articulated through the discursive manoeuvre of disenchantment. Here, Germain’s critical engagement with disenchantment as a philosophical discourse is extremely insightful (see Germain 1993).

self-consciousness, of the ability to reflect upon the self and to move beyond the immediacy of subjective experiences. Further still, this also means that the historical and cultural make-up of “the West”, the subject matter of disciplinary reflections on the self, is always promoted to the ranks of the universal.

Now that the disciplines have established themselves as the citadels of universal forms of knowledge, or else, to quote Cheach, “as the guardians of standards for determining the universal validity of social phenomena (i.e. social scientific laws)”, and such standards are developed by the experiences confined within “the West”, “there is an unspoken but for that very reason all the more tenacious isomorphism between the universal structures of reason and the social structures of the West” (Cheach 2008: 63). This isomorphism of “the West” and the universal, in turn, implies isomorphism of “the non-West” and the particular.

The point I want to stress here is that Eurocentrism – or else, Western-centrism – of the disciplines is not necessarily because of the inherent parochialism found in their practice of promoting the trans-Atlantic experiences to the ranks of the universal. The disciplines are *necessarily* Eurocentric because their claims for universal knowledge are predicated on the notion of self-consciousness of “the West”. Not only does such recognition move us beyond the well-versed critique of Eurocentrism articulated against disciplinary parochialism, it also directs us towards another realm of possibility to reflect upon the oppositions (the theoretical vs. the empirical, “the West” vs. “the non-West”, the universal vs. the particular) and isomorphism (“the West” as the universal, “the non-West” as the particular).

What I am effectively suggesting here is an alternative modality of critical intervention. Regardless of how theoretically sophisticated and interdisciplinary area research has become, the field of area-centric knowledge is still concerned with the bounded object, which is juxtaposed, explicitly or otherwise, or deliberately or otherwise, against “the West”, against the universal structure of its self-consciousness, either as an alternative or as a comparative model. But if we are serious about developing appropriate ways of addressing experiences in and of “Asia” – and for that matter, of “the non-West” – not merely as a data set for testing or tinkering with universal theories, but as something that has direct contributions to theory-building, then what is necessary is a radical shift in our epistemological and ontological presumptions. It is our responsibility to deconstruct such isomorphism by dislocating, or else expatriating, the universal from the bounded space of “the West”, from “Western” self-consciousness. Simultaneously, it is also imperative to dismantle “Asia” as a bounded anthropological culture, as the object of anthropological knowledge upon which the universal is projected, and ultimately to transform “Asia” into one that *partakes* of the universal.

The problem of authentic “Asia”

Now, the question is what exactly does it mean to *partake* of the universal. Immediately conjured up in our minds are the postcolonial and decolonial traditions and the way in which their undertakings have paved the way for revealing the arbitrary nature of the oppositions and isomorphism in question. “In their challenge to the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe” and thus “in unsettling and reconstituting standard processes of knowledge production” (Bhambra 2014a: 115), these intellectual traditions have effectively revealed the coloniality of knowledge and being as one that constitutes the psychological condition of possibility for self-representations of “Asia” – or else “the non-West” – and its relationality to “the West” (Clifford / Marcus 1986, Spivak 1988, Jameson 1993, Gandhi 1998).⁶

The implication is twofold. First, to recognise the coloniality of knowledge and being is to defy the idea that knowledge is the product of “discovering” the truths of human existence from the vantage point of the disenchanted, that is, by meditation through the universal structure of self-consciousness (of “the West”). It is therefore to suggest that knowledge is essentially the product of rendering the world with meanings for the self. Second, these intellectual traditions have also articulated a space for understanding the liminality of “Asian” – of “the non-Western” – subjectivities that can be described only as hybridity rather than authenticity (Bhabha 1994, Escobar 2007, Mignolo 2011). Such an understanding of the nature of knowledge and the hybrid quality of “Asian” subjectivities has taken up the position of an intellectual-cum-practical guiding principle for some critical enterprises in the fields of area-centric knowledge production (Barlow 1997, Lee / Cho 2012). Further still, this intellectual sensitivity towards knowledge and being has also reverberated in the disciplines, and some interesting debates are taking place under the aegis of, for instance, “postcolonial international relations”, “Asian international relations”, “decolonial sociology” and “connected sociology”.⁷

The point I want to emphasise in this instance is that, although these critical enterprises have made a giant step in the direction of articulating a possibility of *partaking* in the universal, some of the discussions about “Asia” derived from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions conflate the condition of “Asia” as the marginalised, with an absolute ontology of authentic “Asian”

6 Said has described such an intellectual sensitivity as a “critical consciousness” distinct from theory: “I am arguing, that we distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating and situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as a part of that time, working in and for it, responding to it” (Said 1983b: 174).

7 See Puchala 1997, Inoguchi 2007, Acharya / Buzan 2010, Chun 2010, Seth 2011, Seth 2012, Bhambra 2014b, Savransky 2017, Weiner 2018.

subjectivity. Put otherwise, while postcolonial and decolonial sensitivity allow us to re-signify the multitude of subjectivities of “Asia” as the necessary psychological practices for decolonising knowledge – being hitherto dictated by the conceptual matrix that I have discussed above and that such sensitivity indeed intends to deconstruct – it also creates a locus of signification, and as such a locus of polemics, that purify “Asian” ways of being in the world as alternatives to “the Western” ways of doing so. By wielding “Asia” as the locus of enunciation, as an alternative to “the West”, they paradoxically concretise, even if in a heuristic sense, the conceptual matrix of oppositionality, and therefore remain within the binary enunciation.

In these instances of dislocating “the West” from its hitherto privileged place, it is undoubtedly tempting to conceptualise “Asia” as an alternative to “the West”. Attempts to develop “Asian” theories seem, therefore, misleadingly momentous, when juxtaposed in relation to the entrenched expectations of a world drawn and manifested by theories derived primarily from “Western” experiences. Take for instance the claims for “Asian” urbanism, which have been articulated and gained popularity vis-à-vis the emergence of the so-called Asian tiger economies including Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. Against the backdrop of the exceeding degree of condensation and the velocity of developmental experiences of these economies, “Asian” cities are said to exemplify a model of urbanisation that is dissimilar to the familiar narrative of urban space and its development in “the West”.

The first point of differentiation is the speed of urbanisation, which is said to be predetermined by the velocity of economic development. Dunford and Yeung (2011) offer a comparative analysis of the speed of economic development in various locations, suggesting that it took only about 25 years for those Asian economies to achieve a fivefold increase of GDP per capita, the level of development that required on average between 160 and 180 years in the advanced economies in “the West”, such as Germany and the U.K. This rapid economic growth is said to determine the context of urbanisation in “Asia”, which is characterised by the spread of institutional networks of governmental agencies and the private sector for the development of infrastructure and for increased material affluence (Bach 2011, Watson 2014); the circulation of capital and expertise within the Asian region, which creates the backdrop for exporting urbanisation models of, say, Singapore, or South Korea, to other places in the region as well as in the global south more generally (Percival / Waley 2012, Pow 2014, Nam 2017); and the consequent spatialisation of urban areas as new sites for urban imagination based on the aspiration for economic growth and material affluence. Insofar as “Asian” urbanisation is defined essentially as a statist project based on the abundance of surplus capital generated by rapid economic growth (Power 2012), “Asian” urbanism is also described as a means to an end for the political and ideological aspira-

tions of governments with authoritarian and non-democratic tendencies (Shatkin 2011, Shin 2019).

Further, it is argued that the consequence of this kind of state-led “developmental urbanism”, or what Watson (2014: 216) calls “speculative urbanism”, is “aestheticized land use intensification” (Scott 2011: 309) epitomised by high-density commercial and residential mega-projects and “vertical accumulation” (Shin 2011: 50) of skyscrapers and infrastructures that characteristically transform cityscapes in “Asia” (Hou 2012). A disenchanting ramification of such “developmental urbanism” is what is dubbed as “phantom urbanisation” (Sorace / Hurst 2016: 305), which is epitomised by those newly constructed “ghost cities” in China that remain largely under-populated, or in some cases even un-populated (Woodworth 2012). This kind of “developmental urbanism” is also criticised for its blatant political and ideological aspirations that justify the process of dispossession of basic human rights (Glassman 2006, Levien 2011) and the process of mass displacement of the population (Lees et al. 2016).

These observations indeed provide us with “a multiplicity of narratives” based on “a spatial (rather than a temporal) recognition of difference” (Massey 1999: 128) by calling attention to unique trajectories and characteristics of the process of urbanisation of “Asian” cities. And yet, the epithet “Asian” creates, as it seems to me, an enclosed and bounded locus of enunciation, whereby, while various experiences of urbanisation within “Asia” constitute the vast terrain of heterogeneous stories of urban space, “Asia” is simultaneously presented in its relation to the outside as a qualitative marker for differentiation. This contradiction is evident in the claims of those scholars specialised in “Asian” urbanism. As much as they argue for the necessity to see urbanisation in “Asia” in its plurality by using terms such as “Asian urbanisms” and “urban Asias” (Hogan et al. 2012, Bunnell / Goh 2017, Shin 2019), they claim for “Asian” urbanism something that “can be seen as both *actually existing* and imagined” (Shin 2019: 2), signifying “Asia” as an ontologically grounded authentic location.

Outside the narrow confinement of the claims for an “Asian” urbanism, we find a similar discursive manoeuvre, which has derived from the critique of the utility of disciplinary theories that are said to have systematically neglected complex entanglements and the heterogeneity of human experiences. One illustrative instance is those claims for “Asian” modernity, or for this matter, any understanding of modernity presented with a geo-cultural epithet, such as “Chinese”, “Japanese” or “Indian”. The idea that modernity in “Asia” is distinctively different has gained an analytical purchase especially vis-à-vis the growing sense of disenchantment towards modernisation theory and the in-

creasing scholarly attention towards the manifold trajectory and experience of modernisation and development in Asia.

In the 1950s and 1960s, modernisation theory, a strand of developmental thinking founded upon Rostow's seminal work (1962) on the stages of economic development, had gained both analytical and politico-ideological purchase. On the one hand, it offered a coherent, social scientific framework for understanding the degree of development, in particular, of those deemed as the underdeveloped, and for locating them in the linear historical narrative of human progress. Simultaneously, it also represented a strategic model of political and ideological modernisation projects applicable to the plethora of the underdeveloped, against the backdrop of transnational entanglements of the ideological conflict of the Cold War, decolonisation and the politico-social transformation of "developing" or "underdeveloped" countries. Such a developmental thinking embeds within itself an unstated yet for that very reason all the more problematic schema of spatial enclosure of the underdeveloped as well as a teleological temporal progression towards the modern, which creates and naturalises anthropological differences between the underdeveloped and the developed.⁸

Attempts to understand and locate "Asia" through such a schema have, of course, attracted a number of critics. For instance, Eisenstadt has devised the concept of "multiple modernities", insofar as "the actual developments in modernising societies have refuted the homogenising patterns of social development that are simultaneously modern and different from Western modernity" (Eisenstadt 2000: 1). In the context of "Asia", this idea of modernity as multiple and heterogeneous is often predicated on three qualitative markers of differentiation, namely, cultural values, intellectual tradition and nostalgia. Tu (2014) argues that culture and cultural values exert significant influences on the process of modernisation and thus that the "modernising process [in Asia] can assume cultural forms substantially different from those of Western Europe and North America" (Tu 2014: 105). Culturally distinctive "Asian" values, such as "self-cultivation, regulation of the family, social civility, moral education, well-being for the people, governance of the state, and universal peace" (Tu 1996: 1), are said to set a condition and direction of "Asian" modernity.⁹ Mishra (2013) identifies three strands of "Asian" intellectual response to "Western" modernity in the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afgani, Liang Qichao and Rabindranath Tagore, and connects these intellectual strands to the different paths to modernity taken by "Asian" countries. Fung (2010) discusses

8 The popularity of modernisation theory was not merely a consequence of the dominant Western politico-ideological aspirations in the 1950s and 1960s. Some scholars and politicians alike in "the non-West" had actively internalised such a developmental thinking both as an analytical framework and as a means to an end for politico-ideological aspirations. See for example Conrad's interesting observation (2012) on the issue of modernisation and modernisation theory in the context of Japan.

9 See also De Bary 1998, Langguth 2003, Elgin 2010.

the interaction between different intellectual strands in China, including radicalism, conservatism, liberalism and social democracy, and argues that such interaction has been central to the development of “Chinese” modernity. Iwabuchi explores Japan’s nostalgia for “Asia”, arguing that today’s “consumption of popular culture has become a site [for] the continuities, rearticulations, and ruptures of historically constituted ‘Asia’” (Iwabuchi 2002: 548), and therefore for the imagery of a distinctive “Asian” modernity.

Notwithstanding the differences in the point of entry of these analyses, such a recognition of the radical otherness of “Asia” is said to be a prerequisite not only for dislocating “Asia” from the Enlightenment’s teleological temporality of progression, but also for revealing conflictual and contradictory orientations within “the West” and developing a “subtle appreciation of the modern West as a complex mixture of great possibilities rather than a monolithic entity impregnated within a unilinear trajectory” (Tu 2014: 111).

Here, as I suggest, the problem of “Asian” modernity parallels that of “Asian” urbanism. These attempts, perhaps ethically prompted, to create a site for enunciation of experiences *sui generis* to “Asia”, and thus of pluralising the hitherto singular narrative of modernity, paradoxically reproduce the very division they purport to deconstruct. The incongruity is that knowledge with the epithet “Asian”, while being produced as a mode of – and perhaps in a hope for – repossession (de-essentialisation, de-generalisation and de-objectification of “Asia” as such), becomes a mode of dispossession (essentialisation, generalisation and objectification of “Asia” as such, and by extension that of “the West” as such). Thus, one cannot help but contemplate whether any knowledge grounded in a specific place and culture has trouble escaping a mirror image of that to which it is trying to provide a viable alternative.

It is precisely at this juncture of questioning that I shall return to my earlier claim for distinguishing, on the one hand, the necessary psychological practices for decolonising knowledge by acknowledging the multitude of experiences firmly grounded within spatio-temporally specific locations, and on the other hand, the rather futile claims for authentic “Asia”, for an absolute ontology of “Asian” subjectivity. This is because, while those observations of “Asian” urbanism and “Asian” modernity are undoubtedly well intended and feed back to the ethical responsibility of contemporary scholarly practices to articulate loci for psychological practices of decolonising knowledge, those modalities of signification that to varying degrees purify “Asian” ways of being in the world as an alternative to something else, often to “Western” ways of doing so, do not reflect the hybrid and even liminal nature of subjectivity, and thus require further critical scrutiny. And such recognition of the hybridity and liminality of “Asia” is, as I argue, precisely the point of departure to articulate a way of *partaking* in the universal.

Expatriating the universal

Though it is such an obvious point, it is worth revisiting here the way in which Hegel's teleology of world history as "the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (Hegel 1980: 54) anchors the universal to a spatially bounded location as the locus of conscious being – spirit or *Geist* – that understands itself as a universal being that possesses self-knowledge, and how "Asia" as the site of enunciation of authentic being still inhabits the folds of such Hegelian claims.

In concerning the contingencies of history, and in attempting to "make sense" of such a contingent nature of human existence, Hegel claims that world history is the unfolding of world spirit (*Weltgeist*) – the consciousness that transcends the particular – of a given time in a form of finitude. It is precisely because of this finitude in its manifestation that *Weltgeist* is expressed through, or else anchored into, a certain national spirit (*Volksgeist*). And the nation, or *Volksgeist* of a particular nation that embodies *Weltgeist*, will possess universal normative force and lead all the rest for human historical progress.¹⁰ What is important to reiterate here is threefold. First, the bearer of historical progress, the agent of the development of *Weltgeist*, is a collective form of self-consciousness, which is ontologically bounded within a nation. Second, the development of *Weltgeist* can be temporally divided into various distinctive stages. And third, each of these temporal stages ontologically correlates to a spatially bounded, localised configuration. To this end, Hegel infamously distinguishes the Oriental *Volksgeist*, the multitude of self-consciousness of "Asia", as one that does "not know that the spirit or man as such are free in themselves" and that "are lacking – indeed completely lacking – in the essential consciousness of the concept of freedom" as the transcendence of the particular (Hegel 1980: 54, 145).

Now that the universal comes to be ontologically grounded in a particular place, in "the West", "the West" becomes the locus of universal enunciation. Though our scholarly consciousness today is such that this Hegelian ontology has come to be seen as rather derogative and obsolete, those scholarly attempts discussed earlier to relativise "Asian" experiences by arguing for the uniqueness of "Asia" are, as it seems to me, haunted by the folds of Hegelian claims, and by extension, by the spectre of "the West". Insofar as the claims of local contingencies and uniqueness of, say, "Asian" urbanism, or "Asian" modernity are the inverted mirror-image of universality derived from and claimed by "the West", these studies that articulate "Asia" as the locus of

10 Thus, Hegel claims that "the nation to which such a moment is allotted as a *natural* principle is given the task of implementing this principle in the course of the self-development of the spirit's self-consciousness. This nation is the *dominant* one in world history for this epoch. [...] In contrast with this absolute right which it possesses as bearer of the present stage of the world spirit's development, the spirits of other nations are without rights, and they, like those whose epoch has passed, no longer count in world history" (Hegel 1991: 374).

enunciation, as the locus of authentic being, are a priori deterred from accessing the universal. Further still, these attempts to establish “Asia” as an alternative locus of enunciation have resulted, albeit paradoxically, not only in a repositioning and remarking of “the West” as a locus of contestation and dispersal in theory development, but also in a reaffirmation of “the West” as a prevailing locus of power and centrality. The fact that universality is an exclusive commodity form that some possess and some others do not – the very problematic of Hegelian ontology, and the very foundation for justifying the separation between the universal and the particular, between “the West” and the rest – remains unimpaired.

Thus, as I have indicated through my discussion so far, *partaking* in the universal does not entail elevating “Asia” to, or else articulating “Asia” as, the locus of enunciation of the authentic. What is required instead is, first, to challenge the ontological grounded-ness of the universal, thereby expatriating the universal from a spatially bounded location. Central to such an undertaking is to conceptualise “Asia” – for that matter, any spatially and temporally bounded location – not as an enclosed and stable site for history, culture and social progress, nor as a mere object of comparative studies, but rather, as a perception, as a temporal category, as an epistemic space that is characterised by its hybridity, by its liminality that defies any notion of ontological enclosure.

In this instance, I take a cue from the modalities of decolonial imagination that emerged from the postcolonial and decolonial traditions in general,¹¹ and from Bhabha’s intervention into “liminal” or “interstitial” space more specifically. Notwithstanding the potential pitfall of these intellectual traditions,¹² their undertakings in occupying “exteriority” constitute a useful point of departure. Here, “exteriority” entails not necessary an ontological outside, but “an outside that is precisely constituted as difference” (Escobar 2007: 186; see also Dussel 1999, 2000), whereby it becomes possible, by occupying such “exteriority”, to “think otherwise, from the interior exteriority of the border” (Mignolo 2001: 11). For Bhabha (1990), as I read it, this exteriority constituted as difference is precisely the space-in-between, the space of liminality, or of interstice, that exists between competing cultural traditions, historical periods and critical methodologies, and that enables narrative constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of various cultural constituencies. In shed-

11 These include, but are not limited to, Mignolo’s notion of “border thinking”, “border epistemology” or “pluritopic hermeneutics” (2000), Quijano’s articulation of the coloniality of power (2000), Spivak’s “planetary thinking” (2005, 2008), Dussel’s “transmodernity” (2012) and Roy’s “worlding” (2014).

12 For example, normative calls for displacing “the West” by claiming other distinctive positionalities embed within themselves the very Hegelian ontological problem I have discussed earlier. Therefore, Jabri (2011) argues that “so powerful is the legacy of colonial rule that the subject of the postcolonial condition is always already somehow predetermined, somehow stamped, indeed inscribed by the colonial experience. Viewing [...] from the vantage point of the non-West is hence to do so through a lens that is already prescribed and shaped by coloniality and the desire to resist its continued economic, social, political, and epistemological domination” (Jabri 2011: 11).

ding light on the liminal negotiation on modalities of “being in the world” across racial, gender, class and cultural differences, Bhabha (1994) effectively suggests that “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition, [...such that] the social articulation of difference [...] is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 1994: 2). And thus, “it is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (ibid.).¹³

That the Other, and by extension the self vis-à-vis the Other, is articulated through such continuous liminal negotiation, is precisely the point upon which I want to expand further, for the purpose of expatriating the universal from the bounded place of “the West” and directing us towards a possible way of *partaking* in the universal. More specifically, Bhabha’s articulation of the liminal space allows us to view various experiences and phenomena, which are said to be specific to “Asia” or to “the West”, not in terms of being either marginal or central to the universality, but as things that *together* constitute and reconstitute the universal. From this perspective, it becomes possible to comprehend “Asia” or “the West” not necessarily as a bounded, stable and fixed locus of enunciation, wherein history, culture and social progress occur independently from the external, but as a form of hybridity emerging from or defined through constant negotiations of differences and sameness. This means that no *Volksgeist* exists as such, and thus no *Volksgeist* (the particular) alone can embody the *Weltgeist* (the universal) as such. In the moment of understanding thus, the universal can be expatriated from a concrete individual body. In so doing, the universal is no longer understood as the transcendence of the particular, of the finitude of our being, but grasped in its aporetic nature, as the manifestation of the multitude of alterity, as something which is open to any spatially and temporally defined bodies, articulated through the interactions of such bodies, and shared among them. This normative shift is precisely what I mean by *partaking* in the universal.

Thus, in conclusion, I suggest that a truly decolonial theory from “Asia”, which escapes the ontological trap of Hegelian enunciation, should be one that not only takes incommensurability seriously, and differences as imaginatively as possible even if we cannot translate them into our own categorical

13 Bhabha’s writings are not spared from criticism. Perhaps potentially one of the most serious problems of Bhabha’s formulation of liminal space between cultural and national constituencies is that it fails to engage effectively with the material conditions of the global south, privileging in turn what Said describes as a “liminal intellectual” who has exclusive access to the textual and discursive space. Another issue is that, while Bhabha gives more credit to the agency of the colonised subject by arguing for the hybridity of colonial subjectivity and mimetic subversion of things “Western” (Bhabha 1994: 102–112) – indeed, more credit than Spivak gives in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1998) – the mode of resistance available for the colonised subject seems to be delimited by the language of the dominant.

imperatives (on incommensurability, Deleuz 1994 writes that it is a feeling formed prior to the explanation of how exactly differences are constructed, and thus cannot be presented as a specific difference between entities or cultures). It should be one that embodies the liminality of “Asia”, and by extension of “the West”. It should be, therefore, one that addresses the idea of the universal as infinite interactions, as a hermeneutic circle articulated through the interactions among diverse ways of being in the world, expressed and experienced in various spatially and temporally defined locations.

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Tokyo behind Screens: Participant Observation in a City of Mobile Digital Communication

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Abstract

This paper critically discusses the method of participant observation (as ethnographic method and everyday practice), which consists of participation, observation and mediation, and suggests adjustments, through the lens of perception, which seem necessary in smartphone-saturated cities. The author argues that digital and material forms of mediation lead to different possibilities and limitations of sensory perception. These therefore need to be consciously acknowledged in the social production and construction of space and place. Through a focus on human perception, the challenges that individualised on-site media consumption provides to the concepts of participation, perception and mediation are discussed. In this regard, the interface, most prominently the screen, functions as a nexus that retranslates information through mediation back into the field of human perception. Mobile digital communication can therefore enrich the sphere of perception (at site), but what is digitally mediated is at the same time constrained by the technical and translational possibilities of the medium and the interface. The case study of the Shimokitazawa Curry Festival in Tokyo is used to show how participation, multisensory perception and mediation are practiced in an urban setting. The same case also provides empirical data concerning multisensory participation as a method that is facing new challenges through increasing mobile digital communication.

Keywords: Tokyo, Curry Festival, participant observation, anthropology of the senses, digital communication, screen

Welcome to a city of screens

To reground the anthropology of the senses, our first priority must be to restore the virtual worlds of sense to the practicalities of our sensing of the world. (Ingold 2011: 317)

Participant observation as an academic method and as a way to understand user-generated media content remains as useful as ever for the study of our presence in the world and also our perception of the world. But it requires adaptation to and reflection of the mobile interfaces and digital communication that augment our perception and use of space.

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In many literal and metaphorical ways, Tokyo is a city of screens: there are screens in front of windows that protect against the sun or mosquitos (*amido*), folding screens (*byōbu*) and sliding screen doors (*fusuma* and *shōji*), and there are emotional screens that people carry to shield themselves from the society around them, as people in all cities do (cf. Slaatta 2006). Additionally, there are large LED screens in front of stations, like the Alta screen in Shinjuku or the many screens at Shibuya crossing. There are also an increasing number of screens in trains and subways, in department stores and of course the uncountable number of small screens in the hands and pockets of the city's residents (cf. Sneep 2017, Hansen 2018, Baron / Af Segerstad 2010). Urban spaces are full of interfaces that either limit perception (like a partition), show perceptible information (like a video screen) or do both at the same time (like a smart phone screen). The smartphone enables users to perceive visual and auditory information, while simultaneously limiting the perception of one's surroundings and obstructing other people's view of the smartphone user.

In this paper, I critically discuss the method of (multisensory) participant observation (PO), which consists of participation, observation and mediation. I also suggest adjustments that are necessary in smartphone-saturated cities. Digital and material forms of mediation lead to different possibilities and limitations of sensory perception. They therefore need to be consciously acknowledged in the social construction of space and place.

While engaging in PO of the perception of public space in neighbourhoods in western Tokyo,¹ my fieldnotes became permeated with observations of smartphone usage in various situations: while walking, riding a bicycle, driving a car, sitting, standing, smoking, but also while shopping alone or in groups, talking, listening to others talk, queuing in front of restaurants, ordering, eating, drinking and many more. My method was sufficient for the purpose of my study, as “ethnographic methods [should] document empirical operations and communicative practices as they appear and disappear in real time” (Lee 2008: 458) on location. At the same time, my research led me to doubt the possibility of understanding human (inter-)actions where the causes and results of these actions were often communicated solely through digital interfaces, mostly smartphone screens.

These interfaces enable users to consume and contribute to individualised digitally mediated discourses about location while on location. The everyday use of digital interfaces as modes of mediation necessitates rethinking our understanding of the social construction of space and place (cf. Low 2009, Horst / Miller 2012a). “In Japan social media has become an integral part of everyday life” (Gerster 2018: 17), and therefore the existing theories need to be discussed and transformed accordingly (Horst / Miller 2012a: 107; Seligmann /

1 The empirical data, observations and examples are based on my PhD project “Exploring the Nexus between Individual Perception and Social Construction of Urban Spaces” (working title).

Estes 2019: 5–8). Existing anthropological research on Japan mainly covers ontological questions: Ito Mizuko et al. (2005), Corinna Peil (2011) and Matsuda Misa (2014) elaborate mobile phone use in various (social) dimensions, Deirdre Snee (2017) explores the influence of smart phone use on everyday street life, Michael Fisch's study on commuter trains (2018) includes cell phone usage and Paul Hansen's article (2018) regards touch as well. In addition, ethical questions are raised by Julia Gerster (2018) in her discussion about social media use in the disaster-struck Tōhoku region.

However, the use of mobile digital interfaces must also be addressed as an epistemological question. We need to ask how perception in a city of screens functions, and therefore how anthropological concepts of space and place need to be adjusted and reframed. Additionally, research methods need to be probed with regard to potential blind spots and their a priori paradigmatic foundations. In this paper, I suggest adjustments that seem necessary in smart-phone-saturated cities. This does not mean that society or the human condition have completely changed, but it implies that variables that seemed static in the past are actually changeable and need to be treated that way.

An anthropological perspective on mediation [...] is largely concerned with understanding why some media are perceived as mediating and others are not. Rather than seeing pre-digital worlds as less mediated, we need to study how the rise of digital technologies has created the illusion that they were. (Horst / Miller 2012a: 105)

The same holds true for participation, which has long been interpreted as a spatial function in a geographical sense, e.g., staying in a certain place for a certain time. Due to digital anthropology this perspective has broadened. It now encompasses various forms of participation in (virtual) social activities (cf. Varis 2015: 62–63). Ito accordingly advocates a “reconfigured methodological toolkit” and calls for “designing new observational methods [...] that span physically demarcated localities” (2005: 11). To summarise, various scholars favour a new discussion of concepts and methods against the backdrop of mobile digital interfaces. The following thoughts illuminate these discussions in a review of the anthropological method of PO in an urban setting through the lens of perception.

Participant observation as a multisensory tool for urban research

“Proper ethnography” involves, according to Clifford Geertz, “going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available” (Geertz 1988: 1). In short, it involves participation (taking part), observation (perception) and mediation (transcription and

publication). This also describes the basic logic behind participant observation (PO): the researcher is in the same (foreign) location – socially, spatially and temporally – as the social group she studies, so she can observe what the informants are doing, enacting and communicating (Howell 2018: 2). Although “[p]articipant-observation is not a clearly defined practice”, it is a central and constituting method of anthropology (Howell 2018: 3). PO as an ethnographic method that embeds the researcher in the field as a whole sensory being has always been multi-sensory. It emphasises and focuses on the sensory density of human interaction and everyday life. It also faces the problem of how to record, describe and deal with olfactory (cf. Henshaw 2014), taste and touch sensations. However, the epistemological question of where the limitations of these senses are and how they are constituted and configured is of fundamental importance if the general context is changed (for example through the intensified use of mobile digital communication). I would therefore like to underline the necessity of rethinking the multisensory elements of PO² by not only focusing on possibilities but also on the limitations and problems (cf. Seligmann / Estes 2019: 16).

I propose a sensory-aware version of PO as a method involving a “reflexive discussion of sensory ethnography practice in ways that make the processes and techniques through which they have produced knowledge open and accessible” (Pink 2013: 263–64). While classical PO is a viable method to gather information about a shared public sphere or a private group (cf. Pink 2009, 2013, 2010; Low 2015), it is now being challenged by the common practice of mobile, individualised and diversified media consumption (cf. DeNicola 2012). The mobile use of digital equipment has changed what is possibly perceivable as well as possibly participable.

Regarding location, I follow the conception of space and place by Setha Low (2009) who provides an anthropological reading of Henri Lefebvre (1991), Michel de Certeau (1998) and Michel Foucault (1991). In her “multidimensional model of space and place” social relations are the basis that necessitates materiality through embodiment and language to function as a medium of discussion (Low 2009: 34). *This Space as Mode of Mediation* can be approached hermeneutically as a text, whose meaning can be read (Aucoin 2017: 405) on the condition that the text is perceived and decipherable.

It is therefore necessary to ask how to apply ethnographic methods and approaches in urban studies and sensory anthropology, without ignoring the broad variety of practices of digital communications. *The Second International Handbook of Internet Research* (Hunsinger et al. 2019) or the *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication* (Georgakopoulou / Spilioti 2015) are more general publications, but empirical studies (Kita /

2 Thereby following Ingold 2002, 2011; Pink / Howes 2010; Hansen 2018.

Yamada 2017, Quercia et al. 2015) exist as well, approaching perceptions of urban space through digital communication or data. However, these studies deal with translations and “transcriptions” of perceptions, thoughts and feelings (cf. O’Dell / Willim 2013: 316). In this regard, it is important to recall that the act of transcribing is an editorial one and “includes a selection process” (O’Dell / Willim 2013: 317). This also holds true for technical forms of transcription such as photography (visual) or audio recordings (auditory), and even more so for information transcribed by autonomous technical sensors, such as surveillance cameras or weather stations. The selection process in these (technical) cases is inscribed in the programme. The technical construction determines the possibilities of perception and transcription (cf. Flusser 2000: 33–40).

The academic output regarding sense-sensitive ethnographic methods – called “sensory anthropology” by Sarah Pink and “anthropology of the senses” by David Howes (Pink / Howes 2010: 331) – is currently a lively topic of discussion (cf. Ingold 2011). Even though there are methodological discourses on this (cf. Low 2015), (digital) mediation is only marginally approached. The same could be said about the rich urban studies research output (cf. Nasar 1989) focusing on Tokyo (cf. Imai 2017, 2008), that provides detailed empirical studies and frameworks but refrains from tackling the methodological problems of mobile digital devices. Only recently do we find research that is strongly committed to technology as urban praxis (cf. Sneep 2017) or as a substitution for human perception in a smart city setting (cf. Verma et al. 2019).

Sensory systems and their limitations

Participant observation is based on conscious perception. In particular, communication practices are in the focus of attention and these can be limited to only one sensory category. For example, music, radio or voice-calls are limited to hearing, or text and pictures shown on a screen are only accessible through visual perception. These practices can also be combined to involve multiple sensory categories, like the smell of incense sticks and the ringing of a temple bell. It is important to understand that each receptor needs an adequate stimulus, a stimulus with sufficient intensity to exceed the sensory threshold that allows it to be perceived (Smith 2008: 34–36). This tuning between receptor and stimulus is a nature and nurture combination process mediated over a longer time through the “physical features of the world we live in” (De Lange et al. 2018: 766). The expectations we create based on our (socially and culturally influenced) experiences shape our thoughts and anticipations, and they also sharpen or dampen perceived stimuli (ibid.: 764–771, Ingold 2002: 157–171).

The work of Itō, *How Are People Who Can't See Seeing the World* (*Me no mienai hito wa seikai o dō miteiru no ka*, 2015), for example, is very insightful in this regard. Itō worked on perception by people with disabilities, showing that their world (view) is not “lacking something” but is different due to the abilities of their senses, and that this is true for every individual. The convenient but misleading supposition that everyone perceives in the same way, as Uexküll (2001: 109) pointed out, creates a strong confrontation between “normal” and “disabled”, resulting in the view that the latter are somehow “handicapped”.

In addition to biological receptors, there are also a large number of technical receptors (like a magnetometer or a gyroscope in a smartphone) known as sensors, which are able to perceive, for example, gamma radiation (Geiger counter), electromagnetic waves outside the visible spectrum (infrared photo-sensor), and many more. There is the possibility of translation between the senses, so that information detectable only by one receptor can also be perceived by another. The mother who reads a street sign to her preschool child is a simple example for this, as is the constantly uttering radio in the back of a shop, which does the same work of translation for its owner, receiving electromagnetic waves and translating them into sound waves. These forms of translation from one sensory category to another transmit only part of the information. Some information is altered, and other information might not be translated at all. It is important to note that while the street sign might be unreadable to the child, it remains nevertheless perceivable. Electromagnetic radio waves, by contrast, will never be perceivable by any human. There is no problem of comprehension here, but rather one of perception. The need to have a technical receiver that can translate the (digital) information into a form that is perceivable for humans is the crucial point. It is also the reason why I have repeatedly emphasised that the screen is the most important contemporary representation of this interface. Screens (and headphones) are omnipresent because they are the best match between the possibilities of human perception and digital (binary and electronic) communication.

Let us next consider the limitations of the sensory systems with regard to biological as well as technical aspects. First, a distinction can be made between distance senses (such as visual and auditory senses) and contact senses (such as taste, touch and thermosensitivity). Olfaction is delicate, because it is based on chemoreceptors and therefore needs direct contact with molecules to be detected. However, in a lived world environment, these molecules can be carried over kilometres in the atmosphere. This also holds true for hearing. This leads to the second layer of distinction, dividing the human senses into energy-based senses and molecule-based senses. Mechanoreceptors, photoreceptors and thermoreceptors detect energy level changes in form of electromagnetic waves or oscillation, as well as forces that affect the human body.

These energy-based senses are somehow transmittable via digital communication through an adequate interface. A speaker, a display and a vibration device are the producers of such perceivable information in a cell phone. By contrast, the chemoreceptors are based on molecules that cannot be transmitted by electromagnetic waves or produced from an energy supply.

The third layer of distinction regards the level of measurement (or scale of measure), which corresponds to the second layer of distinction. Energy-based sensations refer to a ratio and interval scale, while molecule-based senses detect nominal (discrete) scale values. While energy-based sensations are transmittable through information and then made perceivable through energy conversion, molecule-based senses need transportation instead of transmission because they have very limited possibilities of matter conversion. A camera can detect the wavelength and intensity of electromagnetic waves reflected by a pinch of curry spice and then transmit this information to a screen, where wavelength and intensity are technically reproduced. The smell of a pinch of curry, by contrast, is a distinct variable. Even if describable as information by listing all the molecules and their percentage, it is not technically reproducible somewhere else through the use of energy.

The sensory differences and limitations of spatial media and space as modes of mediation should now be clear. We have also noticed the effective match between energy-based senses, digital communication and smart phones as interfaces. With the growing number of (digital) spatial media as an important factor that shapes the “experience of spatiality” (Leszczynski 2015: 745), a preponderance of visual (and auditory) sensations is obvious. As we will see below, attempts are made to translate and communicate smell and taste through pictures and text. On the other hand, a stronger urge to control information affects not only spatial media. For example, Paul Roquet (2016) showed in his book *Ambient Media* that by engineering and controlling sensory information in urban environments (e.g., in shopping malls or elevators), we see space as a mode of mediation drawn near the communicative processes of spatial media that is marked by a limitation of the perceivable.

Participation: A shared space and place

Mobile media individualise perception and provide immediate augmentation. This results in diversified discourses that dissolve a shared environment. Participation means that the act of sharing can take place. This can be performed through sharing a geographical location, using space as a mode of mediation in order to enable proximity, contact and interaction. Sharing can also take place through other media, such as user-generated digital communication that

allows for contact, interaction and relational proximity. If (digital) communication refers to a location, it is called spatial media. This is where the discourse about space happens. Combining the two – participating in both space as a mode of mediation and spatial media – implies participation in a shared environment (local public sphere). However, individualisation and fragmentation can dissolve this local shared environment through multiple simultaneous but separated discourses (cf. Foucault 1991).

Disintegrating field sites?

By studying perceived urban space in times of digital communication, the definition of the field site has become problematic. The concepts of geographical place and socially constructed space no longer overlap (cf. Low 2014, Lefebvre 1991), but Ingold's statement about fieldwork and the resulting idea of a field site is still very much to the point:

[Participation] is what makes anthropological fieldwork possible, for it allows the fieldworker and local people to inhabit a common ground of experience, even though each may bring to bear a radically different conceptual frame to the task of its interpretation. (Ingold 2002: 167)

The contemporary practice of immediate telecommunication, and through it augmented perception through screens, is marring the validity of this statement. The “common ground of experience” (Ingold 2002: 167) is starting to crumble under the siege of individualised mobile interfaces. Hence, taking (digital) communication relating to space into account, i.e., “spatial media” as defined by Leszczynski (2015: 729), the definition of the field becomes more complicated. As Piia Varis stated,

[the u]nderstandings of space and place – and indeed, understandings of what constitutes ethnographic “field” – have also been complicated by the fact that mobility is increasingly not confined to physical movement. (Varis 2015: 58)

Mobility and accessibility – not necessarily linked to physical location – fracture or disintegrate the classic idea of a somehow contained or at least distinguishable area of field research (cf. Castells 2013, Seligmann / Estes 2019).

In my own research in Tokyo, the processual approach was helpful at the beginning. It led to the selection of two starting points for my ethnographic fieldwork. The commuter train intersections Shimokitazawa³ and Meidaimae were both experiencing and expecting major changes in the physical structure of public spaces and train lines at the time (cf. Sand 2013). Because biological perception is triggered by stimuli, such as changes in the environment of an organism (Smith 2008: 33), these places were ideal for observing spatial perception.

3 Existing scientific literature deals with the shopping streets in a global context (cf. Zukin et al. 2016), the protest movement and its community (cf. Miura 2016), and the microeconomic situation (cf. Hattori 2012).

While my first week of fieldwork – full of participant observation and casual interaction and conversation with informants in public spaces – could be described as somehow successful, the urban practice of everyday and ubiquitous smartphone use made it clear that the smartphone as interface (cf. Galloway 2012) was omnipresent. The information it contained, however, was not for the observing ethnographer. Deirdre Sneep, who dedicated her dissertation to the study of cell phone use in Tokyo, gets to the point by stating that “[t]he ‘smartphone walker’ has become a standard part of city life” and that it is a phenomenon worth studying (Sneep 2017: 78).

The problem is that only the device, i.e., the outside surface of the smartphone, is visible, while the programming and content behind the screen, and therefore the act of communication, remain invisible in public space. In such a situation, it is tempting to construct a dichotomy of real space vs virtual space, or physical space vs cyberspace, as many did, and were subsequently criticised for (cf. Leszczynski 2015: 743–746). Even though the metaphorical use of virtual spaces and cyberspaces needs to be acknowledged, in addition to different usage of these concepts in other disciplines and approaches, it is important to recall that the information is not perceived in cyberspace but through the screen (the interface) at a specific location (Hansen 2018: 6). A shattered smartphone screen, for example, ends the possibility of perceiving the digital information at that precise location.

We can therefore say that while PO in public spaces is useful for participating in space as a mode of mediation and while it results in a rich quantity of sensory impressions, this method is less rewarding when it comes to studying participation in digital spatial media. Through the possibility of privately communicating in public, digital media often strips away the contact and interactional aspect of participation in space as a mode of mediation, surrogating it in highly fragmented spatial media. Michael Fisch (2018: 51) described this pointedly by writing that “the silence of the packed train [...] as well [as] the various forms of media – from cell phones to screens to posters – [...] have become essential features of the commute in recent years”. This generates a fractured environment that includes spatial proximity as well as communicative distance at the same time. Of course, not all spatial media are digitally transmitted by screens. There still exist verbal, visual and other multisensory communications and contact. However, the social construction of space is biologically based on contact and interaction. Next, we will therefore turn to a discussion of the influence of individualised spatial media on a shared environment.

Sensory-based socially constructed spaces

Many critical geographers⁴ regard space as a “material and social reality, that is constantly brought into being through embodied socio-technical practices” (Leszczynski 2015: 735). The way human beings are connected to this socially constructed space is through perception, i.e., their senses.

At the beginning of the last century, the influential biologist Jakob von Uexküll developed theoretical notions of how organisms perceive their environment (*Umwelt*). He stated that only through our “sensory organs” can we “transform stimuli into properties”, and furthermore that we must learn in small steps “that familiar objects are not small but remote” (Uexküll 2001: 108). These findings are confirmed by modern biology,⁵ and they are also compatible with social system theory (cf. Luhmann 1984). We are, in short, separated from all other beings by the limits of our senses, but we are also connected to the world around us.⁶ Therefore, through our senses we are connected to other beings that share this world. Uexküll also took into consideration that

[...] the idea of an objective universe, that embraces all living things, is undeniably very useful for ordinary life. The conventional universe, where all our relationships to our fellow human beings are enacted, has brought all personal *Umwelt* spaces under a common denominator, and this has become indispensable for civilized human beings. Without it, we cannot draw the simplest map, because it is impossible to combine all subjective points of view in a single picture. (Uexküll 2001: 109)

This acknowledgment of the social construction of reality is the necessary link that bridges the gap between materialists’ and constructivists’ understandings of the world through communication.⁷ Communication is understood here in a broad sense as “the sharing of meaning through the exchange of information” (Castells 2013: 54), and “[a bit of] information is a drawn distinction based on a perceivable difference” (Luhmann 1984).⁸

How does this insight help us to deal with digital communication and space from an ethnographer’s perspective? First, it proves that so long as we are unable to perceive in the same way, we need to construct a shared environment – in this case a shared idea of space – to enable any meaningful communication and civilization. A shared environment can be understood as an *argumentum ad populum* that is constructed from a multitude of individual differing

4 For example, Lefebvre 1991, Massey 2005, Weichhart 2018.

5 Cf. De Lange et al. 2018, Smith 2008.

6 Tim Ingold’s work (2002: 153–287, 2011) focuses on this point from an anthropological perspective in detail as does that of the above-mentioned Sarah Pink and David Howes, but also Michael Jackson and Paul Stoller.

7 Uexküll was not the first to do this, but others have pointed out similar mechanisms (cf. body and mind in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Karl Jaspers’ discursive truth and Wittgenstein’s thoughts about things and facts).

8 And Luhmann 1992, following Talcott Parsons and Gregory Bateson: “a ‘bit’ of information is definable as a difference which makes a difference” (Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago University Press, 1972, p. 315).

perceptions through participation. We are therefore not constructivists by choice, but by necessity. Therefore, the *argumentum e contrario* is that if we are not communicating with each other (but only beside each other), we are creating parallel environments that are not collectively shared.

Secondly, it is important to understand that *Umwelt* is not the space around us but rather what our senses are capable of discerning of its stimuli. It “reveal[s] the ways in which physical spaces are always-already information spaces”, and thus the “experience of spatiality (as material socio-spatio-technical relations) [is] as always-already *mediated*” (Leszczynski 2015: 745, emphasis in original). This means that (digital) spatial media and space as a mode of mediation do not contrast each other – such as a “cyber space vs real space” distinction would imply. The two coexist and both are needed for the social construction of space. The difference between these two is based on the characteristics (limitations, potentials and degrees of freedom) of the media that structure the ways of communication (cf. Castells 2013: 54–136) and the possibilities of perceiving them. It is possible to avoid participation in (digital) spatial media by avoiding communication, or by only consuming spatial media and therefore being unperceivable by others. Regarding space as a mode of mediation, it is highly complicated to avoid communication in daily life, because by our bodily existence we leave perceptible traces in space. Furthermore, space as a mode of mediation allows for a broad variety of perceptions, while spatial media are highly limited.

Perception: Screening the city

We have seen above that space is constructed through both spatial media and space as a mode of mediation, and that spatial media are consumed and partly constituted by screens (on mobile digital interfaces) on site. This diversifies what is individually perceivable, resulting in networked forms of communication. By contrast, space as a mode of mediation allows for multisensory communication in spatial proximity. Through increased attention to the human sensory system, I try to show in this section that the feeling of difference between spatial media and space as a mode of mediation is mainly caused by the sensory dearth of the former and the (unavoidable) sensory fullness (or even overflow) of the latter. Space as a mode of mediation is also difficult to control, which is why spatial media (especially through mobile screens) are used to draw the focus to specific sensations or information, creating an augmented space. The Shimokitazawa Curry Festival can serve as an example to demonstrate how taste and smell are rich in information. These are therefore regarded as important for PO, because they add layers of contradictory, confusing and

unconscious information to places and they contribute the “finer points” of a multisensory dataset. The ethnographer as author or composer faces the familiar problem of having to put in academic prose what is otherwise extremely difficult to verbalise and transcribe. The same is true for user-generated social media, in which sensory input needs to be transcribed.⁹

The following sentences are based on the field notes I wrote in the Kitazawa Branch of the Setagaya-ku government building, while waiting for a counter to open. I walked through the eastern part of Shimokitazawa (SK), where the newly built bridge of the Keio Inokashira-Line¹⁰ spans the north-south running Chazawa-dōri, which is, with a proper lane in each direction, a major street for the surrounding area:

Monday, 15 October 2018, around 7:45 am. Crossing the street [Chazawa-dōri] to enter SK through the green metal gate into *Shimokitazawa minamiguchi shōtengai* [SK south exit shopping street]. There is no south exit at the moment, due to the construction work, but the name remains. People in business suits rush by in the direction of the train station (new south-west exit). Apart from this herd of exhausted-looking individuals, the streets are deserted, the shutters of the shops and restaurants closed. Only garbage bags clutter up the street. Passersby seem to hold their breath.

It smells bad. A mixture of spices (curry and chilli), oil and alcohol, some cigarette butts in between. A menagerie of abundant cans of *chūbai*¹¹ decorate a small brick wall, contributing artificial grapefruit (?) to the smell mix. The smell changes in composition and intensity by house and street. It is ubiquitously awful: the last stage of a wasted weekend. The stronger-than-usual curry note is probably a legacy of the Shimokitazawa Curry Festival, which ended the day before. The bags are awaiting the approaching garbage trucks, which collect the remains of consumption two times a week (Mondays and Fridays), starting around 8 o'clock in the morning.

The communication processes and sensory restrictions of academic articles do not allow me to include a smell sample (I am sure readers will be happy about this), but I hope the description allows one to imagine the olfactory sensations. Without any certainty that the smell of that Monday morning was altered due to the Shimokitazawa Curry Festival, I would like to take this as an example of how important the multiplicity of information that creates reality really is. This Curry Festival, for instance, is an example of the “inextricably linked” (Graham et al. 2013: 465) nature of space. While the “curry part” of the event is only perceivable at the location through gustation and olfaction, the “festival part” is not so much present in the streets (except to some extent at the main square in front of the train station) due to the decentralised nature of the festival, but it accumulates in spatial media. Numerous shared pictures, videos and comments of participants (under the Japanese hashtag *#shimoki-*

9 Cf. O'Dell / Willim 2013, Geertz 1988.

10 A commuter line connecting the Tokyo Sub-Centre of Shibuya with the popular suburb of Kichijōji.

11 *Chūbi* or *chūbai* is an alcoholic drink mixed of some kind of fruit soda and hard liquor, resulting in an easy-to-drink beverage with an alcohol content of 3–9%.

takarēfesu) together with the social media presence of the organisers – the company Ai Rabu kk. and the Shimokitazawa Business Association – provide a substantial collection of mostly visually perceivable information¹² and a sense of the feeling of the festival. Long before the 10-day event starts, and long after it has ended, the mediated discourse cultivates the field by triggering the idea of curry in the expectation registry of consumers. All year around, the multiple restaurants that offer curry reference their products somewhat (in commercials and online media) to the event or have it referenced by others (through tabelog.com or social media posts). Graham, Zook and Boulton (2013) describe such a phenomenon of mediated space as “augmented realities”.

They define these [augmented realities] as the context-specific, emergent perceptions of place(s) that are (re)produced as our experiences of physical spaces are supplemented and structured by the voluminous flows of geocoded information about spaces and places that individuals generate and mobilize synchronously and proximately via networked devices, becoming part and parcel of how we (re)enact space whilst we are in space, experiencing that space. [...] These “augmented realities”, which are intimately predicated on the pervasiveness of location-aware mobile platforms, influence not only perceptions of particular places, but indeed also material behaviours, activities, and movements in and across space as “particular interpretations of events and locations are foregrounded or side-lined”. (Leszczynski 2015:735)

While this definition is quite appealing in framing the phenomenon in question, it is less helpful in addressing the problem of how ethnographic methods should deal with these augmented realities. Participant observation is possible during the event, but to eat at all 128 shops that offered curries is not. Even though informal onsite interviews of customers were possible, they did not provide real insight regarding taste and smell. Other than *oishii* and *umai* (both meaning “delicious” or “tasty”), the customers did not use more specific words, nor did they find it necessary to elaborate on their sensory experience on site. Asking one informant who was willingly chatting with me in front of the train station how he experienced the fragrance and taste, he answered that it would be hard to describe and much easier if I would go there and try it myself. This carelessly spilled answer supports the hypothesis that the difficult, time-consuming and skill-demanding work of transcription and verbalisation of senses into text is a hurdle that limits communication about perception. The general cultural and social training (in most modern countries) is focused on vision-to-text transcription, while other senses are ignored.¹³

In contrast to this inability or unwillingness to communicate sensations of taste and smell on site, digital communication about these sensations was nonetheless flourishing. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that a large share of communication takes place through digital spatial media. Even in the pam-

12 See Ai Rabu kk. 2018d, 2018c, 2018b, 2018a.

13 The Japanese language’s onomatopoeia might be interesting in this regard, but exceeds the scope of this paper, cf. Kita / Yamada 2017.

phlets provided on site, the prominent page three was completely dedicated to a smartphone application. A QR-code was printed on the cover as well as on the posters in the streets.

It is obvious that a study of digital communication might be the logical next step, to obtain more data (or to augment those communications that are not observable on site). While advertising and journalistic content can be researched with media studies methods, the individual perceptions that are shared online (e.g., on tabelog.com) are more like snippets of field notes (cf. Tabelog 2018). The users share the same burden as the researcher, trying to transcribe their perceptions and sensations and communicate them to others.

Figure 1: Shimokitazawa Curry Festival 2018 (cover and page 3 of a map to the festival)



Source: The pictures – cover page (on the left) and page 3 (on the right) – are taken from a twelve-page pamphlet in A3 format, published and distributed in print and online by the Shimokitazawa Curry Festival 2018 executive committee.

Mediation: Communicating sensations human-machine-human

After discussing the spatial problem of participation and the sensory problem of perception, the final aspect of PO, the transcription and mediation, needs to be debated. In an academic setting, PO as a method is still very much text-centred (field notes, transcripts and articles), even though visual anthropology offers the medium of film as an (of course still largely visual) alternative.¹⁴ PO as everyday praxis has gained a wide range of possibilities for the mediation of sensations through digital media. Visual media (photography and short videos) are often used, and digital platforms like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook encourage adding spatial signifiers to these posts, creating spatial media.

Using again the case of the Curry Festival, I first show how such digitally mediated images are used to share something that is referring to olfactory sensations and taste. Critique is woven into this discussion as I argue that more academic awareness is needed of human-machine interaction. The act of transcription, if done in collaboration between machine and human, not only obfuscates the editorial process (through the technical sensor and the handling of it) but also claims to mediate multisensory perception, even though the output is just a semiotic token, a representation not a sensation (cf. Hansen 2018: 3–6).

The number of sensors in cities (e.g. surveillance cameras, thermometers, microphones, etc.) is rising, especially under the influence of smart city aspirations. These sensors, in the same way as city users with their smartphones, could provide further data for research. At the same time, their deployment also raises objections to the use of data in violation of protection and privacy. The spatial media that are produced, distributed and consumed on site without much delay create a surplus of perceptible information, but this augmentation is ephemeral and individualised. This information is increasing the attention towards and expectations of perception.

Digital curry and the power of pictures

Searching for the hashtag *#shimokitakarēfesu* 2018 (in Japanese) and surfing the social networks in order to engage in digital participant observation, I was overwhelmed by the flood of contributions generated by festival visitors. Most of them consisted of one or more photographs of a curry dish and a very short text, often followed by a hashtag indexing the curry festival and another one giving the restaurant's name. The taste, as well as the aroma – perhaps the most prominent features of curry dishes – were given less attention. At least in

14 I am fully aware that there is excellent research regarding sound (cf. Roquet 2016, Bonnet 2016) and a lively community doing anthropology of sound, but in terms of mediation, audio files or live performances are still not accepted as scientific publications.

some tweets, the users employed adjectives to describe the meal, but the variety was limited mostly to *supaisu* (“spicy”) and *oishii* (“tasty”). The photographs, however, were quite appealing, in spite of the fact that they did not provide information about the taste or smell but focused simply on the visuality of the dish. When departing from the receptive possibilities of the apparatus – the camera – a translation of the chemoreceptors’ information is not convertible into a photograph. To quote Vilém Flusser:

In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do. (Flusser 2000: 35)

This does not mean that the camera determines the photographer, but it emphasises that the “possibilities of producing information” this way follow the rules of the “photographic program” (Flusser 2000: 26). Flusser understands this program as the technical and cultural knowledge that is necessary to build an apparatus, and the specific form and function built into it. The user of this apparatus is in most cases neither able to build the apparatus nor to understand in detail what occurs inside it (technically, mechanically or through coding). Therefore, users view photographers as the functionaries of the apparatuses, who “do not play with their plaything but against it”, thereby creating some kind of unity (Flusser 2000: 27). This idea of “playing against the apparatus/program” is something that structures not only photography but the whole structure of digital (spatial) media. The single users are not in control of the program but are willing to play along in order to get what they want. In many cases, the program seems to follow the will of the user, because the user has learned to want what the program can do.

Starting from another point and perspective, namely the study of Tokyo’s commuter train network, ethnographer Michael Fisch also develops his “machine theory for thinking with technology”, the goal of which “is to think with the processes of immersive technological mediation and conditions of human-machine interaction” (Fisch 2018: 6). He also raises the idea of a “rigged game” and the human willingness to participate in a human-machine interaction, even though the output might not be satisfying (Fisch 2018: 121–165).

By viewing the digital spatial media in line with the ideas of Flusser and Fisch on human-machine interaction, and by applying these concepts to the case of the Curry Festival, we can indeed see mediation occurring at the “margin of indeterminacy” (Fisch 2018: 14). The program gives a certain leeway to alter or interact in a way and therefore communicate. We find, here again, a possibility to perceive, that is to say, to structure the possibilities of communication.

The machine and its sensors and the human and its sensory systems are in this together, divided by their possibilities of perception. The program also restricts the perspective (the perception) and what is outside of the range that

must be translated into “program readable” data (Flusser 2000: 36). But in contrast, to affect human beings, it must be also translated into information that we are able to perceive. A server with tweets of the curry festival would not be accessible without a peripheral device translating it back into visual images (cf. Galloway 2012).

I mentioned before the delicious-looking pictures of curry meals at the curry festival that were posted on social media platforms. This phenomenon of technically produced pictures as proof or evidence of something that is actually not transmitted – here smells and tastes – is a widely spread practice. It is anchored in a (false) belief in the objective nature of technically produced and sensed information. The limitations of the provided information are not stated clearly enough, even though this is obviously important. It is particularly relevant for other examples such as surveillance cameras. Flusser describes this problem on the basis of the photograph:

This lack of criticism of technical images is potentially dangerous at a time when technical images are in the process of displacing texts – dangerous for the reason that the “objectivity” of technical images is an illusion. (Flusser 2000: 15)

Objectivity is an illusion, because subjectivity is a matter of perspective, and there is no sensor without perspective. There is only a program that enables the technical process, a program with all its ideas and flaws built into the machine.

While “reality” and in this sense the experience of spatiality cannot be split into what is real and what is virtual, our perceptions depend on the capabilities of the medium we are using to perceive and then on the medium we are using to communicate about it. This holds true also for urban space as a mode of mediation. The mode of mediation, too, is limiting in a sense, but not so much for all those who have learned to see the city as a natural state of being. For a machine with the ability to sense location, through a GPS receiver, tall buildings and concrete walls are a clear restriction in the possibilities for communication. Nevertheless, we see a tendency in newly built architectural and city spaces to control the (human) perceptions by technical systems or rules. In this way, the limits of perception by patterns learned through digital communication are reduced.

Artificial sensors and human perception

Cities are becoming increasingly sensory, at least in a technical way. Sensors are fundamentally present in the conception of smart cities, as are processors that store and analyse data (cf. Ramaprasad et al. 2017). Constructed environments are equipped with sensory systems (e.g. surveillance cameras, therm-

ometers, microphones, etc.). Even before there were any high-tech sensors in the city, or even before the neologism “smart city” was coined, the city could be seen as a machine for living (cf. Hillier 2007, 2012) with multiple programs enabling it and written in it.¹⁵ These programs, mostly materialised in architecture and infrastructure, structure the possibilities of living – just as Flusser’s photographic program sets the rules for human-camera interaction.

To give a concrete example, consider once more the visual and olfactory stimuli that are perceivable at the curry festival. Space as a mode of mediation is not unstructured or unconstrained. The window screens facing the street allow for visual communication that might bear the same information as the smartphone screen, by showing, for example, a replica of the dish. The wind, transporting aerosols through the streets from the curry kitchen to the human nose, is structured by ventilation systems, the height of buildings and so on. Due to the multisensory quality of the medium space, it is difficult to control these stimuli.

The structures of the city and their effect on PO reveal connections between architecture, design and city planning and the sphere of sensory ethnography. I therefore advocate extending reflections about human-machine interaction to the realm of the urban. The city – every built structure as a matter of fact – both constrains and enables communication processes, thereby enabling and disabling specific perceptions as it functions as a medium.

In this sense, mediation is a claim about the nature of our techno-socio-spatial realities – our being-with locational technologies, being-in space/place, and our being-with each other in a technological present characterized by the pervasiveness and entrenchment of spatial media in the spaces and practices of everyday life. (Leszczynski 2015: 747)

This emphasis on everyday life and the human scale regarding technology should not be forgotten or neglected, because even though it is central to ethnographers, it might be less acknowledged by scholars of other disciplines, or societal actors (e.g. the police). The human scale, as a scale of perception and communication, might be the only real determining force in this discussion about ethnographic methods and the multisensory perception of space. This is not to deny digital communication, algorithm-based media and a persuasive amount of technology-mediated information in our everyday lives. It is, however, adjusting the scale to understand that it is not the amount of information that is important. Nowadays there is always enough information through screens everywhere. Rather, the limits and the multifaceted, more than human notions of perception are shaping what and also how much we comprehend.

These limitations lead to constant processes of transcription and translation bound by systematic constraints, but the output and the material change.

15 Seen from a different perspective, and avoiding the word “machine”, we could also apply the theory of structuration by Anthony Giddens, which adds more perception awareness (and the development of research since the 1980s) (Giddens 1984: 45–51, 111).

That is to say, the minimum requirement for every perception is not limited to one's own possibilities. A (smart) city, sharing space with smart machines, is a city of sensors. This city is not only a place full of sensors but also a space constructed by and for a multitude of sensors – an interdependent fabric of perceptions. The interplay of information and material constellations is, however, always a material one. Information needs materialisation to be perceptible. Therefore, anthropological fieldwork is needed as an approach that considers human action and interaction (with other humans or machines) as embodied practices of communication and the enactment of information. Just as former anthropologists observed how scriptures led people to perform specific rituals or practices, we need to be open to accepting that scripts (codes and programs) are leading people to act and interact in a certain way.

While space as a mode of mediation is rich in the variety of senses, as shown through the above example of the waste left behind after the Curry Festival, it is not possible to perceive everything. One needs to select (consciously or unconsciously) the information that can be processed. This leads to two important mechanisms that also structure human perception: “expectation (‘what is likely?’) and attention (‘what is relevant?’)” (De Lange et al. 2018: 775). With the increasing amount of spatial media and despite the fact that what is perceivable can be very limited – allowing only visual perception, for example – the mechanisms of expectation and attention are significant. Expressed in more philosophical terms, François J. Bonnet states the following:

For we must not lose sight of the fact that the sensible, in so far as it allows access to the world of representations [...] presents in itself, or rather becomes for itself, a major stake. For whoever controls the sensible, or at least directs it, in doing so de facto manipulates the representation of the world and thus the world itself. Mediation and mediatization of the sensible therefore play an essential role in the construction of the real. (Bonnet 2017: 15)

Conclusion: A matter of perception

Studying Tokyo, one needs to give full significance to what can be sensed (space as a mode of mediation) and to the augmented and assembled perceptions that mobile interfaces (spatial media) are creating. For a long time, the discussion unfolded along the question of how culture (the world of representations) shapes our perception – while the perceptible world was rendered as (relatively) fixed. Today, the question in a city of screens has shifted to issues of how we are sharing and sensing a world full of individualised screens. I use participant observation as a research method, but also as a tool to question the paradigms and inquire as to the limitations of ethnographic fieldwork (in contemporary Japan). Re-evaluating the three stages of PO (par-

icipation, perception and mediation) through the lens of urban perception, I advocate that PO be used as a framework to understand social media activities that involve the transcription of sensory perceptions. In light of the discussion above, three conclusions can be drawn: 1) Participation is constituted through proximity, contact and interaction. While highlighting that personal perception is individual (*Umwelt*), a socially constructed idea of a shared perceived environment is needed to enable communication. 2) The perceived difference between spatial media and space as a mode of mediation is mainly caused by the sensory paucity of the former and the sensory richness of the latter. 3) Digital ethnography and anthropology of the senses can be complementary and mutually beneficial, but they are divided by the act of transcription. This transcription of perceptions into digitally storable information and back into perceivable information is bound by biological and technical constraints as well as by cultural and programmed environmental variables.

To sum up, perception shapes and limits the possibilities of human beings and societies. Not only humans and animals, but also machines/apparatuses are limited by their possibilities of perception. Consequently, the human-machine relationship – conceived through the bottleneck of perception and mediation – will be central to understanding social interaction in the 21st century. In connection with the topic of this special issue, the significance of perception for the topic of poetics and aesthetics of urban space in Asia is not questioned, but I have tried to show through the discussion above that perception is also a major factor regarding the political and social construction of urbanities in Asia. In this regard, participant observation as a way to think through and reflect on urban space is a key method not only in anthropology, but also for urban planning, social sciences and politics, to better understand how human beings actually dwell, live and interact with one another.

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A Place of Caring: Politics of the HIV Testing Centre in the Red House Square, Taipei

I-Yi Hsieh

Abstract

The Red House neighbourhood in the Ximen shopping district, located on the south side of Taipei, has been the centre of the city's vibrant culture of sexual inclusivity and gay activism since the early 2000s. Next to the shining billboards at Ximen Square, the Red House presents itself as a reminder of the neighbourhood's historical transformation from a marketplace during the Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan (1895–1945) to a major pornography theatre in the 1970s–1990s, while emerging as a new urban centre for youth culture, entertainment and outdoor gay bars in the 2000s. Addressing issues of urban exclusion and inclusion, this paper focuses on an HIV testing booth located in the Red House area. Based on interviews with social workers and drawing analyses from archival research, this paper reflects on the politics of a place of caring. Providing 15-minute HIV testing sessions free for anyone in the gay community, the testing booth is an outpost of the Taiwan AIDS Foundation, a nongovernmental organisation that receives public funds. Despite the fact that HIV tests are now widely available for purchase – even accessible from vending machines – the testing booth's cosy, discretionary and friendly manner renders it a place of caring, where one can be attended by social workers as well as receiving a consultation.

Keywords: Taiwan, Taipei, Red House, AIDS, HIV test, care, LGBT

Introduction

In May 2019, same-sex marriage was legalised in Taiwan. The passage of the bill into a legal statute in the Legislative Yuan (the equivalent of parliament), establishing the recognition of same-sex union by marriage registration, marks

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a milestone for gender politics in Taiwan.¹ A hard-won victory of gender equity, the two years leading up to this 2019 legislation nonetheless speak to the challenges faced by LGBT activism in Taiwan. For what was passed in 2019 was merely an Act of Implementation pertaining to the Supreme Court's 2018 ruling, in which the prohibition of same-sex union was declared unconstitutional.² While the 2018 Supreme Court ruling consequently determined the amendment of civil law by the Legislative Yuan, this legal sovereignty was challenged by a referendum launched by a new coalition of conservatives that gathered support from evangelical churches and the conservative wing of the Taiwan Presbyterian Church, aligned with some in the Buddhist and Daoist communities. In the swift referendum at the end of 2018, the proposal opposing measures to amend the definition of marriage in the civil law won a majority. Given the result, the same-sex marriage legislation was compromised; the legislators in turn drafted a special "implementation act" pertaining to the Supreme Court's ruling without amending the civil law. This turn of events is characteristic of the dynamic of gender politics in Taiwan, as the equity movements can be best described as constantly confronting oppositions old and new. For the LGBT community in Taiwan, this shifting horizon of social inclusion and exclusion is rather familiar terrain.

Informed by this dynamic of inclusivity and exclusivity central to LGBT politics in Taiwan, this paper presents an analysis of the history of HIV in Taiwan in general and the ethics/politics of the HIV test booth located in the Red House neighbourhood in west Taipei in particular. This booth, known as "Gisney Land",³ is an outpost of the Taiwan AIDS Foundation, one among many that form a wide network of nongovernmental organisations that provide HIV tests, AIDS public education, support and care for HIV+ patients as well as drug abuse workshops and more. The Red House itself is an octagonal building first built in 1908, with a neo-baroque exterior covered by red bricks. Designated as a marketplace during the Japanese colonial period in Taiwan (1895–1945), the building was renamed the "Red House" in 1951 and repurposed into a theatre. Now surrounded by outdoor LGBT-friendly bars, shops and a music venue, the Red House epitomises the historical transformation of the Ximen district and its tangled relationship with gender politics in Taiwan. As the end of Japanese colonialism in 1945 was followed by the retreat of

1 The full legal statute, created in this 2019 May legislation, is entitled "Act for Implementation of J. Y. Interpretation No. 748," which was drafted in response to the Taiwan Supreme Court's ruling regarding the legality of same-sex marriage. The full content of the act can be found here: <https://mojlaw.moj.gov.tw/NewsContentE.aspx?id=196> (accessed 16 September 2019).

2 Full content of this Supreme Court ruling can be found at <http://cons.judicial.gov.tw/jcc/zh-tw/jep03/show?expno=748> (accessed 16 September 2019).

3 The social worker Wayne informed me that the name of the HIV testing booth, Gisney Land, was meant to convey the aim of creating a joyous and supportive space for the gay community. It takes reference from Disneyland and its appeal of wonder and happiness. Most of the social workers employed in the booth have either a medical or social work background. As members of the gay community, they expressed passion in working in the gay community to which they belong.

Chiang Kai-shek from mainland China to Taiwan in 1949, the Red House neighbourhood stood as a witness to this postcolonial transition into the Cold War. Nonetheless, as cultural studies scholar Chi Dawei argues, it was exactly at this postcolonial juncture that Taipei began to experience the emergent gay urban culture surrounding the Xingongyuan (the “New Park”) and the Red House in the Ximen district (Chi 2017). Set against this backdrop, the social workers at the HIV testing booth present an invaluable case pertaining to the convoluted path toward the creation of an alternative space of caring. From their experience, we are presented with a concrete picture of grassroots NGOs that work among the frictions embedded in the history of AIDS politics in Taiwan.

Echoing this special issue’s call for re-examining Asian urban life in its interweaving of poetics and politics, this paper ventures into addressing the confluence of urban history and spatial politics of gender inclusivity using field interviews and analyses of fictional narratives pertaining to the Red House district. The research methodology of this paper is informed by urban ethnography, which encompasses archival research and semi-structured interviews with social workers at the Taiwan AIDS Foundation – and with a playwright whose recent theatre production involves an AIDS hospice in Taiwan. My archival research focuses on the historical transformation of the Red House area, a context against which the spatial politics of gay urban socialising emerges in Taipei.

For the analyses drawn from literary depictions and selected dramaturgy, the effort is made to portray a vivid, concrete picture of the Red House and its adjacent neighbourhood. As the figures surrounding urban gay quarters tend to be rendered as shadowed, ghostly or invisible, with their voices muted in official archives, this essay intends to draw literary portraits of gay urban life in addressing the gay socialising space in Taipei – echoing what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls the *chronotope*, i.e., a socio-linguistic concept of time-and-space in literary configuration (Bakhtin 1981: 147).⁴ The concept of *chronotope* serves as a vantage entry point into analysing forms and senses of temporality and spatiality as social concepts embodied in literary rendition. One instance of such analysis is anthropologist Keith Basso’s use of the idea of *chronotope* in his research of Western Apache stories, in which he discusses the sense of place as being withheld in fictional accounts. For Basso, the stories themselves provide important moral narratives that reveal a deeper sense of time-space configurations, which are socially and culturally shared, as they

4 Also see Valentine Voloshinov’s discussion of literary creation as embedded in a sign system already recognised socially. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, he argues that literary accounts of the social world are essentially inseparable from existing political and ideological conventions. Thus, literary works can be analysed socially as much as narratives in other forms when it comes to the related context of politics, in which such linguistic practices are considered possible forms of communication (Voloshinov 1973).

are utilised in public communication in various forms (Basso 1984). In the following sections we will encounter discussions much in line with this idea, in which contemporary reflections (gathered at interviews) regarding the Red House district as a gay quarter are in a dialogic relation to the literary chronotope of the district's history as a sexually diverse neighbourhood since the Japanese colonial period. Such a methodology also speaks to the "science, technology, and society studies (STS)" community's strong aversion to the "two culture" division prevalent in social sciences in the post-WWII era, in which scholars oppose the separation of socio-cultural realms from the scientific and the medical configuration of our knowledge – however falsely asserted. The superficial divide of science and humanities fails to address the intricate interweaving of the cultural and the technological (Martin 1994).

In line with this discussion, STS scholars also point out the history of AIDS in the United States, as well as worldwide, as a social, cultural and moral issue as much as a medical one – given that the struggle of the HIV+ community is surrounded by stigma, IV drug use and gender politics that affect public health. The cautionary tale of AIDS politics in the United States, as told by Epstein and Farmer (2004), urges one to consider the web of AIDS knowledge and practice from below. For instance, Shilts's *And the Band Played on: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1998) and Epstein's *Impure Science* (1996) both illuminate problems layered in AIDS denial which led to the undertreatment of the pandemic in the early 1980s – as was also the case in South Africa in the 2000s. More specifically, Epstein focuses on the production of AIDS science in the United States in the earlier years of the pandemic when stigma, coupled with governmental negligence, resulted in a tremendous death toll. Given this history of the failure of "good science", Epstein opines that "the science of AIDS, therefore, cannot be analysed 'from the top down'". For, from the onset, AIDS has been

a politicised epidemic, and that political character has had consequences: it has resulted in *multiplication of the successful pathways* to the establishment of credibility and *diversification of the personnel* beyond the highly credentialed. The construction of facts in AIDS controversies has therefore been more complicated and the routes to closure more convoluted. Credibility struggles in the AIDS arena have been multilateral: they have involved an unusually wide range of players. And the interventions of laypeople in the proclamation and evaluation of scientific claims have helped shape what is believed to be known about AIDS – just as they have made problematic our understanding of who is a "layperson" and who is an "expert". (Epstein 1996: 3)

Epstein's caution about the construction of AIDS science then turns to place great emphasis on grassroots activists, i.e., the nonmedical professionals, the "laypersons" whose intervention shifted the configuration of AIDS knowledge. Also documented in his book are activists and other members in the movement who not only criticised scientific research as fuelled by antigay assumptions, but whose involvement also proves that community-based AIDS

organisations are better-suited and more experienced than experts in elaborating and practising health knowledge – such as what exactly “safe sex” means. This reminder calls on the researcher to shift his/her focus from realms pertaining to “good science” to the actual players involved in constructing AIDS science. In the history of AIDS in Taiwan, as will be elaborated in the following sections, we are presented with a similar case echoing Epstein, in which the work conducted by activists and nongovernmental organisations substantially refines and advances AIDS knowledge and treatment.

With the aim of incorporating social and cultural realms into the discussion, this paper also applies a comparative angle to the case in Taiwan in its substantial divergence from that in the United States. Most significantly, the lack of universal health care in the United States sets it apart from Taiwan, where treatments for AIDS are fully covered by public healthcare. Mindful of this difference, this paper hopes to contribute to the literature of AIDS care with an attentiveness to the pandemic’s respective configurations regarding its exclusion from, or inclusion in, public health policies. Despite the fact that the universal healthcare system in Taiwan has been active since 1995, HIV screening measures still depend heavily on local NGOs – as their ability to reach out to communities outside of normative medical spaces outperforms governmental agencies. Providing socially engaged ways of caring, these NGOs reveal to us an understudied sphere of AIDS treatment that excels in forming and maintaining social relationships. To begin, I will first turn to the historical geography of the Red House district in west Taipei.

From Red House to Little Bear Village

The emergence of the Red House district as a gay-friendly space can be dated to 2006, when several bars and cafes with rainbow flags attached to their storefronts began conducting business in the piazza adjacent to the Red House building (Lo 2010: 3). One of the pioneering cafes was named “The Little Bear”, a new nickname with which many in the local LGBT community began to refer to the neighbourhood (*ibid.*: 2–3). This gesture toward an open identification with the gay community set up a huge contrast with the city’s former gay quarter, the Xingongyuan Park – which was prominent in the 1960s and 1970s – as the park was known to be a congregation place for gay men at night, with an atmosphere of human shadows moving quickly between park bushes under hues of dimmed light. The indistinguishable faces in the park were representative of the closeted, liminal identity of the LGBT community at that time (Lo 2010: 2, Chi 2017: 104–161). In the 2000s, this shift of spatial politics of the gay community from the closet to public visibility, along-

side the restoration of the Red House, nonetheless spoke to a century-long transformation of the district. From its onset in the early twentieth century, the Red House has been demarcated by urban exclusion and inclusion.

Originally designed to be a marketplace targeting Japanese shoppers (Matsuda 2006: 70–71, Huang 2004), a “model” for all other marketplaces, in 1908 the construction of the building of Red House was convened under the master plan to modernise Taiwan, which included other urban marketplaces and the newly constructed sewer system, road pavements, parks and slaughter houses. After 1945, the Red House was taken over by a Shanghainese businessman and turned into a Shanghai opera house called the Huyuan Theatre. In 1956, it was renamed the Red House Theatre. In 1963, it was changed again, into a movie theatre, where the first movie screening machine and large silver screen were introduced in Taiwan. The cinema played mostly black-and-white movies in genres of martial arts and Euro-American westerns.

Since the Japanese colonial era, the neighbourhood surrounding the Red House, particularly at the proximity of Sansui Street, had been the city’s prostitution quarter until 1997, when governmentally regulated legal prostitution was banned (Wu 1997).⁵ Some thus called this area an “auction market for pleasure” (ibid.: 47), where

trans-dressing male prostitutes could be spotted [in the neighbourhood] around 1960, who would sing songs and loiter [at the area] for customers. (Wu 1997: 49)

The confluence of prostitution,⁶ same-sex sexual encounters, and theatre entertainment rendered the Red House neighbourhood a sex district in the city.⁷ In the 1980s, with many new movie theatres appearing in the Ximen district, the Red House cinema began showing soft pornographic films in an effort to compete with the other new theatres in the area (Lo 2010: 7). It was also by this time that the soft porn theatre became a congregation spot for gay men in Ximen. While the presence of prostitutes in the neighbourhood was addressed in novels published in 1960, the Red House Theatre’s proximity to old gay quarters⁸ in the city earned it a reputation for being a popular social space for gay men, where sexual encounters were common and expected in the dark space (Wu 1997: 49).

In the early 2000s, with the aim of constructing the city’s cultural heritage, a new wave of conservation was launched to restore the architectural beauty of the Red House. The area remains, however, a space characterised by its mixture of entertainment and sexual culture. This sexual culture has cohabit-

5 Wu cites Ke Ruiming’s *Taiwan Fengyue* (Ke 1991: 119) in support of the account of the area around Sansui street as a sexual quarter from the Japanese colonial period until 1997.

6 Including legal brothels regulated by the government and illegal ones.

7 Some mentioned the existence of trans-dressers in the Japanese colonial era, who provided sexual services in the teahouses. But it is unclear whether there were such establishments in Ximen or around the Red House at that time (Wu 1997: 48). See also Ke 1992: 119.

8 Such as the public park of Xingongyuan and another nearby movie theatre called Xinnanyang.

ed with gay sexuality since the Japanese colonial era, while the Red House and its environs have appeared constantly in the queer literature in Taiwan as well. As Chi Tawei notes, the public culture pertaining to the Taiwan Tongzhi literature published in 1980s and 1990s actually indicates a readership – and thus a shared sense of the existence of gay culture – prior to the publication dates. Given this reasoning about the prolonged historicity of readership, Chi argues that the emergence of same-sex urban culture in Taiwan should be likely dated to the 1960s, while the origin of this public history can be pushed even farther back into the 1950s (Chi 2017: 22–23). Chi’s observation on queer readership as existent in the 1950s and 1960s corroborates the archival record of Red House. This urban history can be said to serve as the backdrop against which an HIV testing booth can be located in a vibrant gay district in the city.

May we shake hands? Early cases of HIV in Taiwan

With the first case of AIDS diagnosed in 1981, the crisis that swirled up globally in the early 1980s caught up with the community in Taiwan in 1984 when an infected American visited the island. In 1985, the first local HIV+ person was diagnosed: a Malaysian Chinese recently returned to Taiwan (Zhang 1995: 50). The epidemic worsened in Taiwan in 1987, as the number of infected rose tremendously. In addition to this, a female HIV-positive person and an infant were diagnosed as infected with the virus in the same year; there were also 40 cases that appeared to be transmitted through blood transfusion (*ibid.*). While the AIDS crisis undoubtedly has had a tremendous impact on the LGBT community globally, the virus’s particular history in Taiwan differs from the mainstream narrative dominant in the United States. This is due to the fact that the Taiwanese public healthcare system began to incorporate AIDS medical treatment and HIV tests into public health policies in the 1990s, in dramatic contrast to the earlier history of the AIDS community’s exclusion from public health in the U.S.

Before the acronym “AIDS” (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was coined in 1982, the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention reported unusual clusters of pneumonia in five homosexual men in Los Angeles in June 1981. With this finding, 1981 is generally considered to be the year when the AIDS epidemic began in the United States. Indeed, the period of 1981–1985, the earlier years of the AIDS epidemic in New York and around the United States, is now infamously known for its death toll largely due to the government’s negligence, coupled with the stigma of AIDS as a “gay disease”. Treatments were scarce, as AIDS was excluded from public health policies. The

rising number of deaths in 1983, of 1112, was met with anger from activist movements organised by patients and the families of those who had been infected. The activists combated the stigma as well as demanding that the disease be taken seriously as a public health issue.

In May 1983, the U.S. Congress passed the first bill to fund AIDS research and treatment – \$12 million for agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In July 1983, the U.S. Public Health Service began to open National AIDS Hotlines.⁹ But it was not until March 1985 that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began to license the first commercial blood test, ELISA, which was used to detect HIV antibodies; following suit, blood banks started screening the blood supply.

Thus, 1985 marked a special year in the history of the AIDS pandemic. It was the year when the disease first caught the public's attention – most significantly, then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan mentioned AIDS publicly for the first time. With theatre productions, memoirs and novels also beginning to come out that year, the narratives surrounding the illness were further deepened; nonetheless, it was undoubtedly a time when the HIV test was novel, and the prognosis was grim. Defying the social and cultural stigma of AIDS, many works of fiction and memoirs were written during this time, often by patients who died young, speaking not only to the hardship and secrecy but also to a community of caring. Kenny Fries, for example, addressing narratives about the cusp of the pandemic, e.g., *Eighty-Sixed* by David Feinberg and *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket* by John Weir, says that these stories, if read more closely, show

how the gay community, built on secrecy, competition, and caring, morphed into an example of how a long-despised and marginal group learned to take the power to change into its own hands. (Fries 2017)

In 1990, four years after the first positive diagnosis of HIV in Taiwan, with the “Regulations of the AIDS Prevention” declared by the then-Bureau of Health (now the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, C.D.C.),¹⁰ AIDS medications began to be incorporated into the public health system, in contrast to the case in the United States. The unique combination of a universal healthcare system and the attention that the public health professionals paid to the AIDS community has brought about a different history of the epidemic in Taiwan.

In *May We Shake Hands?* – a collection of stories about the earlier cases in the AIDS crisis in Taiwan – journalist Yiping Zhang writes about the peak years of the epidemic, around 1985–1987, when the government's slow imple-

9 All materials drawn from the archive of HIV.org, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline> (accessed 3 July 2019).

10 The Taiwan Centres for Disease Control is currently under the Ministry of Health. It was first established in 1999, on a smaller scale, and named the Bureau for Disease Control. In 2013, it was restructured into a higher rank of the governmental bureaucracy.

mentation of thorough HIV screening in blood banks, prisons and clinics met with criticism (Zhang 1995: 59).¹¹ In 1985 HIV screening tests had already been approved by the U.S. FDA, initially based on measuring antibodies in reaction to the HIV virus in one's body (Cui 2006: 115–16).¹² These screening tests for HIV have since become widely available at medical centres sanctioned by Taiwan C.D.C. or at local medical services (lower-level publicly funded clinics providing basic medical treatments; Cui 2006: 71). Anonymous HIV screening tests are also available at the Taipei Sexual Disease Prevention Centre (TSDPC), and the Taiwan Department of Health designated eight medical centres for anonymous HIV screening and counselling in 1997. The origin of TSDPC can be traced to the Vietnam War, as it was initiated in 1969 for the treatment of U.S. marine troops being flown to Taipei (about 200 soldiers every week) for short breaks from the battlefield (*ibid.*). Set against the backdrop of the Cold War coalition between Taiwan and the United States, the TSDPC received assistance from the World Health Organisation, and it dealt mostly with syphilis in its early days. The TSDPC was also structured to collaborate more with local NGOs; thus, in the case of HIV prevention records, social workers of HIV NGOs would even approach people in bars or brothels for virus screenings. In 1988, TSDPC added a specialist tasked with HIV screening. This history of social outreach campaigns delivering tests for sexually transmittable diseases during the Cold War era can be said to be the onset of social workers' participating in the AIDS testing efforts in Taiwan.

The end of martial law in Taiwan in 1987 marked the beginning of a flourishing activism targeting various social, cultural and political issues. Previously criminalised, gay rights activism now seized the opportunity and began to grow exponentially. In 1998, the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Organisation, the first nongovernmental organisation for LGBT rights, was established. Its website states that the Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline was initiated in the aftermath of an incident of a gay teen who committed suicide. Among such NGOs, the Taiwan AIDS Foundation was established in 2004, focusing on issues including AIDS tests, treatment, counselling and education. These nongovernmental organisations often are supported by mixed financial resources drawn from both C.D.C. funds and private donations. The HIV testing booth that this paper focuses on is emblematic of this system: a loosely connected network of social workers, advocates and doctors who work in this liminal space between

11 This is a book collection of Zhang's journalist essays published in newspapers from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, in which she interviewed many HIV+ patients in the early days of the epidemic.

12 This method includes enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), also known as an enzyme immunoassay (EIA) and PA (particle-agglutination) tests. Both tests detect HIV antibodies and antigens in the blood. However, if a person is tested as HIV+ on an ELISA test, this could also be a false positive because certain conditions such as Lyme disease, syphilis or lupus may produce a false positive for HIV in an ELISA test. With concerns about false positives, these initial screenings often require a companion test utilising western blot, also called the protein immunoblot, which is able to detect specific proteins by visualising the target antibody through methods such as staining, immunofluorescence and radioactivity.

the state and society. Several long-standing NGOs, the Tongzhi Hotlines included, show that local AIDS-advocate NGOs have prioritised socially engaged, community-based practices. In this way, they seek out ways of cohabiting with animosity while continuing to carry out work related to human rights and gender equity.

The ways in which the AIDS pandemic changed the gay community is a subject of great importance in the Tongzhi literature in Taiwan, and Tawei Chi once proclaimed that “AIDS sets up a water-shed moment for the new and old Tongzhi literature” (Chi 2017: 386). Chi cites a scene in the story “Human Buddha”, in which two men meet in an empty, practically deserted gay spa. All of the customers were terrified by the AIDS pandemic and had fled from gay saunas (*ibid.*). Here, the evocation of the gay sauna as a socialising space illuminates urban gay spatiality. Drawn to present a convincing scene for the readers, the gay spa, appropriated in the novel as a fictional urban space for sexual encounters, is underlined by the configuration of a sense of time-and-space – a chronotope, in other words – which is defined by sexuality. Launched to invoke a mirroring effect of such an urban space in the reader’s mind, the trope can be seen as a widely shared “enactment” of urban poetics. The dystopian fear that accompanied the arrival of the AIDS epidemic further provides a nuanced image about the shifting aura of the gay sauna in relation to a sense of comfort and homosexual desire materialised and rendered visible in literary depiction. It also speaks to a milieu of panic shared by members of the gay community, serving as a better context for us to understand the consequent development of various activist groups’ shift toward prioritising HIV as their central task.

Undetectable equals untransmittable

In recent years, Taiwan C.D.C. has prioritised “pre-exposure prophylaxis” (referred to hereafter as PrEp) among AIDS prevention measures. According to the official statistics released by Taiwan C.D.C., the application of PrEp has shown positive results in the decrease in the number of new HIV infections. In 2005, the number of AIDS virus infections reached 3,377, the highest of all years; in 2017, however, it had fallen to 2,513 cases, and in 2018, the cumulative cases from January to October were only 1,647.¹³ There has been a steady decline in the number of AIDS cases since. Many believe that this positive record could hardly have been achieved without the efforts of grassroots activist groups, as much of the preventive work relies on social workers and

13 See Huang / Huang 2019 and their discussion of the report released by the Taiwan Liver Disease Prevention & Treatment Research Foundation (<https://www.liver.org.tw/journalView.php?cat=60&csid=754&page=1>, accessed 9 July 2019).

volunteers who enter local communities, parties, rural parks and even summer beach parties, where the knowledge and means of AIDS prevention are scarcely available. The popular phrase used in introducing PrEp, and in how this medical treatment functions is “U=U”, which stands for “undetectable equals untransmittable”.¹⁴

When I sat down with Wayne – the social worker and manager of the HIV testing booth at Red House Square – in May 2019, many people came in and out of the space for anonymous testing and counselling while the interview was conducted. It has been a major theme for the booth to introduce the campaign of PrEp to those coming in to be tested, as well as the significance of “U=U”. In my later visits to the space, in addition to Wayne, who has worked for the Taiwan AIDS Foundation for nine years, there were also two part-time social workers assisting with the screening process. All the social workers and employees I encountered or interviewed in the Foundation’s outposts are members of the LGBT community. The booth at the Red House receives the largest number of visitors among the Foundation’s three community engagement spaces, i.e., in Taipei, Hsin Chu and Chiayi. From May to July 2019, I interviewed four social workers routinely stationed in two of these community centres. Both have worked in the same site for more than eight years, which makes them incredibly knowledgeable about the work of HIV screening and care in Taiwan.

My interview with Wayne was the most informative, in which he explained the trajectory leading up to the current setting of the booth. This site in Red House Square was chosen precisely for the area’s popularity among the gay community. Before the current operation, the Taiwan AIDS Foundation consulted several Japanese NGOs, which were also keen to set up HIV-related spaces in areas attractive to the local LGBT community. The Red House booth focuses exclusively on providing HIV tests, while the centre in Hsin-chu handles other affairs besides testing – such as education and community outreach. For example, the social workers in the Hsin-chu location would convene mobile HIV screening, venturing further into rural communities and providing anonymous tests at weekend stations in parks or other popular gay congregations far from medical centres. Educational workshops for dentists or firefighters¹⁵ regarding how to handle AIDS issues are also on the agenda. Occasionally,

14 Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U) is a worldwide campaign that states, definitively, that people who live with the HIV virus, yet have undetectable HIV RNA, are unable to transmit HIV. This message has been approved by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the HIV Medicine Association. For more detail about the epidemiology of U=U, see Ashley York’s article in *Nature Reviews Microbiology* (York 2019), in which York presents an observational study of 782 gay couples across Europe whose HIV-1 infection was fully suppressed by antiretroviral therapy. York’s study shows that, when HIV virus is fully suppressed, people living with HIV have zero chance of infecting their partners. Other studies supporting the data behind the U=U movement are discussed in the online article “Undetectable Equals Untransmittable” by Milena McLaughlin (McLaughlin 2019).

15 According to Wayne, dentists and firefighters are more likely to be exposed to events or incidents in which direct contact with blood from strangers is present.

they host LGBT socialising events. A routinely held drug abuse workshop for group support is also included in the Hsin-chu booth's calendar. These activities all serve as part of the HIV prevention measures, and they also reflect the different funding structures underlying each local centre managed by the Foundation.

A standardised round of HIV testing at the Red House screening booth consists of a pre-counselling session, a blood-drawing process and a result-reading session at the end. At each session there would be one social worker accompanying the subject and explaining the current state of AIDS treatment and available resources, as well as follow-up procedures if the test result came out as HIV+. As the Red House booth's funding resources come solely from the municipal health bureau, which targets gay men as the public health focus of HIV risk control,¹⁶ the entire testing procedure is free for anyone identifying himself as having engaged in male-male sexual activities; while for anyone outside of this category, the suggested donation is around \$7 U.S. (200 TWD). The whole process lasts about 15–20 minutes. The Red House booth mainly provides the blood test, while in the Hsin-Chu centre two kinds of tests – one oral and the other through blood – are both available. As the testers explain, the method chosen can help determine if the infection date was within the range of the last three months or earlier, which makes it easier to determine the window of the infection and even who the transmitter might have been. The oral HIV test package is also available in a vending machine in Red House Square, which takes a swab from the mouth and gums and can detect the HIV antibody with 99% accuracy.

All of these tests are anonymous, but there is a questionnaire to be filled out. The questions include age, gender, sexual orientation and the subject's knowledge regarding AIDS medical treatment, etc. In the event of an HIV+ test result, the social worker provides information regarding medical treatment and offers the services of the Foundation's other social workers, who can accompany the test subject on medical centre visits. What the booth provides is a space between the private home tests and the hospitals or disease prevention centres managed by Taiwan C.D.C., i.e., between an individual space and the fully medicalised, state-run facilities where those who test positive must be registered.

While the social workers I interviewed are in general wary about reifying AIDS as a gendered, stigmatised pandemic associated exclusively with gay men, they are nonetheless tasked with the double duty of confronting the public's ignorance and sufficiently serving a community in need of allocated AIDS medical resources. Their emphasis on community engagement becomes the

16 See Cui's discussion about how the HIV prevention in Taiwan became a gendered policy focused on gay men (Cui 2006).

organisation's characteristic, as it favours a low-profile, low-key work ethic that values communication and support more than efforts to claim public attention, which was a distinctive feature sought after by many AIDS rights groups in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s (Martin 1994: xv).¹⁷ Given this under-the-radar public engagement philosophy, the testing booths seek to blend in with their surroundings. In Taipei, a first-time visitor would need to acquire knowledge of the booth's location prior to the visit or by obtaining information passed on either from friends or from any of the LGBT-friendly shops at Red House Square. The sign of "Gisney Land," in rainbow colours, is rather inconspicuous; in Hsin-chu, the booth is even squeezed into the fourth floor of a business building crowded by cramped schools and evangelical church centres. In a way, this discretion speaks to the Foundation's awareness about the stigma of AIDS while avoiding direct confrontations with the public. Further, this guiding principle of meeting people in places where they feel comfortable allows an alternative spatial politics to be developed.

The testing booth at the Red House location opens its door in the evening, from 6 p.m. until midnight, which renders its booth-front a luminous spot shining in the darkness. According to Wayne, the hours are set to make HIV tests more accessible for the working population. This means that the booth seeks to operate in the hours when normal medical facilities are not available. This schedule is also to compensate those who are unable to take time off work, or who have difficulty excusing their absence from work for the sake of an HIV test. This emphasis on creating a comforting, trusting space is also evident in the Red House booth's interior design of cosiness, which is accompanied by ambient music or popular Taiwanese pop songs playing in the background. The booth itself is far from capacious, and, at a maximum, can house two small tables rendered into separate, curtained spaces where the tests and counselling sessions can be conducted in private. A centre desk and an information bar, where many flyers and small booklets have been placed, create a minimalist visual presentation. The centre desk serves as an office space where Wayne and other part-time staff members can gather between the testing and counselling sessions. The booth lacks the crudely presented – and sometimes threatening – information boards illustrating the horrors of the illness, which are often present in clinics. The booth intentionally avoids making its space look like a conventional medical space.

Social workers at the booth unanimously expressed their concern for every test subject's emotional reaction, while the low profile of Gisney Land reinforces the Foundation's implicit compromise with the public's animosity to-

17 See Emily Martin's account of AIDS rights groups such as ACT UP/BALTO, which emphasises rendering the politics of inaction and negligence visible by making "its presence felt dramatically at a public event. When you are at an event as an ACT UP member, blowing a shrieking horn, holding an effigy of the governor, or dramatically falling 'dead' on the ground, there is no hiding in the background" (Martin 1994: xv).

ward HIV-related affairs. For instance, Wayne invokes his own awareness of this negotiation on behalf of the booth between the closet and society's tacit acceptance of HIV spaces, rather than openly confronting the stigma or discrimination. Nonetheless the booths effectively provide a sense of comfort for test seekers concerned about privacy. One can also argue that, due to the new treatment of "U=U," frequent HIV tests have become key in the treatment of AIDS, for to accurately determine the time of infection would be the first step to commence this treatment. While undergoing the "U=U" treatment, constant testing for any detectable, active virus that risks the possibility of transmission also becomes a necessary part of the procedure.

Sensitive to the stress and anxiety that might arise during the test, one of the social workers even told me that he would often have a peek at the test result before reading it alongside the test subject. With this strategy, the social worker is prepared for the subject's reaction if the test result is positive. Despite being skilfully sensitive to the subject's possible stress coming into the session, the social workers at the Red House Square booth mentioned several cases when the result was hard to bear and caused a strong emotional reaction. One case was that the subject, having received a positive result, stormed out of the booth without hearing any counselling in which medication options and supportive resources would have been explained. In some cases, subjects would leave without being referred to medical centres or social workers at the Taiwan AIDS Foundation; oftentimes, however, they would come back to the booth after a while, when they were ready to face the situation.

Reflecting rigorously on the issue of the social configuration of an able body, or the healthy body, as socially and historically constructed, the social workers are able to attend to this sensitive moment of one's shifting understanding of selfhood and illness when facing HIV test results. "What if this person is not yet ready to accept the situation? And, after all, what is a healthy body?" Wayne asked. For him, the mission of an HIV screening booth lies in its ability to provide this window for one to consider whether, and how, to be introduced to the fully medicalised world, whereby the full coverage of AIDS medicine by the universal healthcare in Taiwan means there exists almost no chance for an HIV+ person to escape the state's registration upon receiving medication or treatment.

AIDS as a public health issue in Taiwan

The inclusion of AIDS in public health policies points to the different history regarding the social configuration of the pandemic in Taiwan. Since 1995, AIDS medical treatments in Taiwan have been fully covered and apply to all

citizens and legal residents, whereas in the United States, the expensive cost of private medical care widens the gap between well-to-do patients and the rest of the AIDS community. This recognition and inclusivity of HIV+ in the public health realm in Taiwan has come a long way, however. In 1983, the introduction of hepatitis B vaccinations from the United States to Taiwan created concerns of the shot's possibility of being infected by the HIV virus, for by then hepatitis B vaccinations were being made of blood plasma. In order to avoid the risk of the immune shots being infected by the HIV virus, coupled with the first case of an HIV+ foreigner passing through Taiwan in 1984, in 1985, the Ministry of Health established an HIV Prevention Unit (Cui 2006: 45–46).

Despite there being 39 HIV+ persons by the end of 1986, instead of drafting legal clauses for the pandemic and its prevention as well as treatments, the Ministry of Health only urged HIV virus carriers not to donate blood. It was not until the crisis reached a tipping point in 1987 that the first local HIV+ patient was registered, and problems also emerged in the blood transfusion centre, as the public began to urge the government to pay further attention to prevention and regulation. Only in 1987 did the Ministry of Health (later restructured as the C.D.C. in 1999) draft a Special Law of AIDS Prevention, which set up involuntary screening of “suspicious persons”, e.g., homosexuals, IV drug users and people working in certain careers such as prostitutes, international cargo staff members and sexual disease carriers (Cui 2006: 57). AIDS was also included in “the Pack of Infectious Diseases” as a non-categorised item; the other three different ranks include cholera, plague, polio, syphilis, etc. Being placed into the “non-category” allows AIDS patients not to be subjected to involuntary segregation or to be reported, public health measures that are otherwise applied to other diseases such as SARS.

In 1990, the amendment of the Special Law of AIDS Prevention included a penalty for those who intentionally infect others with the HIV virus, but the suggestion from some members of the parliament regarding involuntary segregation was rejected (*ibid.*: 61). This amended “Special Law” (*tebiefa*) was passed in November 1990, with Clause 10 specifying that “anyone verified by medical institutes at all levels as having acquired AIDS should notify the assigned medical centres to provide *free* treatment” (*ibid.*: 62, *italics mine*).

A space of caring

With free treatment guaranteed in the 1990 Special Law, along with universal healthcare implemented since 1995, the issues raised by international AIDS communities regarding the high cost of medicines – controlled by large phar-

maceutical companies – is hardly a problem in Taiwan. That being the case, caring for HIV+ patients remains an issue as the illness gradually turns into a chronic condition for an unforeseeable length of time. Among the nongovernmental organisations providing long-term care for AIDS patients in Taiwan, the Harmony Home Foundation Taiwan was the first one, having been established in 1986. Providing a community-based home, the Harmony Home was initiated by the legendary Ms Yang, a heterosexual woman whose passion for HIV+ care was said to have been triggered by her friendship with famed theatre director Qiyuan Tian – then a young fine arts student who had become infected with AIDS in the 1980s (Zhang 1995: 126–138).¹⁸ From the onset, the organisation's goal has been to care for HIV-infected babies, children, teens, women and old people as much as caring for adults, due to the stigma that prevents many in the community from receiving care provided at other facilities. It expanded into a hospice of much larger scale in 2003.

During my interviews with social workers and volunteers, many mentioned to me a recent theatre production that tackles a sensitive subject, the collapse of a care community for AIDS sufferers – a theatre production entitled *A Betrayer's Possible Memoir*,¹⁹ written by young playwright Li-ying Chien. The play centres on the true story of an AIDS home in Taiwan in the 1990s, which was once a refuge for HIV+ gay men, where they could receive care and support. The home was closed after one of the members reported a gay party to the police. To dramatise the actual event of the dismantling of the community surrounding this AIDS home, the plot adds a heroine who is portrayed as a young documentary filmmaker – who is also the niece of the traitor to the HIV community. In her attempts to discover the reasons behind the closure of the AIDS home, and what led to her uncle's conspicuous betrayal, the filmmaker gradually unearths tangled stories told by activists who participated in this then novel community of care in the early 1990s. On the one hand, this play presents invaluable intersecting narratives about the early days of the AIDS epidemic; on the other hand, the fictionalised plot is able to expose disagreements and frictions in the gay community without directly revealing the names of those involved.

In my interview with Chien, the playwright, in July 2019, she described how the play was based on her fieldwork in which she interviewed several senior members in the HIV+ communities. Such recollections of AIDS stories provide invaluable narratives of care that circulate widely in the community. They also shed light on how sickness is perceived by the local community, i.e., how the idea of able bodies is woven into other social and cultural images,

18 Zhang illustrates in detail Ms. Yang's encounter with the fine arts student in pseudonym. Also see the Harmony Home Foundation's web page (<https://www.twhhf.org/>), in which Qiyuan Tian's identity as the young fine arts student is revealed.

19 For more information about this performance, see <http://tifa.npac-ntch.org/2019/tw/theatre/the-possible-memoirs-of-a-traitor/> (accessed 31 July 2019).

and how care for AIDS patients is fundamentally about maintaining relationships. While the characters and the plot of the play are fictional, the script is based on the real event of one prominent figure “H” (a pseudonym), a gay man in the activist circle, who remains quite controversial for his denunciation of homosexuality in later life. Despite once being a strong advocate for gay rights when younger, H’s later shift to evangelical Christianity met with much criticism from the gay community. In earlier journalistic reporting about the first AIDS home in Taiwan, H’s name was evoked as a volunteer who was “a passionate young man, who, despite being at the young age of 25, has carried the [HIV] virus for six years” (Zhang 1995: 130). He was also co-founder of another activist group for the HIV positive, the first rights organisation focusing on AIDS patients’ inalienable civil and human rights. Chien told me that, for those in the Taiwan LGBT community who came to see the play, the “betrayal” character portrayed in the show was quite recognisable, as the plot reminded them of H, who in real life had gone through such a drastic shift in his politics as to join a Christian group against same-sex marriage and to support conservative evangelicalism that denounces sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norm. High-profile and extremely controversial, H has published an autobiography explaining his turn from AIDS activism to Christian evangelicalism.

At the end of our interview, I asked Chien about her views as to why H would make such a dramatic shift with regard to AIDS politics. As the creator of a fictionalised narrative about this controversial figure, Chien’s response points to the issue of personal relationships as being essential for those in the AIDS and LGBT communities. She considers that H’s relationship problems with his then-partner were probably the last straw for him; for in the already small circle of AIDS activists in Taiwan, H’s status as part of an openly gay couple in which both are HIV+ was likely where H had drawn his strength and personal identity, when he was still a part of the community. But once this strong tie was broken, H became isolated. What the play *A Betrayal’s Possible Memoir* and the story of H speak to is the centrality of “relationship maintenance” in the community of AIDS care. Interestingly, Chien’s observation echoes feminist theorists’ articulation of what constitutes the ethics of care. In the Taiwanese context, “relationship maintenance” is also central to the local AIDS care. For example, the following two AIDS educational graphs circulated by the Taiwan C.D.C. show us the kind of popular configuration regarding this “relational thinking”.

If one types “Taiwan AIDS Immune Measures” into a web search, the result might come up with these two images instead of images of a fortress or an immune system with cells and lymph nodes at war – as the immune system has been depicted in U.S. popular culture since the 1950s (Martin: 34–35, 52–63). In Figure 1, a person consults a gloomy friend and finds out that the friend has



Figure 1: Taiwan C.D.C. AIDS contagion cartoon (by SANA)



Figure 2: Caption of the graph included in a web page about false information regarding AIDS contagion (cartoon by Xiaopo Wu). The figure on the left says: “Mosquito! Damn!! I must have gotten HIV from the mosquito that had bitten someone with the HIV virus.” The figure on the right is illustrated with the line “Already bitten [by a mosquito]” (<https://bit.ly/2v7BndT>).

been tested as HIV+. This person comforts the friend, stating that HIV tests are anonymous and that infected people still have the right to work; one only has to refrain from donating blood and should keep in mind preventive measures during sexual activities. In Figure 2, the graph presents an example of misinformation about AIDS contagion, in which the person on the left is worried about being infected with HIV after receiving a mosquito bite. Both images clearly have a target audience of local Taiwanese, addressing issues such as mosquito bites while applying vernacular terms such as “monkey brother”, i.e., a pronouncement evoked to simulate a scene of friendly dialogue among fellow Taiwanese. These visual presentations of AIDS in the Taiwanese context can be said to resonate with feminist scholars’ discussions about relationships being a central part of the ethics of care – despite this point remaining largely underdiscussed.

Ethics of care and cohabitation

Echoing many fellow feminist scholars, Katie Hogan has pointed out that the ethics of care should cease to be a marginal topic in the AIDS community (Hogan 2001). The subject’s marginality has a lot to do with caregiving being long designated as a feminine task, despite the fact that gay men cover much of the work of caregiving for AIDS patients. Hogan criticises the fact that in AIDS literature the conceptualisation of “women as sacrifices, and caregivers bolsters the historical association between care and the private realm of women and family” (ibid.: 2). Hogan brings up statistics that illuminate AIDS as a major cause of death among women, especially among African American and Latino women.²⁰ The invisibility of women in the conversation about the AIDS epidemic marks women in the pandemic as bereft mothers, caring wives and sacrificing sisters. When it comes to caregiving and caretaking, Hogan writes:

[C]aretaking and sacrifice are fundamental human experiences, worthy of society’s time and support, and [...] literary and visual responses to AIDS are forged to generate compassion and care. But it is worrisome that those members of American society who sacrifice the most are often those with the least amount of power, and this observation holds true in the age of AIDS as well. It is also problematic that Western culture, history, myth, family, and economic structures continue to link caretaking activities with certain group of people, mainly women, instead of viewing care as responsibility of the entire society. (Hogan 2001: 2)

20 Hogan writes: “[I]n 1997, AIDS was the third leading cause of death for women ages 25–44 in the United States, and since 1990 it has been the leading cause of death for African American women in the same age group. As of 1996, African American women composed 59 percent of all cases of women with AIDS” (Hogan 2001: 4).

While Hogan's criticism rings true about the condition in the United States, the issue of "viewing care as responsibility of the entire society" remains a sticking point not exclusively in the United States but also one prevalent in South Africa, South Asia and the People's Republic of China. When it comes to AIDS, can anyone be excluded from this conception of good society? Further, what are the legitimate criteria regarding a person's inclusion in, or exclusion from, public health policies and receiving care? Much of the moral philosophy of care concerns an intellectual pathway traceable from "the good society" debate to the feminist ontology of reconfiguring society as in need of care. For example, in 1990, Patricia Illingworth argued for society to take up the responsibility of caring for HIV patients based on a "good society" reasoning, which is an argument deeply rooted in the liberal tradition (Illingworth 1990). She opines that it was the lack of other choices that left the HIV+ and IV drug users to suffer from the pandemic, i.e., far from their own personal responsibility.

Long considered germane to feminine and feminist ethics, caring has been a notion that instigates discomfort in the Euro-American moral philosophy. Care ethics is often criticised as, by its nature, a "slave" faculty of moral reasoning. As Virginia Held, one of the leading philosophers in the ethics of care, writes, "[t]he ethics of care usually works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories" (Held 2006: 13). Embedded in relational thinking, the duo of the care-receiver and caregiver draws philosophical meditation into a dialectic that can stretch into a whole network that sustains this relation. The ethics of care thus hardly qualifies as universal, and its socially grounded specificity renders it easily dismissible by transcendental philosophy. With this, care ethics tends to be positioned as antagonistic to the Kantian deontology in which Reason – the sole independent faculty that differentiates humanity from animality – centres and bestows the power to overcome and eradicate possibilities of reliance. Care ethics also stands as a critique of the liberal political and economic theory that considers "the person as a rational, autonomous agent, or a self-interested individual" (*ibid.*).

Held's insistence on reframing care ethics is more than an epistemological query. The argument points to the ontological condition of care as grounded in relationships given by, and recognised as, a condition of cohabitation. Given that the ethics of care places one in the state of being in a relationship, the moral considerations of this condition concern, fundamentally, the well-being of both parties in this relationship. A person never exists in the ethics of care as a singularity but always and already as tangled in a web of life. It is thus reasonable to describe this caring relationship as a form of cohabitation in a space that is clearly beyond individualist principles of morality. In the case of AIDS, considering what this space of cohabitation involves is not

merely framed by the relationship formed by the caregiver and care-receiver. It also fundamentally involves the care for one's body and the care of the illness itself: the virus, the antibodies and the condition of illness that all together form the face of sickness.

As mentioned previously, AIDS activism since the 1980s has profoundly changed the knowledge production related to the pandemic. Given this reflection about AIDS knowledge formation, it is conceivable to consider the HIV testing booths in Taiwan as also taking part in the configuration of the meanings and practices of AIDS science. Cohabitation has been the key philosophy embraced by these testing booths, enacted by the willingness to negotiate with public culture as well as concerns about relationships as a part of one's overall well-being. What has been practised and prioritised in Taiwan differs from the idea of "caring for one's own body" in the United States. As anthropologist Emily Martin writes, in the United States, since the 1950s, the public imagination of the immune system extensively utilises imagery of the military, fortresses and war in terms of forming the configuration of one's body as a defence mechanism (Martin 1994). This imagination of a "systematic" immune organism, formed into the sense of units of lymph nodes and cells inside and the virus as an intruder from the outside, is actually a post-war configuration.

In Taiwan, as this paper has shown in previous sections, the discourses and practices of the HIV+ community place much more emphasis on the theme of "relationship" rather than centring on the configuration of AIDS as an issue of the individual immune system. Instead of attributing ideas about the immune system at war – an image often replicated in the posters and cartoons on the walls of clinics and in the Taiwan AIDS Foundation's testing booths – these images are replaced by a warm space of cosiness. This attempt to draw the visitor's attention to the words, explanations, gestures and counselling support of the social workers rather than to frightening medical images of a body under attack again points to the prioritisation of the centrality of the relationship. Rather than appropriating the military analogy of combating the disease, what concerns the Taiwan AIDS community regarding the disease appears to follow the ethics of maintaining trust in relationships. In the case of *A Betrayer's Possible Memoir*, we have also witnessed the profound impact resulting from the collapse of such relationships.

In a space that focuses on HIV tests, relationships also cover realms that are more than human. A caregiver in the AIDS community is oftentimes also a health professional who acquires medical knowledge and takes care of all medical concerns surrounding the patient in a space of care. The caretaker is being placed in a space constituted by a microcosm of viruses, antibodies, antigens and the test methods utilised to visualise these active participants in AIDS. Oftentimes, they play a crucial role in determining further treatments

suitable for a patient seeking the HIV test. If considered under the normative frame of one's body as an organism, the agency of things such as viruses and antibodies could appear to be minor, for these molecules cohabit in an HIV+ person's body alongside other parts such as lymph nodes and T-cells. Nonetheless, these seemingly minor proteins are the determining factor in AIDS tests. Furthermore, viewed from a larger context, the AIDS testing booths in Taiwan are the purchaser rather than major provider of international AIDS medical products. Thus, the philosophy of cohabitation can also refer to this extended web of AIDS medical supplies that involves the state, universal health care, legal statutes and the international society of the HIV positive. By integrating the philosophy and practices of care into the thinking about the development of AIDS – and not simply viewing the immune system as a personal, bodily issue, but rather placing it within an interpersonal relationship – the Taiwan health care professionals and the AIDS activists have turned their geo-political as well as medical vulnerability into a form of strength.

Conclusion

The experience of the LGBT community in Taiwan sheds light on the ways in which vulnerability can be inspirational in stirring up alternative forms of being – particularly in terms of how to cohabit despite differences, which is essential to social inclusivity. Embarking from this recognition of treating AIDS within society, as opposed to in exclusion from public health, the case in Taiwan further points to the possibility of vulnerability as a strength to be materialised in a social space of caring. Prioritising the nuances of caring, maintaining relationships and cohabiting with differences as well as with viruses, the HIV testing booth creates a challenge to the moral assumptions behind the obsession of a healthy body as an individual responsibility.

By addressing the dialogic relationship of the poetics and politics of the space of caring, this essay points out the underlying chronotope of LGBT sociality embedded in the history of Taipei since the colonial era. Through excavating the archaeology of the urban space's emergence, the discussion illuminates a concrete sense of “there there”, the urban time and space of lived experiences, where LGBT socialising and ethics of care coexist with the public culture. The case of the Red House neighbourhood shows that the formation of cohabitation involves material as much as sensorial aspects of the place. Furthermore, literary configurations of urban space articulate the moods with faces and lives at the moments when the medical history of AIDS and personal life collapse – be these moments of the fearful gay sauna during the AIDS pandemic, the imperatives for caring that face the sick or even the resentment

and anger among rivalries in the HIV+ community. In these condensed moments of emotions, we are presented with unusually valuable events when the collective global history of a pandemic touches on a version of personalised stories. The moments extend the discussion of urbanism into the realm of affective relations embodied in material interactions, with which everyday co-habitations with AIDS, e.g., spaces of fear, places of caring or the creation of a vibe of comforting, show their historical concreteness. They allow us to look at the faces of the pandemic, against a context where it interacts with everyone and everything. My emphasis on interactivity and dialogism hopes to further defy the misguided exclusion of AIDS from public health as in and of itself sabotaging the very society it is attempting to protect.

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Contemporary Studies on Asian Cities

Review article

Patrick Heinrich

Abstract

This review article explores recent urban studies in Asia in order to explore differences, similarities and convergences between urban and area studies. The review of three recent publications of urban studies in Asia is motivated by the transnational and transcultural make-up of many contemporary Asian cities and their growing interconnectivity. These phenomena result in a rescaling of urban economies and networks, and this is also reflected in urban ambitions and planning. After a brief presentation of the three publications under review, I discuss three questions: Why do urban studies matter for area studies? How are social relations articulated in urban spaces? What is the city doing to people and what are people doing to the city? The discussion of these questions notes that the relation between city, nation state, neighbouring states and the rest of the world has become more complex and harder to predict. Careful consideration of the cases under study reveals processes of a recalibration of relations, calling for the attention of area studies. Urban centres constitute a rewarding field of studies as they require a new focus on new details, experiences and developments.

Keywords: Asian Studies, urban studies, urbanisation, transnationalism, area studies

MARK PENDLETON / JAMIE COATES (EDS), *Thinking from the Yamanote: Space, Place and Mobility in Tokyo's Past and Present*. *Japan Forum* 30(2), pp. 149–162. London: Routledge, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2017.1353532>

DOROTHY SOLINGER (ED.), *Polarized Cities: Portraits of Rich and Poor in Urban China*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. 208 pages, \$39.00. ISBN 978-15381-1648-7

JUNE WANG / TIM OAKES / YANG YANG (EDS), *Making of Cultural Cities in Asia: Mobility, Assemblage, and the Politics of Aspirational Urbanism*. London: Routledge, 2018. 254 pages, 27 illustrations, £36.99. ISBN 978-11383-6034-1

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In the age of globalisation, nation states in Asia are rescaling their markets, alliances, networks and innovation systems. The effects are far-reaching and affect institutions and individuals alike. The resulting change is prominently anchored and visible in large urban areas. Urbanisation is felt everywhere, as Lefebvre (2014) famously observed, but the economic benefits of urbanisation are distributed unequally. Asia is today a hierarchically clustered region, thus fulfilling Henri Lefebvre's (2014) famous prediction of an "urban revolution". His general urban theory implies that "there" is also "right here", and "right here" means "in the city". Lefebvre made a far-reaching observation: even as the world becomes increasingly more interconnected, the importance of "place" does not vanish. On the contrary, it is increasingly important, but not everywhere to the same extent. Processes of globalisation and interconnectivity are not rendering the world "flat"; instead, we find a hierarchical and functional order of cities.

Cities in Asia are part of these transformations, and they are also spearheading many of the urbanisation processes we are witnessing today. For specialists of area studies, these changes call for attention. Urban studies constitutes a valuable field for contemporary area studies as much of its research agenda and many of the research objects are located in and shaped by urban spaces. We also have a methodological problem at hand: urban theory is largely based on a narrative of urban modernity associated with Europe and the USA, but Asian cities are leading this development today. This notwithstanding, the impression prevails that scholars studying US or European settings are working on general insights and theory building, while specialists of Asia are providing new data and cases. This practice is reminiscent of the North–South gap in the production of knowledge, where the South is preliminary seen as a source of data to test and verify Northern theorisations (Jazeel / Mcfarlane 2007).

Today, the importance of large cities often surpasses the limits of the nation state, and sometimes also of Asia. This begs the question of how Asian studies can deal with the urban age. This review article looks for some cues in three recent publications on Asian cities. There is a rapidly growing field of research that focuses on cities and city regions today. The recent boom in urban studies is truly impressive. A search of "urban studies" publications on Google Scholar yielded more than 100,000 results for the past two years. From these, I chose three larger works published in 2018 that I believe either constitute thought-provoking readings for Asian studies specialists or discuss prominent issues in area studies from an urban perspective.

This review article and the books discussed therein reflect the fact that cities represent very insightful objects of research for area studies specialists who 1) seek to focus on translocal, transregional and transcultural phenomena, 2) search for "themes" that allow them to disconnect from Western epistemol-

ogies, and 3) seek to dissolve the uncomfortable dichotomy between the West as the hub for theory making and the rest of the world as a testing ground and a data mine for such theories.

Since the publications under review here comprise 31 chapters and articles altogether, introducing and discussing every single one is neither feasible nor desirable. I will, therefore, first introduce the publications in general terms, and then discuss questions I regard as relevant for area studies in the urban age. Before we start, I hasten to add that this review is written by an area studies specialist for area studies readers. It goes without saying that urbanists, geographers, political scientists, etc. would have different things to say about these publications and link them to different bodies of ideas and concepts.

General overview

Making of Cultural Cities in Asia: Mobility, Assemblage, and the Politics of Aspirational Urbanism is an edited book comprising 15 chapters with an introduction by the editors, June Wang, Tim Oakes and Yang Yang. The book is divided into two parts, “Assembling new models – global networks and state aspiration” and “Encountering the cultural/creative city – negotiation, resistance, and community aspirations.” Most chapters of this book discuss cities that are part of the Sinosphere. In addition, there is one chapter each on Hyderabad, Seoul, Busan and Mumbai.

As the book title announces, the chapters mainly address cultural policies. More concretely, they focus on policies that aspire to strengthen arts and culture in order to attract the “creative class” which, in turn, is seen as a key driver of urban economic growth in Asian cities. This is a competitive undertaking, and any failure to attract creatives is seen as losing ground to other cities. Urban competition and the fact that the ambitions of policy makers are explicitly focused on and restricted to urban centres are indicative of the fact that we truly live in the urban age.

In their introduction, the editors, drawing on the influential work of Roy and Ong (2011), state that “we consider how cities are trying to make themselves into cultural cities as a way of enhancing their dreams of world city status, their worlding ambitions, their aspirational urbanism” (p. 3). Each individual chapter discusses, from various angles, the role of art and the creative class in neoliberal urban planning and in art-driven urban gentrification. One obvious effect thereof is the alienation from or displacement of former residents from urban spaces that are being branded as “creative” and “cultural”. Unsurprisingly, therefore, these transformations frequently involve urban struggle and result in tensions within the city. The volume discusses in great

detail how the long-standing international urban trend to turn abandoned industrial facilities into arts centres, and their neighbourhoods into fancy residential areas, plays out economically, culturally and demographically across Asian cities. It also shows that this type of urban planning is never an easy undertaking, as it evolves in a quickly changing globalised and urbanised world where cities are in competition with one another.

Three approaches stand out in the focus of this book: one is “worlding”, that is, “the art of being global” (Roy / Ong 2011), the second “policy mobility”, i.e., the spread of ideas, practices and actors at particular times and in particular places, and the third is “assemblage”, that is, a transcultural process of piecemeal arrangement, organisation and combination of resources. Cities are thus seen to constitute dynamic, aspirational and interconnected nodes in a global network of mobility and exchange. The individual chapters demonstrate that assemblage provides a useful concept to overcome the static local-global dichotomy. Readers of this book will find many insightful analyses of how cultural policies are shaping Asian cities and learn more about Asian city aspirations and their outcomes. If there is anything to be criticised, then it is the heavy focus on the Sinosphere and the complete absence of Japanese cities in a volume dedicated to Asian cities.

Polarized Cities: Portraits of Rich and Poor in Urban China is a briefer and more concise book. It focuses entirely on the People’s Republic of China. It is written by ethnographers and sociologists, and it features seven chapters in addition to an introduction and a concluding chapter. The book is addressed primarily to students of Chinese Studies and features three parts, “Polarization: Scope, Causes, Manifestations”, “Portraits of the Urban Poor” and “The Upper Reaches of the Urban Rich”. While “city” appears prominently in the book title, there is little reference to urban studies in the book. Urban studies perspectives could have been more fruitfully explored, as urbanity has a great number of particularities in China, such as the limitations on urban household registration, which result in drastic social, political and economic exclusion. One can, of course, observe and analyse poverty and wealth in urban settings also from the viewpoint of urban sociology or ethnography, but such approaches are at pains to capture more comprehensively how urban milieus and territorialised policies influence individual access to strategic resources. What we find in this book are thus case studies that simply happen to be located in cities.

All of these chapters report new research on “rich and poor” in Chinese cities. The polarisation of the population calls for new attention, because China has transformed itself in a relatively short period of time from a strongly egalitarian society into one of the most unequal societies in the world. Through having a comprehensive discussion on rich and poor in one volume – poverty

usually attracts much more attention – the editors seek to show that the socio-economic “divergence is largely the outcome of policies and practices devised and enforced over forty years by the regime’s political elite” (p. 15). In China, being poor is not simply a “problem of precarity”. Poverty is also perceived as a residue of China’s premodernity and as an unwanted reminder of the humiliation that its slow transition to “full modernity” has entailed. Poverty also “stands in the way” of realising the New Chinese Dream. All of this makes poverty a delicate issue in China.

In view of the anti-corruption crackdown under Xi Jinping, the display of excessive wealth has also become problematic. What it means to be rich and enjoy a wealthy lifestyle has therefore been subject to rapid and substantial changes. All book chapters show that the boundaries between rich and poor are solidifying from generation to generation. These barriers are also getting higher and harder to surmount. Social mobility is low in contemporary China. Both the poor and the rich have become sort of “untouchable”, albeit in very different senses of the word’s meaning. The poor appear to be forever trapped in poverty, while the rich have begun to resemble an aristocracy of sorts. All the while, the middle class is reproducing itself, too. In the concluding chapter, David Goodman writes: “The paradox is clear; to have the opportunity to become middle class in the future, not to mention ever to climb the highest rungs of the ladder, one must come at least from a middle-class background in the first place” (p. 175).

The case studies collected in this volume give detailed insights into everyday life of poor and wealthy people in Chinese cities. Urban approaches to the topic under discussion, e.g., the large amount of work on “the right to the city” and its applicability to Chinese cities, could have been fruitfully explored in this book. This opportunity has been missed, making the book more of an ethnographic and sociological snapshot, albeit a very precise and insightful one, about the current socio-economic polarisation in Chinese cities.

Thinking from the Yamanote: Space, Place and Mobility in Tokyo’s Past and Present is a special issue of *Japan Forum*, the official journal of the British Association for Japanese Studies. It consists of an introduction to the topic and then six articles. The authors are specialists of Japanese Studies with different disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from art, anthropology and social history to popular culture. The authors draw on approaches from regional and urban studies, making the special volume insightful for a large readership. Coherence among the individual articles is achieved by their sharing one important and overarching perspective. The main idea in this volume is to view all sorts of phenomena (social, demographic, virtual, artistic, etc.) “from the Yamanote”, the 45-km-long rail line that loops around the heart of Tokyo, connecting to more than 50 other train lines. Writing from the Yamanote re-

quires the authors to come to terms with the consequences and effects of mobility. This provides for a welcome perspective and a thought-provoking methodological challenge.

The Yamanote should obviously not be simply regarded as a piece of infrastructure. The loop line is undisputedly the heart of the megalopolis. It affects people in many ways, and it has been of crucial importance for making Tokyo what it is today. Tokyo's well-known north-east and south-west divide, for example, extends way beyond the city, as the Yamanote connects to other railway lines that link to socio-economically diverse parts of the Japanese hinterland, from where different people arrived for different purposes and motives. Today, as ever, the train line you use to reach the Yamanote may give a first indication of who you are. Correspondingly, all 29 stations on the line (the 30th will open for the 2020 Olympics) function also as a social index, and they have always done so. Despite the (past) ideology of Japan as one large middle-class society, to know where you get on and off the Yamanote, and where you spend your leisure time, has always been indicative of who you are. Despite the diversity of the neighbourhoods that the line crosses and of the people that it carries, passengers riding the Yamanote have learned to ignore differences. In so doing, the train line plays a key role in the reproduction of the idea of a Japanese nation. It is worthy of note, in this context, that riding a train connecting a number of the world's busiest train stations is spectacularly uneventful.

By studying various topics from the perspective of the Yamanote, entirely fresh perspectives on everyday life in Tokyo emerge. As it is a journal volume, this publication is shorter than the two other publications reviewed here. One is left with a desire to know more on further topics – migrants, language and tourists come to mind. It would be a good idea to depart from this special issue and to expand it to a full book-length discussion.

Following this brief summary, I would like to proceed to identify some shared insights that can be gained from these three publications, especially insights that may interest experts of area studies. Cities matter, as they constitute an important analytic unit for knowledge-based societies. The urbanisation process is also an opportunity to reflect on the social sciences and the humanities. Both tend to regard nations and states as the most fundamental and basic unit of analysis. As a matter of fact, these disciplines were founded to support the establishment of nation states (Giddens 1995). This methodological nationalism does not pay adequate attention to the fact that a lot of the things that go on in nation states actually happen in cities, and it also treats too lightly the fact that cities are connected to cities in other nation states. In view of this background, let us therefore consider what can be gathered from the three publications with regard to the following three questions: 1) Why do urban

studies on Asian cities matter for experts of Asian studies? 2) How are social relations articulated in urban spaces? 3) What is the city doing to people, and what are people doing to the city? To be sure, none of the questions will be answered exhaustively here, but looking for answers in the three publications should serve to illustrate the relevance of Asian urban studies for scholars of Asian studies.

Why do urban studies matter?

Methodological nationalism departs from the view that some fundamental “horizontal bond” (language, culture, history) unifies the nation, and proceeds from this epistemological position to studying differences “below that unity” by focusing on, for example, class, ethnicity, identity, sexuality, dialects, etc. The city has the advantage of being so diverse that it prompts an initial focus on diversity from the very start. Hence, the focus automatically becomes how a sense of urban communality is achieved or not achieved. *Polarized Cities* is spot on with this issue as it focuses squarely on segregation and illustrates the fact that very little is actually shared between migrant workers and the destitute, on the one hand, and top government officials, wealthy businesspeople and their offspring, on the other hand. Li Zhang’s chapter on “Convergence and divergence between rich and poor” shows that rich and poor in Beijing even breathe different air: “In sum, the notion of ‘air democracy’ turns out to be a fantasy after all. Facing common environmental threats, the rich are able to afford different strategies to protect themselves and lessen the adverse impact on their health.¹ The poor are once again exposed to multiple hazards but have fewer resources, or none at all, to help them cope” (Solinger 2018: 51).

Urban perspectives also matter because cities are important for governance. To govern the nation implies first and foremost to govern cities, due to their interconnectedness with the world and their economic and demographic power (Jacobs 1985, Brenner 2004). The use of the creative class for economic growth is an excellent example of this. The ideas of Richard Florida (2003) or Charles Landry (2000) about attracting a mobile creative class to the city through policy initiatives enjoy much currency across Asia. Their core idea is that engineers, intellectuals and business majors follow the creative class, and that it is therefore important to attract the creative class and to reinvent contemporary cities as “creative cities”. Doing so is believed to spur economic growth in economies in transition from manufacturing to the production and

1 These measures include having outdoor areas “enclosed” by a dome with filtered air, second homes in the countryside, overseas vacation during summer, indoor air filters, personal air bottled, etc.

circulation of knowledge. In an introduction to the creative city, the editors observe that the idea of the creative class is mobile, and that it has been positively received in Asia “because of its resonance with the already established neoliberal discourse on urban entrepreneurialism” (Wang / Oakes 2018: 147).

The city is also a place that requires methodological innovation. The studies published in the special issue of *Japan Forum* are part of the “spatial turn” and the more recent “mobility turn” in the social sciences in that they focus on a train line and reflect upon different cases from the perspective of the Yamanote. The Yamanote plays an important role, for example, in moulding individuals into expected norms of behaviour and attitude. This is most obvious in the “good manner” campaign posters that have appeared on the trains and the train stations since the 1990s. The routine of riding the Yamanote is a perpetuation of everyday life that Japanese sociologist Shinji Miyadai (1995) has famously termed “the endless everyday” (*owarinaki nichijō*). In the concluding chapter of the special issue, Mark Pendleton therefore observes on the Yamanote “a temporal suspension, an impasse in which people are in perpetual motion but going nowhere, simultaneously struggling for a place to live, while also clinging on to a range of cruelly optimistic visions shaped by nostalgia” (Pendleton / Coates 2018: 262). This observation on Japanese post-bubble society, seen from the Yamanote, proves to be very much to the point. These examples illustrate that urban perspectives offer great detail, precision and impulse for methodological reflection.

How are social relations articulated in urban spaces?

The growth of megacities involves processes of reconfiguration of space, and, with that, displacement and gentrification. In Beijing, a city with very systematic urban planning, the growing number of ring roads is a good example. The analysis of the constant expansion of the city can be studied in a very direct manner. Urban growth pushes the less affluent and less privileged continuously further away from the city centre. It is as if they were riding the waves created by the city’s expansion. By moving towards the outskirts of the city, they naturally make room for new inhabitants, but they also take professions and industries with them. In *Polarized Cities*, Joshua Goldstone notes in his chapter on migrant waste collectors that: “Since they first emerged, Beijing’s informal recycling markets have followed and marked that ever-widening edge [of the city] ever since” (Solinger 2018: 117). Another form of urbanisation is the avoidance of encountering those different from oneself. Andrew David Fields and James Farrer write about the emergence of VIP clubs in Shanghai’s nightlife scene: “In comparison to the free-floating contact zones of the earlier dis-

cos, the contemporary VIP club is culturally speaking a ‘safe space’ catering only to young *fuerialdai* [offspring of rich parents]. [...] This exclusion seems deliberate; it protects the top elite men and women from sexual and social competition” (ibid.: 139). This segregation is accompanied by the exclusion of less privileged participants from the nightlife scene, as manifested in the decline in the popularity of nightclub hostesses among the young rich in comparison to their parent’s generation: “Meanwhile, the *fuerialdai* [...] were increasingly less interested in partying with the relatively uneducated KTV hostesses, and favoured the company of women who tended to be better educated, were themselves from wealthier backgrounds, and understood (or set) trends in fashion, the arts, and other high-culture subjects” (ibid.: 140).

Spatial and social distancing and exclusion stand in a dialectic relation. This topic is explored in great detail in *Making Cultural Cities in Asia*. The book is a trove of examples about social relations and space. Amy Zhang’s chapter on the 798 art zone in the northeast of Beijing, for example, discusses how the use of a decommissioned factory first for art storage and then for hosting ateliers and galleries led to the redevelopment of the entire neighbourhood, which is today seen as one of the most fashionable ones in the capital. Art for art’s sake was never at the heart of opening the factory to the artistic community, however. Rather, “[a]rtistic communities are viewed merely as effective tools for turning obsolete industrial compounds into urban destinations or, in the case of the 798 art district, for regentrification” (Wang / Oakes 2018: 70). Once the district is relaunched and rebranded, the artistic community is no longer required. The “arty” district becomes devoid of artists, as these are pushed out by gentrification. Julien Ren, in his comparison of arts spaces in Beijing and Berlin has a point in stating that when “the financial interest reaches a certain level, the symbolic value of creativity cannot compete. [...] [T]he exchange rate of creative capital to financial capital will always favour finance” (ibid.: 183).

Not everything has an economic basis, however. Social relations in space emerge also historically and as an effect of infrastructure and the specific demography of the adjacent hinterland. In a paper on Ikebukuro on the Yamanote line, Jamie Coates describes how Ikebukuro station and its neighbourhood acquired the image of being unruly and sometimes wild. Located along the north of the Yamanote, and thus connecting to the northern, less affluent prefectures, Ikebukuro remained for many decades on the margin of Tokyo’s city centre. It was therefore little affected by the Japanese economic boom, despite being one of the busiest stations of the Yamanote. At the same time, Ikebukuro was never part of the old downtown neighbourhoods (*shitamachi*). In short, it remained excluded from a great number of categories that help to identify a liveable or desirable place. As a result, it is often seen as exotic and as being “out of place” in Tokyo. When I taught at a university in Saitama Prefecture

just north of Tokyo, my Saitama students made it very clear to me that “Ikebukuro is ruled by [commuters from] Saitama” (*Ikebukuro wa Saitama ni shihai sareteruyo*). Ikebukuro serves as “a contact-zone between one space and another, between one time and another, as well as a horizon projecting into the future” (Pendleton / Coates 2018: 182). This affects identities, as residents are aware of this, play with this image and thereby reproduce the “mysterious” status of Ikebukuro.

Space, as it emerges in the three publications, is always power-invested, carries a legacy, is ambiguous, functional and many other things, and it goes without saying that all of this affects social relations in manifold ways. As Doreen Massey wrote decades ago, “The spatial organisation of society [...] is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result” (Massey 1994: 4). We have many concrete examples of this in these three publications.

What is the city doing to people, and what are people doing to the city?

Massey’s observation leads us straight to the third point of inquiry. City life affects its inhabitants and, at the same time, the city is the result of everyday life. Cities have often been described as eternally unfinished projects (Benjamin 2006), and they have also been compared to a palimpsest (De Certeau 1984). We find many insights on the dialectic relation between the city and its inhabitants in the three publications, in particular in the special issue of *Japan Forum*.

For example, Joseph Hankin in an article on the *buraku*² writes how the Yamanote and the mobility it brought for everyone provided the *buraku* with the opportunity to escape the neighbourhoods associated with them. The civic inattention required daily in the packed trains allowed them to disappear into the crowd, and this created a sense of belonging. This process of bringing uniformity and unity through civic inattention was not the same experience for everyone involved, however. Hankin observes that the “expectations of social interaction and comportment, mediated through the Yamanote transportation infrastructure, did not hail and impact all people equally. [...] One set of people, newly indexed under the umbrella term ‘buraku’, found that the precise promise of the Yamanote – the promise of increased geographic, social and economic mobility, a promise that might allow these people to escape from the social stigma they had long carried – was premised on a disavowal of that social marginalization in the first place” (Pendleton / Coates 2018: 192).

2 Descendants of the feudal outcast class. As an interesting side note, the word *buraku* refers to “neighbourhood” and literally means “hamlet”.

The differences may not be directly visible to the observer, but they can be unearthed by inquiring into the different experiences of cohabitating the same city.

Another closer look at what the outcomes of urban planning are doing to everyday life can be obtained in Jay Bowen's chapter on the creation of ecological spaces in Seoul in *Making Cultural Cities in Asia*. The restored Cheonggyecheon stream and the surrounding public recreational space is branded as a landmark project for creating eco-cities. The label "ecological" is dubious, however, as the restored stream requires that water be constantly pumped into its newly created concrete bed. What we have at hand is actually aesthetic developmentalism that follows neoliberal ideas. The Cheonggyecheon project has pushed many people and businesses out of the neighbourhoods that it crosses, thereby playing a role in alienating long-time residents from places they had previously found familiar. The invented narrative of "green urban practice" in contemporary Seoul shows strong parallels to the former authoritarian development of the city. Not much has changed, really. The emerging cityscape is not only not ecological, it also continues to be shaped by the exercise of power.

Any policy that attempts to affect the conduct of others while ignoring the existence and interests of inhabitants will provoke some sort of reaction, that might range from protest to civic engagement. An example of the latter type of reaction can be found in Mun Young Cho's article in *Polarized Cities* on Foxconn workers, entitled "The Passionate Poor". Foxconn is a Taiwanese multinational electronics giant that has been involved in many controversies about labour rights violations and its military-like organisation of factories and dormitories in the People's Republic of China. Mun Young Cho's ethnography on volunteer activities (e.g., karaoke, dance or cooking events) organised by Foxconn workers shows how these workers seek to become members of a community in order to maintain a sense of dignity and to create meaningful lives for themselves. Mun Young Cho concludes that the stories of the workers she followed "all demonstrate a craving to realize their own values through volunteering. Yet these tales also reveal structural obstacles that this activity cannot on its own resolve. Volunteer labor, as my interviewees described it me, lends its workers high aspiration for equality, self-esteem, respect, recognition, belonging, delight, and achievement. Absent in their descriptions of factory labor, these wishes are, at bottom, dreams for what amounts to social membership, that is, for having their own *place* in society" (Young Cho 2018: 100, emphasis in the original).

Where economy, labour and urban planning create inhuman conditions, the city changes from below. If urban, demographic or economic policy fails to consider conditions as basic as the desire to belong, individuals cannot help but create spaces. It is human nature to seek to make common spaces when-

ever people encounter one another, and this in turn, is quite different from what methodological nationalism would have us believe – that national space is a given and that every resident of a nation therefore must per se feel “at home” across the entire nation.

Summary

Knowledge about cities circulates globally, and we therefore find a number of similarities in the cities studied in the three publications under review. Developmental neoliberalism and gentrification are the most obvious examples. There is, however, no centre from which these trends emerge. It is not the case that some cities (or regions) serve as the matrix that is then applied everywhere else. What we find instead are various ideas, interests and ideologies with very different genealogies that meet in specific contexts, economies and populations.

Classic urban studies began to develop in North America and Europe more than 100 years ago, and its theorisation and the cases it presented to substantiate it were initially also restricted to these locations (Chicago, Detroit, Paris). This is no longer true of urban studies today. To start with, the “heroic urban modernity” (super-density, skyline, neon lights, city highways, infinite urban pools, etc.) may today best be represented in Asian cities such as Shanghai or Tokyo. Furthermore, cities like Singapore have become influential places that attract the attention of urban planners from around the world. Last but not least, many Asian cities are leading the trend in the transformation from manufacturing centres into global hubs of knowledge and services. Greater Tokyo, for example, has more than 200 universities today.

The study of Asian cities must therefore distinguish the urban particularities from larger, global developments, seek an understanding of how they interconnect and depict the concrete manifestations thereof. Urban studies of Asian cities often depart from topics of global trends and developments. Departing from a particular case, and maybe also from local theory about a particular city, is however just as important. After all, all cases are of equal theoretical relevance, and not all cities share the postmodern features of the majority of cities featured in the three publications. Asian cities may also have a number of unprecedented phenomena. The world’s largest urban conglomeration at present, Tokyo, is set to start shrinking already in 2020, and this has triggered reflection on how to govern demographically declining cities. For example, the suggestion of Aiba (2015) is to “fold them up”, that is to say, to ensure that the inevitable population concentration in one part and depopulation in another part of the city does not result in the abandonment of

depopulating spaces. Instead, these spaces can be folded up, instead of being “shut down”, metaphorically speaking. In concrete terms, they could be readjusted in such a way as to be used only temporarily (and remain vacant otherwise). Spaces are simply “unfolded” when required, much like popular beaches that are very busy during summer but remain largely deserted during the rest of the year. Such theoretical considerations of declining cities are relevant also for other Asian states (c.f. Long / Gao 2019). Last but not least, urban growth in many places in Asia is still based on the expansion of manufacturing industries. Theorising this fact in the context of a globalised and interconnected world would therefore add to our general understanding of urban spaces and life today.

What, then, can we take away from a review of these three publications with regard to the relation of urban and area studies? Simply put, the relations between city, nation state, neighbouring states and the rest of the world are no longer as clear as they once were (or were believed to be). When I wrote in the paragraph above that we need to seek an understanding of how urban particularities and global developments interconnect, I meant to say more precisely “how they really connect” in the cases studied. We cannot simply assume that the scales always run top to bottom from global, to region, to state, to city, to neighbourhood. In many cases, cities matter more than the state, but in others not. And not all cities are of similar importance, and importance is contingent on what we choose to study. Careful recalibration is needed, case by case, to enhance our knowledge of cities, states and regions in a globalising world. It is also for this reason that urban centres constitute a rewarding field of studies for area studies. They add precision and call for new attention to new details and questions, and that is no small accomplishment.

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Book Reviews

RANJIT SEN, *Calcutta in Colonial Transition*. London: Routledge, 2019. 284 pages, £115.00. ISBN 978-1-1383-6691-6

The existential philosopher Henri Lefebvre, writing about urban life in his influential book on *The Production of Space* (Blackwell Publishers, 1991), argues that “[social] space is a [social] product”, by which he means that space once produced serves “as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control [...] of domination, of power; but that it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political [state] forces that create this space try to but fail to master it completely” (Lefebvre 1991: 23). Explaining it further, Lefebvre says that the “state consolidates on a world scale by weighing down on society in full force with the help of knowledge and technology. It plans and organizes society ‘rationally’. It also enforces a logic that puts an end to conflicts and contradictions and neutralizes whatever resists it by castration or crushing. But in this same space there are other forces on the boil, because the rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programs provokes opposition. The violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion” (ibid.: 26).

Ranjit Sen’s new book *Calcutta in Colonial Transition* is a depiction of one such space – a Calcutta that was elevated to the seat of the British Empire in the East and then abandoned when the Bengalis revolted. He narrates its “checkered history” by indicating how it originated as a “riparian village” and became the second city of the British Empire in India and the capital of the Empire itself. Says Sen, “as the seat of an imperial power Calcutta was also the house of a new culture: the Renaissance of the nineteenth century [...] giving rise to a cosmopolitan culture speaking of a global humanity of which Rabindranath Tagore [...] [was] the best specimen” (p. vii).

Sen, who is a former Professor in the Department of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Calcutta, knows the city well. He explains that he is not trying to illustrate the origin of the city in this book. In fact, that was the subject of his first book, *Birth of a City: Calcutta*. Rather, he is analysing the process of urbanisation undergirding the development of Calcutta under the British administration.

The urbanisation of Calcutta began when the Marathas started invading the area in 1742. This led to a mass migration of people to the city. The fort that the English had built for their own safety became a sanctuary for the local people. This led to a bond of trust between the Bengalis and the English. While the English extracted taxation from the local people, they offered protection

and sanctuary from robbery and slave traders. The spatial expansion of the city began only after 1757, at the conclusion of the battle of Palasi, when the commander of the Bengali forces Mir Jafar, who betrayed Siraj-ud-daullah, the Nawab of Bengal, and helped the British win the war, granted three things to the British East India Company: free tenure of the town of Calcutta, *zamindari* (landlordship) of 24 *parganās* (administrative units), and a sum of one crore and seventy lakhs of rupees (or 17 million rupees) as restitution money to cover damages caused by the invasion. As the door opened for migration into the city, many respectable people from the interior gradually moved their families and assets to the city. The city became so wealthy that the renowned journalist Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyay called it *kāmālaya* – the abode of enjoyment, the dwelling place of Lakṣmī the goddess of wealth.

From Wellesley's Minute of 1803, which organised the city with the aim of improving health conditions, to 1857, Calcutta expanded geographically. To make the city the eastern outpost of western capitalism, the English allied themselves with the disaffected elements of power in the Nawabi administration and helped establish a class of comprador merchants, the *banians*, who functioned as early collaborators with the new Empire. By the middle of the 19th century, colonial Calcutta had become the base of the military supremacy of the English, with its periphery stripped of its potentialities for an industrial revolution. The British benefited from the vacuum created because of this, gaining military supremacy, political mastery and a complete command over the economy (p. 134).

From the time of the collapse of the Union Bank in 1848, Calcutta became an appendage of the British Empire and Indian industries became captive fields for British capital. The economic and political domination caused widespread unemployment amongst members of the educated elites, who started protesting. This led Calcutta to become a centre of nationalist agitation. The agitation had four characteristics: a resurgence of the Hindu cult of Shakti; an identification of India with the concept of a motherland; the emergence of leadership drawing inspiration from Hindu mythology, employing its symbols for mass mobilisation; and a boycott of British goods to hit the Empire where it counted – in its purse (p. 241). To counter this movement, the British partitioned Bengal in 1905 along communal lines, eventually moving the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912. Calcutta then became a politically motivated centre of national awakening (p. 243).

While Bengalis gloat over the emergence of prominent leaders of this movement, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal, Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Vidyasagar and K. C. Sen, it is important to realise that they were products of a colonial education that the colonisers were unable to repress. But given that much has been written on that subject

elsewhere, Sen does not elaborate extensively on the Indian independence movement that originated in Bengal.

While Sen ends his narrative at this point, we can see how Lefebvre's theory aptly describes the manner in which the British tried to control Calcutta. Even with all their military and economic might, they not only failed to prevail over the inhabitants of Bengal, but had to retreat from the entire subcontinent less than fifty years after 1912.

The British colonisation of Bengal not only provides a rich source of information for theorists or urban philosophers like Henri Lefebvre, but also intrigues scholars of postcolonial theory in several ways. For instance, in the description that Sen provides of how Calcutta was developed, one sees the colonial racial mindset play out in all its gory details. The planner of Calcutta imitated London in the 19th century so that it could become a colonial town where the eastward-moving Britons could see the image of London reflected in an "oriental" setting. They envisioned a segregated growth for Calcutta where "the 'natives' were concentrated in the north and the south was retained for the whites with a grey zone that was in the middle where the Portuguese, the Danes, the Dutch, the Armenians, and the Muslims 'of diverse origin' lived" (pp. 7–8). This, Sen says, was the buffer zone that helped the white town maintain its character.

Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*, Oxford University Press, 1973), writing of the development of London, says: "It was ironic that much of the physical squalor and complexity of 18th century London was a consequence not simply of rapid expansion but of attempts to control that expansion. For complex reasons, ranging from fear of the plague to fear of social disorder – there had been repeated attempts to limit the city's growth [...] to prevent the poor from settling there. Yet the general changes were of an order, which made exclusion impossible. Not only retinues of servants but many thousands of others flooded in, and the main consequence was [...] forced labyrinths and alleys of the poor. And this was happening as part of the same process as the building of town mansions, the laying of squares and fashionable terraces."

One sees a similar iteration of the development of Calcutta in Sen: "The physical setup of the city had a dualism in it. At the first sight, it was a dualism between the black and the white town in which the black town of the north gradually progressed towards the south swallowing up [...] the 'grey town'. Under pressure, the white town progressed a little to the south-west, letting the rich members of the white community have their garden houses and community clubs at Alipur, Khidirpur-Garden Reach area. In Calcutta, slums grew around mansions not because of lack of space [...]. They grew out of the need of the Empire itself. European households in the white town had a large retinue of attendants as their routine necessity [...]. The result was that in the rear

side of the spacious Chowringhee [...] there grew up an extensive slum zone where access was difficult except through one or two crooked lanes. [...] These were ineradicable slums and they persisted defying official frowning throughout the colonial rule” (p. 57).

Since the author, in his description of the urbanisation history of Calcutta, also follows the establishment of the British colonial rule, this book is of interest to scholars interested in British colonial strategies, postcolonial studies and Indian economic, social, cultural and, of course, political history alike. The book focuses on the period between 1757 and 1912, from when Calcutta was captured by Lord Clive in the Battle of Palasi to when the capital of India was moved from Calcutta to Delhi. The structure of the narrative is complex and Sen goes into much detail about several questions that he raises in the course of the book. This sometimes requires him to review information already covered elsewhere in the book. If, therefore, one is expecting a linear narrative, one might be disappointed. But the richness of the research and details provided about several historical events of Calcutta makes this book a must-have for one’s library. It would have been made even richer had maps of the various historical configurations been provided. Also, a list of the glossary of Bengali and Sanskrit terms would have been very helpful.

Mahua Bhattacharya

UPINDER SINGH, *Political Violence in Ancient India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 616 pages, 4 maps, €42.00. ISBN 978-0-67497-5279

Upinder Singh’s recent monograph on political violence in ancient India, from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century CE, consists of an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. Singh has chosen the very common (modern) misperception of a nonviolent Indian past as the starting point for her critical study. The first three chapters of her book are chronologically arranged, whereas the last two chapters follow a more thematic approach.

Chapter 1, entitled “Foundations”, covering the time from 600 to 200 BCE – and thus in terms of dynastic chronology, the pre-Maurya / Maurya period – is perhaps the most “traditional” of all chapters. Singh provides a systematic overview of the discourse on violence in textual sources usually related with this period, starting in the 6th/5th centuries BCE, “the most fertile period in the history of ancient Indian thought” (p. 25), which witnessed a great deal of prominent critique of violence and much discussion of ethical values. Referring to Buddhist and Jaina texts, the *dhamma* messages in the edicts of Maurya

king Aśoka and the ambiguous and often rather contradictory positions on violence in the epic literature, namely in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as other textual evidence, Singh writes of an “intense cultural conversation between different religious, philosophical, and intellectual traditions” (p. 56).

Chapter 2, entitled “Transition” and covering the time from 200 BCE to 300 CE – and thus in terms of dynastic chronology, the Sātavāhana-Kuṣāṇa period – starts in the same way as Chapter 1, i.e. with a discussion of relevant texts, such as the *Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra* and the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*. However, the inclusion of epigraphic, numismatic and art-historical source material far beyond the usual scope makes this and the next chapter stand out clearly when compared with other discussions of the ideology of Indian kingship. Upinder Singh shows that royal inscriptions, especially panegyrics (*praśasti*), but also coins and stone sculptures, played an important role in legitimising political power. The royal *praśastis* illustrate intra-dynastic conflicts, provide epigraphic images of kingship and prove the wide circulation of epigraphic models, as seen in a “striking similarity in the format and style of royal inscriptions across different parts of the subcontinent and the spread of Indic epigraphic practice to Southeast Asia” (p. 154). The author highlights the importance of royal patronage in the context of political ideology (p. 171) and rightly emphasises the specific “Indian” character of this patronage, with a widespread distribution of grants and endowments among beneficiaries of different religious affiliations.

“Maturity” is the chosen title for Chapter 3, which covers the time from 300 to 600 CE, the Gupta-Vākāṭaka period. This chapter focuses even further on epigraphic sources, mainly Sanskrit inscriptions. During these centuries, a “vocabulary of political hierarchy emerged” (p. 184), with “formulaic expressions of paramountcy and subordination” (p. 188), and a “solid core of political ideas had taken shape” (p. 238). In this context, Singh asks the crucial question (p. 239): “How did a certain level of consensus on the ideology and practice of kingship emerge and how did it spread across the subcontinent during these and the succeeding centuries?” In her attempt to answer this question, she points to the centrality of the relationship between rulers and Brahmins, from court to village levels. She also underlines the fact that inscriptions, predominantly copper-plate charters, introduce us to an increasingly important aspect of royal practice, namely kings’ granting of land to Brahmins (and religious institutions) on a large scale, which could be described – one would like to add – as a pan-Indian phenomenon, prevalent in many parts of the subcontinent.

The fourth chapter, “War”, focuses on military action against other “states” and the ideological background for this throughout the entire period from 600 BCE to 600 CE. Upinder Singh discusses the same sources as before, but also additional material, such as Greek accounts of India, or the so-called

hero and sati stone inscriptions. On the basis of Kṣatrapa, Sātavāhana, Vākāṭaka and Gupta epigraphs, she argues that from the early centuries CE onwards, “war became connected with the ceremonial aspect of royal grants” (p. 334). In Chapter 5, “Wilderness”, the last chapter, the author examines the same sources, focusing on tribal or “non-state” cultures, but also on aspects of forests, as for instance their relevance for concepts of renunciation as well as for hunting and protection of animals. The epilogue finally summarises the attestations for the circulation of influential political ideas, including the impact of Indian notions and practices on Southeast Asian traditions. The final remarks indirectly reveal the desiderata for future research: a similar study of political violence in early medieval India, i.e. the period from the 6th to the 13th centuries.

There are some inaccuracies in the book: for example, with reference to a famous cave inscription from Nasik in western India, Upinder Singh claims that “Rishabhadatta” was the “son-in law of the Kshatrapa king Ushavadatta” (p. 334). In fact, this inscription records activities of Uṣavadāta, the son-in-law of the Western Kṣatrapa king Nahapāna. And “Rṣabhadatta” is merely the Sanskritised form of the Prakrit name “Uṣavadāta”. But considering the large range of source material analysed by Singh, such shortcomings do not diminish the value of her book.

Annette Schmiedchen

AXEL MICHAELS, *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*. Stuttgart: Kröner Verlag, 2018. 512 pages, €27.90. ISBN 978-3-520-21201-6

In his *Kultur und Geschichte Nepals*, Axel Michaels offers a general history of Nepal, spanning from the earliest extant material evidence dating to before the Common Era up to modern times. As professor emeritus of Classical Indology and Religious Studies at Heidelberg University and head of various research institutions and groups in both Germany and Nepal, Michaels has been one of the driving forces of the study of Nepal in Europe. The present volume constitutes an important contribution to the field by providing a high-level synthesis of up-to-date scholarship on Nepal’s history and its culture, both past and present, and reflects Michaels’s broad range of research expertise: grounded in a combination of text-based philological methods and ethnography, he has conducted numerous research projects related to Nepal on topics as wide-ranging as ritual studies, temple histories, chronicles, legal literature and documents.

A particular strength of the volume is the large number of new insights on cultural and historical developments for the period between the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the Śāha Dynasty in 1768/69 up to the end of the Rānā Dynasty in 1951, a result of ongoing research activities on documents of this period being newly edited and studied in the context of Michaels's current long-term project on "Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal", based at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and being conducted in collaboration with the National Archives of Nepal. Further new insights into this period found throughout the book have arisen from the extensive research he conducted on the *muluki ain*, Nepal's National Code, which was instated in 1854 – a key reference point, since this was when existing socio-religious structures and customs, partly originating in pre-modern Nepal, were systematised into a formal legal code for the first time.

In his preface, Michaels opens the book with the question, "How does one write a history of Nepal?" He comments on the country's immense ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as on the methodological challenge that available sources for reconstructing Nepalese history are often disparate, sporadic and difficult to date. As reflected in the structure of the book, his answer is to move away from a single linear historical narrative dominated by political chronology. He focuses instead on the many entangled histories of Nepal's regions, religions, cultures, arts and economics as they coincided with the reigns of known dynasties and governments, while nonetheless following their independent trajectories and pace. Michaels also addresses the methodological question of how to evaluate Nepalese – and also South Asian at large – historical writings (e.g. *vaṃśāvalīs* and *māhātmyas*), which tend to intertwine historical facts with mythological episodes coloured by religious persuasions and thus to operate on cosmic time scales different than fact-based chronologies. This is a circumstance that has often led to such sources being deemed ahistorical and outright dismissed for historical reconstructions. Counteracting this view, throughout his book Michaels convincingly recovers the historical value of such sources – particularly for the 18th and 19th centuries – by assessing them in combination with the study of official documents, legal literature and inscriptions, nonetheless remaining sensitive to the interpretative context of the genre-specific blend of political and religious agendas pursued by their authors. He thereby points out how histories of politics and powers in Nepal are often conveyed and negotiated through religious narratives and ritual structures that follow their own logic and framing, therefore requiring different forms of analysis but being no less historically meaningful. Michaels's comprehensive approach particularly comes into play in some of the essays on specific cultural features – such as holy cows, *satī* practices, slavery and blood sacrifices – each demonstrating how the trajectories of these

micro-histories are important elements in forming an understanding of Nepal's history as a whole.

The volume is divided into ten chapters, each focusing on the different areas that have shaped the development and history of Nepal. The first chapter outlines the source materials at our disposal, including inscriptions, archaeological reports, coins, manuscripts and chronicles. Besides the provenance of these sources, the chapter also includes a survey of the collections, archives and galleries where they are kept, an invaluable orientation for students and researchers of Nepalese studies. The next two chapters set out Nepal's geographical and social makeup. Chapter two outlines Nepal's physical and geographical aspects. It surveys how the country's location, with some of the country lying in the plains towards India in the south and other large parts lying in nearly inaccessible areas of the Himalayan mountain range bordering China/Tibet in the north, has shaped the infrastructure. A section is also dedicated to the country's frequent earthquakes due to its position in a tectonically active area, and discusses the responses to the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake as well as text sources on how earthquakes were dealt with and culturally received in the past. All of these aspects have shaped much of Nepal's history in terms of governing structures, administration, trade, foreign relations and economic development. Chapter three provides an overview of Nepal's current broad spectrum of ethnic and cultural groups, with the Bahun-Chhetri being the largest politically unified group and the Newars probably the culturally most influential. It also includes a survey of the country's complex and diverse system of social hierarchies and family structures, and refers to the impact of the systematisation of Nepal's ethnic groups into a caste system in the National Code, or *muluki ain*, of 1854. Michaels also explores the position of women in Nepal's different cultural and religious contexts – ranging from disadvantaged dependents and victims of social oppression to respected active agents within family structures with important ritual functions. He also points to their gradual emancipation in the last decades through increasing access to education, the media and the job market.

Next follow outlines of the histories of regions and ethnic groups across the country: the fourth chapter is dedicated in its entirety to the history of the Kathmandu Valley, which has largely been at the centre of scholarship on Nepal's political and cultural history, to the extent that any discussion of the Valley is often seen as synonymous with talking about Nepal's history. In order to offset this position, in the fifth chapter Michaels then provides an overview of other regions and peoples: the history of the early Khasa-Malla kingdom of western Nepal, the development of the lowland Terai region and the Mustang region, as well as the histories of the ethnic groups of the Kiranti (Rai-Limbu) in the east and the Sherpas.

The next three chapters, six through nine, are dedicated to key themes that have collectively shaped the country's socio-religious and cultural history: the development of the state, economy and society; the development of religion; and the development of arts and culture. Chapter six is thus dedicated to diachronic analyses of the land tenure system, the work force and migration, trade, administration, the juridical system, the educational system, media and the health system. Chapter seven outlines Nepal's complex religious history, not only providing an overview of historical sources of both major traditions – Buddhism and Hinduism, with their many sub-groups – but also examining the country's rich ritual and processional tradition as well as religious sites such as the Guhyeśvarī temple. A key point made about religious life in Nepalese society is that although Hinduism remains the more dominant religious force, the self-understanding of religious affiliation is an open one, to the extent that some Nepalis would call themselves both Hindu and Buddhist and simultaneously worship gods from various religious branches during festivals or at religious sites. This does not amount to a religious syncretism in the sense of each religion losing its identity or its own religious officiants and structures as they converge into one, but means rather that individuals participate in religious events of various denominations without considering this to be in conflict with their individual religious affiliation.

Chapter eight is dedicated to culture and the arts. Its first section outlines Nepal's languages and literatures, as well as the diverse usage and degree of literary production in each. The second section is dedicated to the local art and craftsmanship scene, which has a strong and long-standing tradition that can, for instance, be traced to woodcarvings dating to the 6th/7th centuries. The chapter also includes a special focus essay on Nepalese modern art by Christiane Brosius, giving insights into the country's ever-growing art scene, including its increasing presence internationally, as well as its role in dealing with political unrest and national traumas such as the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake. The ninth chapter outlines the architectural history of the Kathmandu Valley, surveying the architectural remains starting with the Licchavi period up to modern times. In this chapter Michaels draws greatly on the research on the history of Newari architecture by Niels Gutschow, with whom he has frequently conducted joint research projects. Included in this chapter is also a discussion about recent developments and challenges relating to cultural heritage preservation in the light of modern urban developments and rebuilding activities after the earthquake.

The final chapter – bearing the title “Nepal in the World” and acting as a kind of concluding summary and outlook for the future – examines the repercussions of Nepal's special position as a country that largely closed itself off to outside influence until the 19th century, styled itself as the last Hindu kingdom, was never colonised, and only initiated a process of democratisation in

the middle of the 20th century. Michaels points out that these factors led to an unusual amount of ethnic and cultural diversity in the country, as well as ancient traditions being preserved. While this fact has been celebrated, at the same time it has also led to problematic political, economic and societal developments resulting from the challenges of uniting this very diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions into a nation state and, at the same time, of gradually participating in the processes of globalisation and modernisation long at work outside the country. Yet, notwithstanding these difficulties, Michaels ends on an optimistic note, opposing the image sometimes held of Nepal as a developing country in danger of becoming a “failed state”, overwhelmed by the political, economical and environmental challenges resulting from explosive population growth, work emigration, political unrest and over-tourism. He emphasises that the country has also developed increasingly institutionalised forms of co-existence between religious and ethnic groups that preserve their many unique cultural features, and argues that it is precisely this diversity of ethnicities, cultures and religions characterising Nepal’s history that could be the country’s resource in moving forward. It may also result in an exemplary model of how to achieve “unity in diversity” (p. 423). The volume concludes with an appendix containing a timeline with important historical events, starting with the birth of the Buddha, and also including a list of kings and prime ministers; a useful list of references organised according to the topics treated in the chapters; a general bibliography; a glossary of important and frequently used terms; and finally, two indices, one for persons, and the other for places and things.

Given that the scope of the book is of extensive temporal and contextual reach, it is unsurprising that not all topics can be treated with the same depth and that choices of focus had to be made. Michaels himself points this out in his preface. Thus, in some areas of more marginal attention of the author, a few minor errors have slipped in, errors that, however, can be easily corrected for a second edition and certainly do not influence the overall narrative and impact of the book (e.g., p. 7: the earliest extant inscription in the Valley reads Jayavarman rather than Jayadeva; p. 67: the last record of the “Licchavi period” in 877 CE was not an inscription but a manuscript colophon; p. 273: the expression used in early inscriptions is Paramamāheśvara [“entirely devoted to Śiva”] rather than Paramamaheśvara [“great God”] and refers to the intensity of the king’s devotion to Śiva rather than to the greatness of the deity Śiva; p. 276: the *Śivadharmaśāstra* and *Śivadharmottara* do not teach “intensive tantric modes of worship”, but rather forms of lay worship, partly preceding the tantric forms; the sculpture in the Chāṅgu Nārāyaṇa temple area showing Viṣṇu riding Garuḍa [Fig. 15] is dated to the ninth century on p. 293 but to the fourth on p. 333). Some economic and social processes described for the Licchavi period are perhaps depicted with more certainty than

can be afforded from the source material and current state of knowledge, a circumstance, which, however, reflects the state of scholarship on the subject, where broad historical narratives are often presented. And finally, footnotes for more detailed or specific information would have been extremely useful and welcome, but due to the format and perhaps the intended readership of the book, these are regrettably not included. In such cases, the reader has best to refer to the bibliographical references arranged according to the treated topics.

To conclude, Michaels's volume is an important and very welcome contribution to the field of Nepal studies, providing a long-awaited updated history of Nepal, following earlier works with a similar aim from the last century, such as the general histories by Sylvain Lévi and Dilli Raman Regmi, and Mary Slusser's cultural history of the Kathmandu Valley. Despite the dense and complex interrelationships that are depicted, the work is clearly written and enjoyable to read, with vibrant descriptions of social, cultural and religious contexts and accounts of historical events. The volume also contains numerous translated text passages from original sources, which give insights into specific cultural and political events and satisfyingly pull the reader from the grand narrative to the specific source material, also for those who do not read the original languages. The volume also refers to often neglected and, for many, less accessible yet important scholarship of Nepalese scholars (see, e.g., pp. 244–249). While the volume has been written for a broader audience and will be extremely valuable for students or scholars of interrelated subjects such as art history or religious studies as well as for general historians, it is also of great interest to experts engaged directly in Nepal studies, as it provides new insights into cultural and historical developments (particularly of the 18th–20th centuries), brings together the main issues and latest directions in the field, and is accompanied by an extensive and up-to-date bibliography. For now, the volume has been published only in German; it is hoped that an English translation will soon follow to make this work more widely available.

Nina Mirnig

FENG YANGGANG, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 247 pages, 154 maps, €229.00. ISBN 978-90-04-35885-0 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-36990-0 (e-book)

This book is a major accomplishment by a prominent student of religious life in the contemporary People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), assisted by his graduate students, post-doctoral researchers and further specialists in

transferring information to maps. As I am a big fan of putting information into maps, but quite illiterate in modern map-making programs, I was very pleased at the opportunity to review this book. Having read it I am still quite happy, although predictably I have my comments and criticisms as well. Generally, I would not recommend the atlas as an introduction to the topic, but in combination with a general introduction to Chinese religious life today that uses a different conceptual framework. Similarly, Feng is well known for his personal connections to the Protestant church (including extensive funding by the John Templeton Foundation) and this is evident in the clear-cut institutional categories that he has adopted in this atlas and his own earlier research. This is not a fundamental objection in my eyes, but it is something to be kept in mind when using this excellent atlas.

Feng Yanggang is not the first to analyse Chinese religious life by means of maps. That honour should go to Father Willem Grootaers (1911–1999) of the Flemish missionary order “Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary” (or Scheut). Inspired by the work of his father, the dialectologist Ludovic Grootaers (1885–1956), he analysed local temples in northern China using detailed maps. His publications (including marvellous maps) from the late 1940s and early 1950s can be found amongst others in *Monumenta Serica* and *Folklore Studies* as well as partly in book format. Grootaers used maps on the county or city level to discover very local, detailed variations in the arrangement of shrines and other devotional phenomena. Feng Yanggang operates on a much higher level of abstraction, from the county to (mostly) the province or even the entire country. The reader should be aware of the kind of simplification that using such large units entails, especially when using this atlas for teaching or further research.

Counting means making choices about what to include and what to leave out, and mapping means drawing clear borders. Feng is well aware of this and spells out very clearly in the beginning of the atlas his particular framework for doing so, which is therefore crucial reading material. He divides religion in China into a legal or “red” market (as defined by the PRC state), a “grey” market (where he includes Confucianism and Folk Religion – his terms) and a “black” market (the illegal religions, again as defined by the PRC state), developed on the basis of the religious market theory of R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge. The notion of a grey market is Feng’s most relevant adaptation of the theory, to make it applicable to the Chinese case in which the seemingly clear-cut institutions that we have in the West are not always present, but where there are still a large number of diffuse religious activities (captured here under the term “folk religion”). The legal – or red – and illegal black markets both remain labels for countable forms of religious activity, although the black market is much less understood for want of reliable surveys. After all, to take the most persecuted group of them all, the Falun Gong still has adherents

in China today, but nobody really knows how many and where. The brief discussion of this movement (pp. 64–65) also illustrates the pitfalls of using materials on persecution, since all the estimates for its original followers are extremely speculative and most likely too high. All in all, the topographical approach works well with the kind of large-scale data we have for the PRC, since Chinese researchers generally focus explicitly on religious institutions and specialists, rather than on actual believers. Different understandings of a religious dimension of life in general or of a particular religious institution might yield different results, but would be hard to carry out in the specific political context of the PRC.

In many respects including Taiwan as a methodological counterpoint would have been quite interesting, as there is much more available data to allow a more detailed geographical approach. Taiwan has had complete freedom of religion since the late 1980s and relative freedom before that (as compared to the PRC), which yields a different religious situation (in addition to any other regional specificities) and allows very detailed sociological surveying. Furthermore, this could have provided a much more nuanced investigation into religiosity without adhering to a specific institution, something that has proven quite important in the Western European scene, with a decrease in institutional strength over the last century, but not necessarily a complete loss of religiosity *per se*.

Using Feng's framework yields some interesting, though sometimes debatable results. Thus, by accepting the PRC notion of the five legal religions of Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Protestantism and Catholicism, he defines religious life first and foremost as bound up with institutions. While this may work for Protestantism and Catholicism (but only in so far as we succeed in including the hard-to-track house churches of the first and the semi-underground church of the second), it does not work for Buddhism and even less for Daoism. These traditions were always first and foremost providers of ritual (something that could also be argued for some aspects of Catholicism, certainly those above ground) and whether a layperson was or is also Buddhist or (very rarely) Daoist is extremely hard to ascertain. I would myself call many traditional lay religious groups such as the Non-Action Teachings which I studied extensively myself, and which still linger on in the south and on Taiwan (though nowhere discussed in this book), or the Red Yang Teachings that still linger on in eastern China (around Tianjin) lay Buddhist in nature. The many volunteers in Buddhist monasteries and/or ad hoc followers of prominent monks are probably also not effectively captured in the statistics, whether in the red or legal market, or in the grey or informal market. Defining lay Buddhists as those who have taken a vow (p. 19) does not entirely solve the problem of measuring the larger impact of Buddhist ritual specialists, as opposed to Buddhist believers. And one might wonder whether taking a vow is so crucial in label-

ling someone as a lay Buddhist believer. Historically at least, it was not. Only very few people took a vow and far more people relied on Buddhist practices or rituals in more informal or even ad hoc ways (for instance sutra recitation by elderly people or hiring priests for funerals). Alternatively, accepting the PRC definitions makes Protestant Christianity appear very strong (p. 12) and while this certainly conforms to fears within the Communist Party apparatus, it is also partly shaped by the choice of what to measure as religion. Feng pays considerable attention to such issues, so it is important to read the detailed narrative that comes with the maps and not just to look at the maps for quick and often mistaken conclusions.

What cannot be caught in the maps are differences between urban and rural regions. Feng is certainly aware of this, pointing it out for Buddhism (p. 20) and Protestantism (p. 32), for instance. Here we are talking about the red market; since we do not know the size or spread of these and other religions in the grey market, such distributions are of course of limited usefulness. Similarly, one wonders how reliable the systematically mentioned self-reporting of membership in the Chinese Communist Party or Chinese Communist Youth League is (pp. 20, 27, 33, 39, 43). As the author points out, members are supposed to be atheist, so people who are religious (especially if only at home) would usually hide this fact. In the future, given the current repression of religion in general and of membership of religious organisations for party members and government officials in particular, this discrepancy between real religious identity and public confession to this identity will only grow. Thus, as far as the party is concerned we could say that even the official legal religions belong to the grey market, rather than the red one.

The problem of definitions is different still for Confucianism. The labels Buddhism, Confucianism as well as Daoism are Western labels that only came into being as -isms since the very late 18th century, in the sequence mentioned here. Buddhism and Daoism are actually labels for ritual specialists and monastics (only very few of them were “believers” in the post-Reformation sense), but at least we tend to agree roughly on what they meant in the 19th and 20th centuries or even before the invention of these terms. This is not the case for Confucianism, which was initially taken by mostly missionary authors to refer to religious activities such as the worship of Confucius and ancestors, and only much later came to refer more selectively to a philosophical tradition. When we include ancestor worship within this label (as Feng does, and I agree this makes good sense within his framework), we face the problem that the Chinese state does not. I also doubt that many Chinese would identify ancestor worship as Confucian, and indeed it is traditionally much more strongly connected with Buddhist and even Daoist ritual practices. Moreover, there are different degrees of worship as well, according to the specific social history of this practice in the late imperial period. In southern China (especial-

ly the cultural regions where Hakka, Fujianese and Cantonese language variants were spoken) the lineage could be several generations deep, creating rather large meaningful kin groups. In other parts of China collective ancestor worship was much more limited in generational depth. Thus, the requisite survey for a hypothetical map of ancestor worship would have to differentiate between these degrees and would also need to take Buddhist and/or Daoist aspects into account.

Another aspect that is not easily captured in maps is the relevance of the unit of a religious site. For example, there is a highly varying ratio of sites of any religious background to the size of the population. When two counties have ten sites and one of the two has 100,000 inhabitants and the other has 1,000,000 inhabitants, then the relevance of having ten sites is quite different, but that would not show up on the map. Similarly, given that Buddhist and Daoist institutions are inhabited by a varying number of specialists, whereas churches are not, a single Buddhist or Daoist site might be able to serve far more people than a church, at least as far as life cycle rituals are concerned. This also means that the weight of such an institution is very different from a Christian one.

The distribution of sites in the maps also raises interesting questions. In Map 6 (p. 28) the whole region of Beijing is shown without any Protestant sites, but this is corrected on pp. 76–77 and is evidently a mistake. In the same map the province of Shandong is also surprisingly sparsely covered by Protestant sites. The region has had a long tradition of Western missionary activity since the late 19th century, much like neighbouring Henan, where Protestant sites abound (see two maps on p. 28 and p. 150). The maps here conform with the more detailed description of Shandong elsewhere (pp. 142–146), suggesting that Protestant sites are largely limited to the western part of the province. I find it hard to believe that a place like the former German colony of Qingdao would not have more than the single Protestant site that is now shown on the map. The same section also introduces a new place name (Shangdong, which I assume is just a typo) and refers to the existence of indigenous Christian sects (pp. 145–146). These sects cannot be captured in maps due to a lack of information, but this again points to a further difficulty in this kind of exercise. While people in the field, including Feng himself of course, are well aware that a map of Protestant sites can only refer exclusively to officially recognised sites, the uninitiated reader (such as our students) will easily jump to the conclusion that they in fact reflect real distributions of actual beliefs. As a larger religious force, Protestant traditions may well be much stronger in Shandong than the maps can show.

As a keen lover of maps and admirer of the work of Willem Grootaers, there is a final observation I would like to make in concluding this review. Provinces are very large units, more akin to states in Northern America and

countries (or groups of countries) in Europe. To take the above example of Shandong, if the figures are right and Protestant sites are largely limited to specific parts of the province, then providing a provincial distribution of religious sites (Figure 23 on p. 145) is quite meaningless. A much more interesting map would be to relate the present state of officially recognised Protestant sites as well as the present state of prohibited and/or indigenous Protestant sites to the history of Western missionary activity or various economic criteria. What the work of Grootaers showed (and I have been able to make similar observations in work of my own), is that religious phenomena are not necessarily distributed according to political boundaries such as those used perhaps unavoidably in this atlas, but according to natural borders (think of mountains that block and rivers that can both block and connect), trade routes, economic development and so on. Missionary history may be another factor here. Large units such as provinces and probably even prefectures do not allow us to see the kind of gradual change and difference that usually occurs with religious phenomena. The Putian region in central coastal Fujian, studied in detail by Ken Dean and Zheng Zhenman in their magnificent *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plain* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), is really the exception that proves the rule. Here we do have a fairly detailed (and undoubtedly still incomplete) analysis. Indeed, it may be the only region in China for which we have a topographical analysis that includes not only official religious institutions within the state framework (such as presented on pp. 133–137), but also a wealth of others, some more Buddhist and others indeed more Confucian – if we wish to stick to these problematic labels. Indeed, Dean and Zheng present extensive topographical information, showing how local temple associations help to integrate larger geographical units based on socio-economic needs. Such detail is not evident in the atlas under discussion.

After the work by Willem Grootaers, this atlas by Feng Yanggang is a major step forward. He and his team have stuck their necks out and provided us with a useful and innovative tool for understanding religious culture in contemporary China. I for one will certainly use it in teaching and research, both to agree with it and to take it as a point of departure for further debate. I also hope that others will feel inspired to use more maps in understanding religious culture in China today. When they do they will find that a surprising amount of the available research deals with a very small set of places, usually urban and usually mainstream officially recognised institutions. Let us stop treating China as a single analytical category, but give it the detailed and localised understanding that its many constituent parts deserve.

Barend ter Haar

XU ZHIYUAN, *Paper Tiger. Inside the Real China*. London: Head of Zeus, 2017. 305 pages, £ 8.99. ISBN 9-781781-859803

This is a collection of essays that Xu Zhiyuan, a well-known journalist and essayist living in Beijing, wrote for the Chinese language versions of the *Financial Times* and *Bloomberg Businessweek* from 2007 to 2015 and which have been translated into English. His publications could not appear in mainland China, but he is still free to travel and to investigate there. Though Xu claims not to be a “dissident writer”, he pulls no punches against the Communist regime, both under Mao’s totalitarian terror and under the current capitalist party cartel.

In his 80 essays the themes are varied, often tied to topical events, like the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the Nobel Peace Prize award to Liu Xiaobo (and his subsequent sentencing to 11 years in jail), the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, or spectacular political events, like the Bo Xilai trial (ending in a life sentence), acts of political repression and reactions to crimes. Unavoidably there is a fair amount of repetition and his conclusions understandably are often similar. Yet his essays make fascinating and instructive reading as he retells and interprets his varied encounters all over China.

To Xu the “China model” is “absurd, unjust and unsustainable” (p. ix). It is the result of the hard work of the Chinese people, not of the country’s leadership, which defends a sclerotic political system against a steadily progressing society. For Xi Jinping “reforms” mean top-down changes tightly controlled by a Leninist party. While oppression, fear and silence spread, the society is engulfed by consumerism, entrepreneurship and a common fervour for the stock market, as people hope for security, which, after decades of policy-induced poverty, they believe only money, prosperity and status symbols can bring (p. 7). Hence the majority poses no challenge and continues to believe in party state power, as long as it delivers the goods. Also the economic elites – rootless as they have become – are unwilling to transform their wealth into social and educational causes but remain obsessed with only one subject of conversation: how to make more money. Living in a spiritual vacuum without deep convictions, they see material wealth as the only measure of their success (p. 13).

Xu debunks the Western illusion that free trade, a market economy, the internet, globalisation and a growing middle class would eliminate the Party and change China into an open and democratic society (p. 162). Rather, the “Beijing Consensus” showed that dictatorship and economic freedoms could coexist. The “Great Firewall” has cut off mainland Chinese from the world by banning Google and Facebook. Now they live in small closed and tightly supervised internet communities. TV programmes consist mainly of talent and variety shows, and even young professionals are immersed in trivial pleasures.

People believe that one can only rely on one's own resources, as everything else (such as housing or admission to schools) is scarce and uncertain in the absence of consistent rules (p. 72). As nothing, including private property, is protected by law, any individual or company can be attacked at any time. The response is to seek protection through political connections and through bribes. Ultimately businesspeople who become too successful – or officials who become too corrupt – move abroad, preferably to Canada and Australia, to safety with their families and wealth (p. 56). Dissidents are so brutally repressed that they become bitter and dogmatic, and often turn to infighting amongst each other (p. 205). The resulting political apathy has helped the regime to push grand projects through, unhampered by environmentalists or labour unions. For the construction of the Yangtze Dam in 1997, for instance, 1 million people were driven from their homes (p. 75).

The Communist Party of China has become a power cartel in its own right, interested only in profit, maintaining the status quo and surviving its eternal ruthless factional fights. It controls not only the governments ministries “working like organized crime syndicates” (p. 107) and the monopolies of the state-owned enterprises with their unlimited supply of cheap credit, but also the security apparatus and the bureaucracy down to the last village. In its violent past of revolution, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and Mao's personality cult it erased people's memories, destroyed ancestral halls and cultural traditions, razed cities and burned written records (p. 110). Over the years it survived its perennial internal power struggles among party cliques, such as purging Bo Xilai with his dictatorial personal ambitions, getting rid of the “Shanghai gang” of Jiang Zemin or eliminating certain princelings. For its 90 million members and officials, as “bribeable businessmen looking out for their own interests” (p. 35) without convictions, the only thing which counts is loyalty to the right faction or leader through a network of personal connections. Party congresses have traditionally consisted of empty sloganeering and clichés and hierarchic rituals. If anything then hours of ambiguous wording would leave people in a permanent state of confusion about future actual policies. Within the party, climbing up the ladder of privilege within the rules of the game and being allied with the right faction rewarded mediocrity, with the best, those with their own thoughts, being weeded out (p. 174). The party as such became a “giant interest group of its own” that exploits the country. It represents neither workers and farmers, nor the middle classes or the billionaires. As a cartel of the dominant interests it consistently decides against workers' rights, the environment and public morality. People are seen primarily as tools or material for production and consumption (p. 197). Thanks to the *hukou* system (adopted from the Soviet *propiska* internal passports), rural migrants receive the worst treatment, as an unprotected urban labour force. Ethnic Uighurs are viewed by a non-comprehending public opinion as thugs

and thieves – in contrast to their perception by Westerners, who sympathise with them as underdogs (p. 258). The home territory of the Uighurs, Xinjiang, has (like Tibet) seen a massive influx since 2000 of development projects and poor Chinese settlers, whose main aim is to make money quickly and then get out again (p. 260).

As a result of unchecked one-party rule a self-serving bureaucracy has increasingly expanded, greedily and detachedly eating up national wealth and resources, wasting public funds for administrative palaces in small towns and for useless infrastructure (p. 267). It has destroyed all political and civil organisations, stifled creativity and suppressed cultural traditions and the freedom of speech (p. 120). Since a proper budget law does not exist, local officials are free to spend funds on whatever local party officers (often themselves) they choose. Land sales are a major source of revenue for county and city governments, which explains their eagerness for new real estate development and the expropriation of farmland. For township and village governments fines for second pregnancies are a lucrative side income. Hence their eagerness to chase pregnant women for forced, even late-term abortions (p. 289). However, people still expect officials to provide decent housing, education and security (all of which is in short supply) and even increasing share prices. While Beijing and Shanghai, as prosperous and safe places of numerous and often important residents, see little discontent and unrest, this is different in the rest of the country where people are resentful and suspicious of arrogant and aloof officialdom. Among the many examples cited by Xu, the uncaring and much delayed public response to the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, which killed 70,000 people, figures prominently. Officials only care to please their superiors and see the population as uneducated and unworthy (p. 240). 90,000 local “disturbances” against administrative injustice are registered each year. The system’s response is to prosecute perceived ringleaders as “criminals” and to purge a few incompetent local officials (p. 209). Hushed up as internal affairs, such cases pose no systemic threat.

Still the regime feels vulnerable. Its legitimacy is based on violence, a revolution and a civil war that ended in 1949, but not on an election. With no convictions and no real communication with its subjects, it is afraid of any unrest and wants stability above everything (p. 249). Crushing any possible dissent mercilessly and playing the nationalist card are its main instruments.

In Xu’s view China is a major benefactor of the international status quo and does not have any interest in challenging it or creating a new world order. At the time of writing (2011) it was “passive on the international stage” (p. 64), had “no military ambitions” (p. 218) and was “not interested in aggressive expansionism” (p. 163). Eight years later things have obviously changed under Xi Jinping. Earlier there were only unintentional external consequences of China’s demand for energy and raw materials and its use of an undervalued

currency and cheap labour – conquering export markets and driving up raw material prices. Yet China’s leadership remained unaware of its global responsibilities. Neither did it care about them, nor about foreign criticism of its foreign and domestic policies (p. 212). This is reflected in the attitudes of their citizens, who now settle all over the world with little knowledge of national cultures and even less understanding of local life, and worse, no desire to learn (p. 186).

This somewhat melancholic volume of a very perceptive, well informed observer makes insightful and fascinating reading. Hence with Xu’s critical insights the book is a useful antidote to the propaganda spread by the regime’s Confucius Institutes at Western universities. His repeated conclusion that the regime is unsustainable is plausible and easy to follow. Yet Xu shirks the question of actual regime change – with good reason. Were he to have indicated identifiable actors within China, the regime would have arrested, eliminated or rendered them harmless long ago. The book’s format of a collection of previously published essays makes them sometimes appear dated and occasionally repetitive. Although aimed at a general reader and not at an academic audience, Xu’s essays offer valuable insights into dramatic events of the last decade and to social milieus and outlying provinces not readily accessible to foreign researchers.

Albrecht Rothacher

CHRISTOPHER J. SHEPHERD, *Haunted Houses and Ghostly Encounters: Ethnography and Animism in East Timor, 1860–1975*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019. 416 pages, 21 illustrations, 4 maps, £25.00. ISBN 978-87-7694-267-0

This volume by Christopher J. Shepherd presents itself as a meta-ethnography, an analysis of how ethnography, ethnographers and animism converge in Portuguese Timor, which was Portugal’s most distant colony in Southeast Asia. This colonial presence ended in 1975 and was followed by a complex and troubled decolonisation process that involved a civil war between the political parties. Although the country proclaimed independence on 28 November of the same year, it was soon invaded by Indonesia, which occupied the territory until 1999, when a UN-supervised referendum ensured freedom from foreign rule. Resistance to the Indonesian occupation lasted 24 years and cost the lives of an estimated 180,000 people.

The book consists of an introduction, two distinct parts and a conclusion. The sobriety of its structure contrasts with the detail of its ten chapters, each

dedicated to an author with specific work on Portuguese Timor. Although not identified as such, there is an eleventh author, which is the native Timorese themselves, whose voice can be heard in the writings of the others. The extensive analysis covers 115 years, ranging from the publication of Afonso de Castro's seminal work in 1867 to when the last professional anthropologist working in the field, Elisabeth Traube, left the territory in 1975.

The introduction explains the pertinence of religious studies – in particular the renewed interest in animism – which is a key concept for understanding colonised societies. It also illustrates how the ethnography undertaken in the field was combined with this concept, and how this process proved mutually intelligible to colonisers and natives, serving the purpose of both domination and reciprocal accommodation.

The author's basic argument is that animism cannot be analysed without examining the agents involved and the dichotomy between colonisers (foreigners) and colonised. Animism is, simultaneously, an instrument of communication, interpretation and correlation of the powers present. It is a tool of affirmation or recognition of power, in both its material tangibility and the intangibility of belief. Indeed, the author advocates a dynamic notion of animism, which he calls “transformative animism”, a dialectical process that stems from the interpretation and mimicry of Timorese society by the foreign colonisers for the purposes of domination and, in the case of the Timorese, the accommodation of these foreigners and their demands. This is a heuristic device used to interpret the dynamic of the potencies involved, those resulting from animism practices versus the dangers posed by the challenges of accommodating the colonisers' attitudes towards such practices. The endogenous concept associated with practices of animists, which is present as an investigative thread, is *lulik*, from the Timorese Tetum language. There are several possible translations of this word, such as sacred, or forbidden, with connotations of “taboo”.

The first part of the book, which is dedicated to “colonial ethnography”, broadly covers the period between 1860 and the 1940s, and includes the work of six authors, symbolised by their occupations: Afonso de Castro, the governor, Henry Forbes, the naturalist, Osório de Castro, the magistrate, José Simões Martinho, the captain, Armando Pinto Correia, the administrator (but also a military man) and Abilio José Fernandes, the missionary. This selection of actors facilitates an understanding of how they related to the *lulik* and the Timorese, as well as inferring how the native people reacted to the presence of these newcomers, each potentially perceived as a threat. With the exception of Armando Pinto Correia, the texts of these authors are not classical monographs of an exclusively ethnographic nature and purpose, but include sections in which ethnography emerges in description, and in which Shepherd undertakes exegetical meta-ethnographic interpretations.

The second part, which is dedicated to “professional ethnography”, analyses the work of four anthropologists who did fieldwork in Portuguese Timor, the results of which were published in the 1970s and 1980s. These texts are classic anthropological endeavours, based on a lengthy period of time and painstaking work in the field. Each chapter’s title alludes to the respective anthropologist’s perceived or adopted posture regarding their enquiries and relationships in the field, according to Shepherd. The first is Margaret King, who Shepherd calls a sentimentalist, followed by David Hicks, the theologian, Shepard Forman, the apprentice, and, finally, Elisabeth Traube, the detective. The analysis of these professional anthropologists focuses mainly on how they portray, or fail to portray, their relationship with the Timorese and *lulik* in their work. There are also conclusions regarding how the Timorese they interacted with interpreted the presence of these foreigners within the framework of existing colonial relations. The essential difference when studying the work of the colonial authors versus the professional anthropologists is that, in addition to the access to their textual data, the latter could still be questioned, directly or through family members (in the case of King, who had died). This was a process in which the author’s understanding was not always accepted by those concerned, particularly the discussion regarding their posture towards colonialism and anthropological tactics of field maintenance, a discussion that is expanded in lengthy notes. Some of the remarks could, in a “meta-ethnographic” approach, be portrayed as “meta-considerations” because they are somehow speculative, leading to the objectivation of certain private traits of the author’s life experiences.

For each of the authors analysed, the book shows how animism, its sublimation or its knowledge became constituted as an ecology of mutual knowledge and behaviours between colonisers (and anthropologists) and the colonised populations. One of the key points of understanding here is the condition of being a foreigner. When animism is understood as a form and manifestation of power, the presence of foreigners – colonial agents, administrators, missionaries and anthropologists – emerges as a potential threat, alongside non-humans or ancestors. Whereas in the case of colonial ethnography, the reflection on the theme has an underlying instrumental, material purpose that incorporates the natives into the colonial order and culture, in the case of professional anthropologists we can observe how their work reflects their understanding and management of their role as agents and bearers of *lulik*.

The book ends with a comparative analysis of the various authors surveyed and their relationship to animism based on interactive argument, in what the author christens hyper animism, defensive animism and assisted animism. Hyper animism occurs as a reaction to threats posed by the colonial power. Defensive animism functions as a way of protecting animism against the transgressions of foreigners, while assisted animism occurs in situations in which

animism, its practices or material manifestations are tolerated. Running deeper, in a structural mode, the homology argument proposed by the author discusses the processes that engage foreigners and spirits and that, throughout colonial history, would provide a basis for relating to others, namely ethnographers, not only in a ritual fashion but also a political one.

The book makes a significant contribution in several areas. It examines animism, demonstrating how it has developed in context and showing its dynamism. It is a study of how the process of knowing others manifests itself in different judgements or interpretations, whether by colonisers or anthropologists. It enquires into the presence and articulation of ontological world visions. It offers potential clues for more in-depth research of this same period using the work of other authors, either colonial or professional anthropologists. It also covers new ground in the way these same concepts can be an object of research within the context of post-colonial anthropological studies, as well as in the way key institutions of society, such as the State and the Timorese Catholic Church, deal with animism, despite the fact that, nominally, the overwhelming majority of the Timorese population is Catholic.

Lúcio Sousa

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Urban Poetics and Politics in Asia, Part I

Special Issue edited by Patrick Heinrich, Francesca Tarocco and Daniele Brombal

- 5 Editorial
Patrick Heinrich, Francesca Tarocco, Daniele Brombal

Articles

- 11 Area Studies for Urban Sustainability Research:
Current Practice and Untapped Potential
Daniele Brombal
- 31 Expatriating the Universal:
A Decolonial Imagination beyond Authentic “Asia”
Aya Hino
- 55 Tokyo behind Screens:
Participant Observation in a City of Mobile Digital Communication
Florian Purkarthofer
- 79 A Place of Caring:
Politics of the HIV Testing Centre in the Red House Square, Taipei
I-Yi Hsieh

Review Article

- 103 Contemporary Studies on Asian Cities
Patrick Heinrich
- 117 Book Reviews
- 141 Authors