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

Patrick Heinrich, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca'Foscari University Venice, Italy; patrick.heinrich@unive.it.

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 *fueridai* [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 *fueridai* [...] 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, Ikebukero 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 "Ike-bukuro is ruled by [communters 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.

References

Aiba, Shin (2015): *Toshi o tatamu: Jinkō genshō jidai o dezain suru toshi keikaku* [*Folding up the City: Urban Planning to Design an Era of Population Decline*]. Tokyo: Kadensha.

Benjamin, Walter (2006): *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brenner, Neil (2004): *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Certeau, Michel (1984): *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Florida, Richard (2003): Cities and the Creative Class. *City and Communication* 2(1): pp. 3–19.

Giddens, Anthony (1995): *Nation-State and Violence*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Jacobs, Jane (1985): *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*. New York: Vintage Books.

Jazeel, Tariq / Mcfarlane, Colin (2007): Responsible Learning: Cultures of Knowledge Production and the North-South Divide. *Antipode* 39(5), pp. 781–789.

Landry, Charles (2000): *The Creative City. A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*. London: Comedia.

Lefebvre, Henri (2014): *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (translated from French by Robert Bononno).

Long, Ying / Shuqi Gao (eds) (2019): *Shrinking Cities in China: The Other Facet of Urbanization*. Singapore: Springer.

Massey, Doreen (1994): *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Miyadai, Shinji (1995): *Owarinaki nichijō o ikiru* [*Living the Endless Everyday*]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō.

Roy, Ananya / Aihwa Ong (eds) (2011): *Worlding Cities. Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.