

*Asian Cities: Colonial to Global*

Gregory Bracken, ed.

376 pages, 2015, £80.00 (hardcover)

Amsterdam: Amsterdam Press

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Continents are being reimagined and reconfigured economically and socially during these early years of the 21st century. This reimagining of the place of continents outside the Global North in a new world order is epitomised by Jim O'Neil's evocative BRIC acronym: Brazil, Russia, India, China. Africa too is being reimagined and problematised, seen less as a poor, war-ravaged postcolonial backwater and more as a significant player in the world economy and society. The realisation has dawned that South America, Africa, and above all, Asia are not simply sources of raw materials and markets for the Global North, but powerful drivers of the world economy in their own right. Aside from their fabulous natural resources and market potential, the continents of the Global South are important because of their cities (Miraftab and Kudva 2014). Indeed they hold most of the world's mega-cities. Globally, cities are seen rightly as the driving forces of national and continental economies and societies, although their destructive capabilities are well recognised. For three decades the concepts of the global city and the postcolonial city in the context of planetary neoliberal capitalism have been the subject of much academic debate and controversy.

For continents and cities in the Global South, this is a challenging but exciting period indeed, so the book *Asian Cities: Colonial to Global* is certainly timely. Overall the book is a good read, incorporating a collection of empirically centred chapters that present a wealth of contemporary and historical detail. The acknowledgment of the impact of colonial histories on the present is a notable feature of every chapter. Bracken has assembled a highly knowledgeable, diverse range of authors, from highly respected academics to emerging scholars. He is to be commended for allowing what might be called the Asian voice to speak about Asian cities. Each chapter begins with an abstract that is useful and necessary in this kind of collection, where readers will dip in and want to know quickly, for a given chapter, whether they should read on. Over the last decade, there has been a growing academic focus on the cities of the Global South, especially Asia. This book will complement others such as Perera and Tang (2012) and Wong (2013).

All the chapters are well researched and written, avoiding the use of convoluted language one sometimes encounters in postcolonial academic writing. There are some excellent empirically grounded chapters that are cognisant of local and global histories. Certainly, the contributions by Zhou and by Martin are the standout chapters in the book. Some of the prose is elegant and incisive, for example:

New Songdo should be understood not only as a budding 'global city' or a straightforward real estate project, but also as a meaning-making project. New Songdo has been constructed on an enormous area of reclaimed land where ambivalence and contestations are more easily obscured, hidden from newcomers and potential international investors and denizens. (Martin 259)

The chapters by Lee, by Gonzaga, and by Logan are excellent contributions to the field, but they do not engage with the stated aim of the book. Given the lack of a substantial rationale and explanation in the introduction of what might constitute "colonial to global," the chapter authors concentrate on the fascinating detail of their case studies. Most of the more compelling chapters offer investigations of the impact of urban regeneration and renewal on the case study cities. These chapters complement a variety of books that place state-led and partnership-led urban regeneration in the context of a theoretical consideration of neoliberalism and cultural regeneration in the cities of the Global South generally and Asian cities in particular.

Four chapters, while interesting and revealing, take little if any heed of the book's aim—for instance, chapters by Vljakka, Shing Lee, Hirsh, and Febrica. Vljakka's chapter provides a welcome explicit theoretical framework for the research based on the spatial ideas of Henri Lefebvre. The discussion of graffiti as Lefebvrian spatial representations is fascinating, but the chance is missed to relate this to broader ideas regarding the production of urban public space. Vljakka (96) appears to misunderstand the origin of the term *graffiti*: it is Italian, not English.

The selection of Asian cities for inclusion in the book was inevitably a significant challenge. However, Bracken's decision to exclude India, its second-largest country with its host of global, mega and postcolonial cities certainly seems puzzling, although some Indian cities are mentioned in passing. It is surely partly the job of the introduction in an edited collection to anticipate such obvious criticism and pre-empt it by providing either a rationale for city selection or a least acknowledging major omissions.

Here we come to the major weaknesses of the book: its lack of a well explained rationale, along with an extended introduction and conclusion. Both these elements of the book are too brief to give a clear framework and focus for the chapters. Since the introduction does not problematise "Asia," it is defined in the chapters in nine potentially conflicting ways, all left unexplained: 1) Asia-Pacific, 2) Asian Tigers, 3) Central Asia, 4) East Asia, 5) Great East Asia, 6) Northeast Asia, 7) South Asia, 8) Southeast Asia, 9) Greece to Siberia. Nor does the introduction seek to explain the apparent non-sequitur inherent in the title, in which the colonial is recast as the global, rather than the postcolonial. Paradoxically, the chapters engage far more with the postcolonial than they do with Saskia Sassen's global city concept; few even discuss it in any meaningful way. Sassen herself accepts that the term is highly contested, especially the nature of its Anglo/Eurocentric perspective, despite the nod at Tokyo.

The book does not engage to any great extent with Foucault's powerful but contested concept of genealogy any more than it does

with Sassen's global city concept—surely a missed opportunity. If the introduction does not provide a rationale or an appreciation of what Asia (and its cities) might mean in all its historical and contemporary complexity and contradiction, then the conclusion does not conclude—largely ignoring the fascinating detail presented in the chapters. Ultimately, the book is something of a missed opportunity. While it could have made a key conceptual contribution to the idea of the Asian city, especially its distinctiveness and its global influence, it only puts down a few markers in these directions. Overall, the weaknesses do not prevent the book from making a useful contribution to the growing Asian cities literature. The book is undoubtedly a worthwhile read and students, even those familiar with the cities and the issues, will find it illuminating, educational, and largely enjoyable.

#### Works Cited

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