

26

Conclusion

Reflections on Urban Agency

Daniel P.S. Goh

Agency has been the recurrent subtext in this book, weaving a rich thread through the diverse reflections on the warping of urban space-time in Asia. A conclusion cannot possibly do justice to the depth and breadth of the essays. In any case, we reject the idea of a unitary urban Asia or an identifiable Asian urbanism. But neither do we want to offer many urban Asias or Asian urbanisms, like so many colorful trajectories making for a splendid Orient. Thus, my purpose here is less to draw conclusions about existing and coming *realities* and more to plot the lines of *consciousness* that are emerging from the cities and urbanities discussed in the essays.

Agency, in its observable sociological form, refers to the social action of groups and individuals in the context of social structures that limit, guide, enable, and facilitate the action in the first place. In turn, social structures are reproduced by institutionalized social actions and are changed by social actions that challenge the structures. Consciousness refers to the reflexive awareness of worldviews, values, practices and contexts, the interplay of which produces meanings that give rise to agency. In her discussion of the uses of imagined pasts in Dhaka, Zaman (in chapter 5) makes the distinction between restorative and prospective nostalgias. Both use the same elements of historical imagination from the recent war of liberation from Pakistan to the distant pre-colonial Mughal era. But restorative nostalgia negates the present city and its incipient future, thus rendering “the past impotent of any agency” (p. 55), while prospective nostalgia responds to the urban condition and deploys the past to imagine possibilities for the future.

Similar to the nostalgic consciousness in Dhaka, Chu (in chapter 6) finds the heritage conservation consciousness in Hong Kong and Macau to be split between the official, authoritative (restorative) mode of the state and the market on the one hand, and the unofficial, democratic (prospective) mode of political activists on the other. However, Chu finds the emerging agency to be much more complex and intertwined between the two modes, resulting in the co-production of the two cities' postcolonial futures. Sorensen (in chapter 2) shows the longer-term implications of such intertwined modes in Tokyo, where the simultaneously utopian and dystopian city that has inspired futurist imaginations rises from the complex of state planning authority, speculative capital, property relations, democratic politics, and radical urban visions. The key takeaway point here is that agency often exceeds the intentions, agenda, and interests of the individual, group, and institution, thus creating cities that cannot be reduced to the sum of their processes and conflicts.

Even when authority overwhelms urban consciousness, individuals in groups that are not formally organized but constituted by shared worldviews and social bonds imprint their agency on the concrete city. As the authority of the developmental state bulldozes through Kuala Lumpur building skyscrapers and razing slums, inscribing dominant ethnic, class, and gender-sexual identities unto societies, Lee, Goh, Landau-Ward and Sutcliffe (in chapter 19) find marginalized citizens moving through the manicured streets and shopping malls to produce their alternative subjectivities and leave their mark in graffiti, protests, and beauty pageants. In Singapore, Sinha (in chapter 22) finds practitioners of folk Hinduism realizing their religious worlds in one of the most orderly, planned cities in the world, making shrines in semi-hidden sacred spaces within, between, and beyond the urban grid of state-sanctioned temples guarded by religious authorities and secular spaces policed by state authorities.

Thus far, agency is still imbued with the sense that it is rising from below to hit the structures engineered by far more powerful authorities. Agency, in this sense, has the shine of subaltern resistance against the dominant powers, though many of the essayists have stayed clear of this sensibility. In fact, in its common usage, the word "agency" has been successfully appropriated by authorities. For states and international state-like bodies, agencies refer to autonomous arms set up to achieve specific aims through specialized knowledge and expertise. In our cases in this book, these agencies operate in the field by operationalizing the powers of the state to local contexts and creating new urbanisms to fulfill the political and socio-economic visions of their principal—the state. Much like the

agency rising from below, these agencies also produce outcomes beyond the original intentions and plans. We see this in Kripe's discussion of the plans to build the Silicon Valley of Asia in Singapore, which were overtaken by the unexpected success of a to-be-demolished flatted factory serving as a temporary space for incubating start-ups (chapter 14). Upadhy (in chapter 15) shows how the new capital of Andhra Pradesh, Amaravati, which involved multiple agencies from the local state and Singapore in the planning process, has already produced diverse and dissonant negotiations even before the city is built.

It is incorrect to describe the agency of state agencies as top-down, as they do not act with the absolute authority of the state. Rather, they negotiate themselves into the field, sideways, adapting and adjusting to local conditions, culture and relationships, deepening the powers of state and capital through expanding networks of flow. This sideways agency is very materially visible in the infrastructure projects that burrow underneath and extend beyond the city. Anwar (in chapter 8) discusses the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as an instance of the grand Chinese geopolitical project of One Belt, One Road, and finds mega-infrastructure networks enveloping the region and swallowing up small towns and peripheral spaces into a new form of transnational imperial urbanism with its attendant superdiversity. Ghertner (in chapter 9) peers into the extrastatecraft of sewage pipelines in Indian cities defined by technical specifications and sees the supranational Hindu coding flowing along the pipes in and through the maintenance labor of under-caste workers, thus making possible Hindu statecraft and undergirding the development of religious-political authority.

If the actions of state agencies should be recast as sideways agency rather than top-down agency, then are there grassroots actions of communities and non-state groups that should be rethought as sideways agency rather than bottom-up agency? Gillen (in chapter 7) presents an interesting case in which the dynamic spaces of Ho Chi Minh City are being produced by rural migrants whose ultimate goal is to return to the countryside, which portends further urbanization. Ho (in chapter 12) tracks African student migrants to Chinese cities where their aspirational hopes are dashed by harsh economic and ethnic realities, compelling efforts to move to other more cosmopolitan and globalized cities to fulfill their new dreams. In these cases, it would be inaccurate to argue that these migrants make up the urban grassroots, since the urban-makers neither grow from roots nor seek to sink roots. Their consciousness is one defined by mobilities, not of individual achievement, but along routes carved out by communities and steeped in the communities' cultural practices and values.¹

This sideways agency is not limited to migrants, but may also be exercised by the groups we would more conventionally describe as the urban grassroots. Indeed, Taylor (in chapter 13) shows citizens from cities and townships across Indonesia gathering at Urban Social Forum meetings to discuss alternative urbanisms and share knowledges. The citizen groups therefore develop the capacity Taylor sees as “essential to creating a sense of agency and direction” (p. 144), against apathy and resignation to the status quo if they were otherwise isolated in their hometowns. In another vein, Van der Veer (in chapter 23) reflects on the cosmic conviviality of Asian cities sustained by transnational networks of Hindu, Chinese, and Christian religious practices and processions spreading across national and civilizational boundaries. The sideways agency in this case is not limited to the religious networks but also protrudes into the secular networks of capital driving planetary urbanization in hyper-developmental Asia.

Another way sideways agency has been exercised by people and communities is in the hybridizing and filling in of hollowed out urban spaces formed by authority. Deformed state and market spaces are taken over and reworked into organic forms that defy any romanticization of the urban grassroots. We see this in Schwenkel’s discussion of Vinh City in Vietnam (in chapter 3) and Sereypagna’s (in chapter 4) documentation of the White Building in Phnom Penh, where the old socialist futurism of public apartment buildings and utopian living have been turned into paragons of community life that reject the cosmopolitan promises of neoliberal redevelopment. In a different setting, where neoliberal capitalism has seemingly triumphed in collusion with the paternalistic state, Elinoff (in chapter 11) finds urban social movements linking arms across the Isan region in Thailand to expose the destructive absurdity of development. What is interesting is how these movements treat the grandiose infrastructure, shining skyscrapers and seductive condominiums of the expanding urbanization in a sensory manner, connoting them as a ruined and degraded urban condition.

Taken together, the lines of consciousness giving rise to sideways agency that I am drawing out from my reading of the essays in this volume confound the dichotomy of bottom-up versus top-down urbanization. They also allow us to consider another type of agency that would not have fit into the conventional dichotomy. This is what Bunnell and I called the “recentering agency of the city” in our framing of papers collected in a symposium published in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*:

We see the recentering of Southeast Asian cities as referring to political actions that take the city not only as site and re-

pository, but also reflexively as identity in itself to be fought with, for and over. Rather than merely forming the context for political and economic activities by state or capitalist agents, the city gives rise to forms of grassroots activism that reflexively map and imagine the city in the process of acting to change it.²

In this volume, the recentering agency of the city is exemplified by Douglass's case of Seoul under Mayor Park Won-soon, whose progressive leadership in inclusive urban-making and rejection of global city-making is a culmination of decades of civic consciousness-raising and democratic mobilization by the city's urban grassroots (chapter 20). In effect, Seoul appears to exercise its own agency—sideways agency achieved from the bottom-up efforts of the urban grassroots—and does not function as an agent of the developmental state. However, such a recentering can be fragile, as Asian cities are constantly under the pressure of neoliberal redevelopment, given the developmental state's *raison d'être*. O'Donnell (in chapter 21) maps the recentering agency of the urban villages of Shenzhen in its early phase of development, where informality permitted different negotiations that made for a more inclusive urbanism. But alas, the last of the villages recently succumbed to large-scale corporate-style redevelopment by the developmental state.

The weight of realities could undermine imaginative possibilities and aspirational futures, producing negative consciousness instead. Agency would thus border on meaninglessness. Bowers (in chapter 16) documents the fatalism of female manual workers in India's Silicon Valley, Bangalore, who could not see beyond the immediacy of their low-wage employment. Bowers tries to end with a hope, in the figure of a labor organizer leading a protest on the steps of the town hall, but this woman was only able to attain her voice by retiring from her job as a construction worker and receiving training from a NGO. In Miller's case of refugees from the eruption of Mount Merapi, Indonesia, who were resettled into townships (in chapter 17), she finds desolation among some of the refugees, as a result of the disruption of their agrarian lifeworlds and the exhaustion of rebuilding their lives in an urban environment. In another tragic case, Padawangi (in chapter 18) details the fate of an old neighborhood in Jakarta, which could not prevent its relocation despite strong urban grassroots, in the face of state efforts to mitigate chronic flooding caused by economic activities in other parts of the city.

In the grand scheme of things, does it matter at all that we exercise bottom-up or sideways agency? The *longue durée* sketch by Hogan (in

chapter 24) suggests that the contribution of urban Asias is a futurity of hyper-urbanism, where the technologies and imaginaries of the skyscraper modernism of American metropolises are brought to a different scale. Urban Asias do not lose their historical and cultural specificities; Hogan argues that the past—collective memory fragments, maritime ecumenes, littoral ecologies, and heritage areas—is folded into this futurity. Driven by capital flows and developmental states, it leaves very little room for any agency by the urban grassroots. Viewing this development from his antipodean vantage point where the temporality slows to a different dream, Hogan may well be right (and only the future will tell!), while the rest of us traversing in the alleyways of cities speeding to the future cling to the hope of agency. Does it all matter? Jones (in chapter 25) revisits his two decades-old argument that East and Southeast Asia was seeing a thoroughgoing urbanization rendering the rural as a meaningless category or just another form of the urban, and reaffirms it. Whether it all matters does not matter. Urban agency is all we have.

Notes

- 1 Tim Bunnell and Peter Marolt, "Cities and Their Grassroutes" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, 3 (2014) 381–5.
- 2 Daniel P.S. Goh and Tim Bunnell, "Recentring Southeast Asian Cities" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, 3 (2013) 827.