

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Urbanisation in East Asia

Asia is one of the fastest growing regions in the world. Economically and politically the region's increasing importance has led some to see the 21st century as the Asian century. We are certainly likely to see an increasing shift from an Atlantic-centred world to a Pacific-centred one, with all the ramifications that that will bring. One of the major factors fuelling Asia's remarkable growth is urbanisation. The articles in this issue of *theFocus* are about the cities of Asia, and the scholars who have undertaken the research outlined here, most of it ongoing, come from a variety of different disciplines, including architecture, urbanism, sociology and the humanities. Their articles focus on East Asia and examine what cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Manila and Kuala Lumpur are doing for (and to) their countries, as well as the wider region as a whole. They examine how these cities are positioning themselves in a rapidly globalising Asia and how some of them have made canny use of models imported from the West, yet have managed to retain their own identity. Indeed, by melding the different influences of East and West some of them have managed to create a new and dynamic urban environment.

Gregory Bracken

Urbanisation in East Asia: The geometries of stone

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17 >

URBANISATION IS PLAYING A VITAL ROLE, particularly in China's recent and remarkable economic expansion. Alan Wheatley, in a recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* (3 August 2010), estimates the number of migrants in China to have reached 211 million in 2009. These people have been taking part in the largest mass migration in human history, sparked off by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in 1978. This 'second revolution' turned China into the world's workshop and enabled the country to move into the footlights on the world stage. A carefully controlled capitalist enterprise, which goes under the rubric of 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics', has enabled China to overtake Japan as the world's second-largest economy (which it did in August 2010). Some commentators even see the country as toppling the US from its number one spot in 20 years' time. America's economy is still three times that of China, but if China manages to sustain its 9% per annum growth this could well be a possibility.

This economic miracle also has its downside, which is particularly obvious in China's cities. The country has a population five times that of the US and its per capita income is on a par with countries like Algeria, El Salvador and Albania (i.e. approximately \$3,600 per annum, whereas the US is approximately \$46,000). Despite this, China has become the world's largest market for passenger vehicles, reflecting an interesting new stage in the country's economic development. The country no longer relies on the export of the cheap toys and clothes that first earned it the nickname 'workshop of the world', instead it has begun to turn to domestic demand in an effort to boost production and encourage Chinese people to buy the products that are made in the country. While this may seem a step in the right direction, it is having some unfortunate side-effects, such as the environmental impact of increases in steel and cement production, as well as an increase in the demand for power, which is still primarily fuelled by coal (China surpassed the US as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases in 2006). However, China has recognised this problem and has taken steps to address it. Li Daokui (an economics professor at Beijing's Tsinghua University) was quoted last month in another article by Alan Wheatley as saying that investment in a low-carbon economy, as well as urbanisation and development of the interior, will be the main factors sustaining China's annual growth rate of 9% over the coming decade (*International Herald Tribune*, 17 August). He sees the country about to enjoy a 'golden period', one which will see not only a new focus on energy efficiency but also on the shift to growth in the domestic sector we saw mentioned earlier. Red China, it seems, would like to be seen as Green China.

The changes that this rapid economic development have caused have often been painful, even for those who have seemed to benefit the most – those with good jobs in the country's manufacturing sector. The Chinese government introduced a minimum wage in 2004, yet such moves, promising as they are, do not go far enough to alleviate the problems associated with the country's rapid economic growth, as witnessed by the wave of strikes that affected the country earlier this year. The government's apparent reluctance to repress these strikes is seen as a turning point in a country known for having little tolerance for labour militancy. This new-found tolerance is yet another sign of China's new economic maturity. Concern for workers' rights, and the gradual increases in wages that have resulted from it, are signs that China is leaving behind the old era of low-wage capitalism.

Yet what about those who have been left behind by this economic miracle? Or those who have been imperfectly able to partake in it? The 'floating population' of millions of migrants to China's cities, born out of the restrictive *hukou* registration system. These people simply disappear when the economy takes a downturn. They haven't disappeared, of course, all they have done is returned home, which does nothing to solve their problems; in fact, it exacerbates them, as there's nothing for them to go home to. One horrific example of the malaise associated with China's rapid pace of change was the spate of attacks on rural elementary school children in the run up to the Shanghai World Expo. Economic pressure and the stress of life in a such a rapidly changing society, not to mention the social stresses that have resulted from the One Child Policy, laudable as it is in principle, are having detrimental side-effects, with far too much pressure being placed on children to succeed, so they will be better able to take care of parents in their old age.

The debate over urbanisation and land reform that is beginning to engage the country is dealt with by [Ana Moya Pellitero's](#) article, which looks at the influence the economic reforms are having on the countryside, as well as the cities, particularly the dangers faced by the vast floating population which is ripe for exploitation. [Bogdan Stamoran](#) also examines China's rapid urbanisation from the point of view of how high-speed city building may soon yield to an agglomeration of numerous large, non-agricultural settlements, where individuals' plights are increasingly irrelevant in these new utopias. His article also examines China's massive infrastructure upgrades, which are enabling this growth but asks what effect it will have on Chinese family life? This is what all of the papers in theFocus are really about: the people who call these cities home. Some, like rural migrants, are mere sojourners in the city, but after a decade or two maybe they should start thinking of these places as home. That is, if they are allowed to.

Sojourners have been coming to Shanghai since its inception as a Treaty Port in 1842. Most of them lived in a housing typology that is unique to the city: the alleyway house. This is referred to by two authors: [Non Arkaraprasertkul's](#) analysis uses the more general term *lilong* in his examination of the nostalgia that has enveloped this accommodation, just as it is in real danger of disappearing; [Lena Scheen](#), in her examination of Wang Anyi's famous novel, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, refers to them by using the Shanghainese term *longtang*. These alleyway houses feature almost as a character in the famous novel, which also acts as an encomium to a vanishing way of life. Lena Scheen also interviews the writer who reveals that she moved to the city as a young child and was always perceived as an outsider. The heroine of her novel is a woman who goes against the grain and suffers for it. 'I can't say Wang Qiyao is a representative of Shanghai', says Wang Anyi, 'then she is like Boston ivy on the wall of an old Shanghai building: a beautiful decoration of the city'.

A number of the articles take a broader view of urbanisation in East Asia. [Jacob Dreyer](#) examines how Beijing and Shanghai are vying with one another to be models for the rest of the country. These are two cities with very different characteristics, perhaps China could embrace the best of both worlds and benefit? Or will its cities follow one or the other model and increase the polarisation between them? [Leslie Sklair](#) takes us away from China by examining the architectural iconicity in the transition from the colonial to the globalising city. He takes a look at Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor, as well as the Petronas Towers and their role in helping Kuala Lumpur position itself as a global city. Finally, we come to a part of Asia that is somewhat underrepresented in discussions of globalisation and postcolonialism, that is the Philippines. [Estela Duque's](#) article examines the role of the US Army in the Philippines between 1898 and the 1920s, and the effects it has had on Manila and its environs.

I worked for many years as an architect in Asia. When I returned to Europe to begin training as an urbanist I found that I had to unlearn some of the tools that had previously served me so well. Perhaps the most important thing I learned was that even though cities might appear to be made up of buildings, as well as the streets and spaces between them, the most important thing about them is its people. Architects often concentrate exclusively on buildings (though the better ones do tend to take other factors into account), urbanists are better at seeing the spaces between buildings, not as empty space but as the connections that link the buildings to one another, which of course enables them to function. Spaces between buildings function very much like the spaces between the spokes of a wheel, the wheel's integrity depends as much on the spaces as on the materials the spokes are made of. None of this, neither the buildings nor the spaces, would be anything without the people who inhabit them. This simple fact is something that is reflected in the thoughtful and timely essays contained in this issue of *theFocus*, and is also something that any reader fortunate enough to visit the places mentioned in the papers should bear in mind. A stroll through these cities' street should be enough to convince anyone that what cities are all about is not the cold geometries of stone but the people who call them home.

Gregory Bracken
IIAS, University of Leiden and Delft School of Design, the Netherlands
gregory@cortlever.com