# Whither the 'Asian' City?

The worlds of Santosh, or Mohammed or the women of Yangzhou cannot be explained by globalization yet that does not relegate them to the category of 'traditional' or 'backward'. They live in kaleidoscope worlds, as does anyone living in a rapidly changing capitalist city. It is a world in which making a living is an erratic, uncertain enterprise; in which faith can be regular observance, occasion for celebration or simply overlooked; in which marriage provides status and security but also carries risks. They are worlds in which 'of the city' or 'being urban' is the here and now, in which 'west' might be no more than a compass point. [p. 107]

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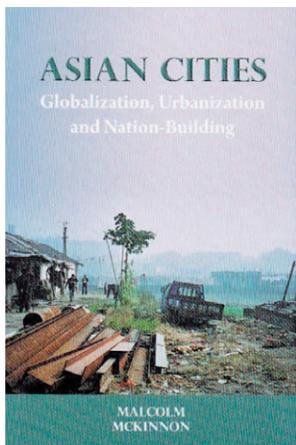
**Reviewed publication:**
McKinnon, M. 2011.
*Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building,*
Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 288 pages, ISBN 9788776940799 (pb)

In *Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building*, Malcolm McKinnon argues that globalization is not the only default explanation for urban transformations in contemporary Asian cities. Instead, he argues that cities in "developing Asia" – which he interprets as the People's Republic of China, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia [p. 11] – face two processes that "do not affect Western cities in the same way" [p. 3]. These processes are urbanization (i.e., massive transformations of the social, cultural and built environment) and nation-building (i.e., the process through which a population of a particular territory acquires a shared identity). He supports his argument empirically by adopting comparative analyses of a metropolitan centre where "a great deal had been written" [p. 14] with a lesser known provincial or second tier city "with which it was more practicable for the researcher to become acquainted" [p. 14]. These are the three pairings of Shanghai with Yangzhou in China, Jakarta with Semarang in Indonesia, and Bangalore and Mysore in India.

The book is organized into four parts. Following an introduction in Part 1, Part 2 discusses urbanization and cities:

chapter 2 focuses on urbanization, defined as "the process by which cities and towns become more populous and more economically significant than rural areas" [p. 37]; while chapter 3 focuses on urbanism, defined as transformations in cities vis-à-vis traditional areas of life, including "new levels of education, new kinds of occupation, and new opportunities for private space" [p.71]. Part 3 discusses how various processes in Asian cities relate to nation-building: chapter 4 discusses businesses, i.e., the "building of domestic networks and markets by capitalist businesses" [p. 136]; chapter 5 discusses the flows of domestic labour migration; chapter 6 discusses the travel and hospitality industries in cities; and chapter 7 discuses how commercial popular culture is a national and global phenomenon in developing Asian cities. Part 4 concludes the book and postulates the future of urbanization, urbanism and nation-building in developing Asian cities.

McKinnon's broader objective is to question Eurocentric dominance in urban theories that have been conveniently projected upon non-Western contexts. Globalization, taken as the default explanation for late-20th and early-21st century Asian capitalism, results in "the relative invisibility of *both* urbanization and nation-building in scholarly discussion" [p. 9]. Triggered by his visits to a number of Asian cities in late-1990s and early-2000s, McKinnon questions how globalization has been conveniently interpreted as "*symmetrical* globalization" [p. 214], arguing instead that globalization pans out "asymmetrically" in different (developing Asian) contexts. Thus, he argues that it is useful to consider "multiple globalizations" [p. 215], as well as how the shift from one type of globalization to another implicates processes at other scales (e.g., regional, subcontinential, national).

However, a casual reader without the benefit of know-ledge of recent debates in contemporary urban studies would find it difficult to follow McKinnon's book. The book gives prominent space to ethnographic accounts and detailed

descriptions of urban phenomena in the respective chosen cities. As a consequence, little space is given to explain the theoretical conversations that this book locates itself within. It is as if McKinnon assumed that readers would be familiar with debates about Eurocentricism and the questioning of globalization in urban studies. As a result, the reader is left to do a lot of work: firstly, to connect the dots between the stories; and secondly, to understand how these fit into the flow of arguments at the broader theoretical perspective.

On the other hand, as an academic researcher and writer, I find it hard to get past two shortcomings of the book. Firstly, while McKinnon has rightly identified that non-Western cities go through processes of urbanization and nation-building that were not similarly experienced in Western cities, his somewhat careless categorising of "developing Asia" repeats the flaws of Eurocentrism he criticises. In claiming that the purpose of the book is "to draw out common elements in the urban Asian experience of globalization" [p. 13], McKinnon has over-generalized and essentialized *the* "developing Asia" based on a few conveniently-selected case studies.

Secondly, although McKinnon has attempted to address issues of bias in his ethnographic methods (e.g., selection bias, language barriers) [pp. 11-19], this appears cursory and lacks further elaboration. For example, no mention was made about the durations, frequencies, and nature of any fieldwork visit, other than a quick mention that "ethnographic investigation was carried out periodically in the case study cities over six years" [p. 16]. Another sentence mentioned that "ethnographic material is least rich for China and richest for India" [p. 16], without explaining why and what implications this would have on the analysis. These shortcomings, unfortunately, do not do justice to his use of comparative urban research, as recently advocated by urban studies scholars.[1]

There is no doubt that McKinnon's message is important: cities in "developing Asia" have divergent urban experiences "on the ground" [p. 69], which urban theories developed from the Western experience cannot quite capture and explain. Furthermore, processes and phenomena within a nation-state may better inform our understanding of cities, in addition to globalization as an explanatory factor. Unfortunately, this message has not been fully articulated and/or supported with convincing comparative analysis of *both* "developing Asia" and "the West". For the significance of the underlying message contained within, I wish that this book had articulated the message loud and clear, instead of leaving the casual reader lost without a clear sense of how the case studies connect with each other and to a broader debate.

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**Notes**
1 Robinson, J. 2011. *Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* 35: 1–23.

# A few poorly organised men
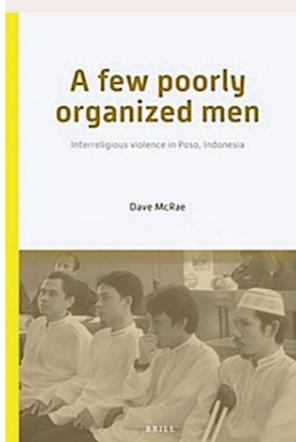
Indonesia's transition from Suharto's authoritarian regime to a more democratic government saw a number of violent uproars, especially in the so-called Outer Islands. Apart from the separatist movements that sought to establish their own independent states (in Aceh, East Timor, and West Papua), many violent regional conflicts materialized along ethnic-religious cleavages.

Antje Missbach

**Reviewed publication:**
Dave McRae. 2013. *A few poorly organised men: interreligious violence in Poso, Indonesia,* Leiden: Brill, ISBN: 9789004244832

The interreligious conflict in Poso, Sulawesi, was Indonesia's most protracted conflict during the post-Suharto era (1998-2007). While previously a quiescent and peaceful locality without any history of interreligious unrest, between 600 and 1000 people lost their lives there due to the outbreak of violence and the many acts of reprisal. Although this number made the Poso conflict less damaging than the deadly clashes

in the neighbouring Moluccas taking place around the same time, the events in Poso nonetheless had deep repercussions among the local Muslim and Christian populations. Also, it left a distressing mark on the national recollection.

Based on long-term observations and multiple fieldwork encounters over ten years, Dave McRae has gained unique insights into the local settings in Poso and the socio-political developments that shaped the bloody events. Thus, his book presents the first comprehensive history of the conflict in Poso. Nonetheless, given that the causes and courses of interreligious violence in Indonesia, and elsewhere, have busied

large numbers of scholars, experts of local conflict histories have to put up with the question of what are the greater contributions of their books to understanding both the genesis of interreligious violence and finding ways to terminate it? In other words, what could be possibly learned from reading a narrow account of just one conflict rather than a more comparative analysis of interreligious violence that takes into account a number of conflicts? There are a number of good reasons, which make Dave McRae's book an enriching and rewarding reading.

Violent conflicts in Indonesia have often been described as the consequence of the rapid political change after the end of the Suharto-era. This change was characterised first and foremost by democratisation and decentralisation that allowed more people to partake in political competition. McRae, however, makes the effort to study the local dynamics in great detail in order to explain both the onset and the continuative dynamics of the enfolding violence. Rather than just assuming that "violence [can be utilised] as political tool in political contestation" (p. 54) when transitioning state authorities (including the security forces) can no longer guarantee law and order, McRae points out the "insufficiency of political interest to account completely for the violent action of the key actors" (p. 66). As McRae successfully demonstrates, by instigating violence against people of the opposite faith, local conflict leaders had little to gain, but much to lose. Having been found guilty for the instigation of violence, in fact, cost a number of promising candidates their prospect of success in