

Asian Migrations

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Cities attract migrants. The relationship between the two can be symbiotic, with the city acting as a magnet for opportunity and also benefitting from the hard (and often quite badly paid) work migrants do. When properly managed, this can be a win-win situation; when misunderstood or mismanaged, it can cause social and economic problems that become entrenched and hard to fix. The papers in this Focus section examine several migrations in Asia (in China, India, and Indonesia) and also Asian migration to the West (in the form of Amsterdam's Chinatown) to see what the current unprecedented wave of migration means for the people themselves and for the cities they move to.



Fig. 1: Migrant street vendors, Hongqiao Market, Beijing (Photo by Gregory Bracken, 2004).

Arrival City

Monica L. Smith identifies “the human propensity for migration [as something that] continually enables our species to adapt to new circumstances.”¹ She thinks that urban migration is not only “the only viable form of concentrated human population but also enabled cities to be incubators for other new phenomena,” which sees relationships between economies of production and consumption, the development of infrastructure, and the emergence of the middle class.²

Peter J. Taylor sees cities as places of opportunity because while “migrants may start at the bottom [...] they had hope, if not for themselves for their children, of a better life.”³ Migrants can, given the right circumstances, be upwardly mobile, even if this takes a generation or two. Even poor migrants send money home. This helps their places of origin. Saskia Sassen has noted that “in many cases the remittances sent by low-income immigrants to countries of origin are now larger than foreign aid to those countries.”⁴

Even when upward mobility is slow in coming, Edward Glaeser points out that “[u]rban poverty should be judged not relative to

urban wealth but relative to rural poverty.”⁵ This is a vitally important distinction because he also points out that “[c]ities aren’t full of poor people because cities make people poor, but because cities attract poor people with the prospect of improving their lot in life.”⁶ He sees this as why cities attract “continuing waves of the less fortunate, helping them succeed, watching them leave, and then attracting new disadvantaged migrants,”⁷ something we will return to in a moment when we come to the concept of Arrival City.

Not all migrants are successful, however. Some return home. Others fall into chronic poverty with “insecure, often part-time and disorganized low-paid labor,” what David Harvey calls the “precarariat,” which he sees as displacing the traditional “proletariat.”⁸

What is remarkable about the current global waves of migration is their sheer scale. Mike Davis tells us that cities have “absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950, and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week.”⁹ While Doug Saunders thinks that “[w]hat will be remembered about the twenty-first century, more than anything

else except perhaps the effects of a changing climate, is the great, and final, shift of human populations out of rural, agricultural life and into cities.”¹⁰

Saunders is the man who coined the term “Arrival City,” which he sees as “readily distinguished from other urban neighbourhoods, not only by its rural-immigrant population, its improvised appearance and ever-changing nature, but also by the constant linkages it makes.”¹¹ He sees these linkages as having two directions: (1) to the migrants’ originating villages, where people, money, and know-how move back and forth, and (2) to the city itself – to “its political institutions, business relationships, social networks and transactions [that] are all footholds intended to give new village arrivals a purchase, however fragile, on the edge of the larger society, and to give them a place to push themselves, and their children, further into the centre, into acceptability, into connectedness.”¹²

The mistake is to look at the Arrival City as something fixed, which can lead to the misperception of seeing them as “cancerous growths on an otherwise healthy city.”¹³ This

point of view ignores their success at creating the new middle class we saw highlighted by Monica Smith earlier, and also in abolishing what Saunders calls “the horrors of rural poverty.”¹⁴ The inhabitants of the Arrival City are in transition from “one condition to another.”¹⁵ They want to stop living there “either by making money and moving their families and village networks out or by turning the neighbourhood itself into something better.”¹⁶ Socially and economically, they are constantly in flux. The only thing that remains, if the Arrival City is functioning in a healthy way, is the bedrock of social networks that they sustain and which enable new waves of migrants to find a foothold in the life of the city. Saunders urges us to “devote far more attention to these places, for they are not just the sites of potential conflict and violence but also the neighbourhoods where the transition from poverty occurs, where the next middle class is forged, where the next generation’s dreams, movements and governments are created.”¹⁷ This is exactly what the following papers try to do.

Continued overleaf



Fig. 2: Female agricultural workers, the Sundarbans, Bangladesh (Photo by Asmeeta Das Sharma, 2019).

The papers

The contributors to this Focus on Asian migrations are all recently graduates of the Masters of Urbanism track from TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. Their articles highlight some of the main findings, and planning and design proposals, of their thesis research. All of them deal with migration in Asia, with the final paper looking at Asian migration to the West.

The first paper is Asmeeta Das Sharma's "Recentering Climate Migration in the Bengal Delta," which examines the human face of climate change. Migrations that result from environmental disasters in Low Elevation Coastal Zones (LECZs) see developing countries most adversely affected, with marginalized populations being the most vulnerable. Her paper looks at the Sundarbans, a mangrove area in a delta formed by the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers in the Bay of Bengal. Circular migration has been the dominant adaptation measure here for decades, but the movement of people puts pressure on both destination cities and the development of the region. Informal urbanization and a "floating" population put excessive pressure on resources and cause uneven development. Moreover, the undocumented nature of these people's movements makes them invisible to governments who would be in a position to help. This paper proposes a strategy to bring alternate livelihoods closer to people's homes, trigger polycentric development, and reinforce traditional cultural knowledge. Working across three scales – the regional, urban, and local – this approach defines a new region with a network of clusters protected by traditional water-management systems. This could redefine the functional relationship between the city (Kolkata) and new urban-rural clusters, and relate both to the villages of the Sundarbans.

Cassie Sun Woo Kim's paper, "Establishing a Regional Framework for Migrants in Semarang," highlights the serious problems this city is facing. The capital and largest city of Central Java, Semarang is sinking at an alarming rate (six to seven centimetres per year, with up to 19 centimetres in some places). There is also a major problem with water source depletion. To address these issues, the city is constructing a polder system as part of a coastal defence master plan, with a large dyke circumscribing the urbanized region as well as the shoreline and mangrove areas. This seawall will also serve as a highway connecting the city to the regional traffic of

East and West Java. Semarang's population is increasing, but the city is running out of land to develop in order to house it. People are also migrating to the hinterland, wanting to get away from the flooding danger zones by moving to higher elevations (which also have fresh water supplies and more greenery). Kim's paper proposes a regional framework for this migration. Choosing a site in suburban Semarang, it explores the possibilities of increasing green and blue areas within an urban context, as well as preserving the natural qualities of the mountainous areas to create safe new areas for the city's residents.

We move to China with the next two papers, beginning with "Planning for African Migrants in Guangzhou" by Qiyao Hu. Globalization, and the transnational migrations that are part of it, have begun to see foreign settlements take root in China's cities. This paper highlights an interesting and little-known phenomenon – African enclaves in Guangzhou – to show how they have formed and what problems they are facing, particularly that of social-spatial segregation. The paper proposes a strategy for dealing with these problems through spatial design and takes account of realistic planning to try and produce a more socially-minded city. Through its three-pronged aims of allowing African migrants participate better, live better, and stay better, we see how actions for improving the living environment, and for promoting the integration of the Xiaobei Road community, are based on five basic principles: accessibility, quality, efficiency, diversity, and identity. The goal is to transform the entire city of Guangzhou into a place friendly for African (and other) migrants, with spatial regeneration and governance strategies actively mobilized to help them participate in the life of the city. This is an urban development strategy that thoughtfully considers the living habits and cultural background of the Africans themselves to ensure that their new home in the city is a friendlier and better place to live.

Our second Chinese paper is Xiaojun Liu's "The Impact of Hong Kong's Urban Renewal on Chinese Migrants," which brings us to the Sham Shui Po district, a magnet for Mainland Chinese migrants, particularly females, children, and the elderly, most of whom are non-skilled workers. Lacking economic or other resources, these migrants tend to cluster in central areas, where building quality is poor but where they can find strong social networks. Urban renewal, however, is threatening these networks. This paper questions Hong Kong's current development-led urban redevelopment, which is leading

to gentrification. It identifies four main elements that are particularly problematic. First, in the name of housing and commercial renewal, old buildings are torn down and, despite household numbers increasing, small affordable residential units are reduced. Second, new projects' commercial podiums limit low-skill job opportunities because, while the number of shops remains the same, their average size increases such that migrants can no longer afford them. Such shops also face inwards towards the shopping malls, not the street, meaning they no longer function as a public space supporting informal social networks. Third, developers provide public services (as they are obliged to do by the authorities), but they locate them on upper floors and behind gates so that migrants do not even know they are there. Fourth, there is a spillover effect from nearby gentrification (especially on Haitan Street), whereby small businesses are pushed out by higher rents. Migrants who come to places like Sham Shui Po see them as an Arrival City, a place that helps integration. Redevelopment, even when well-intentioned, is damaging the very networks on which these people rely. This has the danger of turning Sham Shui Po into what Doug Saunders calls a place of "failed arrival."¹⁸

Staying on the topic of Chinese migration, but this time to the West, You Wu's "The Death and Life of Amsterdam's Chinatown" looks at ways of giving this fascinating yet disappearing part of the city a vibrant future. Her paper begins by looking at Chinatowns generally, observing that they tend to appear very similar wherever they happen to be in the world, yet they cannot be associated with any particular location or time period in Chinese history. Amsterdam's Chinatown, known as Zeedijk, was once a reputable area populated by wealthy merchants. It then degenerated into a migrant district in the 19th century and is now next to the city's red-light district. Identifiable by its decorative characteristics, mostly in the form of exaggerated Chinese-style ornamentation, the number of Chinese stores has decreased in recent years. This is tied to the fact that the face of Chinese migration to the Netherlands has changed in the 21st century, with newcomers tending to be better educated and better off than their predecessors, and so without the need to cluster in an Arrival City. The question of what to do with this characteristic but threatened district is answered by a vibrant proposal that frees itself from the stereotypical image of Chinatown. Wu proposes replacing it with

a vision that is contextualized and varied and which could transform the area into a series of collaborative public spaces, rather than the current tourist-oriented destinations, where locals (Chinese and other) can be involved in the transformation itself. The proposal's collaborative public spaces promote peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding among these different groups, which make a refreshing change from the distinctly Orientalist view of Chinatowns that we are used to.

Conclusion

All of these investigations, some with their planning and design proposals, offer new insights into the increasingly important issue of migration. They show the continued importance of exploring these issues through education and, more importantly, disseminating that research to as wide an audience as possible so that their new ideas have a better chance of being implemented.

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Notes

- 1 Smith, M.L. (2019). *Cities: The First 6,000 Years*. Simon & Schuster: 90.
- 2 Ibid: 90-91.
- 3 Taylor, P.J. (2013). *Extraordinary Cities: Millennia of Moral Syndromes, World-Systems and City/State Relations*. Edward Elgar: 335.
- 4 Sassen, S. (2014). *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Belknap Press: 90.
- 5 Glaeser, E. (2012). *Triumph of the City*. Penguin Books: 10.
- 6 Ibid: 70.
- 7 Ibid: 81.
- 8 Harvey, D. (2019 [2012]). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso: xiv.
- 9 Davis, M. (2017). *Planet of Slums*. Verso: 1-2.
- 10 Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World*. Windmill Books: 1.
- 11 Ibid: 11.
- 12 Ibid: 11.
- 13 Ibid: 19.
- 14 Ibid: 20.
- 15 Ibid: 241.
- 16 Ibid: 321.
- 17 Ibid: 3.
- 18 Ibid: 25.