

BOOK REVIEW

A Different Take on the Development of Asian Cities

Patrick David Cenon
De La Salle University, Philippines
patrick.cenon@dlsu.edu.ph

Malcolm McKinnon, *Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute on Asian Studies – NIAS Press 258 pp, ISBN: 978-87-7694-078-2 (hbk) ISBN: 978-87-7694-079-9 (pbk)

This insightful book presents an alternative perspective on the development and growth of Asian cities. Instinctively, people view the development and growth of Asian cities as heavily influenced by globalization. Through his dissertation, McKinnon presented a perspective that shows how select cities in China, India, and Indonesia have developed and grown. The purpose of his dissertation was not to add specialized knowledge areas like urban geography, culture, business, migration, and media studies, but to draw out common elements in the urban Asian experience of globalization and highlight the contrast between that experience, the experience of globalization in the West, and widely-accepted assumptions about globalization.

McKinnon used an approach that observes, compares, and contrasts three cities undergoing transformations influenced by globalization, urbanization, and nation-building and places emphasis on processes which have a beginning, middle, and end. By putting the three transformations alongside each other, this study highlights a particular set of social insights and perspectives.

McKinnon also used both quantitative and qualitative material. The quantitative material includes statistical data on population movements, market size,

sales figures, and the like. This provides evidence to support the argument that forces operating on an urban and national as much as a global scale shape city life in Asia. The approach uses quantitative material prudently by recognizing the limitations of data in terms of availability and consistency which is explained in the first chapter of the book.

In using quantitative data, the author took into consideration that the nation-state is the “unit” of globalization and is the basis of the collection of statistics. This is helpful to measure and understand nation building but considers that some statistics (e.g., migration and economic activity) may not be as precise, as it fails to cover the informal economy. These limitations in statistics are augmented by qualitative material which use ethnographic methods (e.g., community immersions and key-informant interviews) to capture the realities of informal and undocumented phenomena while helping the readers understand the implications of statistics to the communities and the lives of individuals.

Urbanization

In chapter two, McKinnon showed how urbanization, not globalization, is shaping both

the cities and the lives of inhabitants. The author pointed out that the interweaving of globalization and urbanization frequently takes the form of statements rather than the careful analysis of the relationship (p. 38).

The author conducted a review of literature citing the notion of “global cities” of John Friedmann and Goetz Wolffe (1980) where they pointed out how international capital was shaping cities. Then he argued that the process of urbanization started long before globalization. The urbanization of North America and Western Europe in the mid-20th century were closely associated with industrialization but not with globalization. For many parts of the post-second World War developing world, through the late 20th and into the early 21st century, urbanization proceeded without the stimulus of economic growth. Hence, the argument that the relationship between globalization and urbanization may exist at a particular time but cannot be treated as a constant. Therefore, this does not make for a disconnect of globalizing influences and urbanization, but it does suggest an indirect relationship rather than simple cause-and-effect (pp. 39–40).

The author proceeded with an analysis of three cities—Bangalore in India, Yangzhou in China, and Semarang in Indonesia. The efforts to meet the cities’ requirements for housing, water supply, public health, public education, mobility, and public transportation were noticed in the case of Bangalore. In the case of Semarang, the urbanization experience of nearby towns of Bali, Kengeri, and Jatisari was similar as they witnessed the emergence of housing, schools, hospitals, shops, and bus routes that were driven by economic growth, rising populations, and greater opportunities for employment. In the case of Yangzhou’s makeover, urbanization was a visible transformation, orchestrated by a city government which derived its revenue often from real estate deals which is a good example of Mike Davis’ “imagined urbanism.”

Urbanism

In chapter three, McKinnon discussed urbanism which he referred to as the social, mental, and psychological transformation of the individual. It is a process affecting a person’s way of life. To investigate this process, he observed the transformation

in education, occupation, religious practice, and the role of women.

McKinnon linked the transformation in education and occupation as the driver influencing the changes in the means of economic survival in Asian cities. He noted that the city offers a host of opportunities for employment provided that one is competitive enough to obtain and secure employment. One must also possess the necessary skills to obtain employment and progress into higher-paying jobs. Likewise, working for outsourcing companies will require an adjustment of one’s way of life (e.g., night shifts in call centers). Although many are skilled and willing to alter one’s way of life to secure a job, a crucial component of “surviving” in Bangalore and Mysore was the quality and caliber of one’s connections.

In terms of religious observance, McKinnon noted that religious practices are integrated into the individual’s way of life in the city. The presence of unique religious practices in “global cities” (Semarang and Bangalore) suggests that globalization, characterized by rationality and secularism, can co-exist with religious practices. In the case of Yangzhou, it has been observed that the significant number of people “without religion” remains unchanged despite the city’s transformation. These examples suggest the limited influence of globalization in terms of religious observance.

In terms of the role of women, McKinnon explained that developing cities in Asia are the points of contact for the changes in the role of women. These changes are brought about by the increased education levels, better employment opportunities, and the presence of change agents (i.e., Western NGOs and government programs). These changes in the role of women are expected to spread from these cities to the nearby towns.

McKinnon’s observations of the above changes show that although globalization brings change through economic growth and development in Asian cities, the manner by which the transformation occurs is not driven solely by the forces of globalization. It is also influenced by social values, norms, and institutions present in society. This predisposes the manner by which the developing city and its nearby towns transform from rural to urban. This insight explains the observed similarities and the notable differences in the cities.

Nation Building

McKinnon illustrated the influence of nation-building by explaining the explicit use of the term. Though the term nation-building is associated with the establishment of nation states in the mid-20th century, he explained that nation-building still occurs in an environment of non-state actors. He furthered explained the effects of business, migration, travel and tourism, and popular culture on developing cities in Asia.

In terms of the role of businesses, McKinnon recognized the efforts of India, Indonesia, and China to provide a fair, legal, financial, economic, and social environment that attract business investments to enter their market. He observed three effects resulting from the entry of new businesses. First is the disruption of small retail systems brought about by larger companies that provide more value in their product, service, and retail experience. Second is the standardization of products through branding which allows for more profit. Third is the creation of new networks of production and consumption. In such cases, the entry of businesses into the market creates or increases the need for new auxiliary products and services (e.g., call centers, web design, and motor vehicles). These changes also transform the daily lives of individuals in society.

In terms of migration, McKinnon recognized the need for labor to move freely across borders. He also pointed out that labor also moves within the borders of the nation. The movement of people from rural towns to urban centers is, in most cases, overlooked. This movement comes with the movement of values, beliefs, and a certain way of life coming from different parts of the country. The resulting ethnic diversity brings about new challenges in developing cities.

In terms of travel, McKinnon pointed out the importance of understanding the impact of domestic travel, be it for business or leisure. Although it is often outshined by international travel, he argued that the scale of domestic travel has huge potential as there are fewer constraints for travel (i.e., passport, visa, and costs of travel). This makes domestic travel more accessible to the majority of the population. To enable domestic tourism, companies use the nation as the frame to develop travel networks among cities within the nation as seen in the case of national railways and private bus companies.

In terms of commercial and pop culture, McKinnon pointed out that pop culture is a dynamic interaction of factors within the state. This is different from the commonly held belief that pop culture is influenced by global forces. By illustrating the development of language in Bangalore and Mysore, McKinnon was able to show that elements of pop culture (e.g., language) can be influenced by internal national factors such as the interaction of regional dialects. In China's case, the development of their music industry was not driven by the state that seeks to promote national identity and unity after the Second World War. Although China attempted to ban and control access to cultural imports in the 1970s and 1980s, it moved to wholesale buying, co-producing and profit sharing in the 1990s. The role of the state and limitations in language facilitated the cycling of music from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai. In Indonesia's case, Jakarta Malay or Batawi is widely spoken in major cities among youngsters even if it is not the national language. This can be attributed to the association of the Jakarta Malay or Batawi with what is stylish and modern.

Concluding Comments

In his concluding comments, McKinnon had two conclusions: From a historical perspective, the past decades have seen the development of cities in Asia. While there are global factors that influence the development of these cities, McKinnon was able to illustrate how factors within the country, and in some cases within the city, influence its development. Challenges regarding the availability and consistency of data were also pointed out in conducting research at this level.

Secondly, McKinnon showed that the development of cities in Asia will still be influenced by globalization. These continued developments tend to lead to a shift from asymmetric to symmetric globalization where economic, demographic, and cultural imbalances are improved.

In terms of method, taking a more ethnographic and descriptive approach to this study allows researchers to understand the impact of global, national, and local factors on the development of Asian cities in terms of urbanization and urbanism. Although quantitative indicators may facilitate understanding in

terms of comparison and ranking of cities, revisiting ethnographic and descriptive approaches gives a more real and grounded understanding of social phenomena that are not grasped by indicators. This approach taken by McKinnon is insightful and serves as a good resource for similar studies.