

# The challenge for the modern city

Asian metropolises are, for the first time, in position to define the standards and vision of what it means to be modern



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In 2008, for the first time in history, the world population shifted from majority rural to majority urban. In 2011, the same shift occurred in China. At some point in between, another landmark was reached: More than 50 per cent of the world's urban population now lives in Asia and the proportion is expected to keep rising.

With another 600 million newborns and migrants likely to join the ranks of Asian city dwellers in the next 15 years, there is no question that Asian metropolises will continue to dominate world rankings in terms of sheer size. Rapid economic growth in the region should also allow them to increase their economic clout and the living standards of their residents.

This process is often seen as replaying, admittedly on a much grander scale and at a much faster pace, what already happened in the developed world. In other words, in urbanisation just as in economic growth and social development, Asia is catching up with the West.

Such an interpretation, however, is misleading. The current urban transformation of Asia is taking place in a very different context than the 20th-century urbanisation of the developed world. Understanding this change of context is key to understanding what has been happening in Asian cities in the last 20 years, as well as what is likely to happen in the next 20.

"Asian Cities as Centres of Global Modernity", a project I am currently leading at the National University of Singapore under the auspices of the Global Asia Institute, focuses on exploring this larger context, which we call "global modernity". Stripped of all the technical aspects and detailed data that are the mainstay of what we scholars work with, our model of global modernity emphasises three very recent trends.

## THE COMPRESSION EFFECT

First, there is the oft-noted compression of time and space on the global scale. Seminal changes in transport, media, and communication infrastructures are the most visible components of this process.

The world is interconnected like never before by the flows of goods, money, people and, above all, information — and large cities are the key nodes in this global network. As a result, individuals and organisations become more mobile, urban forms more fluid, and there is rapid transmission, reception and emulation of urban models and innovations.

Second, there has been a no less dramatic shift of gravity — economic, political, cultural — away from the West. The most immediately obvious and commented-upon aspects of this process are those of geopolitics and international trade, from the rise of China as



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a new regional and indeed global geopolitical power, to the expansion of the Group of 7 into the Group of 20 and the fast rise of BRIC economies.

Yet the shift away from the West is occurring on many different levels and it is misleading to conceptualise it in terms of traditional categories, such as the succession of "great powers" or the "Rise of Asia". What we experience is rather a proliferation of multiple new centres of modernity — attraction points for "global assemblages" of organised actors. As a result, the emerging global modernity is at once post-western, polycentric, and distinctly urban.

## THE STATE'S ROLE TRANSFORMED

Finally, and this might be the least recognised major aspect of the global modernity, there has been a worldwide proliferation of organisations and especially those that do not gravitate — in terms of their goals, organisational legitimacy, and inter-organisational relations — toward national governments.

The global population of such organisations, from business enterprises

to non-profits and non-government organisations has increased dramatically since 1990. Some are explicitly transnational and political in their orientation, giving currency to the notions of global governance and global civil society. The majority, however, is oriented towards specific social sectors — the economy, education, healthcare, science, religion and so on.

Their proliferation indicates a major transformation in the role of the state, from the main representation of society and central figure of international order, into just one of many organised actors within a heterogeneous and rapidly evolving global organisational field.

The emerging order of global modernity poses many new challenges to urban scholars and planners, municipal and national governments and all other actors that participate in shaping contemporary cities. But it also creates a new world of opportunities.

Regarding Asian cities, many have been dealt a very good hand in this new game. They are in the most dynamic region of the world economy, benefitting from large pools of migrant labour and with fewer legacy issues to deal with than their western counterparts. There should be little surprise then that instead of catching up gradually, major Asian metropolises often seem to have leaptfrogged over the competition.

They steal the spotlight in world comparisons, not only by having the tallest skyscrapers, fastest trains, busiest airports,

but also the best schools and hospitals, avant-garde architecture, tourist attractions and the ability to stage spectacular events. Moreover, as the protagonists of the new polycentric, post-western modernity they are increasingly in position, for the first time ever, to define the standards and visions of what it means to be modern.

## THE COSMOPOLITAN CHALLENGE

Yet the position of Asian cities as new centres of global modernity is by no means assured, even in the short run, unless they develop successful mechanisms of dealing with the other two aspects of global modernity.

Organisational proliferation and the creation of a global, compressed time-space continuum have radical consequences for the very idea of what a city is, and how it should be planned and governed.

As individuals and organisations become more mobile and globally connected, cities shift from semi-permanent agglomerations of captive locals, to fluid ensembles of cosmopolitans, including increasing numbers of foreigners, short-term residents, and travellers.

The number of stakeholders in the city thus increases rapidly and so do their visions of what the city is and what it should be. Freed from the constraining imperatives of national development and planning, large cities find themselves facing not only increased competition from other cities in regional and global networks, but also new

demands for more sophisticated and multi-faceted governance.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is the challenge of creating stronger incentives for various

stakeholders to take ownership of the city, to become interested, active and responsible city makers, that defines modernity and the prospects of success for

any and all cities today. ■

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