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City Neighbourhoods for Active Citizenship in Asia

[Gregory Bracken](#)

Neighbourhoods for the City in Pacific Asia is by K.C. Ho, an Associate Professor of Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore. Published by Amsterdam University Press as part of their Asian Cities series – which is run in conjunction with the International Institute for Asian Studies and explores urban cultures, societies, and developments in Asia – the book focusses on evolving and sometimes competing ideas of the city as well as urban residents’ interactions with them, especially on issues such as well-being, the environment, heritage, and public life.

K.C. Ho’s examination of the neighbourhood in the city is not a new concept, as he himself admits, but it is a current one because so many of the issues relating to it refuse to die, particularly localised, collective action, which is one of the book’s main themes. It is extensively illustrated with numerous photographs showing the neighbourhoods under discussion, helpful maps, and tables summarising key findings. The book lives up to its claim of making three contributions to urban studies in Asia.

First, it is one of only a few to adopt a multi-site approach. Second, it focusses on local communities at the neighbourhood scale to show a “third way” for sustainable and equitable alternatives to the state- and market-driven provision of urban services and amenities (which often result in unequal outcomes, especially when there is a decline in state funds). And third, most studies either ignore city government or view it as antagonistic to the neighbourhood – Ho’s approach is original and astute in that it understands the relevance of the neighbourhood for the rest of the city, because, as he says, it is “the smallest scale at which the division of politics occur” (p. 207). According to Ho, “the urban neighbourhood must be reconceptualized and recovered within studies of the city” (p. 210) because it is “the first source of collective action” (p. 210). It is also where rights and responsibilities are worked out, and where respect for diversity is established. It is, in short, nothing less than a “learning ground for active citizenship” (p. 210).

It is this “capacity of the neighbourhood to act” (p. 216) that makes the neighbourhood so important for the city and society. It is also one of the main focusses of the book as it examines its five case studies: Sungmisan in Seoul; Mahakan, Bangkok; Tangbu, Taipei; Langham Place, Hong Kong; and Tampines, Singapore. All five are well-researched, with a wealth of empirical data gathered over years of fieldwork (of particular value are insights from residents). Useful comparisons are also made, with interesting findings on issues such as heritage (in Bangkok and Taipei), community provision of amenities (in Hong Kong, Seoul, and Singapore), and placemaking versus place marketing (in Hong Kong and Taipei).

The first three chapters act as an extended introduction to the case studies. The first two introduce the concept of neighbourhood as well as sketch in some issues relating to the wider city, such as liveability, heritage, sustainability, and citizenship, all of which, Ho says, “are produced and therefore should be addressed at the neighbourhood level” (p. 16). The book also makes effective use of urban and architectural theory, with some of the most interesting points being made in reference to theorists (often French) such as Lefebvre and Bachelard (which we will return to in a moment). Ho also helpfully differentiates between the “global” city (of Sassen and Scott and Stroper) and the “ordinary” city (of Robinson), relating the latter to Michael Douglass’ “invitation to think about the different dimensions of the city instead of an all-inclusive city typology” (p. 220). This is helpful because, as Ho says, the global city has rendered “a large range of city types” structurally irrelevant, “especially those in the Global South” (p. 220).

Approaches to multi-sited research

It is the author's highlighting of the relevance of the neighbourhood, and its place in the wider context of the city, that is the book's greatest strength. How he goes about doing this is explained in Chapter 3 ("The Logic of Comparisons in Multi-Sited Research Designs"), where his rationale and methods are outlined and he briefly introduces three different multi-sited approaches: (1) grounded; (2) analytic ethnography; and (3) comparative case approach, where "the relationships between the cases are as important as the relationships within the site or case" (p. 59, underlined in original).

In the grounded approach, the researcher keeps "the task of concept formation undeveloped before entering the field" (p. 60), and initial interviews are "relatively unfocused and only when patterns and relationships emerge does the researcher move on to more focused questions" (p. 61). The analytic ethnography approach (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson) puts "theory back into the driver's seat" (p. 63), with the focus on the "extension or refinement of theory" using "existing literature as a guide to further research" (p. 63). Ho sees this as indicating "a shift from inductive to deductive approaches" (p. 63), where "cases are 'made' by invoking theory" (p. 63, quoting John Walton).

Finally, the comparative case approach (inspired by Chahal and Daloz) is seen as a third way which "attempts to strike a balance" between the other two (p. 64). Here we see existing theory guide the researcher through concepts, linkages, and questions, yet still allow them to take a more inductive approach by letting local context influence the lines of reasoning and their limits.

Neighbourhood as the smallest social unit of the city

This book makes a significant contribution to the field of Asian urban studies not only in its methodology but in the author's insightful way of relating what goes on at the neighbourhood level to the wider city. This is of vital importance because "the collaborative efforts city governments establish with local communities [...] ultimately speaks to the liveability and progressivity of cities" (p. 11).

The book ends with a chapter called "Neighbourhood Action, Metropolitan Politics and City Building," which invites the reader to focus on the neighbourhood as the smallest social unit of the city from three vantage points: (1) the metropolitanization of politics require a reconsideration of the neighbourhood as a local space for collective action contributing to the well-being of the city (which we saw earlier as the "learning ground for active citizenship" [p. 224]); (2) relations in the city should reflect a negotiated order between various agencies leading to the fair distribution of resources; and (3) the focus on the city as the convergence between local interests, national priorities, and global dynamics shows its growing importance in the life of a country.

Ho's intelligent and nuanced understanding of the neighbourhood is further enhanced by his developing of concepts from Lefebvre and Bachelard, particularly the latter's topo-analysis, which studies "the sites of our intimate lives" (p. 204). Ho cleverly extends Bachelard's "concern with the intimacy of the home" to the neighbourhood (p. 204) because he sees the neighbourhood as lying "just beyond Bachelard's intimate space of the [actual] home" (p. 205). If the neighbourhood's essential elements are "relaxation for the soul, recreation for the self, a convivial connection with others physically close by and an attachment and identity" (p. 205), then these elements are shaped by regularity and sustained by a common set of practices to become "the basis of a community of residents willing to act together to defend their shared space" (p. 205). And like Bachelard's dreamers, these neighbours can then rest, secure in the intimacy and familiarity of their homes and neighbourhoods because they are "where we are most at peace" (p. 224) – or at least we should be.