

Mapping Urban Complexity in an Asian Context

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This second issue of 'Footprint' sets out to examine some of the techniques being used to map urban complexity in Asia. The nine papers included here explore the urban environments of China and Japan, as well as those of South Asia, namely India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. They also examine the cultural phenomena that underpin these cities' identity and urban expression.

But first we may need to ask: why Asia? Deyan Sudjic has pointed out that when the Petronas Towers in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur were finished in February 1996 something interesting had happened to the global balance of cultural power. For the first time since the Gothic cathedral, the world's tallest structure was no longer in the West (Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*, 2005). The tallest towers in the world are now being built in cities that few Westerners can even find on a map: Pusan in South Korea, Tianjin and Guangzhou in China. And seven years after the Petronas Towers had been completed they were surpassed – by another Asian building – Taipei 101 in Taiwan is approximately one hundred feet taller.

Asia is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world, and the new paradigm for the shifting geopolitical configurations typical of our times. China's efforts to emulate the Japanese 'economic miracle' has seen it rejoin the global network with a vengeance; the twenty-first century has even begun to be called the 'Chinese Century'. China has the world's fourth largest economy, the result of a growth rate

of about ten percent per annum over the last thirty years. As a country it is now second only to the United States and Germany in terms of international trade, having surpassed Japan. In fact, China's economy has accounted for approximately twelve percent of all growth in world trade in recent years. With over one fifth of the world's population, China has been called the world's workshop, but not because it is home to the cheapest workforce, rather because it offers reliable and capable workers. Urbanisation has been a major source of the country's staggering growth, and is likely to remain so as an estimated two hundred million people migrate from the countryside to the cities in the first decade of the twenty-first century. And although we suspect it will be some time yet before America's global hegemony will be challenged in any meaningful way, perhaps a more interesting relationship to watch will be that of Asia's two burgeoning superpowers: China and India, as they follow very different paths under their contrasting political systems: China's strict governmental control versus India's democratic *laissez faire*.

Secondly, why mapping? The map as an instrument of power/knowledge, according to Michel Foucault, spans three successive chronological thresholds in the West: Greek measurement; medieval inquiry; and eighteenth-century examination (Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 1980). While there is a clear historical succession in these three techniques, they did not remain isolated from one another. Foucault was of course interested in exploring the distinctions between examination

and inquiry as reproducing the distinction between social sciences and the science of nature, but what he was in fact really interested in was seeing how inquiry came to serve as a matrix for the great eighteenth-century art of surveying, where people (i.e. Europeans) travelled the world in order to gather information about it. These explorers didn't collect raw data: they 'inquired'. And they put whatever it was they saw, and collected, neatly in place. In short, they 'collated' this information into schemas designed to help them better understand the world around them. This exercise enabled them not only to shape their own view of the world, but in fact re-shaped the world according to the view they had formed of it. This was colonialism's greatest strength, and the source of its devastating power. It wasn't just the Gatling gun and the King James Bible that enabled the British to extend their massive empire across a quarter of the globe; it was the power they had to impose their way of seeing the world on other, invariably subject, peoples. As John Darwin says: 'without the military and political leverage that the British enjoyed in India after 1760, British knowledge of Indians would have been much smaller in volume as well as *different in kind*' (John Darwin, *Empire*, 2007 – editors' italics). According to Darwin, Europe's intense curiosity about the rest of the world may well have been because it lay at the edge of it, not at its centre. This small outcrop of the vast Eurasian landmass was no happily placed 'Middle Kingdom'; far from it, it found itself on the periphery, squeezed between hazardous seas, arid tundra and wealthier and more sophisticated (and powerful) neighbours to the south-east.

With the explosive increase in Europeans' sea travel from the fifteenth century onwards, reports brought back by brave mariners quickly found a large audience, and an influential one. The practical and pecuniary interests of merchants and colonisers increased this demand for knowledge of other places. Geographical data was a valuable commodity; in fact, according to David Harvey, King Philip II

of Spain thought his maps sufficiently valuable (and subversive) to keep them under lock and key (David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 2000). This was the era of the celebrated 'voyages of discovery' (though in fact the Europeans weren't 'discovering' anything – the sea lanes they were so painstakingly mapping had already been in use for centuries by Arabs traders and, until the early fifteenth century, the Chinese).

Knowledge about the wider world was something that had to be absorbed, and represented. The potential for commercial controversy (e.g. whether a country's government should export gold or silver or not) meant that information on Asian and/or African trade, not to mention the more established colonial part of the world where most of this gold and silver was coming from, New Spain, had a practical importance. But perhaps even more importantly, this new-found knowledge, and the need to be able to represent it, meant that maps and map-making assumed an increasingly important role, leading, as Foucault has noted, to the eighteenth century's systematic collection of geographical knowledge. Captain Cook's voyages of discovery in the 1770s were highpoints of this 'scientific' travel, where the careful observation of human and natural phenomena became hugely prestigious. The cost of cartographic ignorance, military as well as commercial, was dangerously high. Harvey states that the incentive to procure good maps overwhelmed any other reservations, and he quotes Landes as saying: 'In the international contest for access to the riches of the Indies, maps were money, and secret agents of aspiring powers paid gold for good copies of the carefully guarded Portuguese *padrons*'.

Maps became a means to a very practical end because they imparted such accurate information – a merchant's livelihood, even his very life, could depend on them. Gone were the days when they sported quaint pictures of sea creatures or mermaids, gone were the warnings that 'here be

monsters'. Yet even these quaint devices had served a function. Now dismissed as mere decoration, these figures, according to Tim Ingold, were actually the fragments of story-telling: they literally illustrated the hazards of the journey, much like Ulysses' wanderings in Homer's *Iliad* containing information for the safe navigation of the Mediterranean Sea. They were intended as a reminder of the incidents that had taken place on a given journey; in effect they were a trace, sometimes fanciful, but these stories helped seal the memory in the mind of those experiencing the travelling (Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 2005).

It was at the point when maps ceased to feature these pretty artefacts, the by-product of a map's story-telling function, that they came into their own as the purveyors of cold hard fact: data, in other words, and its projection of a spatial reality. What we saw was a differentiation between mapping and map-making. The map-maker may have banished the pretty pictorial fragments from his map because the information they contained was too vague, too fanciful – inaccurate even, a danger to the traveller – and yet is Mercator's famous projection not also just that, a projection? See how it, too, distorts reality, making the Congo seem as big (or as small) as Belgium. Is the Mercator Projection any more accurate than the 'here be monsters' warning? And would not the head-hunting cannibals of the Carib tribe, or the Dyaks of Borneo with their head-shrinking horrors, have seemed monstrous to any God-fearing European? And been marked as such on a map?

The map, in short, became divorced from the bodily experience of movement. Yet what we are seeing again now is an increased interest in these different sorts of mappings. James Corner's 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention' directs our attention to the failure of bureaucratic regimes in cities to embrace the full complexity and fluidity of urbanism. While there is

no shortage of theories of mapping, the problem is how to 'translate' these theories into meaningful practices and new operational techniques. Corner stresses mapping as a creative process; it unfolds potential, it re-makes territory, it uncovers realities previously unseen or even imagined. And, in spite of what could be considered an over-exposure of the international media and a growing interest of intellectual and academic circles in the reality of Asian urbanities in recent times, there remain many under-exposed – and even covert – phenomena within these regions that, invariably, point towards the utterly complex and imbricate nature of their urban environs.

All of the papers in this issue deal with mapping urban complexity in Asia, and given that the Beijing Summer Olympics are almost upon us it is only appropriate that most of them actually deal with China. The first is Xing Ruan's 'Ephemeral China/ Handmade China' which quotes Lin Yutang's praise of idleness in the author's ironic overview of China's frenzied economic boom, which he claims is ephemeral. Following are two papers about Beijing: the first is Robin Visser's 'Diagnosing Beijing', an attempt to map what she calls the ungovernable city; the second, 'Spatial Complexity' by Sheng Qiang, is an analysis of the evolution of Beijing's movement network and the effects it has had, and is still having, on urban function. Staying in China, we move to that other great metropolis, Shanghai, with three papers. The first, by Non Arkaraprasertkul is called 'Politicisation and the Rhetoric of Shanghai Urbanism' and deals with the new Pudong area as well as examining the *lilong* of the older city; 'Performing Mimetic Mapping', by Anastasia Karandinou & Leonidas Koutsoumpos, maps the course of Shanghai's 'other' river, the Suzhou, in a thought-provoking and beautifully rendered project; while Neeraj Bhatia's 'The Rise of the Private' examines Shanghai's transforming housing typologies, particularly the prevalence of the gated community. The final paper on China is 'Caves of Steel', by Jonathan

Solomon, which takes a quote from science-fiction master Isaac Azimov as its point of departure in its investigation of the development of Hong Kong, particularly Victoria Harbour. We then move further east, to Tokyo, with Raymond Lucas's 'Getting Lost in Tokyo', a short paper which examines the act of inscription through architectural drawing and movement notation as a part of fieldwork in the study of urban phenomenology. And finally, we move south to India with Kelly Shannon's 'The Agency of Mapping in South Asia', which examines cities and landscapes in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

All of these papers draw our attention to the staggering pace of change to be seen in most of Asia's urban environments. Many of them attempt to map these processes, some of them in the sort of new and creative ways outlined by Corner. Not all of these efforts translate into coherent wholes, but we as editors can only applaud these authors' efforts as part of the creative process that is unfolding potential and uncovering the realities that have previously remained unseen. We hope you enjoy them.