

A Bird's-Eye View: Cities in East and Southeast Asia

By Eric J. Heikkila

The rich diversity of Asia is reflected in the many faces of urban life in this region. From Tokyo and Shanghai to Jakarta and Phnom Penh, city life takes many forms in a period of tremendous growth and accelerating urbanization. Urban affairs expert Eric J. Heikkila explores how Asian cities are finding their way.

ONE MAKES SWEEPING GENERALIZATIONS only at one's peril, and this can be no less forcefully true when describing Asian cities. Within the Asia Pacific region the variation one finds is breathtaking, and descriptions that might give us insights into Jakarta or Tokyo may have little traction when applied to Shanghai or Singapore. Nonetheless, it is possible to set out in broad brush details the nature of the aggregate collective. This task is somewhat analogous to the challenge of describing the attendees of a family reunion, where each individual is unique, yet the group as a whole may nonetheless be distinctive from other families. One can characterize the range or extent of its members while also conveying a sense of their relationships to one another. It is in this spirit that I undertake to provide here a bird's eye view of cities in East and Southeast Asia.

Table 1 conveys an overview of how urbanization has been unfolding in this region. These figures, compiled in a recent Asian Development Bank report on *Managing Asian Cities*, show a similar trend in both East Asia and Southeast Asia. Using 2005 as a base year, the data look backwards for 25 years to 1980 and project forward 25 years to 2030, thus placing the current situation in an historical context of half a century. These data indicate that just under half of all people currently residing in East and Southeast Asia live in urbanized areas. Thus, this part of the world lags somewhat behind the global average, which has already surpassed the halfway point between urban and rural. Nonetheless, the present-day urban status in East and Southeast

Asia represents a dramatic increase from 1980, when only one quarter of the population was urbanized. This trend is projected to continue, with over three-fifths of the region's population urbanized by the year 2030.

Although this general trend is quite clear and pervasive, not all countries are marching in unison along the path to urbanization. It is generally the case that in more economically advanced countries such as Japan or South Korea the urbanization process is already largely completed.

endeavors and redeployed in more productive ways. The increasing prevalence and reach of labor markets tend to accelerate this process, especially in transitional countries such as China and Vietnam.

Table 2 provides another bird's-eye perspective on urbanization in the region, with an enumeration of the 50 largest cities/urban areas as compiled in the recent ADB report. As with any such list one might quibble with details that might affect the direct comparability of numbers. For ex-

TABLE 1
URBAN POPULATION IN EAST ASIA AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

	URBAN POPULATION (MILLIONS)			URBAN POPULATION (% OF POPULATION)		
	1980	2005	2030	1980	2005	2030
PRC	196.22	538.98	877.62	19.6	40.5	60.5
Japan	69.58	84	88.48	59.6	65.7	73.1
South Korea	21.68	38.92	43.12	56.9	80.8	86.2
North Korea	9.79	14.12	18.19	56.9	61.7	72.8
Hong Kong	4.61	7.18	8.78	91.5	100	100
East Asia	302.98	682.2	1039.09	25.7	44.5	62.6
Indonesia	33.18	107.88	187.85	22.1	47.9	67.7
Philippines	18.02	51.82	86.62	37.5	62.6	76.1
Vietnam	10.3	22.34	46.86	19.4	26.7	43.2
Thailand	12.42	20.82	35.42	26.8	32.5	47
Malaysia	5.79	16.48	27.32	42	65.1	77.6
Myanmar	8.1	15.5	30.09	24	30.6	49.1
Singapore	2.41	4.37	4.93	100	100	100
Cambodia	0.82	2.93	8.7	12.4	19.7	36.9
South East Asia	91.61	243.77	432.01	25.6	43.7	60.7
TOTAL POPULATION						
East Asia	1178.91	1533.03	1659.89			
South East Asia	357.85	557.83	711.71			
TOTAL	1536.76	2090.86	2371.6			

Source: adapted from Appendix 1, *Managing Asian Cities*, Asian Development Bank, 2008.
<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Studies/Managing-Asian-Cities/appendices.pdf>

Indeed, from a global perspective there is evidence of a compelling correspondence between urbanization and economic growth, although the correlation is not always a straightforward one. It is generally the case that the scope for productive engagement of labor resources is more limited in rural areas, whereas cities offer a wide range of economic opportunities. Thus, from an economic perspective rural-urban migration is a means by which labor may be withdrawn from relatively low-productivity

ample, it is evident that the ADB includes a large swath of the metropolitan Tokyo region in its 35.5 million population figure, while the 9.5 million figure for Seoul is evidently based on the city of Seoul itself, excluding other parts of the Seoul metropolitan region, where the population of the latter exceeds twenty million. Such quibbles aside, the data presented in table 2 do give us a sense of the urban landscape in this part of the world. Several features stand out. Although four of the 10 largest cities (including Hong Kong) are

in China, the remainder are fairly dispersed: in Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. This stands to reason because few countries are large enough to support more than one megacity. Another striking fact that almost jumps out of table 2 is how dominant Chinese cities are on the list. Indeed, 31 of the top 50 cities listed are in the People's Republic of China, while only 19 are elsewhere. In one sense this is not surprising given China's great size, but these data demonstrate vividly the extent to which the urban phenomenon in the region is a Chinese phenomenon.

One thing that these tables are not able to show is the relationship between cities. Size is not everything. Some smaller cities clearly “punch above their weight,” while some large cities pack relatively little punch. One important factor is economic strength. Jakarta may be three times the size of Singapore, but the latter exerts a greater presence in the economic sphere. Cultural and political dimensions are also important in situating cities within a larger purview, so that a city such as Suzhou in China or Phnom Penh in Cambodia — neither of which is included in this list of the top fifty cities — may be more significant in some sense than many cities that outrank them on the basis of population size alone.

Implicit in this discussion is a notion of a hierarchy of cities that are interconnected on the basis of economic, political and cultural transactions. These hierarchies are found both within and between countries. It is interesting that in rather formal, hierarchical societies there is also a fairly recognizable hierarchy of cities. The degree of primacy of Seoul, for example, is very high and this is not reflected in population figures alone. There is a strong sense within Korea that if one does not maintain an active presence in Seoul one is somehow disconnected from the mainstream of economic, political and cultural events. As a result some people who work outside of Seoul may nonetheless maintain their families there in order to preserve the perceived edge that Seoul residency provides. It was partly in recognition of and in response to this phenomenon that recent efforts were made to relocate a significant portion of the national

TABLE 2**URBANIZATION IN THE REGION**

Source: adapted from Appendix 1, Managing Asian Cities, Asian Development Bank, 2008. <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Studies/Managing-Asian-Cities/appendices.pdf>

Rank	City/Urban area	Country	2006	2020
1	Tokyo	Japan	35.53	37.28
2	Jakarta	Indonesia	13.67	20.77
3	Shanghai	PR China	12.63	12.63
4	Osaka, Kobe	Japan	11.32	11.53
5	Beijing	PR China	10.85	11.15
6	Metro Manila	Philippines	10.80	13.40
7	Seoul	South Korea	9.52	8.88
8	Tianjin	PR China	9.39	10.14
9	Hong Kong	PR China	7.28	8.33
10	Bangkok	Thailand	6.65	7.76
11	Wuhan	PR China	6.18	9.18
12	Ho Chi Minh City	Vietnam	5.10	6.79
13	Chongqing	PR China	5.06	6.20
14	Shenyang	PR China	4.94	5.30
15	Singapore	Singapore	4.47	5.24
16	Hanoi	Vietnam	4.22	5.78
17	Yangon	Myanmar	4.18	5.87
18	Bandung	Indonesia	4.15	6.19
19	Guangzhou	PR China	3.88	3.97
20	Chengdu	PR China	3.52	4.14
21	Pusan	South Korea	3.49	3.23
22	Pyongyang	North Korea	3.33	3.72
23	Xian	PR China	3.28	3.75
24	Changchun	PR China	3.14	3.85
25	Harbin	PR China	2.89	2.93
26	Fukuoka	Japan	2.84	3.04
27	Nanjing	PR China	2.82	3.08
28	Zibo	PR China	2.80	3.15
29	Surabaya	Indonesia	2.79	3.77
30	Dalian	PR China	2.73	3.02
31	Inch'on	South Korea	2.68	3.04
32	Jinan	PR China	2.67	2.98
33	Taiyuan	PR China	2.54	2.89
34	Taegu	South Korea	2.52	2.54
35	Guiyang	PR China	2.51	3.07
36	Taipei	Taipei, China	2.46	2.42
37	Qingdao	PR China	2.45	2.85
38	Zhengzhou	PR China	2.29	2.89
39	Zaozhuang	PR China	2.22	2.69
40	Medan	Indonesia	2.15	2.97
41	Handan	PR China	2.15	2.56
42	Liupanshui	PR China	2.14	2.47
43	Changsha	PR China	2.11	3.10
44	Liuan	PR China	2.06	2.73
45	Linyi	PR China	2.06	2.41
46	Wanzian	PR China	2.00	2.71
47	Hangzhou	PR China	1.99	2.59
48	Tianmen	PR China	1.98	2.56
49	Heze	PR China	1.90	2.79
50	Jinxi	PR China	1.88	2.30

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government ministries to a new capital location outside of Seoul. That initiative died on the vine. While Korea provides one particularly notable example, versions of this same phenomenon are evident everywhere.

Hierarchies of cities are evident internationally as well. Globalization refers to the process by which places around the world are increasingly intertwined through flows of finance, trade, electronic data, ideas and people. Cities are the nodes through which most of these flows are channeled. It is not surprising therefore that people should seek to reside in such places, and business firms should seek to locate there, as they are drawn to the potential opportunities that hover like a mirage over these urban centers. The mirage metaphor is appropriate to the extent that not everyone who seeks to a better station in life finds it in these cities. Cities represent risk as well as opportunity for those who might migrate there from rural areas, and so a lottery metaphor may also be appropriate. If one were to remain in the countryside, the prospects may be relatively poor but certain. If one gambles on a move to the city, there is both an upside and a downside, but the sheer numbers of people who continue to make the move suggest that on balance the structure of probabilities is perceived by many to favor city dwellers.

A small example helps to illustrate a set of related points. During the past year and a half I

have visited Phnom Penh four times as part of my work there. Now, not only is Phnom Penh not on the list of the top 50 cities in the region ranked by population, it falls short even of the top 100. Yet, during these visits to Cambodia I developed an extraordinarily rich set of new contacts that I likely would not have encountered elsewhere. During my short time there I quickly came into contact with a most interesting set of colleagues from New York City, Paris, Los Angeles and elsewhere. Although I had not met these individuals prior to my visit to Phnom Penh, it turns out that we had in common multiple sets of mutual acquaintances. So what is it about a relatively small city such as Phnom Penh that should contribute to this remarkable confluence? The answer is that it is the uniqueness and significance of the place that drew us all there. If I were in New York, Paris or Los Angeles it might be rather difficult to identify these particular individuals as colleagues who had interests similar to my own. However, in Phnom Penh it was fairly easy, because there was a relatively small community of expatriates interested in the same subject matter (in this case, a combination of urbanization and heritage conservation issues).

There is a general lesson to be derived from this particular episode. It is as important for a city to find its own horizontal niche as it is for it to move up a notch in any urban hierarchy, although either

or both are reasonable strategies for city leaders to pursue. To the extent that there are indeed national and international hierarchies of cities within wider networks of inter-urban trade and exchange, how might a city seek to enhance its status within this hierarchy? Higher ranked cities are generally more active as sites of trade or other exchange flows. There is also a sense that higher ranked cities are in a position to direct such flows, so that decisions made within higher ranked cities help determine the kinds of investments, for example, experienced by lower ranked cities. Many cities in Asia and elsewhere recognize this hierarchy and make efforts to establish themselves as attractive venues for a relatively elite class of professionals and other decision makers. Singapore is a notable example of a city-state that has adopted this approach, with a strong emphasis on providing the physical, institutional, linguistic, technological, environmental and knowledge infrastructure that could attract regional corporate headquarters to locate there.

Many other cities in the region seek to emulate this basic strategy, with varying degrees of success. One may think of this as a supply-enhancing strategy, whereby strategic investments in infrastructure (in the broad sense described above) create a kind of platform that in turn supports further investments by the private sector and others. When done correctly, and with a bit of luck, a virtuous cycle may ensue as these cumulative investments by the private sector provide the foundations for an enhanced tax base that can in turn readily support continued infrastructure investments. It remains an open question as to how broadly such benefits are distributed throughout the society, but generally speaking this approach does tend to support a broad-based and equitable distribution of wealth that provides a stable social basis for continuous development.

Not all places adopt a supply-enhancing strategy. Cities where corruption is common are more closely identified with a supply-restricting strategy. In such cases the political and economic elite collude to restrict access to economically profitable opportunities. Whether it is through

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licensing restrictions or other forms of regulatory approval, a kind of monopoly control is exercised, and external investors can access economic opportunity only at a price. Such fees are not channeled into supply-enhancing public infrastructure investments but are instead siphoned off to feather the nests of the elite. These cities are easy to identify, as they are characterized by wealthy enclaves surrounded by relatively impoverished denizens. This supply-restricting strategy may yield substantial short term gains to those who are in a position to oversee the restrictions, but ultimately it is not sustainable, and it certainly does not enhance the status of such cities in the urban hierarchy.

A third option is one that is hinted at by the Phnom Penh example, and that is to pursue a more demand-oriented approach through adaptation of a niche strategy. As the name implies, this option emphasizes a city's distinctiveness relative to would-be competitors. To a certain extent, every city has a ready-made niche by virtue of its geographical location. This is consistent with a long established view of cities as market centers providing services and other means of support to the surrounding rural hinterland. Smaller cities, in turn, may lie within the hinterland of larger cities, as intrinsic economies of scale in the production of certain goods and services makes it more economical in the aggregate to have fewer production centers with larger market areas.

In the more traditional “central place” conception, the catchment area for any city is based on proximity, so that rural residents would obtain urban-based services from the nearest city. While this view certainly is valid to a large degree, it overlooks another phenomenon that is increasing in importance in an era of globalization, where geographical distance is in effect shaped through technology. Some places that appear to be quite close in geographic and cultural terms (Pyongyang and Seoul, for example) may in fact be quite distant in terms of the space we experience in our daily lives. In other cases, places that may appear to be quite removed from each other in geographic terms (for example, Hong Kong and Vancouver) may have patterns of economic and social interaction that suggests a much closer proximity. In this sense geography is becoming more malleable, as technology and other factors exert their influence.

This suggests another strategy by which cities might seek to enhance their position within the urban hierarchy — they may endeavor to “stretch” or “compress” perceived geographic space to their advantage. One example of this is provided by the increasingly common example of cities that encourage airlines to establish a hub of operations there. Like many other seasoned travelers, I find generally that it pays to stick with a single airline and its affiliated partner airlines so that my mileage accrual works to my advantage. In traveling from the United States to places in Asia, there are many destinations that my US-based carrier does not reach. In such circumstances it is often convenient for me to use a Korean carrier that allows me to earn miles on my “home” carrier. Using this strategy, I can access most destinations in Asia with just one stopover at Incheon Airport. As a result, geographic space has been reshaped to Seoul’s advantage. It becomes quite convenient for me to stop over in Seoul while on my way to or from elsewhere in Asia, and this in turn makes it relatively convenient for me to maintain ongoing relations with colleagues there. Of course, frequent travelers like me might just as readily use hubs in Narita (Tokyo), Hong Kong,

or elsewhere, and that is why so many cities in the region have been competing to update their airport facilities.

While these relationships between cities within the context of global flows are indeed quite important, one should not lose sight of a primary focus of what takes place within the cities themselves. Above all else, cities are social collectives, and so the effectiveness and fairness of institutions for governance and other forms of collective choice are crucial to their success. Even if a city were “unplugged” from the global economy, although there is no reason it should be, there would still be much to do in providing housing, food, education, health care, education, recreation, environmental quality and other essential inputs that make human existence meaningful and fulfilling. Some cities within the Asia Pacific region succeed on this basis more than others, but each is in a position to learn from the others. Reverting once more to our metaphor of a family reunion, the best way for any individual to be well regarded within the larger collective is to first take good care of matters at home.

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