

# WORLDING CITIES

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**A**sian **E**xperiments and the  
**A**rt of **B**eing **G**lobal

Edited by  
**Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong**

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**ASIAN EXPERIMENTS AND THE ART  
OF BEING GLOBAL**

Edited by

Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong

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assignments from the state express and embody “patriotic professionalism.” This social form combines individualized career planning and calculative choice with an ethic of state-strengthening and love for the nation, challenging more standard analyses of neoliberalism, urban change, and subjectivity. Her more recent work has examined governmental rationalities of environmental city-building in China and sustainability as a governmental problem. Other publications include “Autonomous choices and patriotic professionalism: on governmentality in late-socialist China,” *Economy and Society* 2006, 34(4); and “Enterprising cities and citizens: the re-figuring of urban spaces and the making of post-Mao professionals,” *Provincial China*, 2003, 8(1).

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*Geography, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, and Urban Studies.*

**Aihwa Ong** is Professor of Socio-Cultural Anthropology and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests focus on global technologies, modes of governing, techno-scientific assemblages, and citizenship in particular Asian contexts of emergence. She is the author of the now classic *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: factory women in Malaysia* (1987); *Flexible Citizenship: the cultural logics of transnationality* (1999); *Buddha is Hiding: refugees, citizenship, the new America* (2003); and *Neoliberalism as Exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty* (2006). She also co-edited *Global Assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems* (2005); and *Privatizing China: socialism from afar* (2008). Her latest collection is *Asian Biotech: ethics and communities of fate*. Ong's writings have been translated into German, Italian, Portuguese, French, and Chinese. Currently, Ong is the president-elect of the Society for East Asian Anthropology.

**Ananya Roy** is Professor of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley. She also serves as Co-Director of the Global Metropolitan Studies Center. Roy is the author of *City Requiem, Calcutta: gender and the politics of poverty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and co-editor of *Urban Informality: transnational perspectives from the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America* (Lexington Books, 2004). Her most recent book is titled *Poverty Capital: microfinance and the making of development* (Routledge, 2010). Roy's essays have focused on urban modernity, liberal, and post-liberal paradigms of planning, questions of praxis in the time of empire, and new geographies of urban theory.

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**Helen F. Siu** is Professor of Anthropology at Yale University. Since the 1970s, she has conducted historical and ethnographic fieldwork in South China, examining socialist transformations and the reach of the state, the revival of market towns, rituals, marriage practices, community festivals, and the reworking of the rural-urban divide in the post-reform era. Since 1997, she has worked on the “sinking and shrinking” generation of Hong Kongers who use urban space and global charisma to engage with China. Her publications and co-edited volumes include *Mao's Harvest: voices of China's new generation* (Oxford University Press, 1983); *Furrows: peasants, intellectuals, and the state* (Stanford University Press, 1990); *Down to Earth: the territorial bond in South China* (Stanford University Press, 1995); *Agents and Victims in South China: accomplices in rural revolution* (Yale University Press, 1989); *Empire at the Margins: culture, ethnicity and frontier in early modern China* (University of California Press, 2006); *SARS: reception and interpretation in three Chinese Cities* (Routledge, 2007); and *Hong Kong Mobile: making a global population* (Hong

Kong University Press, 2008). In 2001, she founded the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences. The Institute, hosted by the University of Hong Kong, promotes creative, interdisciplinary research that allows scholars in North America, Europe, China, and Hong Kong to connect. In the next five years, the Institute will focus on research training stressing inter-Asian connectivity in historical and contemporary terms.

# ***Series Editors' Preface***

The Wiley-Blackwell *Studies in Urban and Social Change* series is published in association with the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. It aims to advance theoretical debates and empirical analyses stimulated by changes in the fortunes of cities and regions across the world. Among topics taken up in past volumes and welcomed for future submissions are:

- Connections between economic restructuring and urban change
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- Urban and environmental movements
- International migration and capital flows
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- Patterns of urban-based consumption

The series is explicitly interdisciplinary; the editors judge books by their contribution to intellectual solutions rather than according to disciplinary origin. Proposals may be submitted to members of the series Editorial Committee, and further information about the series can be found at [www.suscbookseries.com](http://www.suscbookseries.com)

Jenny Robinson  
Neil Brenner  
Matthew Gandy  
Patrick Le Galès  
Chris Pickvance  
Ananya Roy



# ***Preface and Acknowledgments***

This book grew out of our particular interests in the field of global metropolitan studies. It has also emerged from our shared sense that dominant conceptual frameworks and methodologies in this field do not capture the diversity of urban dreams, projects, and practices that are constitutive of cities in emerging world regions. We therefore seek to articulate a new ethnographic turn in global metropolitan studies. For us, such an orientation hinges on the idea of “worlding.” We see the worlding city as a milieu of intervention, a source of ambitious visions, and of speculative experiments that have different possibilities of success and failure. We hold that such experiments cannot be conceptually reduced to instantiations of universal logics of capitalism or postcolonialism. They must be understood as worlding practices, those that pursue world recognition in the midst of inter-city rivalry and globalized contingency. We therefore focus on the urban as a milieu that is in constant formation, one shaped by the multitudinous ongoing activities that by wedding dream and technique, form the art of being global. Inherently unstable, inevitably subject to intense contestation, and always incomplete, worlding is the art of being global.

But also at stake in this book is how cities are worlded in geographies of knowledge. By insisting upon a shift away from the concepts of world cities and world systems to that of worlding practices, we seek to intervene in the ways in which global metropolitan studies “worlds” Asia. Impossibly heterogeneous, the idea of Asia functions in this book as much more than a geo-political location. While massive urban problems prevail in the region, “Asia” is increasingly invoked as the testing ground for successful models of economic growth, rational planning, and ecological

sustainability. Inter-Asian comparisons and contrasts have become common practices in many urban initiatives to attain “world-class” status. Thus, in this book, Asia is a geographic location, a space of urban innovations, as well as an emergent symbol for urban renovations that have global applicability. But also in this book we pay attention to the constant experimentation with social formations, to the politics of solidarity that seeks to reformulate the urban question and domesticate the dream of Asian futures.

The book is organized around the themes of modeling, inter-referencing practices, and new solidarities. In somewhat unusual fashion, we have chosen to divide our editorial essays into an introduction and conclusion. Aihwa Ong’s opening essay introduces the book and its key concept of “worlding” as situated practice and experimentation. She makes the case for viewing the city as a problem-space for which a range of solutions are created out of disparate local and circulating elements. Ananya Roy’s concluding essay returns to the theme of “worlding,” but examines how cities of the global South have been “worlded” in the discourses and imaginaries of metropolitan studies. Building on Ong’s critique of urban political economy and postcolonial analysis, Roy seeks to shift the terrain of the political away from the standard icons of global capital and subaltern agency to the “worlding city” as both a site of emergence and as a mass dream. Together, the two editorial essays highlight different theoretical approaches to the common question of the “worlding city.” We hope that such theoretical multiplicity makes visible the productive nature of the concept of “worlding” and the significance of locating the study of “worlding cities” in the context of inter-Asian urbanism.

We owe considerable thanks to the scholars who have contributed essays to this edited volume. It is their work that has led us to the conceptual frameworks that anchor

this book. Hailing from different fields and generations, they present new research on the social, political, material, and symbolic interconnections that are proliferating between different Asian metropolises. Their work has challenged us as editors to address methodological approaches to global metropolitan studies in an era of Asian emergence. It has led us to be attentive to diverse conceptual and research questions and to thereby provide an open-ended account of experiments and possibilities, rather than promote a single unifying framework.

This volume emerged from an interdisciplinary workshop we organized for the “Inter-Asian Connections” conference that was convened by the Social Science Research Council in February 2008. We had the opportunity to hold a two-day workshop, quite appropriately located at a site that features prominently in this book: Dubai. We thank the SSRC for both the initial inspiration for this endeavor and for its generous funding of our workshop. At the forum, Michael M. Fischer and Abdoumalig Simone made astute comments that added to our lively exchange on contemporary metropolitan experiences in the Asian region.

We are pleased to be a part of Wiley-Blackwell’s *Studies in Urban and Social Change* series. We are grateful to two editors-in-chief of the series, Neil Brenner and Jennifer Robinson, for their interest in our project. The various chapters of the book have benefited from extensive comments provided by Jennifer Robinson and Timothy Bunnell. At Wiley-Blackwell, Jacqueline Scott helped us navigate publication and Geoffrey Palmer copy-edited the manuscript with great skill and grace. At UC Berkeley, editing assistance was provided by Jerry Zee.

The book is dedicated to our doctoral students in common who are invested in the interdisciplinary work of building a truly global metropolitan studies here at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, Aihwa wishes to express her

appreciation of scholars based in Asia who are first-hand witnesses to the tumultuous changes under way in cities of the emerging world. Ananya wishes to thank Nezar AlSayyad for immeasurable support and for his own work on cities that continues to be an inspiration for her.

Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy  
Berkeley

# ***Introduction***

## ***Worlding Cities, or the Art of Being Global***

***Aihwa Ong***

... the skyline rises in the East.

*Rem Koolhaas*

Cities rise and fall, but the vagaries of urban fate cannot be reduced to the workings of universal laws established by capitalism or colonial history. Caught in the vectors of particular histories, national aspirations, and flows of cultures, cities have always been the principal sites for launching world-conjuring projects. Today, urban dreams and schemes play with accelerating opportunities and accidents that circulate in ever-widening spirals across the planet. Emerging nations exercise their new power by assembling glass and steel towers to project particular visions of the world. Once again, as Rem Koolhaas (2004) notes, “the skyline rises in the East,” as cities vie with one another, and regional aspirations are superseded by new horizons of the global.

In the 1970s, New York City was celebrated for its architectural constellation, which fostered a “delirious” culture of congestion. Koolhaas (1997) called New York “The City of the Captive Global,” one that unites the modern with perpetual motion. But by the early twenty-first century, the financial meltdown in the fall of 2008 (called the Great Recession) dealt a reversal of fortune for New York, London, and Tokyo. As these mighty cities struggle to retain their

lead as financial powerhouses, Singapore and Dubai are emerging as centers of global finance. Meanwhile, China's role as the banker of the world has made Shanghai and Hong Kong the shares-selling capitals of the world. While capitals of big economies remain crucial players, Asian economies have skyrocketed, and the Asian world has witnessed the stunning emergence of cities of international consequence. The 2010 Shanghai Expo has been the most explicit demonstration yet of a can-do determination to experiment with cutting-edge innovations in urban architecture, industry, and design. Indeed, if nothing else, the 2008 economic recession vividly invalidates magisterial views of how cities, their functions, and publics will change according to some master law of European experience. Today, Asian cities are fertile sites, not for following an established pathway or master blueprint, but for a plethora of situated experiments that reinvent what urban norms can count as "global."

Aspiring cities in the so-called global South challenge disciplinary controls that map cities according to a global division of global capitalist and postcolonial regions. Hegemonic theories of globalization and postcoloniality have long inspired a conceptual terra firma of generalizable global spaces, including cities and their destinies. As is the case with early modern nations, cities in the emerging world today have come to embody nationalist ambitions of wealth, power, and recognition. Major cities in the developing world have become centers of enormous political investment, economic growth, and cultural vitality, and thus have become sites for instantiating their countries' claims to global significance.

A recognition of the changing skylines of the world not only directs our gaze to emerging metropolitan centers, but also points to the fallacies of some key assumptions in metropolitan studies. In the social sciences, two major