



# THE NEW URBAN

## TOWARDS PROGRESSIVE SECONDARY CITIES

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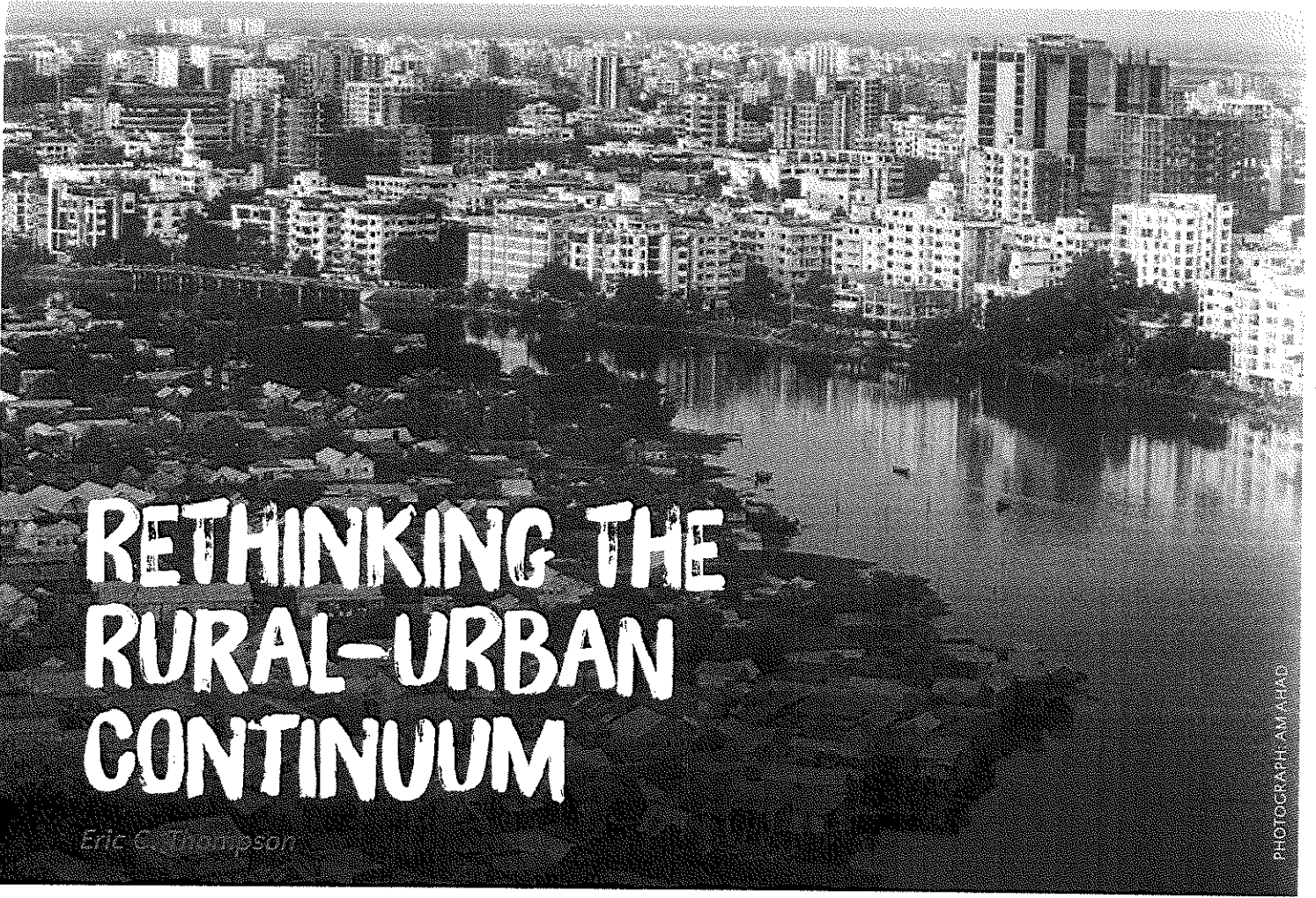
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# RETHINKING THE RURAL-URBAN CONTINUUM

*Eric C. Thompson*

PHOTOGRAPH: AM AHAD

**M**uch has changed since Robert Redfield popularized the idea of the rural-urban continuum in the early twentieth century. Redfield proposed that rather than a simple divide between traditional rural villages and modern urban cities, there existed intermediate communities, such as those of market towns. Today, however, we see less of a continuum and more of a thoroughgoing urbanization of rural places, particularly in Asia.

Given the great social, cultural, political and economic diversity of Asia, the processes of thoroughgoing urbanization or rural urbanization look very different from place to place. They are also not a universal phenomenon. There are still places

where some communities exist in relative rural isolation from dominant urban societies, though such communities are becoming exceedingly rare.

What has become common is that while the majority of Asia's population still lives in areas designated as rural, their orientations are increasingly urban. Moreover, the places in which they live are to some extent only nominally rural communities, at least of the sort we imagine to be relatively tight-knit social units. Instead, rural communities have become socially urbanized. The social and economic life of these communities conform more to the sorts of materialistic, individualized, commercial and loosely networked forms of social life that we associate with urban

megacities.

This short discussion sketches some of the implications of this transformation, particularly what it means for secondary cities and for social and economic programmes and policies.

## Urban orientations

Rural residents throughout much of Asia live in an environment heavily infused with urban forms of knowledge, media and social relations. This is particularly true for children in rural areas, who are growing up with a thoroughgoing urban orientation. The schools they go to, the television shows they watch, the goods they consume and many of the adult rural-urban circular

migrants whom they interact with – often including their parents – all orient them towards living urban-based or at least urban-centred lives. Their urban-oriented upbringing means that many do not see a future for themselves in rural places, at least not in their young adult and working years. A city is seen as the place where their future lies. But in this respect, secondary cities suffer from a 'desirability gap'. In countries like Thailand and Malaysia, for example, the large megacities of Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur dwarf such secondary cities as Khon Kaen or Ipoh in the cultural imaginary of rural Thais and Malays. In other places, the imbalance may not be as pronounced. In Indonesia or the Philippines, the archipelagic geography and underdeveloped infrastructure may mean that closer-at-hand secondary cities loom larger in the ways that young people imagine their rural-to-urban mobility. Similarly, countries like China or India have a greater diversity of major and minor urban centres and, with it, a greater diversity of urban orientations.

Nevertheless, the tendency for primate cities like Bangkok, Jakarta or Manila to draw the attention of young people throughout a particular country is a challenge for those who seek to develop the role of secondary cities within a national urban system. Simply allocating development funds or supporting industrial zones in secondary cities is probably not enough. It is also important that young people learn to imagine their futures outside of primate cities – whether in secondary cities, towns or more rural locales.

### Mobility and circular migration

In tandem with thoroughgoing urban orientations, modern infrastructure has made populations across Asia extremely mobile. Road networks

## RURAL COMMUNITIES HAVE BECOME SOCIALLY URBANIZED...RURAL RESIDENTS THROUGHOUT MUCH OF ASIA LIVE IN AN ENVIRONMENT HEAVILY INFUSED WITH URBAN FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE, MEDIA AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

and private vehicles, in particular, have afforded rural and small-town residents the ability to bypass secondary cities and move directly to megacities as well as between those cities and their homes. Rail networks or even bus networks, by contrast, draw people to train and bus depots in secondary cities. Yet, it is private cars and motorcycles that are becoming ever more common in contemporary Asia.

High mobility may still have payoffs for secondary cities. Circular migration between rural villages and cities used to be seen and largely practised as migration between two points – a place of origin (often a village) and a destination where one worked (usually a primate city). Nowadays, circular migration is better thought of in terms of broad and diverse circulation – of people, goods, ideas and the like. Despite the ability to bypass secondary cities by road, ultra-high mobility in Asia means that secondary cities may benefit from a 'secondary mobility' that goes beyond migrants' typical shuttling between natal villages and places of work.

Highly mobile migrants and others now move to, across and through many different places, not only for work, but also for tourism, schooling, shopping, religious pilgrimage and visiting dispersed family and friends. This reality reflects the theme of desire and imagination – the ways in which places other than megacities can become desirable

destinations. For secondary cities in particular, it is more important than ever for planners, managers and entrepreneurs to consider ways to make their towns and cities desirable destinations for tourists, students, temporary migrants and others.

Closely related to the rapid development of transportation infrastructure has been the equally, if not more, rapid development of telecommunication infrastructure. In places without telephones just a decade or two ago, mobile phones are now ubiquitous. For several decades, television has broadcast images from the world beyond into many of the remotest settlements in Asia. Residents of Iban longhouses in the rainforests of Sarawak on Borneo, for instance, have been watching Hulk Hogan and similar fare since the 1980s. An entire generation, and in some places two or three generations, have now grown up with broadcast television throughout almost all of Asia.

More recently, landline telephones, mobile phones and internet service have made an even more profound impact in networking together the largest cities and smallest villages.

The high mobility of people and of ideas through telecommunication has deeply altered social life. It has led to a seemingly contradictory situation in which people are more connected and less connected than ever before. Mobility has led to the dissolution or at least dispersal and dissipation of



the strong ties that once held local communities together. At the same time, people are more broadly connected to geographically dispersed networks of family and friends and able to form new sorts of communities of interest rather than communities of proximity. This change has implications for a range of policies and programmes.

#### Communities in absence

Governments and NGOs frequently plan interventions in rural places and urban low-income neighbourhoods through a community development approach. A problem with such an approach is that, increasingly, there is little or no pre-existing community through which to organize programmes. The dissolution of the rural-urban continuum due to high mobility and general rural urbanization means that villages and neighbourhoods – whether in primate

or secondary cities – tend not to be tightly integrated social units. Rather, those living in villages, towns and secondary cities are often likely to be atomized and individualized as much as those living in megacities. In a more positive respect, they are also as likely to be connected to others through long-distance, diffuse networks. Organizations seeking to implement development or welfare programmes need to think of approaches other than community development or to think of communities differently.

Another phenomenon that complicates our thinking about social and other relationships across villages, towns, secondary cities and megacities is the ability of people to ‘jump scale’. The idea of jumping scale, drawn from research in geography, is that residents and citizens operating in certain local spheres are able, through transportation and telecommunication, to operate across

and within other spheres in ways previously unlikely or impossible. One of the more obvious examples of this is rural-based transnational migrants. It was once thought that only jet-set elites operated internationally or, at a minimum, that working class migrants would move through nationally regulated migration paths mediated by relationships between global cities. Today, there are increasingly direct connections between provincial Thailand, the Philippines or Indonesia, for example, with Singapore, Hong Kong or Dubai that were forged by working class migrants moving for construction, domestic work and other sorts of employment.

Transnational rural-to-rural migration for labour also is becoming common, such as with Lao agricultural workers in Thailand and Burmese workers in Malaysia. Also of significance is the very large number of marriage migrants, particularly women from less affluent countries, moving to marry men from more affluent countries.

This sort of high mobility and jumping scale is apparent throughout Asia, as much in secondary cities as in primate ones. Again, whereas previously only global megacities were thought of as diverse, international melting pots, many secondary cities are now also having to contend with the opportunities and challenges these dynamics bring. This is especially true of cities located near borders or along major transit routes; such as Udon Thani in Thailand, which is receiving an influx of Lao and Chinese settlers, or Kota Kinabalu in Sabah, Malaysia, where large numbers of Filipinos and Indonesians reside. Local governments in such secondary cities must increasingly implement plans and policies for managing diverse, even multinational and transnational populations, in ways that typically were thought of as issues for larger

## WHEREAS PREVIOUSLY ONLY GLOBAL MEGACITIES WERE THOUGHT OF AS DIVERSE, INTERNATIONAL MELTING POTS, MANY SECONDARY CITIES ARE NOW ALSO HAVING TO CONTEND WITH THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES THESE DYNAMICS BRING

'global' cities, such as Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur or Hong Kong.

All the changes outlined here – thoroughgoing urbanization, ultra-high mobility and the diffusion of communities and social networks – pose challenges for secondary city managers in planning and using local resources. These days, it may be more difficult to engage in planning on the basis of traditional community participation. On the other hand, through social media, it may be possible to enlist broader participation

from dispersed individuals who have either traditional or future stakes in the prosperity of particular places.

Secondary cities need to consider how to close the desirability gap with global megacities. On some bases, such as scale of certain industries, it may be impossible to compete. But in other ways, such as liveability or local novelties, secondary cities may have distinct advantages. The key will be not to think only in terms of the local population's needs (though they should certainly not be forgotten!),

but also the needs and desires of mobile populations.

The thoroughgoing urbanization and transnationalization of Asia is producing a complex patchwork of mobility, settlement and interaction that requires new thinking about how people live their lives and how States and non-government actors can provide services and opportunities to the people they govern and assist. Traditional ways of approaching communities may prove to be ineffective.

Secondary cities and even minor towns and villages require some of the same complex thinking that once seemed applicable only to global megacities. As well, there are likely to be innovative opportunities to work through the networks that residents and citizens are forming and to encourage new, future-oriented thinking about secondary cities, small towns and rural life.



PHOTOGRAPH: YAP KIE SHENG