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Book Review

Beyond Metropolis: The Planning and Governance of Asia's Mega-Urban Regions, by Aprodicio A. Laquian, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2005. 488 pages. \$58.00 (hardcover).

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Most planners acknowledge the importance of Asia's urbanization and its impact on the world, although not all planners may agree with the statement that "The new millennium has been tagged as both the urban and the Asia-Pacific century." (xvii) Along with his other publications on Asia's urban development, Dr. Laquian's new book, *Beyond Metropolis* provides an analytical framework for the study of Asian urbanization, complete with rich case studies. The book might well be viewed as a "conclusion" of his research over the last twelve years.

The book's intellectual foundation builds on findings from in depth research on six of Asia's mega-cities/ mega-urban regions: Beijing, Jakarta, Hong Kong- Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok, and Shanghai from 1991 to 1998. Eight additional Asian mega-regions (Delhi, Dhaka, Karachi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Osaka, Seoul and Tokyo) are examined using secondary data. Laquian creates a matrix in the study: *planning* and *governance* are used as the two key processes for a healthy and sustainable development of mega- urban regions in Asia. The fourteen mega-urban regions are analyzed in the framework with focus on housing, urban services and infrastructure provision through the planning and governance processes.

The planning process

Laquian reviews three types of city planning in Asian countries: classical city planning in the history of Asian cities, physical planning for beautiful cities, and socialist planning for production. All three types of traditional planning view urbanization as a "dependent variable" determined by population and their behavior. The master land use plan is employed to define a city's physical structure in traditional planning. The author introduces the concept of "comprehensive strategic planning" as opposed to the traditional approaches. The new approach views urbanization as an "independent variable" in promoting economic growth and facilitating social and political changes. A comprehensive approach to planning needs "to integrate economic, social, cultural, administrative, fiscal, and political elements". (p. 67) Therefore, governance and implementation should be a part of the comprehensive planning from the outset.

The analysis of the planning process pays special attention to housing and urban services such as transportation, water supply and wastewater treatment. The book examines different urban problems in different geographic locations, i.e. inner-cities vs. periphery areas in Asia's mega-urban regions.

The governance process

Laquian maintains that "governance is much broader than urban management in the same way that comprehensive strategic planning is broader than physical planning" (p. 107) His view of governance is comprehensive by nature. He argues that governance should cover three key issues: who wields authority and power, how benefits and costs are allocated, and the role of public participation in decision making. The analysis of the governance process adopts a political economy perspective analyzing three types of governance structures: autonomous local government systems, mixed regional governance approaches, and unified governance systems.

A particularly interesting facet of the book is Laquian's discussion of problems facing mega-urban region governance and possible solutions. Fragmentation and jurisdictional conflicts are identified as the most serious problems facing mega-urban regions. (p. 145) While readers may all agree with the author's argument that a regional cooperation in the form of unified governance systems might be the best path to sustainable development (in all terms, broader than the sustainable environmental aspect), what readers expect is not only *why* a unified governance structure is important but *how* to achieve the governance structure? Dr. Laquian provides some valuable suggestions based on experiences in Asia's mega regions. However, all kinds of conflicts of interest exist among cities, towns and villages within any given urban region in addition to competition among regions. For instance, one mega-urban region included in the book is the Yangtze River Delta Region in China. Although, as the author notes, there is a unified governance structure in the Shanghai mega-urban region (p. 162), many reports reveal that competition rather than cooperation often dominated relations between Shanghai and its neighboring cities, especially in the globalization era in which competing for FDI is a popular development strategy of China's local governments. (The Yangtze River Delta Report Committee, 2004) One obstacle to establishing a regional unified governance structure lies in "the governance structure" itself as conveyed in the Regime Theory. In governing a city, a local government has to build a coalition with the marketplace to manage limited resources. Both partners in the coalition have local interests--- government representing local voters and the marketplace representing local businesses. In order to build a regional unified governance structure, however, various degrees of compromise by local member cities are required- which might be very difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Based on precedents of established unified governance in Asian regions, Laquian suggests that first, efforts are needed to make member cities "appreciate the need for areawide coordinated action" (p. 412). Second, some kinds of interventions of higher levels of government (central or provincial/ state) are needed to bring about coordinated action among local units. He further suggests that the establishment of unified regional governance might proceed in four stages, starting from a comprehensive regional

planning process to an overarching metropolitan or regional organization in charge of coordination.

Although the book has the sub-title of “the planning and governance of Asia’s mega-urban regions”, and several Asian’s mega-urban regions have been examined, the author’s work seems like a normative model for planning and governance recommended to all regions and cities. His prescription for problems facing rapidly urbanizing Asian countries is a combination of solutions from both “urban planning” and “urban study” approaches: comprehensive and strategic planning to cover the whole region (rather than plans limited within fragmentations by political and administrative territories), and a holistic policy package taking all economic, social, political, administrative, and environmental factors into consideration (rather than separate individual policies). Another critical action is the establishment of a united governance structure with authority and power over local government units within the jurisdiction to promote cooperative efforts initiated by citizens in a participatory way. These recommendations are valuable and provide a potentially fruitful direction for planners as well as decision makers although there are likely to be obstacles to smooth implementation.

In addition to the problem with governance structure, what makes a “universal governance model” complicated is the cultural backgrounds of various mega-regions, as the author mentioned in the book. Cultural tradition defines underlying forces contributing to the regional governance structure. In the mega-urban regions analyzed in the book, there are four distinct groups: the more developed East Asian countries (Japan and Korea); the centrally planned system (China and Vietnam); Southeast Asia (Indonesia and the Philippines); and, South Asia (India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan). Each mega region has different religion as well as diverse cultural and political traditions so that no single governance structure could be introduced. A “best governance structure” that would be applicable to Asia and other parts of the world is even less feasible. For example, intervention by higher levels of government to “push” regional coordination practiced in some Asian regions has little political feasibility in countries like the United States.

Based on the author’s rich knowledge and experience in Asian cities, the book is an important literature and ideal textbook to students in planning as well as in international studies.

References

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