



# Neoliberal urbanism, contested cities and housing in Asia

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Neoliberal Urbanism, Contested Cities and Housing in Asia, edited by Yi-Ling Chen and Hyun Bang Shin, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 216 pp.

Fast-growing cities in Asia have been situated within the framework of developmental states while being involved in the global diffusion of neoliberal imperatives. Neoliberalism has arguably entered the final phase but is still resilient and dominant, partly due to the lack of any robust or convincing alternatives to its hegemony. This edited volume examines the political economic processes of how the rise of neoliberalism intertwines with developmental statism in reshaping the social contours of Asian cities, placing special emphasis on the importance of housing questions in investigating new phases of urban changes in the region. The editors' introductory chapter presents the theoretical framework of looking at transformations in the social, economic and political conditions of housing and urban policies. This is followed by a series of chapters focused on specific cities including Taipei, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Hanoi, Nanjing, and Seoul. The book concludes with discussions on the socio-political prospects of future developments in Asian housing systems in relation to urban contestations.

With the globalizing economy, a policy shift to neoliberal reforms is underway in many Asian countries, leading to the commodification, marketization and financialization of housing. However, it would be misleading to consider that neoliberal policy has replaced developmental state policy entirely. The book examines how neoliberal prescriptions have interacted with the developmental approach in reshaping housing policies. State policy assumes a path-dependent nature, while neoliberalism has been increasingly influential in reforming the existing policy. Developmentalism and neoliberalism have thus combined to lead to the production of state-guided housing systems that are oriented towards a market economy. In terms of prioritizing economic performance over other social values such as equity and equality, neoliberal policy is not much different from developmental state policy. Unlike *laissez-faire* liberalists in the past, current neoliberal reformers comprehend that markets are not complete in and of themselves but rather framed by state-supervised institutions. The governments of Asian countries remain interventionists in managing housing systems while increasingly adopting market solutions as a key instrument in implementing housing policy. This book provides advanced analyses of the effects that neoliberalization has had on developmental states in reorganizing housing systems.

Throughout the volume, the authors consistently demonstrate the significance of looking at increased social inequality when exploring the results of neoliberalization. Developmental states in Asia commonly gave top priority to high-speed economic development, driving the expansion of the middle class. As for housing, many governments promoted middle-class home ownership in line with 'property hegemony' or 'culture of property' in attempt to sustain state legitimacy. With neoliberalization, however, commodification and financialization has increased fluctuations in housing markets, leading to dividing households into those that accumulate property assets, those that experience housing asset dissipation, and those that remain in rented housing sectors. A decline in the affordability of housing is particularly noticeable in Asia. This has effectively discouraged many young people from entering home ownership, provoking intergenerational schisms in regard to housing and asset conditions. This

book points out that neoliberalization has widened housing inequalities, while exacerbated social disparities are in turn beginning to erode the foundations of neoliberal housing systems oriented towards full-fledged commodification.

A notable feature of the book is its claim that social movements play a key role in urban contestations in Asia. It has been tacitly assumed that, unlike Western civil societies, where people's movements have been influential in reorienting state policy under liberal-democratic institutions, Asian people have not held any deterministic power in formulating government policy within the framework of authoritarian states. Against this, however, Hyun Bang Shin, one of the editors, confidently stresses the necessity of considering the rich history of social movements in examining the socio-political processes of urban Asia. For example, in Hong Kong, even under the colonial government's suppression of political opposition movements, the proliferation of urban protests was witnessed. Since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to mainland China, prospects of a decline in civil liberties encouraged many political protests. The 2014 Occupy Movement and Umbrella Movement demonstrated the outburst of people's frustrations generated by aspirations to civil liberty as well as by increasing inequalities, including those in the housing sphere. In 2019, the largest mass protest ever erupted against increasing political suppression by the strong authoritarian state. Another editor, Yi-Ling Chen, highlights the role played by the social housing movement in Taipei in reorienting housing policy. Taiwan's government has moved towards a more neoliberal model in terms of pro-home ownership policy, where the rented housing sector has remained residual. In response to this, the rise of a people's movement aspiring to the expansion of the currently marginalized social housing sector has challenged the neoliberal housing policy. The editors as well as the authors of the specific city chapters effectively shed light on social movements in providing distinctive discussions on political transformations in urban Asia.

Housing and urban studies have almost exclusively been built on Western experiences. Social, economic, political, institutional, and policy trajectories in Asian cities, however, are completely different from those in European and North American cities. Western cities went through industrialization, globalization, and neoliberalization in a sequence, whereas Asian cities have undergone such phenomena almost simultaneously during extremely short periods. Thus, existing housing and urban theories do not necessarily fit into Asian cities. This book makes a significant contribution to clarifying our understanding of the political economic processes of transitions in state-market-civil society relations in Asian cities, providing a theoretical development in housing and urban studies as well as sophisticated empirical case studies of various cities. I have no hesitation in recommending this fascinating volume for scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and students in the field of housing studies, urban studies, sociology, political economy, comparative analysis, and Asian studies.

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