Marie GIBERT-FLUTRE, and Heide IMAI, eds.
Asian Alleyways: An Urban Vernacular in Times of Globalization

*Reviewed by Daniel BULTMANN**

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Alleyways in Asian metropolises can be spaces of refuge, vibrant communities, collective memory, mosaic-like identity formation, through traffic and shortcuts, and dense, conflict-laden interactions between the established residents and newcomers. They can be spaces of transit, territories of daily life, or both. They can be commodities for gentrification, with fading traditions and architectures, or pathways for reconciling development with community support. They can be marginal places with marginalized people or famous parts of a city, attracting tourists and the affluent. They can be traditional neighbourhoods in decline or sites of constant transformation and top-down or bottom-up reinvention. The only characteristics that seem to unite them—and hence all the case studies in this edited volume—are their narrowness and unclear positions, as many of these often less-known areas have unclear ownership and do not even appear on official maps. The volume edited by Marie Gibert-Flutre and Heide Imai approaches the ever-changing, multi-faceted Asian alleyways as spaces of everyday practice through dense descriptions of the quotidian and interviews with urban planners, businesspeople, and the residents of these “liminal places” (Jones 2007), thus bringing to light these often neglected—in real life as well as in academia—in-between spaces.

The volume presents a fascinating kaleidoscope of rich ethnographic detail gathered from metropolises across Asia, such as Ho Chi Minh City, Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Bangkok, Shanghai, Taipei, and Hong Kong. It furthers discussions on how spaces create collectives, how collectives create space, and how social change, local politics, and recent modes of globalization impact lived realities in Asian cities. The volume also shows how private life, public life, and the

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conflicts within and between them are negotiated in these dense spaces, as well as how alleyways not only create identities but also put these identities under duress. These insightful, multi-faceted descriptions do not only pertain to the realm of academia. Many contributors are additionally concerned with the consequences of and their own policy recommendations for urban planning, and with bottom-up neighbourhood initiatives or projects emanating from research that tests different spatial arrangements and interventions with the aim of impacting social behaviour.

Gibert-Flutre opens the volume with a chapter that characterizes Ho Chi Minh City's alleyways as liminal spaces "between 'network' and 'territory'" (p. 33). Since alleyways are related to a "network", they serve as connectors within the city. An increasing density of motorized circulation turns alleyways into crowded passages for city traffic. However, alleyways are also places of "territory", meaning spaces in which various facets of social life take place. Gibert-Flutre stresses that when alleyways are viewed as liminal interfaces, they (unsurprisingly) serve the dual functions of "territory" and "network" simultaneously. Using a wide range of data and established methods, such as urban morphology analysis, participative observation, and qualitative interviews within two alleyway neighbourhoods, Gibert-Flutre also shows how Ho Chi Minh City's alleyways result from both planned and spontaneous development, how they are transformed through governmental attempts to "civilize" and "modernize" them alongside their residents, how they are commodified as "cultural neighbourhoods", how their residents challenge transformations that occur through urban planning, and how population growth and traffic increasingly threaten their territorial function.

In her chapter on post-Olympic Beijing, Judith Audin offers a particularly vibrant, insightful ethnographic description of *hutong* society and the micro-politics of control, identity formation, and subalternity in a marginalized, dense space where residents constantly negotiate social and spatial distance. Audin focuses on the microlevel power networks coalescing around the territorial identities of the rich, poor, "established", and "outsiders", including "newcomers" (Elias and Scotson 1965), as well as the processes of distinction among residents who own different types of housing. She demonstrates how conflicts over the demarcation of private and public life characterize daily life and must be negotiated among various resident groups. The chapter also describes how authenticity is commodified as a brand, and thus can be leveraged to restructure the lanes with ventures such as guesthouses, coffee shops, and souvenir shops. During the commodification of the lanes, a strong division develops among residents, business owners, and outside visitors, which is accompanied by the micropolitics of grassroots party organizations seeking to mediate conflicts, organize community and sociocultural

events, and set up local patrols of volunteers to maintain “order”. Like the opening chapter by Gilbert-Flutre, this one describes the attempts of the government to “sanitize”, “reshape”, and “civilize” the alleys along with the marginalized sections of their populations. The chapter analyses the formation of social stratification within a “street corner society” (Whyte 1943), how local identities are constructed distinctly from those of other social groups within a tightly-knit neighbourhood, and how resistance develops against governmental control.

Turning to the cases of Tsukuda and Tsukishima in Tokyo and Insadong and Ikseondong in Seoul, Heide Imai presents everyday narratives in which places serve as common territories for socially fragmented cities where “multiple and hybrid identities coexist” (p. 108). Unsurprisingly, she emphasizes that “it depends on the perspective of the individual as to how an everyday place like the alleyway is perceived and valued” (ibid.). Overall, the volume collects a wide range of interesting ethnographic materials that often provide valuable insights into urban placemaking. Yet some conclusions remain analytically vague or even commonplace, such as that old structures vanish, that spaces are marked by memories in which the past and present intersect, that spaces are associated with different individual meanings, and that different social groups make different use of places.

Adding fruitful tension to this volume, some authors take a surprisingly positive stance on gentrification and change. Wimonrart Issarathumnoon, for instance, discusses preservation efforts in the Phra Athit-Phra Sumen area of Bangkok that intend to promote cultural and creative sites. The author emphasizes that this area—now filled with coffee shops, restaurants, bookshops, art galleries, and the like—was transformed from “‘urban ordinaries’ into creative places” (p. 115), mainly due to state-led preservation efforts and bottom-up grassroots initiatives. While the area attracted many new residents and visitors, some older residents managed to upscale their smaller shops and cafés into larger businesses. The relatively original positionality of the author is interesting. For her, gentrification is revitalization, a means to harmonize the old with new, while only “some government policies aimed at promoting mass tourism and massive urban facilities have demoted charming local sites into characterless, formal, and unnecessarily monumental projects” (p. 134). She views commodification pragmatically and only criticizes state-led interventions if they create lifeless, meaningless monuments. While she clearly does not reflect upon this, her relatively unique position highlights the lack of consideration for positionalities in papers that decry the loss of tradition and, coming from different angles, may romanticize the past. Stronger reflection on positionalities in the field (Berger 2015)—for instance, how locals perceive the researcher and how he or she perceives the locality—would have deepened the analysis of the chapter’s dense, sometimes overly descriptive ethnographic material.

Shanghai *lilong* residences are the focus of the chapter by Jiayu Ding and Xiaohua Zhong. Building on Henri Lefebvre (1991), they maintain that the *lilong* have changed from spaces of everyday life into conceived spaces that are gentrified and “dominated by political power and professional elites like scientists, urbanists, and architects” (p. 140). The most interesting aspect of the analysed transformation is how Ding and Zhong emphasize the specific intersection of capitalist interests and the legitimacy of central planning in Shanghai. While gentrification in Shanghai may have a similar pattern to that of European or North American cities (e.g., the lived spaces of marginalized populations are turned into art centres and eventually become capital-accumulating tourist attractions), “the mechanisms are totally different. Besides the state-driven or market-driven mode, the story of Shanghai shows greater eagerness for informal revenue from the bottom and regularization from the top” (p. 154). The result is a similarly conceived and commodified space, yet state intervention and the drivers of transformation within the informal revenue market both hold greater legitimacy among the populace.

Jeffrey Hou explicitly connects his analysis with his childhood memories of life in a semi-private, semi-public alleyway in Taipei, where the exteriors that multiple street vendors frequent also serve as the extensions of cramped homes. Hou views alleyways as potential sites for “commoning”, where residents with various social backgrounds interact and resolve conflicts. As an example, he presents a conflict that occurred in the Shida Night Market, one of Taipei’s most famous market areas. A group of “community workers” ameliorated tensions by staging several spatial and social interventions. They established community hubs, such as the White Hub, an active makerspace resulting from an event involving the collection of tools scattered on the streets. Consequently, residents with otherwise socially distant backgrounds began to interact within a non-profit realm in which neighbours with technical skills taught visitors how to repair their household items. Community gardens, storage spaces, and knitting and weaving workshops also fostered community understanding, cohesion, and cooperation. The density of the interactions between different social groups, types of residents, small- and large-scale businesses, private households, and political layers may lead to conflict. However, rephrasing Hou through the words of Emile Durkheim (2013 [1893]), neighbourhood conflicts can be turned into lived “mechanic solidarities” through community interventions.

Hou’s chapter, which exemplifies how bottom-up social-engineering solidarity initiatives can ameliorate conflicts, is complemented by Melissa Cate Christ and Hendrik Thieben’s report on social and spatial experiments in laneway spaces in Hong Kong. The chapter is the result of a study on the behavioural effects of social and spatial arrangements. Its aim was to gather data for a case study and apply it

in a still-ongoing project entitled “Magic Lanes”, which is taking place in one of the oldest districts, Sai Ying Pun. In essence, the authors sought to “provide more inclusive public open spaces through placemaking and community co-creation” (p. 182). The construction of a railway line and governmental revitalization projects negatively impacted the area, resulting in sky-rocketing rents far exceeding the average household incomes of long-time residents. In view of the developments in that area, the authors’ project aimed to democratize placemaking, create more open and inclusive public realms, and empower citizens in the process. The studied lanes within the locality have a unique morphology: they consist of different kinds of stairs. Largely due to these “street stairs” that cover the width of a street, these lanes are not used by traffic. This lack of traffic offers special restrictions and suggests potential usages. The study team began with qualitative research on community engagement, turned their results into a set of community events, and then made changes to the spatial arrangements of the lanes and their wide steps.

By using social engineering techniques supported by scientific evidence from previous data collection, the researchers encouraged the residents to socialize through placing furniture throughout the lane and holding a community festival, thereby establishing inter-group trust and fostering their collaborative capacities: “Through temporal interventions, the project team was able to test potential layouts for the lane and to document their impact on circulation patterns and social behavior” (p. 201). This fascinating study and its set of interventions into the of spatiality community life reinforce how space interacts with group identities. Nevertheless, in that regard, it is also worth noting that the project in many respects falls under the category of a “conceived space”, as discussed in Ding and Zhong’s chapter. That is, it functions as a space that scientists and architects create to yield specific behavioural changes. While the researchers sought to empower the residents, they also used the space as a power technique. In light of the notions and critical perspectives on urban development in other papers in the volume, a deeper reflection on that paradox would have enhanced the collection. The scientists and their project are part of a micropolitics of power in which certain interpretations of a “good” society—a sense of community, increased interaction in public realms, and certain varieties of stronger inclusion and cohesion—are “created.” Whether this project actually changes patterns and inequities in social power is questionable. What it certainly does is cushion potential drivers of conflict within the structure. These “improvements” to community life may have unintended side effects that foster gentrification and marginalization for those affected by recent spikes in rent.

Finally, the conclusion does not systematically compare the different localities, theoretical angles, and empirical approaches contained in the volume. Rather, it

primarily meditates on the future of “integrated and diverse alleyways” (p. 211). The diversity of alleyways and their imaginations is at once an analytical and comparative problem throughout the volume, and diversity is also its biggest strength. Without systematic reflection on positionality and the similarities and differences among cases, many promising perspectives are only expressed as silent conversations among chapters. The concluding discussion by the editors clarifies that they are far more critical of the gentrification, marginalization, and commodification processes occurring within the studied localities than some of their contributors. A more systematic comparison of the chapters would have been a significant asset for the volume. As it stands, the chapters do not speak as much among each other as they could have. While differing in many empirical and theoretical respects, they still communicate with each other. All contributions are, for instance, connected by the themes of gentrification and capitalist commodification, social engineering and community structures, imaginations of the past and present, sources of solidarity and conflict within the micropolitics of a place, social structures of various localities, state-led and bottom-up developments, and different positionality and imaginations within the field. However, the one thread that ties all the chapters and recurring themes together and thus remains integral to the volume itself is the spatiality of power, domination, and resistance.

Ultimately, each contribution delivers valuable descriptions of the everyday in different localities and political contexts. Alleyways are often—but not always—invisible or unmarked “liminal spaces” for marginalized and, as a consequence of urban development, threatened populations. In Marie Gibert-Flutre and Heide Imai’s volume such alleyways take centre stage in the research, and this is an important achievement in itself. The volume also fosters interdisciplinary discussion on the relationship between constructed environments and human behaviours. The focus on everyday alleyway practices yields ethnographic materials that are so rich that the related systematic and deeper comparative discussions may appear lacking by comparison. Perhaps out of necessity, much of the inter-chapter dialogue is left to the reader’s imagination. Nonetheless, the volume draws attention to alleyways, which were previously not described in such ethnographic detail, as social spaces affected by transformations within urban “territories of projects” (Goldblum 2015, 374).

The volume is highly recommended for a wide range of students and specialists across disciplines, particularly those in urban planning, architecture, sociology, anthropology, political sciences, and area studies. Due to its addressing social engineering, human–environmental interaction, solidarity, and conflict, it will be equally interesting to practitioners, members of civil society organizations, and planners from both the private and public sectors.

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