

Urban Mediations: International Conference on the Narratives, Ecologies, and Poetics of the City (Hong Kong, 5-6 December 2024)

City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, 5 December 2024

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, 6 December 2024

This international, interdisciplinary conference aims to uncover emergent frameworks and methods for the interpretation and analysis of literary, filmic, and cultural texts relating to the profound transformation of cities around the world across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Our starting point for discussion is cities in Asia and their dialogues with different cities in the world. While “urban” typically denotes a geographical location and its inhabitants, we use it to indicate a process and practice of co-existence. The urban, in this sense, is informed by socio-cultural, economic, ecological, political, and technological processes that may appear or aspire to be global but that are, in fact, diversely lived and experienced.

The framework “urban mediations” offers a way of thinking about “the urban” not as a bounded, stable object, but as an intermediary agency that is both specific to a particular milieu and connected to people and processes elsewhere. “Mediation” extends recent work on urban infrastructure – the physical systems of connectivity that keep cities moving – to include the social, affective, aesthetic, and material relations that bind the urban to itself and to myriad elsewhere. For Lauren Berlant (2022: 22), infrastructure “is another way of talking about mediation—but always as a material process of binding, never merely as a material technology, aesthetic genre, form, or norm that achieves something.” Like the urban, mediation “is not a stable thing but a way of seeing the unstable relations among dynamically related things.”

Asia is a rich, highly diverse region that can be used as a focal point for exploring the uneven, often unpredictable mediations that constitute urban life. Many of the cities in the region emerged, or were shaped by, what Lasse Heerten (2021:351) describes as the “first globalisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries...the heyday of colonial Empire and steam technologies.” The enhanced interconnectivity, especially since the nineteenth century, has contributed to the circulation of things, objects, ideas, and, for Su Lin Lewis (2016:140), the formation of the “cosmopolitan publics” and “print-worlds,” which often intersect with those that exist in cities and regions in different parts of the world in both physical and symbolic terms. The contradictions, tension, and the co-existence of opportunities and challenges in cities have become sources of inspiration for writers and artists across the world and historical periods to represent, reveal, and respond to different topical issues and conflicts.

Scholarship on Asian cities tends to be framed within a discourse of economic development. On the one hand, studies have highlighted how cities in the region have been and will become key drivers of economic growth in our urban future, with Tokyo, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Seoul and Singapore as long-standing economic hubs and emerging

cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Jakarta, Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi as sites of more recent investment and development. On the other hand, many of these same cities are challenged by issues of overdevelopment, such as congestion, pollution, overcapacity, hyperinflation, extreme weather, aging populations, and shifting demographics.

Other scholars, such as Abdoumaliq Simone (2004, 2010, 2022), Asef Bayat (2000,2013), Ravi Sundaram (2009), and Ara Wilson (2016), have written about how informality in urban environments affords agency to urban residents who are dispossessed of resources and livelihoods because of poverty or displacement. Divested of access to suitable infrastructures because of government corruption or ineptness, residents, across different historical and social contexts, have explored ways to improvise, poach, or hack obsolete or damaged technologies by collaborating with each other. These creative practices of inhabiting the city have been echoed in the work of writers, filmmakers, architects, and artists who have experimented with new forms of collaboration, aesthetics, and community within and across cities for the past two centuries.

As such, issues relating to urban environments, in Asia and elsewhere, are not simply issues of policy planning and resource management but require new ideas from the arts and humanities to comprehend the epistemological, cultural, and ecological impact of rapid urban changes. We hope that by exchanging thoughts and asking questions together we can develop new critical and creative frameworks that engage with different historical moments, address the challenges facing our urban futures, and shed light on the possibilities and practices that exist within the present.

Interdisciplinary in focus, our conference invites participants from both the humanities and social sciences working with texts and practices across historical periods and cultural contexts, from a diversity of disciplines and subfields including literature, film and media studies, architecture, geography, urban studies, gender studies, and anthropology. Participants interested in exploring intersections with gender, race, indigeneity; migration and the circulation of things, cultural texts, ideas, people, information; climate, ecology, and the nonhuman; and Asian urban practices and poetics are especially welcome.

We are looking for papers that address the following questions:

- How might literary works, film, architecture, and other poetic practices mediate, negotiate, or interrogate urban relations and the built environment?
- How can creative and critical practices reveal, mediate, or challenge various forms of inequalities and respond to questions surrounding gender, race, religion, class, labour, and humans' relationship with animals and nature?
- How can microhistories of cities, municipalities, districts, and neighborhoods offer a more nuanced view of specific milieux or challenge grand narratives of development and globalisation?
- In what ways do cities narrate themselves? What stories can be read in the topography, design, and composition of their built environments?

- How do imagination and memory shape and mediate the urban experience, or re-create the materiality of the cityscape?
- How have colonialism's cultural and historical legacies shaped the urban form and the environmental conditions of cities?
- How might “archipelagic thinking” reconfigure how we imagine urban regions characterised by city clusters or interconnected metropolitan centres?
- How do imaginaries of failed or fragile infrastructures reveal fissures in a world system built on the uninterrupted flow of capital, bodies, and goods?
- How might an expanded understanding of infrastructure – not simply as a physical system of connectivity and flow but as the affective, aesthetic, and material relations that bind together social life – enable new conceptualisations of the urban?
- How might feminist and queer literatures, films, and artistic works challenge the masculinist and heteronormative assumptions inherent in dominant frameworks of migration, economic development, and the urban?
- How might we rethink our participation in the technological assemblages that comprise urban life and that mediate our access to the city, to other inhabitants, and to places elsewhere?

Kindly send a proposal with a 400-500-word abstract and a one-page CV to urbanmediations24@gmail.com by the extended deadline of 27 May 2024. As the goal is to produce an edited volume, accepted papers are expected to represent new, unpublished work.

The final session on day 2 will involve 2 parallel workshops to be led by discussants on emergent topics about urban mediations open to early career scholars.

An optional walking tour of sites in Hong Kong will be organized on 7 December. Please check the conference website (<https://urbannarrativesnetwork.com/urban-mediations-2024/>) for updates on the workshops and the walking tour.

Confirmed speakers

Lieven Ameel (Tampere University)
 Nishat Awan (University College London)
 Dominic Davies (City, University of London)
 Peter Dickinson (Simon Fraser University)
 Lee Kah-Wee (National University of Singapore)
 Jasmine Nadua Trice (University of California, Los Angeles)
 Jini Kim Watson (New York University)

This conference is co-organized by City University of Hong Kong, Department of English; The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), Research Institute for the Humanities, Centre for Cultural Studies & MA in Intercultural Studies Programme, Departments of English and Cultural and Religious Studies; University of Hong Kong, Center for the Study of Globalization and Cultures in the Department of Comparative Literature.

Conference convenors

Elmo Gonzaga (CUHK)

Klaudia Lee (CityUHK)

Joanna Mansbridge (CUHK)

Alvin K. Wong (HKU)