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## INTRODUCTION

### A Theoretical Framework for Exploring Aspirations of Youth in Urban Asia

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Navigating daily life in a highly urbanised environment has become a challenge that a majority of the global population now faces. As of 2018, over half of the world's population live in cities, a figure that is expected to rise to 68% by 2050. While Asia still experiences a relatively low level of urbanisation, it is home to 54% of the world's urban population as well as to many of today's megacities, such as Tokyo, New Delhi and Shanghai (UN 2018). Many of those sprawling metropolises that seem to pop up on the map out of nowhere impress because of the speed at which they grow, as well as the modern architectural designs and technological advances that govern life in these cities. The transformed physical environment of urbanising societies has not only altered mundane everyday procedures, but has also left a deep imprint on how people define national identity, the distribution of wealth and economic power, religion, family, nature and so forth. Thus, the quickly changing landscapes of modern cities are sites of reimagination and the creation of new concepts that influence the political, social and spiritual life not only of their urban inhabitants but also, as new trends of thought are carried to the urban peripheries, of rural dwellers.

Looking back at some of the major political movements that have arisen in Asian urban environments in the last decade – such as the 2014 Taiwanese Sunflower Movement, the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement and later the 2019 Hong Kong Protests, the 2014 hunger strikes in Seoul or the 2018 Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement – it becomes obvious that urban youth play a pivotal role in influencing both city and national politics. They not only challenge notions

of national identity and the authority of the state, but are also willing to take considerable risks in spreading their message and exerting pressure on political leaders in order to achieve their goals. The aspirations that these youths hold for a better, fairer society are closely connected to grievances about their personal futures that have arisen from bleak prospects on the labour market, political oppression and social expectations. This is not to say that the aspirations of young people are always or even primarily political in nature. Aspirations can relate to different desires for things like education, career trajectory, close relationships or finding a fulfilling way of life. Indeed, in the city young people are often at the forefront of emerging sets of lifestyle ideas. Hungry for change, they explore new ways to live in the city; inspired by trends brought to them by the digital media as well as their studies and travels, they try to find new compromises between the lives they ought to live and the ones they want to live.

This volume explores some of these intricacies by analysing the aspirations of youth and young adults who are navigating life and imagining futures in various cities across Asia. By bringing together contributions from scholars studying different geographical and thematic contexts and inviting them to read and reflect on each other's work in the process, we hope to create a broader theoretical framework for the study of emerging economic, sociocultural and political aspirations of youth and young adults in urban Asian environments. By exploring such aspirations from a comparative perspective, we hope to uncover different understandings of what constitutes the 'good life' or 'a life worth living' across Asia's urban centres. We will look at youth aspirations through an ethnographic lens to interpret our contributors' 'thick' descriptions of how their adolescent and young adult respondents perceive the topic at hand. Ethnographic descriptions provide an opportunity to obtain an insight into how young urbanites conceptualise their aspirations, as well as the societal background against which these emerge. However, this approach raises some important empirical questions: in Asian urban contexts, what precisely defines young adults' aspirations? Are they intricately bound to the hopes and desires that shape the future visions of their Western urban peers and thus more a phenomenon of a particular technological generation than a specific geographical or ideological environment? Or, if not, to what extent do their aspirations reflect the yearning for a future that emerges distinctively in the specific urban Asian lifeworlds in which our young interlocutors have come of age? Finally, what general lessons can we draw from the study of the aspirations of young urbanites in Asia that will also help us understand youth in other geographical regions and sociocultural environments?

Before delving into the rich accounts given by the contributors to this volume, it is important to note that definitions of the main concepts that frame the ethnographies presented in this volume – 'urban', 'youth' or 'young adults' and 'aspirations' – are not necessarily self-evident and require some discussion. For

this purpose, we will begin by presenting our interpretation of these concepts and will then briefly elaborate on the specifics of studying aspirations in urban Asian contexts.

## Urban Aspirations

Defining the ‘urban’ implies a comparison with its polar opposite, the rural. In fact, the rural–urban divide is one of the traditional pieties in social science and has been of particular interest in the sociology and anthropology of East Asia in recent decades (see Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Pun 2016). Differences between villages and cities are not only related to scale, complexity and the associated demographic effects, but are also reflected in political, economic and legal areas such as social welfare, housing, land ownership and citizen rights (van der Veer 2015). However, various studies globally have empirically demonstrated that the traditional divide between urban and rural does not hold fast. Increasing mobility, online communication and networking technologies cause a blurring of the boundaries between rural and urban areas by connecting them through a steady flow of people and information (Inda and Rosaldo 2008; Jensen 2006; Nonini 2014). Asian cities have become exceptionally large and continue expanding, displaying the porosity of borders and the flexibility of urban social structures. In this context, the term ‘city’, which can seem to suggest a static or fixed state, becomes somewhat problematic. Expressions such as ‘urban societies’, ‘city regions’ or even ‘city states’ appear to express the material and social outlines of these modern phenomena more aptly.

Even though a strict divide between the rural and the urban is made difficult by the intense interrelations between villages and cities, we assert that the latter are distinct in their particular multilayered interplay of structures, functions, power networks, hegemonies, politics and ethics. While such aspects certainly also exist in rural areas, the scale and sheer volume of such competing systems in an urban environment make them unique stages of study. The city environment prompts increasingly complex processes of contestation, identification and symbolisation to take place. In addition: ‘Under urban circumstances people experience, more than anywhere else, the rapidity of cultural change, the hiatus of social inequalities, the consequences of the human impact on nature and the tangible power of political authorities’ (Burchardt and Becci 2013: 17–18). This acceleration of social and cultural change forms the backdrop against which we analyse the hopes and desires of youth in the following chapters. Looking at different ways of imagining the future and the ways in which young people pursue their aspirations will expose these complex processes to scrutiny.

Scholarly attention to the concept of ‘aspirations’ began most notably with Arjun Appadurai’s theorising of the future. Humans are, Appadurai states,

‘future-makers’ (2013: 285). With the future playing a pivotal role in the construction of culture as well as collective and individual identity, he calls into question anthropology’s tendency to frame culture as a form of ‘pastness’. This retrospective view, he writes, narrows down the research scope of anthropology to phenomena that entail an orientation to the past, such as ‘habit, custom, heritage, tradition’ (2013: 180). Moreover, being limited to mostly archival sources to tackle these past-oriented issues presents the anthropologist with further problems. Appadurai notes that archival documents often originate from official sources and thus might present a biased account of the past; as such, they reflect the agenda of the ruling elite and are instrumental in reinforcing and legitimising the power of the state. Instead, he suggests that anthropologists should explore ‘personal, familial and community archives’, which he describes as ‘critical sites for negotiating paths to dignity, recognition and politically feasible maps for the future’ (2013: 288). Considering these points, he suggests that anthropologists must aim at condensing their knowledge of how people anticipate the future into a more general theory of humans as future-oriented beings and the future as a ‘cultural fact’ (2013: 285). He stresses that anthropological analyses must zoom in on the perspectives and experiences of individuals, which form maps to navigate the future and also shape those futures at the same time (2013: 288).

Appadurai is not alone in his call for an ‘ethnography of the future’. Clammer (2012) also criticises anthropologists’ habit of restricting themselves to researching issues of the past and the present. However, whereas Appadurai laments anthropologists’ neglect of the future as a subject of study, Clammer criticises them for not using their ethnographic findings as a basis for making informed predictions about socioeconomic trends, as is done in other disciplines. These alternative principles, he suggests, could counter dominant economic models that currently form the framework of how we anticipate the future:

Up until now this has been rarely attempted – the ethnographic present or the past providing a safe environment for anthropologists to ply their priestly rather than prophetic functions – as keepers of the knowledge rather than as adventurous speculators of what might be done with that knowledge given the range of social, economic and environmental crises that we have ourselves induced. (Clammer 2012: 129–30)

By focusing our attention on the aspirations of urban youths, a demographic that often sets trends for powerful social and political movements, we are exploring future-oriented cultural capacities related to wants, preferences, choices and calculations as they emerge to become transformative forces. However, we are not suggesting a total shift away from the focus on habit, custom, heritage and tradition. Instead, we perceive the past and present to be integral to the future (see

Bunnell and Goh 2018). The present redefines the past and shapes the aspirations people hold for themselves and their community.

Our study of youth aspirations will also shed light on the fundamental ideas and beliefs that motivate these aspirations and keep them alive; these beliefs include those about ‘life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or war’ (Appadurai 2004: 68). Aspirations, which promise the realisation of core values held by individuals and groups, can thus give meaning to the future. They involve the arduous work of *becoming*, of trying to live a life that one deems worthwhile and of becoming the person that one desires (Fischer 2014). They involve pleasures and pains, experiences and struggles. As Benoit de L’Estoile (2014) has argued, orientations to the future are epitomised by the verb *esperar*, which means equally to wait, to hope and to expect – already indicating the different attitudes one can have regarding aspirations and the capability of making aspirations a reality.

Aspirations determine a person’s wants and wishes for ‘commodities’, such as physical goods, marriage, work, leisure, respectability, friendship and health (Appadurai 2004). ‘Living up to the expectations of particular values’, Fischer notes, ‘is in many ways the stock and trade of human existence; and it is this forward-looking, aspirational quality that gives meaning to much of what we do, affluent and impoverished alike’ (2014: 6). We should nevertheless be careful not to reduce the scope of aspirations to material conditions alone. Aspirations maintain a key nonmaterial quality; although sometimes related to or influenced by the economic market, they often transcend it. Aspirations may determine the way in which a person leads every aspect of their life and can create the potential to provide the empowerment needed to construct a life that one values.

Moreover, aspirations are not merely individual. Economist Debraj Ray (2006) points out that aspirations are a part of larger ethical and metaphysical ideas, formed in interaction with social life, or ‘the cognitive neighborhood of [a] person’ (2006: 409). Aspirations orient on social norms and expectations, as well as on communally held hopes and desires. Referring to Appadurai, Ray holds that aspirations, which are deeply embedded in the local culture and social fabric, are shaped by power hierarchies and access to material resources. He illustrates how limited access to power diminishes people’s ability to achieve their aspirations, leaving them frustrated or in despair and susceptible to engagement in political action. He argues that in order for aspirations to form and be effectively realised, several conditions must be met. Crucially, an individual’s environment must allow for suitable role models whose background is relatable and whose achievements appear relevant. Socioeconomic closeness to role models reassures those who follow in their steps that a reward for their efforts is likely and that risks are not taken in vain: ‘Looking at the experiences of individuals similar to me is like running an

experiment with better controls and therefore has better content in informing my decisions – and by extension – my aspirations’ (Ray 2006: 411). Further, a perceived degree of social mobility in society is necessary to foster motivation and open up paths to pursue and realise ambitions. The higher the perceived degree of social mobility, the greater the ‘aspirations window’; that is, the opportunities people see as worth pursuing (2006). The strategies individuals apply to realise their aspirations and the risks they are willing to take to close aspiration gaps (‘the difference between the standard of living that’s aspired to and the standard of living that one already has’ – Ray 2006: 412) are thus importantly shaped by the individual’s specific sociocultural, economic and political lifeworlds. Having seen that individual aspirations and local power structures are closely interwoven, it becomes clear why reframing ‘aspirations’ as a cultural category seems more helpful in their analysis than merely defining them as an individual trait.

Appadurai describes the capacity to aspire as the ability to read ‘a map of a journey into the future’ (2004: 76). A map can be an inscrutable document covered in unfamiliar symbols and words unless we are supplied with the information and experiences required to interpret it. Aspirations themselves are complex understandings of the future pathways available to people; courses drawn to guide oneself through unfamiliar terrain. The direction of these aspirations will be determined by the limits of possibilities that young people see presented by the lives of those around them or to which they are exposed. In order for young people to develop their capacity to aspire, their families, local community members and those they encounter in their daily lives must have experience of navigating particular fields and routes. Regarding this navigational aspect, Bunnell, Gillen and Ho (2017) rightfully state that aspiration should not be taken as a fixed destination or endpoint, but rather as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it evokes ‘a mental image of the future’; as a verb, it suggests ‘practices of seeking, searching – and the possibility of finding opportunities not only different from a priori imaginings but beyond what had previously even been imaginable or deemed possible’ (2017: 37). Thus, aspirations are not static, but are responsive to and have functional value for facing the situations and needs of the present as much as the future.

Responding flexibly to new needs and ideals in society, aspirations might change over time and, being closely tied to local values and norms, these transformations might not always play out smoothly. A plethora of anthropological work in recent years has explored how the globalisation of values and the change of aspirations they bring about has influenced family dynamics and complicated intergenerational relationships (Fong 2004; Hong Fincher 2014; Kelsky 2001). Increased access to higher education and Western philosophical thought, as well as widespread access to social media, have played a role in changing attitudes and expectations, especially of younger generations. The growing focus on individualised goals and aspirations tied to self-realisation and personal independence

that has emerged in Asia has had a significant impact on intergenerational relations. Decisions on matters such as career, marriage and location of residence, which used to be made communally or were under the authority of parents or the state, are now claimed by a younger generation who want to be in charge of their own life. This increased emphasis on individual preferences and goals also affects young people's notion of their personal capacity to realise their aspirations. Agency 'denotes the freedom to act on behalf of what one values and has reason to value' (Fischer 2014: 11). It contrasts with oppression or passivity. Agency, as the following chapters will illustrate, can be claimed in decisions pertaining to family life in order to assert one's position as a self-responsible individual with one's own hopes and desires against the expectation of parents and the wider society. It can also be used to assert one's status as a group against political, religious or other social authorities. Importantly, however, notions of individual and collective agency are connected by the environment they emerged from and may inform each other in significant ways. Referring back to Appadurai and Ray's outline of the embeddedness of aspirations in societal structures, it becomes clear that not only individual and collective hopes and desires but also perceptions of one's capacity to achieve these are significantly shaped by one's surroundings.

According to Appadurai (2004), whereas all humans have the capacity to aspire, it is the social, cultural and economic framework that informs the content of these aspirations as well as individuals' and groups' sense of efficacy in realising them. Exploring the notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity, rather than an individual motivational trait, enables an understanding of the effects of the unequal distribution of social, cultural and economic capital on the capacity to aspire. For this reason, aspirations have often been studied in marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities or those living in poverty. At the same time, we recognise the potential for using the concept of aspirations when focusing on members of the middle and upper classes too. The effects of significant sociocultural, political and economic changes, as well as the challenges of rapid urbanisation and development, are not exclusive to those of lower socioeconomic means and are felt to varying degrees across all strata of society. It is therefore important to take other sections of society into consideration when researching aspirations.

Aspirations come in many different forms. Some of them can seem almost utopian in nature. These include aspirations that are religiously or ideologically inspired, such as to create a Kingdom of God on earth, or the nationalistic aspiration for sovereignty. Others are neither utopian nor long-term. They might be practically oriented, such as the aspiration for homeownership. Certain aspirations can be an end goal (e.g. becoming a business owner), or a means to a longer-term goal (e.g. becoming a business owner so that a house can be bought).

This diversity in the nature of aspirations leads to the question of how to empirically study them. In this regard, we find the heuristic model proposed by Paolo

Boccagni (2017) insightful. Whereas Boccagni applies this analytical framework to dissect migrant workers' aspirations, we believe that it is useful beyond this social demographic to explore aspirations in general. Boccagni's framework is developed around three key dimensions. First, he directs our attention to the contents of aspirations: to what do people aspire? This dimension highlights the necessity of studying aspirations with regards to specific, subjectively meaningful objectives, which are in turn embedded in specific sets of values, interests and rights. The second dimension questions the relation reference of aspirations; that is, who the aspirations benefit. One can cultivate aspirations involving oneself as much as significant others and this relational reference is important to take into account. Lastly, he addresses the 'where' and the 'when' of aspirational goals by applying terms of space-time horizons. Aspirations are embedded in complex spatial and temporal frameworks. They can develop in relation to more or less idealised places, as short-term or long-term projects, or even as temporally undetermined projects. The directions to which aspirations call our attention are crucial in terms of understanding their spatiality. Taking these three dimensions into account will facilitate an ethnographically inspired and comprehensive analysis of aspirations.

### **Urban Aspirations in Asian Contexts: From the Contemporary Mundane to the Transcendent Future**

A comparison between such diverse Asian contexts as Japan, Malaysia, China and Sri Lanka might appear odd, as these places seem to share little in common beyond their continental positioning. We have seen so far that while we are united by our ability to aspire, we differ considerably in terms of the aspirations we hold, in the perception of our capacity to realise those aspirations and in how we pursue them. Moreover, our conceptualisations of our aspirations are not only laden with deeply held, culturally specific values, but they are also constantly in flux as they integrate new values and ideas that are incessantly supplied by a globalised media and social network platforms. Focusing on cities across Asia and exploring how aspirations form under such diverse influences and against the backdrop of cultural and demographic specifics may help to illuminate threads of confluence and influence, as well as divergence, among geographically close neighbours in this dynamic and rapidly rising region.

Some of the aspirations that will emerge in this volume might seem trivial, mundane, ridiculous, uninspiring or even concerning; others might seem fantastical or beyond the scope of an individual's own life. We will not assign an assessment of worth to these aspirations, as we are not interested in developing normative definitions about what is, or is not, an appropriate aspiration. Rather, we see aspirations as frameworks, emerging out of cultural contexts, that can



make us aware of the cultural diversities and similarities that exist within and between Asian cities. They emerge through affective and evaluative engagements with things that are present in the world. Therefore, by researching aspirations, we gain an insight not only into what people value, but also into the culturally diverse frames and strategies in which these values are embedded.

Despite the variety of aspirations that are likely to emerge, in this volume we aim to explore whether notable similarities can be detected. Young adults in different Asian contexts are confronted with a shared global future, involving uncertainties, unpredictability and possible ecological catastrophes, not to mention the ever-present threat of yet another political or economic crisis. It could be that these might translate into similar aspirations. Similarities in young people's aspirations might also be related to changing traditions in urban spaces, the emergence of climate change, as well as political uprisings that result from the fundamentalisms and activism that often erupt in urban centres. Through a cross-case comparison, we can reach an understanding of patterns and dissimilarities concerning the aspirations and opportunities people have to effectively pursue their vision of the future. Towards that end, this volume brings together studies from a diverse range of contexts to explore how aspirations are conceptualised and pursued in very different places, while also allowing us to focus on commonalities.

The contributors to this volume have taken Appadurai's concept of 'aspirations' as an analytical lens through which to investigate and analyse the actions, behaviours, values and attitudes of their research participants. The result is a colourful collection of chapters based on empirical data. As the chapters in this volume will show, precise aspirations are not always immediately identifiable in the mundanity of everyday life. However, in most cases longer-term research based on ethnographic methods can allow aspirations to be deduced more clearly. Such methods also reveal that the concept of aspirations is highly specific and divergent from context to context and sometimes even within the same context. Differences between the aspirations presented in these chapters therefore abound.

Regardless, certain similarities bring these case studies together. First, the chapters presented are all based on contemporary data, gathered between 2012 and 2018. Consequently, the aspirations presented are very timely. They relate to current events and changes taking place on the Asian continent, as well as to changes in gendered perspectives, technological potential, urbanisation rates, and international and national migration patterns. The aspirations are therefore reflections of changing demographics and political ideologies (see e.g. the chapters by Remmert and Westendorp), globalisation patterns (Huang and Grant), socio-economics (Huang and Param), urbanisation rates (Camellia), gendered norms (Camellia and Suzuki) and violence (Andersen).

In addition, almost all the chapters (except for the chapter by Grant) concern members or aspiring members of Asia's middle class. Middle-classness in this

case is concurrently an economic opportunity, a political position, an ideology and an identity. It is a position that one occupies, that one aspires to (Andersen) or that one aims to ‘talk back’ to (Param). It can represent freedom and economic independence or can be felt as a constraint to reaching these same goals (see e.g. Param, Suzuki and Landgraf).

Lastly, the chapters paint pictures of the experience of young people growing up and making a life for themselves in urban cities in Asia. These include adolescents (see Param) who still live under the wings of their parents, young adults who are studying or finishing their studies (Andersen, Grant and Camellia) and young adults who are struggling with questions of family life and careers (Remmert, Huang, Landgraf, Suzuki and Westendorp).

## An Overview of the Chapters

This volume consists of nine chapters. We place these chapters along a ‘continuum’ from the here and now to the transcendent future; from more mundane and personalised aspirations to aspirations that are transcendental and idealistic. The former include aspirations towards a middle-class lifestyle, marriage and having a family and career prospects. The latter include nationalistic and religious aspirations that are temporally and spatially transcendent. Arranging the chapters in this way shows that aspirations are not only material or ‘mundane’, but can just as easily relate to larger frameworks.

In Chapter 1, Remmert presents a clear emphasis on aspirations as not only economic but also ideological, demographic and generational. She shows how individuals are confronted with various aspirational maps that they negotiate based on personal values and objectives. The aspirational maps presented by young Chinese and Taiwanese women are not only obstructed by the socio-economic and political constraints of their home societies, but are themselves also a reflection of complex maps of filial obligations that are difficult to synchronise with personal goals. In Chapter 2, Huang takes a similar approach, but with a clear emphasis on the improvement of individuals’ lives. As she shows, migration experience and anticipation shape the identities and aspirations of the young adults in her study. She indicates how an action (migration) can shape aspirations, with urban overseas experiences affecting future aspirations and intentions.

The emphasis in Chapter 3 by Landgraf shifts to normative ideas about how one *should* live and the good life one *should* be able to have. In her chapter, the ‘good life’ is conceptualised by young South Koreans with regard to middle-class standards for education, life and marriage. It is a negotiation and balance of different values and practices that are considered ‘right’ and ‘good’. In addition, the chapter suggests that a simple dichotomy between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ thus falls short, as ‘traditional’ values are constantly reinvented and ‘modern’ values,

ideas and ethics keep changing. In Chapter 4, Camellia likewise considers more present-worldly aspirations that can be achieved in a person's individual life. However, she approaches this mainly from the strategic choices one makes to navigate life towards these aspirations. The growing global trend towards educating girls coupled with the local belief that marriage is central to a woman's wellbeing has shaped individual young women's aspirations in Dhaka. Many no longer want to be stay-at-home-wives, but rather want economic independence. Interestingly, Camellia shows how they try to reach this aspiration through embodied practices, namely appearance. In Chapter 5, Suzuki builds upon similar ideas to show how the embodied practice of international migration from Japan to Ireland leads to a different, normatively better, lifestyle. Here, international migration is a self-oriented approach to life, reflecting changing relations to family and work. Suzuki's informants seek a sense of self-fulfilment beyond the constraints of personal relations by travelling away from the confines and securities of home.

In the remaining chapters, the emphasis shifts from aspiring to a good life in the here and now to aspirations that reach beyond the individual to a larger national, international or even transnational community. In Chapter 6, Param shows how aspirations can break open existing norms regarding individuality and careers. The personalised aspirations of middle-class Indians in Malaysia question definitions of success and wellbeing and talk back to existing frameworks of achievement and kinship-based relationships in the predominant discourses of middle-classness within that community. In Chapter 7, Andersen describes how the aspirations of young lawyers-to-be in Sri Lanka intersect with common notions of accomplishment in a situation of heightened political tensions. He describes individuals engaging in careers that are not necessarily beneficial primarily to themselves but rather that relate to the future of the country at large. This transformative focus has echoes in Chapter 8 by Grant, in which she shows how coffee baristas in Vietnam are aiming to paint a different picture of their nation as an authentic coffee-producing country on the world stage. She introduces her research participants as young adults who identify strongly with a global coffee community. Lastly, in Chapter 9, Westendorp takes this approach one step further. By focusing on religious orientations of young Hong Kong Buddhists, she argues how we might move beyond the present concept of aspirations in total, seeing it stretch beyond temporal and spatial boundaries.

Taking all these chapters together, we will discover how aspirations are alternately material and immaterial, subjective and communally constructed, practical and utopian, normative, individual and universal. They are situated between 'should' and 'want to' and sometimes even 'have to'. As the chapters will show, they are neither fixed nor always easily identifiable, but their influence on the course and personal interpretation of a young person's experience can be profound.

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