

Carole Zufferey and Nilan Yu (Eds.) (2018)

Faces of Homelessness in the Asia Pacific

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Purpose and intent

This is an ambitious book. Its purpose is to provide ‘practitioners, students, educators and researchers’ with a ‘broad understanding of what it means to be homeless’ in the Asia Pacific, and to demonstrate the ‘diversity of homelessness’ in terms of how it is defined (or not) and how it is perceived and experienced across this region. The geographic scope of the book alone is huge. It addresses homelessness in eight countries that collectively comprise some 40 percent of the world’s population (3 billion of 7.6 billion). Two countries, China and India, have populations in excess of 1 billion; a further two, Japan and Philippines, are over 100 million, South Korea is 50 million, Australia 24 million, Sri Lanka 21 million, all are in the top quartile of the United Nation’s ranking of national populations; even Hong Kong with 7 million is ranked in the second quartile. These countries not only differ in size, but also differ from each other in levels of economic development, political governance and cultural and social structures. And, especially within the largest, exhibit considerable internal uneven economic, political and social development. That the book even comes close to achieving the stated objectives is testament to the discipline of explicit editorial direction and to the selectivity of subject matter adopted by the individual authors of the country chapters.

To ensure coherence and the basis for some comparative analysis, the editors instructed the contributors to, first, explore the scale, distribution and lived experience of homelessness within their respective countries and, second, to structure their chapters around a critical analysis of state policies and the role of non-government organisations. For the most part the chapter authors adhere to these instructions, especially in relation to the analysis of state policies. However, to make their task manageable, most authors tailor their accounts by, *inter alia*, limiting the depth of historical coverage and/or geographical focus, and by limiting their analyses to particular demographic or social groups. Only the chapters on Hong Kong and Australia – two of the smallest countries – attempt a national coverage.

Overview of the substantive chapters

In Chapter 2, Kiener and Mizuuchi, examine post second world war developments in state sponsored homelessness programmes in Japan; programmes which have had only limited success buffeted as they have been over the years by the vagaries of economic growth and fluctuating welfare provision. Their 'case study' of day labourers in Tokyo, Osaka and Yokohama is set in a present day context characterised by a widening of homelessness demographics to include educated, married and previously-housed households. The authors conclude on an 'optimistic' note identifying recent increases in welfare benefits plus, tellingly, the introduction of revanchist 'city cleaning' policies, in reducing visible homelessness.

Qiu and Zufferey (Chapter 3) illustrate the nature of homelessness in China through an examination of selected social groups: older people, women and children and migrants drifting between rural and urban locations. They identify the ways in which Chinese state polices effectively downplay any official recognition of homelessness – the focus of policy is variously on 'rescuing' or 'criminalising' those without shelter and other vulnerable people. State controlled 'Aid Stations' provided limited assistance and support and, while there is evidence of increasing involvement of non-government organisations, these lack resources and frequently refer homeless people to the equally under-resourced state run 'Aid Stations'. Overall the picture painted by Qiu and Zufferey is one of neglect and containment.

Goel and Chowdhary's India chapter (Chapter 4), focusing on housing and homelessness in Delhi, examines the complex interrelationships of homelessness with gender, class and caste, domestic violence and abandonment of children. The picture is one of increasing politicisation, including the denial of citizen's rights, criminalisation and lack of access to shelters and temporary housing.

In Chapter 5 on Sri Lanka, Ariyadasa, McLaren and McIntyre-Mills, examine the treatment of homeless children in resource-starved government institutions and volunteer-run children homes. In a country torn by war, environmental disaster and characterised by deep poverty, the institutionalisation of children has exposed them to chronic deprivation and depleted life chances. Attempts by the state to regulate children's homes have had very limited success. The authors conclude that while state intervention might offer some future alleviation, too many children in Sri Lanka continue to be deprived of their basic human rights.

The Republic of Korea's welfare responses to homelessness (Chapter 6) are examined by Kim and Heo. While the Ministry of Health and Welfare draws up five year plans and undertakes nation wide surveys and central government provides finance, the implementation of homelessness policy in Korea is largely the shared responsibility of the provinces and local authorities. The authors demonstrate that

since the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s which has led to persistent unemployment and recurrent economic crises, Korea has experienced increases in homelessness, certainly among men who have traditionally made up the majority of homeless people, but also among new homeless demographics: women, young people and older sections of the population. The authors argue that for homelessness to be effectively addressed, there is a need for the development of community-based initiatives, a programme of job creation and the sustainable financing of homelessness support facilities.

The authors of Chapter 7, Kornatowski and Wong, adopt an historic and 'national' perspective in examining homelessness in the 'Special Administrative Region' of Hong Kong. Here the importance of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (as in Korea and Japan) is identified in drawing public and official attention to visible homelessness. While a One-Stop homelessness service run by a public-NGO partnership has been in place since the early 2000s, the structural barriers to rehousing – substandard housing, low wages and unaffordable rents – have yet to be seriously addressed. The authors conclude with explicit recommendations regarding length of tenure in temporary housing and the expansion of the One-Stop facility to provide integrated support including mental health rehabilitation.

Nicolas and Gray's Chapter 8 on Metropolitan Manila describes in some detail the experience and conditions of homelessness among street families, illustrated with several telling vignettes. The approaches of successive Philippine governments to homelessness have variously wavered between housing and welfare and have had only a limited impact. The mass housing schemes of the distant and recent past have effectively been sequestered by middle income families, while the cash transfer schemes, designed to provide social security and insurance for the poor and homeless, has been prejudiced by an enduring distinction between the deserving and underserving. Summarising, the authors draw attention, within the context of a minimalist state welfare provision, to the manner in which urban commercial and infrastructure development has been and continues to be prioritised over housing and shelter.

The last of the substantive chapters (Chapter 9) by Horsell and Zufferey deals with homelessness in Australia. Here the focus is on definitional issues and policy discourse. In terms of the 'sophistication' of the national definition of homelessness (periodically challenged domestically) and the swathes of resources that have been invested in homelessness research and policy development, Australia stands apart from the other countries considered in this book. It is the only chapter to mention 'housing first' and while not explicitly cited by the authors has also engaged in discussions regarding 'ending homelessness': such a scenario is light years away from policy discussion in most other countries in the Asia Pacific. Nonetheless, Horsell and Zufferey draw

attention to the persistent and – as elsewhere in the developed world – the growing problem of homelessness in Australia, exacerbated by continued social inequalities, the fragility of welfare provision and the failings of the housing market.

Assessment

In the introduction to this book the editors are at pains to emphasise that our understanding of homelessness is ‘very much circumscribed by our situatedness’ which is ‘heavily dependent on geographical, cultural and historic contexts in which we find ourselves and from which we draw meaning’ (p.1). Their intent is to challenge preconceptions and expose readers to the diverse and the complex nature of homelessness beyond familiar bailiwicks. Yet for this ‘western situated’ reader the overriding message of the substantive chapters is that the determinants of homelessness in the Asia Pacific often mirror closely those in Europe and North America: social inequalities, economic volatility, political caprice combining in complex intersectional ways with individual attributes of the homeless population. Similarly, pathologisation and criminalisation of homeless people and the neglect of structural imperatives replicate trends in attitudes and programmes embedded in the ‘western context’. Of course there are differences, such as the extraordinary resilience of many Asian Pacific homeless people associated in part with the functionality of informal economies, and the importance of family support structures. But even here the differences are not absolute, though the sheer scale of homelessness in several Asia Pacific countries certainly trumps that of the ‘west’. Other drivers of homelessness, barely touched upon in this book, such as environmental catastrophe (as illustrated by the August 2018 floods in Kerala) and social oppression (such as the continuing coercion of the Uighurs in the China’s Xinjiang province) also mark out the ‘different’ nature of the homeless experience in some parts of the Asia Pacific; but such catastrophes and conflicts are not without precedent in the ‘west’ – though again, arguably, scale makes a difference. In an increasingly globalised world, ‘situatedness’ is not what it used to be.

Despite the above challenges –in a context where the bulk of academic research on homeless originates from and is focused on Europe and North America- this book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on homelessness in a part of the world rapidly growing in economic and political importance yet still ‘home’ to a large percentage of the world’s homeless population.

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