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Urban Risk, Risk Response and Well-being in Asian Cities: The Case of Tokyo, Shanghai, and Bangkok

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Abstract

Megacities in Asia have been growing and showing dynamic ‘compressed’ changes. Tokyo, Bangkok and Shanghai are serving as the centre of finance, production and other functions of the region, while disparities within the city are widening to form multi-layered stratification. Besides, in the advancement of globalisation, they now experience uncertainty, insecurity, and more difficult new challenges — facing challenges of global cities in developed countries and of cities in developing countries simultaneously. In order to consider social environment where individual can live well in such Asian cities, this paper explores potential urban risks, risk responses, and actual condition of well-being of urban residents in three cities. The data from field survey show that Tokyo residents face to the work-related problems, while Shanghai and Bangkok residents to the fundamental economic risks. As the responses to those risks, all three cities use some personal networks to ensure enough resources to overcome, even if what relationships they have developed and how to use those vary. An interesting but not surprising finding is that, despite a better living condition, Tokyo residents show the lowest level of life satisfaction among the surveyed cities. In reality, there is a limit in responding to the public needs due to the austerity, which results in a serious policy dilemma. Managing the urban risks in a creative way by multi-actors in local context, such as involving individuals’ personal networks, is one of the key challenges to be tackled for the future development and economic and social sustainability of the world.

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1. Introduction

The world has entered the ‘urban century’— more than half of the population is now living in cities, and the urban population will continue to grow especially in Asia and Africa^[1]. Megacities in Asia are serving as the centre of finance, production and other functions of the regions, while disparities within the city are widening to form multi-layered stratification. In such a global context, megacities in emerging economies in Asia have been rapidly growing and showing dynamic ‘compressed’ changes, where issues and problems of various social-economic development levels often occur simultaneously.

Bangkok and Shanghai are to be prime examples. They serve as a multi-functional global hub and lead the countries’ economic growth like Tokyo, a long-standing Asian megacity. Despite rapid economic development, on the other hand, institutional responses are not catching up and bring about policy dilemma. For instance, population aging has already started before the social security system was fully developed, and before they made a successful transition from middle income countries to developed countries. The coverage of social security on working populations are more or less around 30 % in these countries^[2].

Given substantial changes in economic and social structures through urbanisation and globalisation, more residents in such cities may sense uncertainty, insecurity, or ‘risks’ in their urban living. Cities posed fundamentally different type of risks from rural areas related to the characteristics of commodification, environmental hazards, and social relationships specific to urban living^[3]. The commodity economy of cities requires residents to engage some sort of income generating activities. The lack of infrastructure or basic sanitation system in the city directly cause deterioration of living conditions. If we turn our eye to social relationships, the city is a collective entity of diverse people, who are tenuously tied to each other, and a sense of community is less likely fostered^[4]. In addition, what is noted is that the impacts of urban risks manifest unevenly among different social classes due to their level of vulnerability and ability for risk responses. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that people are not just passive to risks. They rather utilise whatever resources they have to deal with such risks and try to make their life easier if only a little.

To investigate how people face and manage urban risks, therefore, is a key to understand individual well-being in urban settings. This study first identifies urban risks faced by urban lower and middle classes in Asian cities, and then explores people’s response to those risks in relation with social capitals available to them. We will also look at the relation between individual subjective life satisfaction and people’s material as well as social living conditions. Understanding the relation of living conditions and subjective life satisfaction in the region would be critical for further consideration of people’s fundamental needs and approach to economic and social developments at both macro and micro levels. Besides, with the findings, this study would contribute to the academic discussions in urbanisation, inequality, as well as happiness studies in globalizing era.

2. Research Profile and Data

In order to achieve the research objectives, this study designed and conducted a series of surveys, which compares individual well-being of urban residents in Bangkok, Shanghai and Tokyo. The data sets were collected through online and face-to-face questionnaire surveys in the three Asian cities during 2012 - 2013. The survey focus was the primary earner of the households in the middle and lower classes, aged 20 and older residing in each city. Carefully consulting with data on each country’s economy, this research has defined middle class as whose annual income falls between: 180,000 to 600,000 Baht (15,000 to 50,000 Baht per month) in Bangkok, 36,000 to 180,000 Yuan (3,000 to 15,000 Yuan per month) in Shanghai, and 3 to 8 million Yen in Tokyo. Those who didn’t reach the lower line were categorised as the lower class. Respondents were recruited through online survey companies as well as local community leaders or NGOs. Valid responses were 769 (male 46.7%, female 53.3%) in Bangkok, 417 (male 51.1%, 48.9%) in Shanghai, and 1256 (male 52.3%, female 47.7%) in Tokyo.

Basic characteristics of the respondents in the three cities are described as below. On average, respondents in Bangkok were aged 42.8 years old, having 10 years’ education, having lived in Bangkok for 29 years, living with 1.89 persons other than themselves, and having 1.24 children. Their about two-thirds (64.8%) were born outside Bangkok. As to marital status, 61.2% were married, 26.1% were single, 6.2% were divorced, and 6.6% were

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