



Edited by Gregory Bracken

# Contemporary Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West

## Care of the Self

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*Edited by  
Gregory Bracken*

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# Introduction

*Gregory Bracken*

This book continues the investigations published in its companion volume, *Ancient and Modern Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West: Care of the Self*, in which Chapter 1, 'Citizenship and the Good Life' (by this editor) pointed to Cicero's view that the good citizen was a politically engaged one. Cicero eschewed the fashionable New Academic scepticism of his era, which, like postmodernism, seemed to advocate a denial of truth. Michel Foucault, in the critique of structuralism he called poststructuralism, sought to lead theories of the care of the self into the real world, into real spaces, real time, so that they could be immediately beneficial to people.

Cicero was all for human agency but understood that we never act alone. We are part of a community, part of society. Some of the essays in this book examine how communities and societies act and interact; some, like Overseas Chinese native-place organizations can give a valuable helping hand, others, like vicious village attitudes expressed in what should otherwise be the freedom of the city, can have the opposite effect, with tragic consequences, as we shall see.

Cicero's philosophy was never particularly original, he was not seeking new truths (neither was Confucius, as we also saw in Chapter 1 of *Ancient and Modern Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West*), they were both trying to relate philosophy to current situations, which is also the task of this book: to investigate current situations.

Confucius, like Cicero, respected received wisdom, but even he did not accept it uncritically, and this underscores one of the most important themes of this book, which will be highlighted in the Afterword: The Right to the City: that we must dare to think for ourselves. Confucius's philosophy placed humans at its centre but it was not abstract, it was practical, just like Cicero's. We need to practice our humanity; any abdication of this agency can curb its power to effect change. And abdication can come in many guises, whether they be faith-based systems, or village mores, or, more recently, letting machines do our thinking for us.

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Are there answers to these problems? Possibly, but they are not going to be easy, but then sometimes the job of a good researcher is to pose intelligent questions, provoking other people to come up with answers, maybe even solutions to the problems highlighted in the papers here. Many of these papers shed much-needed light on some of the issues that have emerged for people caught in twenty-first century urbanization, what we can perhaps call the world's new urban turn, now that more than 50 percent of us live in cities. An urbanized world should be an improved world, a better place to live in. It should be a place where humans and their social practices, especially those that seek to take care of the self, can flourish. Or, at the very least, where everybody has the chance to try and let them do so.

## The background to this book

As noted at the beginning of this Introduction, this book continues the work that was done in *Ancient and Modern Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West: Care of the Self*, and like that book, it features papers from a variety of different but related disciplines, underscoring the importance of the multi- and transdisciplinary nature of this entire project: a series of investigations into the care of the self in the urban environment.

While *Ancient and Modern Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West* featured a number of papers that looked to the past for practices of citizenship, as well as also taking into account current practices, this book is more firmly grounded in the present: investigating contemporary practice of citizenship, including challenges to the right to citizenship, as in the case of untouchables in India, and Asians with mental health issues in America (Chapters 5 and 6 respectively). These investigations also include exploring the right to the city in the digital age (the subject of Chapter 8, and something that will also be mentioned in the Afterword).

For the moment, we now turn our attention to the papers in this book, which examine contemporary practices of care of the self in cities in Asia and the West. They have been written by researchers representing a range of different experience levels, from young PhD candidates to well-established academics. They also come from a variety of different academic backgrounds, ranging from architecture and urbanism, through anthropology, social science, psychology, and gender studies, to history and philosophy. Yet one thing unites all of these papers: their people-centred approach. This trans- and multidisciplinary approach sheds valuable new light on what are sometimes quite old problems, to lead to fresh perspectives in ways



of thinking about them and, more importantly, dealing with them, which is entirely in keeping with the series of books that have come out of the IIAS-TU Delft seminars held in Leiden each spring between 2010 and 2017, the time I was fortunate enough to be a research fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden.

If there is one thing these books tell us, it is that cities are not simply buildings and spaces between them; cities are people and their networks of interaction. Chapters 1 to 5 look at how these practices are conducted at home, where some can be enriching and enabling, while others are more problematic, as we shall see. Chapters 6 to 8 examine practices abroad, again with the same advantages and disadvantages highlighted. And the book's final chapter, Chapter 9, raises important issues about such practices for the future, leading to the question if humans will still have agency to affect their practices and care for themselves as they should as cities become 'smarter' and such decisions are taken out of our hands by sensors, algorithms, etc.

The Afterword, which is titled 'The Right to the City', builds on this final chapter to question what role human agency can still have in such practices, and harks back to the first chapter of *Ancient and Modern Practices of Citizenship in Asia and the West: Care of the Self*, 'Citizenship and the Good Life' (by this editor), where the Ancients insisted that to be a proper citizen one had to be an engaged one, making for neat bookends to these two related books.

## The papers

We begin this book with a chapter by anthropologist and sociologist Martin Minost, 'The Western World as Utopia? Thames Town, Songjiang and New Chinese Residential Habits'. This looks at cross-cultural representations that have led to the hybridization of domestic space in Shanghai. It questions our understanding of the all too often Western-inspired concept of authenticity. Middle- and upper-class Chinese families have been moving into new residential neighbourhoods where architectural styles and even names have been inspired by the West. This is done to convey an exotic and presumably desirable way of life, but because it is perceived as being based on imitation, these constructions have received a lot of criticism from both Chinese and Western observers who see these new neighbourhoods as 'fake' or as some sort of a theme park. Most of these critics have been architects and urbanists, what Minost does, thanks to his anthropological background, is look at how these spaces are actually inhabited by the people



who call them home. This reveals that they are very far from being merely an outcome of China's increasing integration into the world system, and through his detailed study of the families' living habits in Thames Town, Songjiang (part of the One City, Nine Towns plan) we are given insights into some of the complex social transformations that are taking place in China's cities today. Minost convincingly shows that although these people may live in a neighbourhood that is stylistically a copy of a number of different but identifiably British architectural styles, the residents are not trying to imitate the Western way of life, neither are they experiencing some sort of acculturation process; they are, in fact, generating a new way of living, one that is open to other cultures but which remains specifically their own. This hybridization of spatial practice is a fascinating development in China's contemporary urban transformation, and what we are beginning to see emerge here is a culture that is confident enough to borrow elements from the West without being overwhelmed by them. This could be showing the route to a rich Asian urban future where globalization no longer means Westernization.

Chapter 2, 'How Does Space Have Meaning? A Multifocal Approach to Korean *Jimjilbang* (찜질방)' is by Vera Marie Hälbig, a scholar whose background in transnational studies has been enriched by investigations into the intersection between literary and cultural studies. Her chapter examines the spaces of the traditional Korean *jimjilbang* (찜질방 bathhouse) and does so from a geocritical perspective that includes spatial theory and literary studies to interpretatively realize the narrative and social production of the *jimjilbang*. Due to its cross-cultural point of departure, this chapter scrutinizes both global and local conceptualizations of space. It attempts to sensitize how cultural meanings come into being, and how particular narratives and performances are inherent in the creation of spatial experience. This approach to space needs to be transdisciplinary, and here both narrative and visual representations of space are analyzed to see how meaning is produced. The use of Bertrand Westphal's 'geocriticism' makes sure that space is placed at the centre of this research and marks its point of departure, with literary analysis. This geocritical approach also understands place as a space that is continuously being made meaningful. The multifocal approach to this research attempts a description of a methodologically new step in a field of studies which has previously been determined by author- and genre-centred approaches to space, and the outcome provides substantial material for future interdisciplinary research.

Chapter 3: 'Transforming the Self in Contemporary Korean *Ki Suryŏn* (氣修練): Water, Wood, and Stone in Two *GiCheon* (氣天) DVDs' by Victoria



Ten examines practices of self-cultivation in contemporary Korea. *Ki suryŏn* is a Korean method of cultivation for the mind and body that uses *ki* (氣, life energy) and is akin to Chinese *qigong* (气功) and Indian yoga. *GiCheon* is one type of *ki suryŏn*, which Ten sees as an ‘alchemical practice of embodied knowledge’. Using a theoretical framework based on Michel Foucault’s technologies of the self, this chapter examines the visual iconography of DVDs that advertise *GiCheon*, particularly their focus on elements such as water, wood, and stone, investigating how they are instrumental for the viewer’s self-cultivation. This makes a very literal interpretation of the term ‘technologies of the self’, to embrace actual technical tools, such as videos, DVDs, films, and websites, all of which are employed in Korean *ki suryŏn* for the purpose of the transforming of the self.

The next two chapters highlight some of the more problematic aspects for the care of the self in contemporary urban environments, in this case India. Chapter 4, ‘The Relationship between Architecture and Ritual in the Hindu Crematorium’ by Srivalli Pradeepthi Ikkurthy, notes that in Hindu philosophy death is seen as just another passing phase of life, and that in the cycle of birth and death, death has to be celebrated. Despite this, crematoria and cemeteries have been largely ignored in Indian architectural treatises. India’s recent and rapid urbanization, which has caused many cities to sprawl, has meant that many crematoria now find themselves in a much more urban environment, contrary to the ritual requirement of their being in peripheral places. This chapter tries to explain the architectural variations of these funerary spaces, and takes two case studies, Hyderabad and Varanasi, to show how they have been influenced by three vital, centuries-old layers of religion, region, and time. An understanding of all three of these is needed if these ancient traditions and their architectural articulations are to be passed on for future generations to celebrate ways of life and death.

Rachana Johri’s ‘New Bodies in Cities: Contested Technologies of the Self in Urban India’ is located at the intersection of psychology, gender, and culture and effectively uses both real and cinematic narratives to argue that cities in India are characterized by the highly contested nature of physical spaces, bodily practices, and technologies of the self. India’s urbanization has, in part, been fuelled by rural-urban migration. Cities are attractive to young people because they offer a chance to reinvent themselves. Moving away from the villages, where women and Dalits are fettered by caste- and gender-based identities, those who move to the city should find it possible to reinvent themselves – ‘city air’, as the old German saying has it, ‘makes you free’. Sadly, as this paper shows (using examples from both real life

and cinematic depiction), sometimes it is not possible to escape from the suffocating mores of the village because those narrow, cruel, even vicious practices of restriction and censure can follow people to the city, with tragic consequences, as the examples of suicide, rape, and murder in this thought-provoking paper show.

The next two chapters also contain a mixture of positive and negative practices, this time ones that take place abroad. Chapter 6, by Wong Yee Lam Elim, entitled 'Family, Everyday Life, and the Making-up of Society: A Case Study in Yokohama's Chinatown', examines the Overseas Chinese diaspora here and their successful ways of making a life for themselves in a foreign place without losing cultural identity. One of the key concepts of this paper is the Chinese notion of home (家 *jia*), which means more than simply a living space for human beings; it is living space for the *family*. Taking as its case study a Cantonese family called Xie, we see the connections between family, everyday life, and the making-up of the Overseas Chinese community in Yokohama.

The next chapter, Chapter 7, highlights problems that can come with migration to a foreign place, this time in a group that is usually thought of as successful (or at least not usually problematic): Asian-Americans. This chapter is by Susheelabi R. Srinivasa and Sudershan Pasupuleti, the former is a social scientist and the latter a psychologist, and both of them investigate issues relating to social work. Called 'Mental Health Scenario of Asian Americans: Social and Environmental Determinants of their Well-being and Service Utilization', it looks at Asian-Americans' mental health and their surprising (at first glance) reluctance to make use of mental health services. Asian-Americans are numerically a minority group in the United States, accounting for only 5.7 percent of the country's 325 million population. They are also a group that receives limited attention in terms of policy and programme focus when addressing America's mental health needs. There is a disproportion in their lack of utilization of available mental health services, due to feelings of shame that are a throw-back to the attitudes in their countries of origin. This chapter raises vital questions about this group's needs, particularly their under-reporting of mental health issues. It also includes a helpful look at the social and environmental factors that affect this under-reporting and under-utilization. It is also a timely warning, because unless something is done about this issue it may well mean major problems for what until now has been considered a 'model minority'.

The final chapter in the book, Chapter 8: "Care of the Self" and Discipline in Smart Cities: Sensors in Singapore' by Joost Alleblas and Steven Dorrestijn, looks at Singapore's role as a front runner in developing a society that uses urban sensors to control movement, access, and interaction. Their backgrounds



in the ethics of technology (Dorrestijn) and the design and philosophy of technology (Alleblas) give them unique insights into what is going on in this gleaming futuristic global city. Their paper is firmly grounded in an astute reading of Michel Foucault's care of the self and surveillance theories and asks if current trends in urbanism, particularly those of the 'Smart City', have created a tension between discipline and self-care. They ask what is the meaning of the care of the self in Sensor Societies such as Singapore, where discipline and control seem to come first? Where passes, chips, and biometric data determine who moves in the city and who can be admitted to its functions and benefits. This thought-provoking chapter develops a critique of the Sensor Society that acknowledges both the disciplinary tendencies and (emerging) forms of self-care. But now it is time to turn our attention to the papers themselves.

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## About the author

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