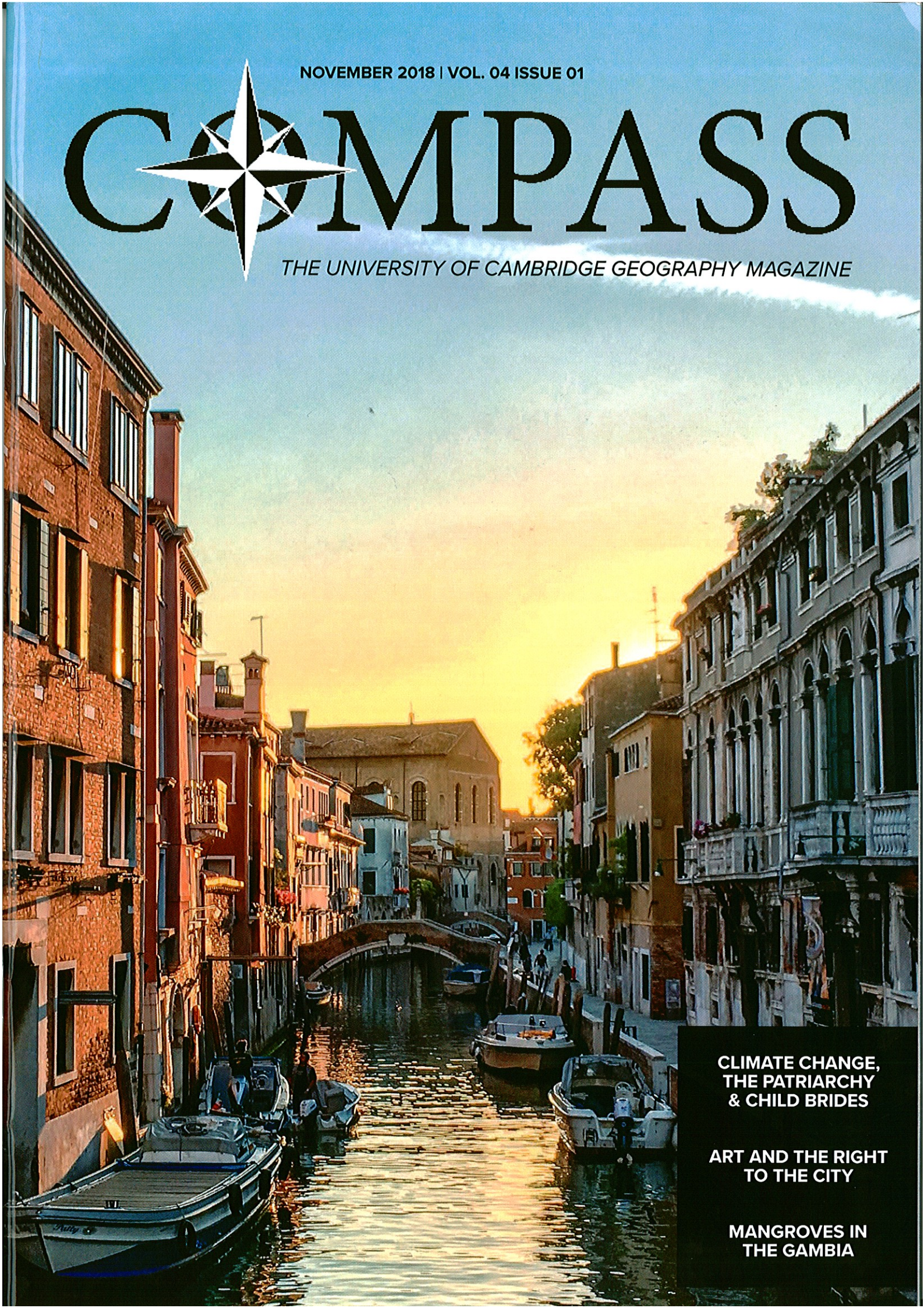
NOVEMBER 2018 | VOL. 04 ISSUE 01

# COMPASS

THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE GEOGRAPHY MAGAZINE



CLIMATE CHANGE, THE PATRIARCHY & CHILD BRIDES

ART AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

MANGROVES IN THE GAMBIA

# ACADEMIA IN HONG KONG:

## IN CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR LOO

**To explore the Asian 'geographies of geography', and to probe the state of the discipline in Asia, Compass writer George Breckenridge interviewed Prof. Becky P.Y. Loo – Head of Geography at the University of Hong Kong. Her work specialises on the urban geographies of East Asia, especially integrated transport systems, urban planning and the environmental impact of such city-oriented frontiers.**

It's 3pm on the 4th August and I'm in an elevator to the 10th floor, heart racing. After reading the night before that the University of Birmingham once described her as "one of Asia's foremost scholars" on urban geography, I couldn't help but be pretty nervous. I'd never talked to an academic in Asia before too, and I wasn't sure how much that would be a bearing on the style of conversation.

Having been shown into an office with the best view I've ever seen, I started by asking her the seemingly obvious: how does academic research in Hong Kong differ from that in the West? Surely there was a difference. To my surprise, Prof. Loo had different ideas: "in many ways, I consider Hong Kong to have the most western style of academic inquiry, especially compared to the rest of Asia". She credits this to the British legacy, the "true academic freedom" that being in Hong Kong allows, and the benefits of the "advantageous intellectual exchange" that the internationalism of the territory accepts. Being so international "makes a huge difference" in fostering "mutual understanding and unity at a time when there is a lot of global divide due to misunderstanding". Overall similarity was not the response I was expecting, I have to say, even if it did seem less surprising that the British academic culture is having its legacy in Hong Kong.

More generally, Prof. Loo declares that "I think geography is on the up. Look, we've been on the decline for a while, including in the UK", but as the undeniably geographical issues of global urbanism and sustainable living increase their presence on the international agenda, she anticipates a reversal of this downward uptake. With respect to cities, she is confident to point out that geographers can provide the coherent research that will discover policy solutions. Referring to Prof. Mike Batty's (2013) influential work on 'The New Science of Cities', she says geographers are well equipped to "study the societal response" to the increasingly complex urban landscapes brought by technology.

As an example, she explains that urban areas, in their contemporary form, are synonymous with the use of connective technology. As researchers, we should aim to "make the best of this", and "keep up with the positive side of this trend". In elaborating, she poises that active geographical research is now moving beyond describing to shaping future cities. Prof. Loo emphasises, although the technology may be the same, the local contexts make the difference. Hence, "getting involved and talking to people is very important" in being able to provide an "authentic, accurate synthesis of the issue". Academic geography can't be an ivory tower, if it is to succeed", she argues.

Quick to stress the reality of the matter, Prof. Loo poses that "geographers are good at synthesis", and therefore scholarship which targets realistic impact. At that point, I took the opportunity to delve into this, by asking her if she felt her own work had influenced real-world urban planning in Hong Kong. Her initial reaction was to point out that it's often not just a single research paper, and that it's the series of research outcomes that cause the dots to connect amongst policymakers. In thinking further, she suggests that her holistic research on 'urban walkability' is perhaps a good example. Her General Evaluation Mechanism (GEM) has countered conventional cost-benefit analyses to quantify the overall enhancements to

society that walkability can bring. It's "adoptable to any city, globally", but is especially useful in Hong Kong – "the 3D city without legs". Having been formally adopted by the Development Bureau of the Hong Kong Government Secretariat, it is now applied at the forefront of land premium decisions about footbridges, with it's implementation directly leading to the construction of elevated pedestrian footbridges in the 'Admiralty' area of the city CBD. The connection of these to the underground 'MTR' metro stations has improved the integration of public transit in the city. Prof. Loo is optimistic for the future in this regard, with commitments to improve the city's walkability included in the Hong Kong Chief Executive's 2017 Policy Address.

Prof. Loo broadened the scope of this research by arguing that scholarship on the urban and transport systems are "fundamentally intertwined", and "don't make sense without the other". When I asked her if it was possible for urban transport infrastructure to prompt sustainable urban citizenship, she agreed, at least so far as personal behaviours of transport choices were concerned. This was because, she argued, they are derived from the design of the build environment in which they are formed. She argued that if we want to harness the potential for infrastructure to influence cultures of performative citizenship, through promoting sustainable norms of transit behaviour, solutions must be found at the stage of planned urban development. Put simply, we must provide deliberately integrated, planned transit services to citizens, and be prepared to "remodel the urban fabric". Indeed, in an age of ever-increasing demographic size, density and age, it has never been more important to "seek denser opportunities" in urban development. Prof. Loo put it to me that the compactness of infrastructure not only affords convenience, but also accessibility; this is especially relevant to the most vulnerable members of society, such as the elderly and children. Once more, China is the country to provide an example of these future demographic demands in Asia.

In October 2018, advances in these urban fields were showcased at The International Conference on Smart Mobility and Logistics in Future Cities. With the Chief Executive of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region welcoming the conference as "an excellent platform to inspire innovative breakthroughs and solutions amidst the growing challenges in our transport system and logistics sector", it is clear senior policymakers are interested in smart city developments. Across my own experiences of teaching at the University of Hong Kong, I have to agree with Prof. Loo: here, "Geography is on the up".

**Words & Photographs**
**By GEORGE BRECKENRIDGE**