

Call for Papers

SMU-Max Planck Workshop “Asian Cities and the International Legal Order 2.0: Urban Challenges and International Law in Asia”

**Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University
2 – 3 November 2026, Singapore**

Synopsis

Urbanisation has become a central concern within global governance and international development frameworks (UN-Habitat, 2020). As urban populations in Asia rapidly expand, Asian cities are exposed to interconnected and acute urban challenges, in particular, environmental pressures, disaster risks, security concerns, and widening social inequalities (UNESCAP, 2024; UNDESA, 2025). Responding to these challenges requires governance arrangements capable of long-term planning, large-scale infrastructure coordination, and inclusive, participatory decision-making (UNDP, 2025). At the same time, urban authorities operate within complex institutional environments shaped by interactions with national governments, international organisations, development institutions, and private actors (Diaz-Sarachaga & Longo Sarachaga, 2024; Leck & Simon, 2018). Cities as a governance layer is assumed in a state of tension with other governance layers at the national and international levels. Developing some specific case studies of these tensions and how they manifest in Asian cities could be really interesting.

Against this backdrop and building on a first Workshop on Asian cities and the International Legal Order held in July 2025, this Workshop raises three questions on urban challenges and international law in Asia. Firstly, **how are international legal norms interpreted and operationalised within Asia’s urban governance context?** Cities are indirectly bound by international legal obligations as an organ of state governments, but have been documented to go beyond this and take action in response to international legal developments in areas such as environmental protection and human rights (Aust, 2018; Bakker, 2020; Oomen and Baumgärtel 2018; Bodiford, 2020). Yet little research examines cities in the Asian region in relation to this phenomenon.

The second question of the Workshop concerns the evolving role of Asian cities within the international legal order: **how do Asian cities participate in and shape international organisations, regional institutions, and transnational governance networks in order to address urban challenges?** Much of the literature on cities and international law comes from a dominant European or United States perspective (Aust and Nijman 2021; Spazk, 2025). However, some evidence suggests that Asian cities engage with transnational city networks differently, which requires further exploration (Lin, 2021; Beringen & Liu, forthcoming).

A third question relates to the adequacy of existing international legal frameworks in addressing urban challenges. **To what extent are existing international legal frameworks adequate to address urban challenges faced by Asian cities?** While the topic of cities and international law has attracted much attention, the jury is still out as to whether their increasingly recognised international role has helped international law to more effectively address urban challenges such as sustainability, disaster risk management and poverty. The next step for the study of cities and international law will be to consider whether their involvement can lead to positive outcomes. Asian cities face many of these challenges and have the potential to be influential in how they are addressed going forward.

Ultimately, many global policy commitments ultimately depend on implementation at the urban level, positioning cities not only as sites where global challenges materialise, but also as key arenas in which global agendas are translated into practice.

The Asian Cities and the International Legal Order conference series seek to enrich debate on cities as influential, yet still under-theorised, actors within the international legal order. By foregrounding Asian contexts, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced and globally representative understanding of how international law is interpreted and reshaped in an increasingly urbanised world.

Call for abstracts

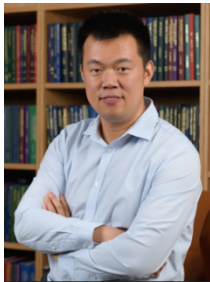
Abstracts of no more than **250 words** should be emailed to lawandsustainability@smu.edu.sg by **15 July 2026**. Selected speakers will be notified by **1 August 2026**. Speakers are required to submit a working paper (6,000 – 8,000 words) before the Workshop by **15 October 2026**. It is anticipated that one special issue from the Workshop will be published by a prominent peer-reviewed journal.

Practicalities

This workshop is organised by the team of Singapore Sustainable Futures Initiative (SSFI), including Dr Asanka Edirisinghe (incoming Yong Pung How Fellow) and Dr Ethan Beringen (SSFI Global Associate). It is supported by SMU Urban Institute, Max Planck Institute for Comparative and Public International Law, and International Law Association. The Workshop will be held at SMU Yong Pung How School of Law as an in-person event. The event is free of charge. We anticipate to provide funding to cover travel costs for selected speakers.

Conference Co-Chairs

Associate Professor LIU Nengye



Prof LIU Nengye teaches and conducts research at the nexus of the law of the sea and international environmental law. Prof LIU has taken the lead to edit three books, published 50+ refereed journal articles and book chapters; and delivered 100+ presentations about his research findings across five continents. He sits on the editorial board of *Marine Policy*, *Ocean Development and International Law* and *Polar Record*. Prof Liu is the Founding Chair of the Steering Committee, Asia Pacific Research Alliance on Law and Sustainability and the Founding Director of SMU's Singapore Sustainable Futures Initiative.

Professor Helmut Philipp Aust



Prof Helmut Aust is Professor of International Law at Freie Universität Berlin and incoming Director of Max Planck Institute for Comparative and Public International Law in Heidelberg. He is a Visiting Professor with the SMU Urban Institute 2025-2027. He serves as Co-Chair of the International Law Association (ILA) Committee on Urbanisation and International Law: Challenges and Pitfalls. His publications include the *Research Handbook on International Law and Cities* (Edward Elgar, 2021, co-edited with Janne E. Nijman), which was awarded the 2022 ESIL Collaborative Book Prize.

Professor Orlando Woods



Prof Orlando Woods is Professor of Geography, Director of SMU Urban Institute and incoming Associate Provost (Research Strategy) of Singapore Management University. He holds a BA (First Class Honours) in Geography from University College London and a PhD in Geography from the National University of Singapore. His interdisciplinary research spans social, cultural, and political geography, as well as urban studies, new media and communications, and critical infrastructure studies. Empirically, his work focuses on South and Southeast Asia.