

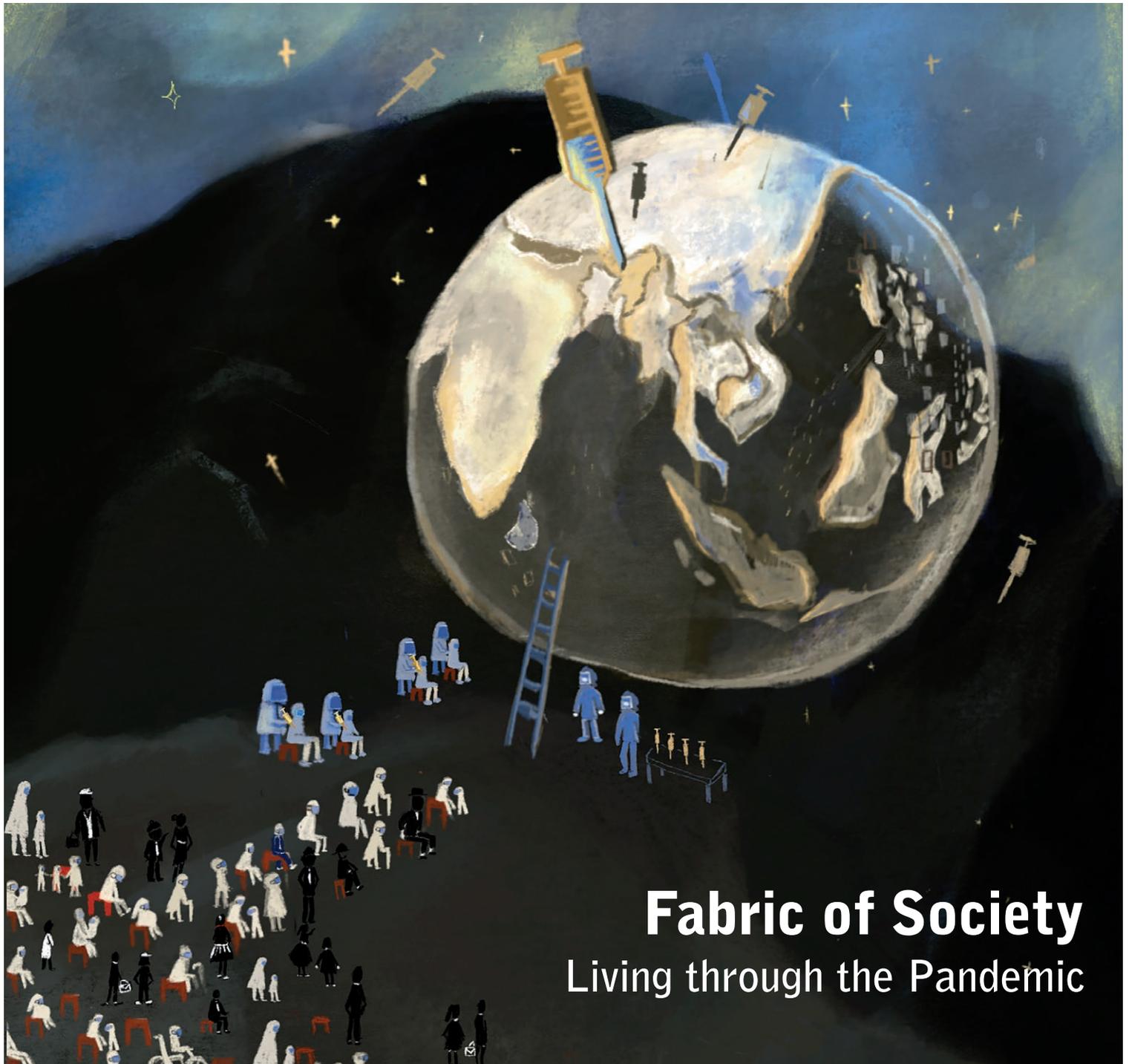
HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

# perspectives

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ASIA



**Fabric of Society**  
Living through the Pandemic

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# Editorial

## Red Light, Green Light

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted patterns of life on all levels, forcing individuals into crisis management, restricting the social lives of communities, and disrupting global systems of collaboration and exchanges, supply chains and trade. As we are writing from Hong Kong, more than 18 months into the pandemic, we know that its end is not yet in sight. Its longer-term impacts are even less clearly recognisable at the moment.

This pandemic has dragged the world into a puzzling time warp that resembles one of the popular “stop-and-go” childhood games such as the one known in Hong Kong as *Red Light, Green Light*. Depending on local transmission waves of the disease and health policies, in some months we have found ourselves socially isolated, with work nearly ground to a halt and life plans jeopardised. In other months the clock ticks again – people take a deep breath and walk in the open, hurriedly trot along old routines to make up for lost time, and some have dashed around the clock to set up massive quarantine, vaccination, or aid facilities within tight constraints.

It still takes 365 days for the Earth to orbit the Sun, but under the pandemic, we have experienced the flow of time differently. The Tokyo Olympics were delayed for one full year; so were countless private events and important individual decisions, from holding a wedding to entering an educational institution or starting a new job. With few warnings or predictive signs, the pandemic hourglass may be flipped at any time, driving societies into the next phase of an alternating cycle.

By August 2021, Asian policy makers, like their colleagues all over the world,

continued to face a choice between strategies of restriction and/or surveillance and quarantine, or making an informed bet on rising vaccination rates and continued vaccine efficacy while relaxing restrictions. In an early phase of the crisis, many Asian countries had been successful using rather restrictive strategies to contain the spread of the pandemic. But such strategies involved obvious hardships, especially for poor populations, and only some countries and places were willing and able to pursue them seriously over extended periods of time. Even then they did not always translate into a successful containment of Covid-19. In some cases, arguably, they may even have led to a delay of vaccination efforts, as a sense of urgency appears to have been lacking. Differences in policy choices, governance quality and public trust produced very diverse outcomes of pandemic management.

When we initially conceptualised an issue of *Perspectives Asia* focusing on the pandemic, we had two aims: We intended to look into how the pandemic affects policies and people’s lives in Asia, and to explore how to move towards a “green recovery” when economies and societies resume their activities. Meanwhile, the pandemic has had disruptive impacts on the “fabric of society”: on everyday lives, institutions, economy and culture, and some of these impacts may last much longer than the pandemic itself. At this time, talking about anything definitively “post-Covid19” is largely premature, or remains speculative. Our conscientious approach is to share down-to-earth experiences from different regions and cultures in Asia and take a look at how the pandemic is reshaping lives, on the level of individuals

and groups, but also with a particular look at state/society relationships. We opt to stand with those who are undergoing hardship and suffering, and we seek to present snapshots and analyses that contribute to a dialogue within the region and beyond.

One of the defining issues that evolved from the experience of the pandemic globally is the importance of trust (or lack of it) in governance and governments. Jessie Lau provides an analysis of this relationship for five Asian countries, while Moe Thuzar portrays ASEAN's handling of the crisis more from a policy perspective. Rina Saeed Khan introduces an interesting government-driven tree-planting project in Pakistan, which aims to tackle both the country's long-standing climate change problems and unemployment during the pandemic.

Other contributions to this edition focus strongly on individual lives in Asia under pandemic conditions. Zhang Rou interviewed ordinary people in China to recall and compare their experience between SARS in 2003 and the current Covid-19; there were moments of déjà vu but also entirely new dynamics, resulting especially from the availability of new information technologies. Khy Sovuthy and Miguel Jeronimo present, by feature story and photo story respectively, the circumstances of Cambodian migrant workers who have had to return home from Thailand and face very uncertain futures.

Experiences of the pandemic differed strongly, not only by country but also by gender. Jeong-Hyun Lee discusses how South Korea's *Digital New Deal* policy, with all its focus on technology and digitalisation, reinforces existing conservative gendered realities for males and females under

the pandemic. Culture comes in in another dimensions as well: Psychologists Emma Buchtel and Li Man-Wai Liman share their insights on face mask culture and vaccine hesitation in Asia.

At the end of this issue, we dare to take a speculative look forward. In a story set somewhere in urban Asia a decade into the future, Chermaine Lee imagines what may be left of the Covid-19 pandemic in the long run.

This issue is accompanied by an online dossier with additional multimedia content, such as a video created by our India office entitled *Brave New World* (see page 48). We are grateful to all contributors and collaborators. Our special thanks go to Carmen Lym, whose front and back cover design embraces a vulnerable and lonely globe under the pandemic, showing diversified snapshots of human life situations, all of it with a gentle touch that, perhaps, is soothing.

**Lucia Siu** and editorial team

Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong Office

# The Question of Trust and Governance during the Pandemic

Jessie Lau

In Asia and globally, the fight against the coronavirus has illustrated the importance of public trust in authorities, particularly when it comes to the effectiveness of various policy approaches. But what does public trust stem from? Why is it so easily lost, and what does it mean to citizens during a crisis? As the world slowly recovers and opens up, countries in Asia are continuing to grapple with new outbreaks, vaccine hesitancy and other challenges. Reflecting on the past year and a half, we take a closer look at how countries in the region have managed the relationship between the people and the state, as well as the successes – and failures – that are defining their pandemic stories.

When the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization and began ravaging rich nations in the West, Victor – a tour guide in his 50s living with his wife and three children on the outskirts of Tokyo – felt lucky to be in Japan.

Although Japan was one of the first to identify the virus outside of China last January, the nation logged fewer than 100 daily confirmed cases until late March. Only then did the country experience its first significant wave, with cases rising to 700 daily infections in April, before dying down. During those initial months, Japan saw fewer deaths than average in Asia, despite having more elderly people per capita than any other country in the region and taking a relatively more relaxed approach to the virus.

“I felt very safe,” Victor said, explaining that there were no strict lockdowns and

life was largely normal last year. He even had hope that international travel would resume quickly. “The government even had a campaign telling us to go travel and go eat.”

## A low-key Olympics

A year later, things have shifted dramatically. Japan is embroiled in a fourth wave, with Covid-19 cases skyrocketing less than a month after the nation lifted its second state of emergency in March. Its vaccine rollout is also one of the most sluggish in the region, stymied by vaccine hesitancy and conservative attitudes towards regulatory approval. The vaccination rate has only picked up with developed countries since June.

An April poll by Nippon TV and Yomiuri Shimbun found that about 70% of Japanese people feel the rollout of vaccines has been too slow. Many had called for the Olympics to be cancelled, and considered it mere luck that no major outbreak had happened.

Victor’s trust in the government’s ability to handle the crisis has plummeted. He and his family have been surviving on savings for over a year. While they hope the vaccine rollout will speed up, they’re also reluctant to take the job, citing safety concerns. “The government’s response is always delayed, and really not on point. It’s like they have no robust plan or method,” he said. “Japanese people feel less trust now.”

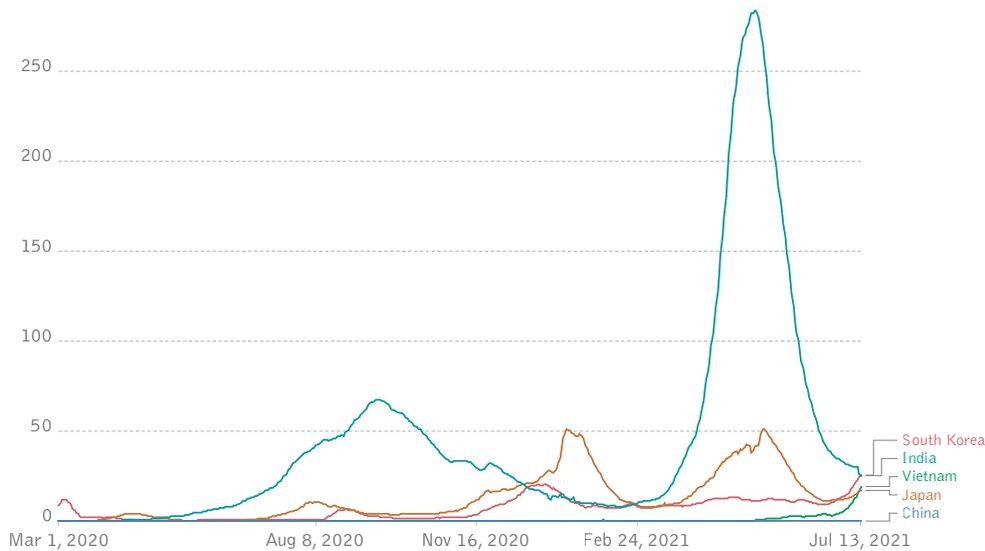
The situation in Japan is one that has played out in various countries in Asia since the outbreak. Although governments in the region were initially praised for their ability to contain the virus during the first months of the outbreak, many have since hit various roadblocks – challenges that have sty-



**Jessie Lau** is a writer and journalist from Hong Kong covering human rights, politics and culture with a focus on China and the Asia Pacific. Her work has been published by Foreign Policy, Channel 4 News, The Guardian and The Economist, among others. Now based in London, she serves as Digital Editor and Board Member at NuVoices, an international feminist collective supporting women working on China subjects.

## Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

© Our World in Data

mied progress and contributed to declining public trust in officials' ability to manage the crisis. In many Asian countries, governments' initial success in containing the virus caused citizens to be less fearful, and more likely to delay taking the jab.

New variants, rampant outbreaks and slow vaccination rates are threatening to put the region behind its western counterparts on the road to normalcy. In particular, governments are struggling to regain legitimacy and public trust, which experts say may have a significant impact on the efficacy of states' pandemic policies in the coming months.

## Trust is falling worldwide

Trust in governments, businesses and the media appears to be falling worldwide due to a perceived mishandling of the pandemic by leaders, according to the 2021 report of the Edelman Trust Barometer, a project that has polled thousands globally on their trust in core institutions for two decades. All the Asian countries polled in the report – including Japan, China, South Korea and India – experienced small increases in public trust between January and May of last year, before witnessing sharper declines that have continued into this year.

Despite being one of the few economies expected to report GDP growth in the age of the pandemic, China recorded the most significant year-on-year decline in general

trust since the project's inception, experiencing a 10-point drop from 82 to 72. After successfully combatting the first wave, the country saw an eight-point increase in April last year, when it eased lockdown measures and reopened businesses. Trust in the government specifically also grew by five points during that period. In the latter half of the year, however, it dropped 13 points between May 2020 and January 2021, the report said.

Following an opaque handling of the initial outbreak that curtailed public trust in authorities, China took strict measures to contain the spread, imposing severe lockdowns and pervasive surveillance measures that came under intense criticism. But as cases dropped and the West became the new epicentre of the pandemic, China eased restrictions and was able to shift the narrative of the state's handling of the pandemic from one of initial failure to success.

So why is public trust now reportedly falling? According to researchers at Edelman, the decline "reflects an introspective Chinese mindset that takes the long view on reacting to challenges, coping with uncertainties and thinking about trust." Others say trust is falling due to a widespread feeling in China that the state's victories in controlling the virus have been overplayed, while the human cost has been swept under the rug. In Wuhan, the site of the outbreak, there is still anger at authorities for their delayed response to the virus, and collective memory of this trauma has continued to linger.



*Tuong Vi Nguyen, a tour guide-turned-gig economy worker in Hoi An.*

## Mixed reactions in China

Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute, says citizens now have mixed reactions to China's Covid-19 approach. Although the lockdowns were extreme compared to those in other countries, many do believe that "on the whole, the government handled the pandemic better than a large number of Western democratic governments," he said. Such comparisons have been encouraged and bolstered by local media, which is tightly controlled by the government. Yet memories of the state's initial opaque response and the heavy consequences of the national lockdowns persist, Tsang added.

Like in other parts of Asia, China's successful containment of the virus has also contributed to a perceived lack of urgency around getting vaccinated – a trend that has hampered its vaccination rollout. Reports by various countries on the efficacy of the Chinese vaccine have been mixed, and the nation's three major vaccine makers have yet to make available much of the peer-reviewed data from their late state trial. Such factors have led to concerns over safety and contributed to vaccine hesitancy, which is also connected to past vaccine scares and perhaps one facet of the reported decline in trust, experts say.

## India: "A lockdown buys you time"

Regionally, one country that has experienced a devastating U-turn in the fight against the virus is India. Being the new global epicentre of the pandemic in April to May, India in early May saw a peak of more than 414,000 new cases per day, a 25-fold increase since late-February; the number fell to 36,000 in mid August. As of August, the country has recorded more than 32 million infections, and the delta (B.1.617) virus variant first found in India has now spread to at least 132 other countries.

Despite being one of the world's largest vaccine producers, India has run out of vaccines during its difficult months, as well as hospital beds and medical supplies. As the situation deteriorates, public opinion is shifting, with critics condemning the government for its complacent approach to the virus following its initial success against the outbreak. In early March, just before cases began to surge, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan declared the nation was in "the end game of the Covid-19 pandemic."

For months, the state has also been easing lockdown restrictions, despite signs of a coming wave of infections. Many have criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other politicians over their inaction, and for prioritizing politics over the pandemic by allowing reckless rallies and religious gatherings.

In India, support for Modi does not translate into trust in public institutions, according to Debasish Roy Chowdhury, researcher, journalist and co-author of an upcoming book on Indian governance. Before the current wave began, the fatality rate from the pandemic was relatively low in India and the country, like many others, was suffering from “coronavirus fatigue.” This, coupled with a nationalistic propaganda push from Modi’s administration perpetuating the idea that India had “won” against the virus, fuelled widespread complacency regarding the virus, he said.

“A lockdown buys you time to improve your infrastructure. It does not end Covid-19, it just slows the spread. India saw the lockdown itself as a solution, which was wrong,” Chowdhury said. “India did not buy enough vaccines. What you have now is an enormous vaccine shortage. It’s the reason why the rollout was very slow. Right now, there’s very low public trust in India.”

The pandemic responses in various Asian nations this past year have garnered mixed results. Yet for those who have experienced setbacks, their approaches have revealed gaps in public health infrastructure and governing practices that serve as important lessons for the region as a whole.

Some, like China, were able to contain the virus early on and emerged relatively strong with a robust economy – but are now grappling with the long-term consequences of mishandling the initial outbreak. Others, like Japan and India, appeared to fare pretty well during the first few months, only to squander those initial gains by becoming complacent and taking protracted approaches to controlling the virus.

## Trust is sewn together by many threads

There have also been some relative success stories. In Vietnam for instance, centralised leadership, clear public messaging and strict enforcement of public health measures helped authorities control the virus better than some of its neighbours – and even reportedly increased public trust. Its Covid-19 figures have remained extremely low for one and a half year, until meeting its first wave in July 2021. Its national Covid-19 figures – 7,000 deaths and about 300,000 confirmed cases in August – are still low by global standards.

Although Vietnam’s tightly-controlled

media landscape means that negative aspects of the state’s pandemic response are underreported, the country has still been regarded as a regional coronavirus success story. Vietnam’s economy also grew by 2.9% in 2020 and is projected to grow by 6.6% this year, according to data from the World Bank.

“I feel more trust in the government after the way they handled the pandemic. We feel so proud of what our government has done to protect us,” said Tuong Vi Nguyen, a 25-year-old Vietnamese tour guide in Hoi An who has not had a steady income since the outbreak last March.

The primary breadwinner for her family, she has spent the past year doing odd jobs while waiting for the tourism trade to restart. Despite these challenges, Nguyen says she’s emerged from the past year feeling grateful for the Vietnamese government, which she feels acted swiftly to contain the spread and prioritized public health over the economy from the get-go. Vietnam has fared better than many richer nations with more advanced healthcare capabilities, she added.

For Nguyen, a combination of luck, effective communication from the state, and people’s trust in authorities and willingness to follow the guidelines enabled the country to contain the virus. Many followed social-distancing procedures diligently, even during times when families would traditionally congregate, such as the Lunar New Year, because they were aware of the nation’s challenges and believed in the state’s policies, she said.

“Our life since last year was a big challenge. But we are still living happily and hopefully,” Nguyen said. “When people trust the government, people do what the government says. I think that is key.”

Perhaps one of the biggest lessons the pandemic has taught us is that public trust is sewn together by many threads. The pandemic trajectories of India, China, Japan and Vietnam have shown that although policy successes or failures have a short shelf-life in a fast-moving crisis, the degree to which public trust is successfully managed has long-term consequences. Faith in politicians must be backed by faith in public institutions, transparency is crucial, and while economic growth and pathways to normalcy are important goals, they cannot come at the cost of human lives.

At the end of the day, it’s not enough for states to build public trust. They must also work hard to keep it. ■■■

# Vulnerable but Brave: The Case of Youth in Assam

Kaustubh Deka

The Covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdown stopped the momentum of life across vibrant spaces. How are the youth in Assam, a peripheral region of India, coping with the changed circumstances? What new forms of solidarity and mobilisation have emerged in this flux that has seen relations between authority and pro-active social groups realign? As some youths based outside the region face 'Covid-19 racism', many others contend with lost livelihoods and face disruption in their academic lives. Against the odds, the youth of Assam show resilience as they try to transition into a 'new normal', even as the pandemic continues to unfold.

of nations, like India's northeast, experience a pandemic phase? One could refer to various global assessments regarding the widespread inequalities in the wake of the pandemic, felt along lines spanning from ethnicity to income and around the areas from healthcare to technology. However, what makes the case of India's northeast interesting, is the fact that it gives us important reference points to discuss how the pandemic and its consequences need to be placed in the larger context of contentious state-society interactions. It needs to be mentioned here that although it contains a mere 3.6% of India's total population and covers only 7.6% of the land, the eight states situated in the northeastern part of India carries a significant status when it comes to cultural richness. It is home to a tremendous ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, mirroring the region's highly diverse geographical terrain. Furthermore, the region's extreme geopolitical sensitivity (sharing turbulent international borders) puts it in paradoxical proximity to the centres of power: geographically and emotionally 'peripheral' in many senses and yet close to the national security apparatus.



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## Introduction: a sudden halt

Aviko and Robert were excitedly planning for the upcoming finals of the interdepartmental volleyball tournament, when both of their cell phones rang almost simultaneously. It was the latter part of March 2020 and the government, they were told, had instructed the campus to be closed within a period of 24 hours and the hostels evacuated due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The lives of Aviko and Robert, and the other students at Dibrugarh University in Assam, were to enter a sudden and unpredictable phase. Some would never return to the university campus at all, most would return a different person.

Pandemics are times when a nation, its people, and the very system that holds it all together get tested. How do these experiences play out in the peripheries of these systems? How do spaces in the margins

## The frontal youth of the region: mobilisation and mobility disrupted by the pandemic

"The lockdown and the various restrictions imposed gave the government that much needed excuse or opportunity to break the momentum of our movement. After all, once the campus is gone, what kind of activ-



*'EMPTINESS': The lawns and benches of the usually vibrant campus now wear a desolate look as the hostels and the departments have remained locked for months. Photo taken by the author at Dibrugarh University, June 2020.*

ism can be there at all? If it was not for the pandemic and the consequent restrictions, our movement would have grown stronger by the day," Bhaskar (name changed on request), a post graduate student tells me.

He is one of the many students at the university who had actively participated in protests condemning the Government of India for passing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019. From December 2019 to January 2020, many parts of India underwent an intense phase of protests in the wake and aftermath of the passing of the CAA. Northeast India and Assam, in particular, had been in the eye of this storm. At Dibrugarh University, students were at the forefront of the movement demanding the scrapping of CAA, alleging it to be a pernicious act harmful to the 'indigenous' of the region.

With their varied history and social position, the youth as a socio-political category has historically played the role of effective and at times pioneering agents of change in the region, both as channels of protest as well as participation. The transformative role of youths in this region became strongly entrenched when a prolonged social movement led by students, often referred to as the Assam Movement (1979 to 1985), came to be widely acknowledged as India's biggest post-independence youth movement. The domain of educational spaces have been crucial sites of transformation, either towards hope or desolation; the category 'youth' can be taken, therefore, as illustrative

while discussing the unfolding of the post-pandemic era in peripheral regions such as Northeast India.

The outbreak of the pandemic right on the heels of this youth-led movement proved significant for more reasons than one. For one, the changed scenario (once again) reaffirmed the continuing paternalism and ties of dependency that define the relation between the governments and populations of different states in India (Gohain, 2021). The lenses of confrontation began to change into those of cooperation, and hostility turned into dependence. In addition, the imposed break to this 'relentless activism' gave a moment or two of reflection for the participants. During this course, the nature of the movement itself went through a sort of transformation: new spaces of solidarity and activism began to emerge, especially in the form of internet-based social activism. As is well documented elsewhere, the use of social media in social campaigns usually have the potential of adding some bit of radicalism and innovation to movements. At the same time, a 'digital turn' can also isolate a movement, constraining it to a clique well-versed in the language of social media. However, the fact that two important and largely effective online campaigns were run by the youth in Assam during the pandemic shows that with sufficient penetration of internet and digital technologies, 'digital revolutions' seem to be a prospective reality even for spaces that remain peripheral on many counts. The campaigns



*A 'winter of discontent': Students of Dibrugarh University seen gathered in large numbers to register their protest against the passing of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. Photo taken by the author at Dibrugarh University, December 2019.*

revolved around two significant incidents of ecological importance that happened in Assam during the pandemic-induced lockdown. One was the issue of a government-proposed land clearing for coal excavation within an elephant reserve and rainforest (Dehing Patkai coal mining proposal) and the other was the campaign for adequate compensation and ecological protection in the wake of a massive gas leak (the Baghjan gas blowout incident). In addition to these campaigns, several social media vloggers emerged from all around Northeast India during this period. Their popularity reached an unprecedented level, measured by an ever increasing number of 'views' and 'shares' of their content across social media platforms and the rising number of subscriptions to their channels. Showcasing aspects of local food, lifestyle and places, this phenomenon of young 'ethnic vloggers' is something interesting that has emerged strongly during the pandemic and continues to grow.

However, internet penetration does not seem equally promising when it comes to the domain of education and shifts in the educational system; the way it seems poised within the 'new normal' comes across as a matter of concern. The disquiet has been whether the existing digital infrastructure is sufficient to meet the sudden requirements that the pandemic situation demands. This has made students worried and tense, almost slipping into depression, regarding

their educational future. As the lockdown placed a lot of emphasis on the prospects of switching to methods of digital education or a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) system, I ran a quick survey involving the students of my department in the initial days of the lockdown. The findings indicate that internet indeed can be used widely for passing on essential information, however when it comes to more in-depth interaction (classes, tutorials and so on) access seems limited and inequitable. Only 35% of students claimed to have fast internet services needed for online classes, 30% had personal laptops (important for doing assignments or reading big files) and less than 40% had options to regularly 'recharge', i.e. to purchase the required volume of internet data for their devices. The scenario at the national level, as it existed prior to the pandemic seemed to be rather grim, too. According to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey report on education, only 24% of Indian households had internet facility through a computer laptop or tablet. While 66% of India's population live in villages, only a little over 15% of rural households had access to internet services. For urban households, the proportion was 42%. Smart phones were not considered in this survey.

There are examples galore of young students dropping out of courses, unable to continue their education during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, female students seem to outweigh their male counterparts



*'A sense of unease': As the lockdown lifts, classrooms are prepared for students to return to a 'new normal' where life is all about protocols and calculated distances. Photo taken by the author at Dibrugarh University, December, 2020.*

in this regard by a significant margin, thus, the pandemic has exacerbated gender gaps in education. Padma Chettri, 19, is one such student. During the lockdown, her father, who is a daily wage earner, couldn't afford to support her education, which had been made more expensive through new Covid-19 requirements. Padma has now moved from her village to the nearest town of Dibrugarh, to work as a domestic caregiver and is also looking to acquire skill-based training from some institutions. Unfortunately, Padma is not the only one. Covid-19 gave birth to many Padmas and their battle of resilience and courage is only truly beginning as the pandemic recedes into a new normal.

## The virus in the mind, scars that surfaced

"I never thought I would have to come back to my small hometown in this way. City life was good. Yes, we used to be taunted in the streets every now and then, but we enjoyed the freedom and possibilities city life offered. Then Covid-19 changed everything and we were treated like germs by our own neighbours," Ranjan Basumatary (name changed on request) recalls.

Basumatary used to work in a posh shopping mall in Bangalore till the pandemic first forced them into their homes and then hostile neighbours forced them out of

the state itself. His was part of the Covid-19 racism story unfolding in India. During the pandemic, Northeast Indians in different parts of mainland Indian cities were racially profiled, negatively stereotyped, even physically assaulted at times as the 'face of coronavirus', leading to a spate of racial abuse and discrimination. Arguably it could be traced to a problem associated with a non-inclusive and insufficiently imagined concept of an 'Indian face', where 'Mongoloid phenotypes' have not found a place in such common imaginaries. A large section of people from India's Northeast region have 'racial features' and distinct cultural traits that separate them from most of the other parts of India. As many, even within India, remain ignorant or disdainful of this aspect of India's rich multi-ethnic foundation, the 'different, Mongoloid looking' Northeast Indians often face racist taunts and even abuse. The way the pandemic panned out on the youth from Northeast India made people reflect on the extant structural factors in Indian society that eventually manifests into acts of racism. Calls for stringent anti-racism laws began to dominate public discourse. However, as Haokip observes, "How ordinary Northeast Indians cope with these extraordinary circumstances along with racial discrimination will remain in the minds of the victims long after the viral pandemic is gone. The scars of racial discrimination will linger in their memories." (Haokip, 2020: 17)

## Conclusion: the long road to loss and recovery of trust

As states across India gradually lifted lockdown restrictions by the end of 2020, educational spaces began to open up too. In our classrooms, benches had begun to gradually fill up. But a certain unease had remained, and towards the end of the first quarter of 2021, the pandemic was back with a renewed severity. India was in the grip of a deadly second wave, forcing all educational institutions shut once more. Education switched back to digital mode again, bringing back the dilemmas associated with it. Although some improvements on this front has been made since the first pandemic wave, the magnitude of the problem has been too large to be addressed within the short span between the two waves. Significantly, in this span, Assam managed to hold elections for the legislative assembly and elect a new state government. Some newly formed political parties backed by students and youth organisations didn't do well in the elections. Instead, the ruling party returned to power with more strength. This prompted some to argue that the good will earned by the ruling party through the government's Covid-management work helped them electorally, whereas the interruption to the political mobilisation of the youth caused by the pandemic hampered their electoral performance.

Through the course of the two waves of the pandemic, the underlying socio-political fissures of the system were exposed, while also exhibiting the strength and vulnerabilities that the youth manifest while undergoing a crisis situation. The experience of the pandemic has perhaps hardened this generation, made them perceptive and prudent in ways that will bear out in the days to come. As the pandemic unfolds into subsequent phases, the nature of interaction between the State of India and its young population at its troubled and vibrant peripheries will go a long way in determining how India fares in this 'brave new' world where pandemics are a matter of existential negotiation. ■■■

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<sup>4</sup> [https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1797&context=asc\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1797&context=asc_papers), accessed on 10.03.2021

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/coal-mining-near-assam-wildlife-sanctuary-suspended/article31769417.ece>

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# ASEAN's Covid-19 Response: Policies and Perceptions

Moe Thuzar

Southeast Asia is struggling to contain the spread of Covid-19 amid a resurgence driven by the Delta variant, leaving national governments with no capacity to spare on neighbouring countries. At the same time, ASEAN faces a trust problem due to the intangible nature of regional cooperation, and capacity issues associated with the prolonged deadlock over the selection of a special envoy to deal with the political crisis in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the potential for future regional cooperation after the health crisis subsides is within view.

## National or regional actions?

In March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic. This lent urgency for ASEAN governments to come up with a regional response to serve multiple needs: primarily to reassure the respective populations in ASEAN countries, and to coordinate across multiple sectors to address health, information, financial, and security aspects of the pandemic. Prior to March 2020, Covid-19 had been viewed largely as a domestic, and at most bilateral, matter. In fact, this emphasis on the domestic nature of the response would prevail up to the convening of the Special ASEAN Summit on Covid-19 in July 2020 and even well beyond the establishment of the Covid-19 Response Fund and the adoption of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework at the 37th ASEAN Summit in November 2020.

The discrepancy in regional and national-level actions probably stems from the way in which the pandemic affected

each ASEAN member state. The pandemic's threat to regional economies propelled ASEAN to mobilise its regional health governance mechanisms, which had been developed and tested since the SARS and Avian Flu outbreaks in 2003-04. Even so, the rapidity with which infections spread across communities and borders, and the severity of the respiratory illness, took a heavy toll across the region. The economic impact of the pandemic was further compounded when the world started locking down, slowing global economies, disrupting global and regional supply chains, and affecting employment, consumption and investment around the world.

## Covid-19 responses in ASEAN

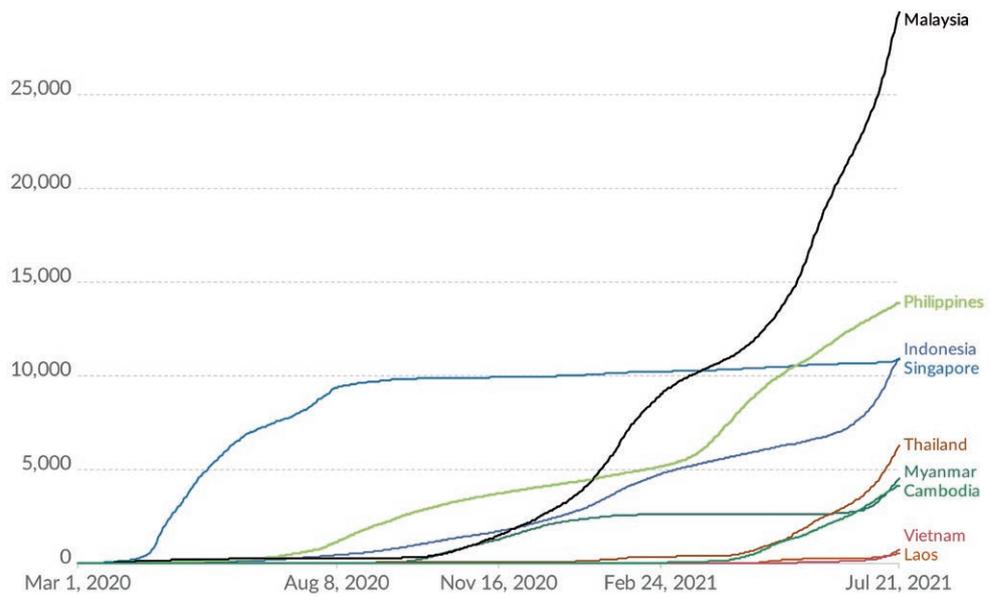
Most of Southeast Asia managed to avoid the brunt of the pandemic for most of 2020 by swiftly closing borders and restricting movement. Data visualisation from Our World in Data shows the spread of the pandemic across communities and countries in the region (Fig 1) and the intensity of various Southeast Asian countries' responses to Covid-19 (Fig 2).<sup>1</sup> This "Stringency Index" for Southeast Asian countries is based on the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker. It reflects common policy responses in ASEAN member states, ranging from public information campaigns and movement restrictions, to the closing of schools, workplaces and public places, as well as near-total lockdowns, strict contact-tracing, quarantine and reporting requirements, as well as domestic and international travel controls.



**Moe Thuzar** is a co-coordinator of the Myanmar Studies Programme and a fellow at ISEAS. She was previously a lead researcher at the ISEAS ASEAN Studies Centre. Before joining ISEAS in 2008, she spent 10 years at the ASEAN Secretariat, with the last three years there spent heading the Human Development Unit. Moe has contributed to several compendia/volumes on ASEAN and on Myanmar. She was also part of the ASEAN Studies Centre team that engaged with Myanmar for its 2014 ASEAN Chairmanship. A former diplomat, Moe is researching Burma's Cold War foreign policy (1948-1988) for her PhD dissertation, drawing from her years in the Myanmar Foreign Service.

## Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

© Our World in Data

The graphs show that as a first response to the pandemic, most ASEAN countries reacted by adopting highly restrictive measures during the period from March to May 2020. Many people have attributed the initial successful containment of the virus in the region to these hard measures. However, these containment strategies were not so successful when faced with new virus variants amidst efforts to reopen economies. Indeed, infection figures rose in most ASEAN countries at different times in 2021.

The Government Response Tracker has also developed a number of other indices to track policy responses not reflected in these charts, such as those related to testing, contact tracing, healthcare and vaccine investment and measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of Covid-19, including income support and debt relief, which may or may not include access to or support from the ASEAN Covid-19 Response Fund.

### Vaccination challenges, resurgence and a hindered recovery

Vaccination against Covid-19 is a core part of national policies and responses to the disease. Authorities view vaccination as the means to a triple protection: to prevent the disease itself, reduce the risk of trans-

mission, as well as to keep the national healthcare system from being overwhelmed. While governments rushed to secure vaccine doses to inoculate entire populations, the cost of the vaccine has also led to an imbalance in access and distribution not only among countries, but also among communities within countries. Vaccination programmes globally largely follow a phased approach by age, after prioritising those on the frontline confronting the disease on a daily basis. This has also been the approach adopted by ASEAN governments.

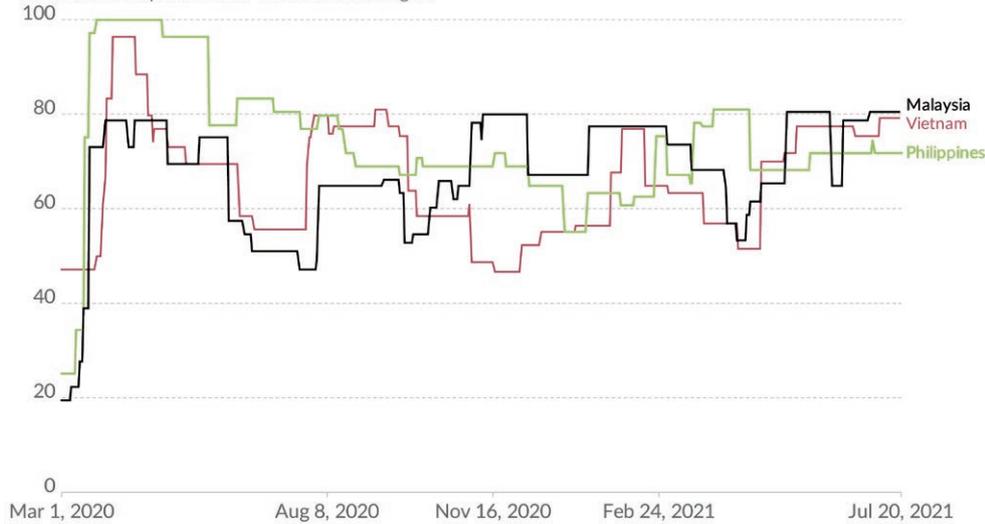
Several ASEAN states had rolled out vaccination programmes by March 2021. At that time, regional analysts started predicting a V-shaped or W-shaped economic recovery for Southeast Asian countries. However, shortly afterwards, new variants of the virus and a resurgence of cases in several ASEAN member states delayed hopes of declaring the region open for business or returning to pre-pandemic activities.

Across the region, the uncertainties of Covid-19 virus mutations, the drawn-out duration and the rapid and extensive spread of the pandemic strained public health and public communications systems, adding to perceptions of slow responses and frustrations over the limited capacity to stem the rising number of infections and deaths in several ASEAN countries.

The varying stages and efficacy of responses to the pandemic in each mem-

## COVID-19: Stringency Index

This is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest). If policies vary at the subnational level, the index is shown as the response level of the strictest sub-region.



Source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8>

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ber state reflects the diversity of ASEAN in terms of governance, resources available to deal with the pandemic's multi-faceted challenges, health system resilience and capacity, and public trust.

Singapore stands out as a leader in vaccination, implementation of stringent measures to prevent and trace the spread of new variants and infections, and in sharing medical equipment and supplies to fellow ASEAN members such as Indonesia and Myanmar.

In Myanmar, a devastating third wave of Covid-19 has compounded the humanitarian crisis catalysed by the military coup on 1 February 2021. The military junta stated that it would continue the vaccination programme started by the National League for Democracy government in January 2021, but implementation and reporting of new cases has been patchy at best, and a major wave of infections has overwhelmed the health system by mid-2021.

Public trust in government efficacy to manage the Covid-19 stresses on the economy and society have also played out in different ways. The political relevance and survival of leaders in Thailand and Malaysia have been largely affected by their Covid-19 response performance. The performance approval of governments in Indonesia, Vietnam, Brunei, Laos and Cambodia do not seem to have been adversely affected. In the Philippines, which had imposed “one of the

world's longest and strictest lockdowns”, the economic recovery outlook lags behind the projected recoveries of Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

An ASEAN senior official (speaking on anonymity) has shared an observation that given ASEAN's diversity, the regional-level responses to the pandemic would take on a complementary role to the primary responsibility and prominence of each member state's national response and efforts to address the multi-faceted challenges of the pandemic.

With Southeast Asia – and ASEAN members – now at the epicentre of a new Covid-19 surge in 2021, ASEAN will need to reinforce its earlier regional cooperation commitments for the pandemic response, financially as well as in programme and policy coordination towards recovery.

## Setting new precedents for cooperation?

The unprecedented nature of Covid-19 caused ASEAN to move to a virtual platform for the first time in its 50-plus years of existence. During the SARS outbreak, officials still travelled to various ASEAN cities to hold consultations on dealing with the socio-economic fallout from the epidemic. But not so with Covid-19. Vietnam's 2020 ASEAN chairmanship became the testing

point and benchmark for how ASEAN could function solely via online communications during a public health crisis such as Covid-19.

Many important regional health governance mechanisms were also employed as components of ASEAN's collective response to the pandemic. High-level ASEAN meetings, at both ministerial and summit level, discussed regional measures, not just in the health but also in economic and social sectors, to tackle various aspects of the pandemic. In addition to the Covid-19 Response Fund, the establishment of the ASEAN Centre on Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases in November 2020, as well as the ASEAN Emergency Operating Centre Network for Public Health Emergency and the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre, contributed to the regional response, facilitating timely and accurate exchanges of information, and technical support and expertise for laboratories in member states. ASEAN also took on the "infodemic" challenge, and deployed the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre to combat misinformation and fake news, as well as disseminating important information on preventive measures to minimise and stop the spread of Covid-19.

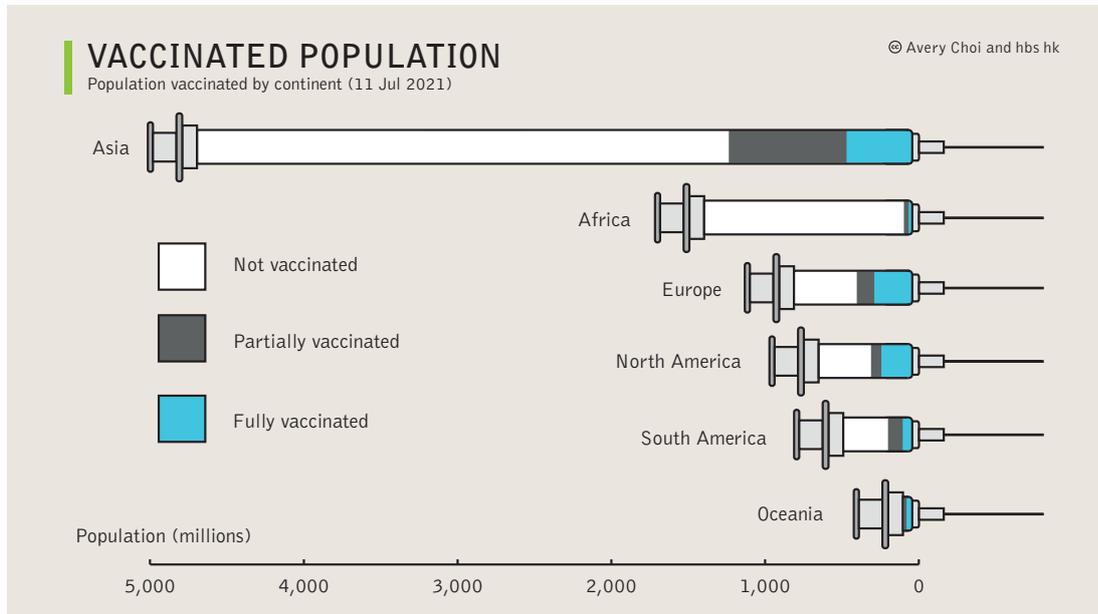
The comprehensive scope of the regional efforts thus shows ASEAN's collective will and commitment to contain Covid-19. But as is the habit of realising regional commitments, the responsibility to implement is national. Effective national responses require strong leadership, centralized and/or better-coordinated multi-sector national pandemic taskforces, clear and concise public information, and strict enforcement of public health and other measures to contain the spread. The nature of the pandemic foregrounded such national commitments and responses - to reassure the respective populaces in ASEAN countries and boost confidence in the government's actions. ASEAN countries also negotiated vaccine access and other cooperation bilaterally more than regionally, with various international, multilateral, and bilateral interlocutors. This approach may need some recalibration, with new variants threatening the road to recovery. A patchwork of bilateral agreements will also need to be worked out for travel and health policy coordination across the region.

Regional measures, which provided the foundation for various national responses and policies, are not immediately visible

on the ground compared to national measures and bilateral cooperation for vaccine access. Areas where coordinated regional action will be necessary long after countries reach herd immunity include labour mobility, employment, education, livelihood/survival conditions, and coping with existing and emerging social issues/concerns. In some instances, the social compact may require rebuilding altogether. Regionally, ASEAN took a first step with its rapid assessment report on Covid-19 impact on livelihoods, issued in December 2020. As is wont of regional cooperation optics, however, many in this region will only see a row of ducks serenely gliding across the water, but not the ducks' feet paddling furiously beneath the surface. ■■■

# Asia Vaccinating

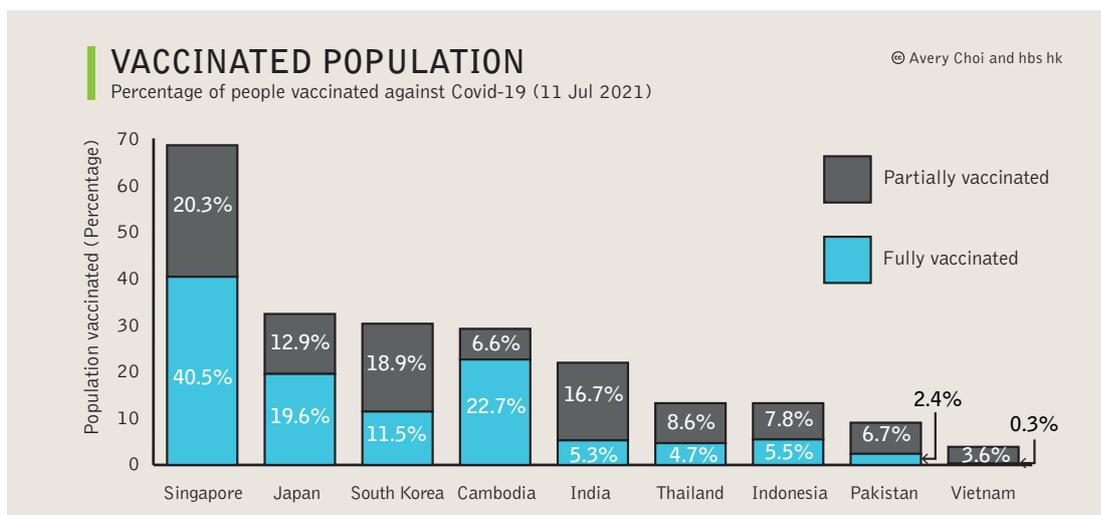
By mid-2021, vaccination against Covid-19 was in full swing in many Asian countries. However, hidden behind encouraging average figures, progress was rather unequal.



Source: Official data collected by Our World in Data.

Note: these data include a large number of vaccinations reported by China on June 10, 2021

The graphs on this page provide a snapshot of the progress of vaccination against Covid-19 in selected Asian countries as at July 11, 2021. By this time, a little more than 25 per cent of Asia's population was fully or partially vaccinated. Measured by population size, this was about global average, and with nearly 1.2 billion people having gotten at least one jab, the progress was impressive in absolute term.



Source: Official data collected by Our World in Data

However, vaccination progressed with very different speeds in different Asian countries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the city of Singapore led the field; wealthy Asian countries followed, but at a distance. In general, they did better than poor ones, but not always; per capita GDP does not necessarily predict vaccination success. Policies by national government and the people's trust in them (or lack thereof) matter.

# Stepping in the Same River Twice

## Three Interviews with Ordinary Chinese Citizens

For Chinese people who experienced SARS in 2002-2003, Covid-19 was an unwelcome reminder of the uncertainty and fear they endured 17 years earlier. If this is the second time for them to step in the same river, what was familiar this time around, and what was different?

As we look forward to a post-Covid-19 era and reflect on what has changed as a result of the pandemic, people who experienced the SARS outbreak in 2002-2003 offer some insights. In the following interviews, three Chinese citizens share their personal experiences and impressions as to how information, and the response to it, spread during the two outbreaks – from fear sparked by rumours to relative trust based on high-tech reporting systems. They also explain a dramatic shift in the roles of traditional and social media in conveying news to the people.

**Interviews by:**

**Zhang Rou**, Heinrich Böll  
Stiftung Beijing Representative  
Office



“Timely discovery, timely report, timely quarantine, timely treatment”

**Mr Wang** was working from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm in a company in Beijing in 2020. Back in 2002-2003 when SARS broke out in Guangdong province, he had been working in Beijing for six years, and was preparing to take the graduate school entrance exam for a degree in English.

How did you first learn of the SARS outbreak in 2002, and the Covid-19 one in 2019? What were the main information channels for you, then and now? Was there a difference in terms of access to information? How did you deal with disinformation in 2003?

In late 2002 I read some posts in an online forum about “a weird disease in Guangdong” and there was also news of “people panic buying vinegar in Guangdong”. Then I started to see related information in English news. In 2019, the early information I received about Covid-19 was also from an online forum. During SARS, especially at the beginning, I relied on the Internet to get the latest information, and also on friends and colleagues. In 2019-2020, 95% of the information was from online sources, including English social media, Chinese and English news and Chinese online forums. Compared to today, the information flow in 2003 was relatively slow. For a long time there was no official confirmation as to what the disease was and how to prevent catching it. In 2020, people could exchange real-time information on social media, making it impossible to hide the outbreak and to clarify rumors in a quicker manner. Regarding disinformation, I would refer to different sources to compare their stories, especially news from English media.

In 2019-2020, information technology played an important role in Covid-19 prevention, which was not the case before. During SARS, how were prevention measures implemented?

In 2003, the fundamental method was staying home. In the city, everyone’s work unit (danwei) informed employees to stay home. In rural areas, they blocked the entrances of villages. There was no “lockdown” announcement, but the city was actually locked down, especially when everyone was afraid to move around. In 2003, for several months, my company told employees not to go to work by bus. I still took the bus and there was no way to track that. But in 2020, it was easy to find out whether I’d been to certain high-risk districts.

Was there any difference between the two pandemics in terms of social trust and interpersonal connections?

The fear that permeated the atmosphere in 2003 was more from a lack of understanding of the disease. When the spread route was not identified, people were very careful about contacting “outside” people, such as people from other villages or other residential compounds. And we didn’t travel across the country as frequent as today. The “dangerous outsider” was a vague concept. In 2020, with rapidly shared information, the fear was specifically directed at certain groups of people, with real-time updates. In 2003, colleagues were considered safe because we knew each other. But in 2020, you’d prefer not to see a colleague who had travelled to a Covid-19 high-risk area appear in the office, and it was possible to avoid such people. As for social trust, I don’t think the impact of Covid-19 is substantially greater than SARS, because the way people define an “outsider” and whom to trust has already been largely reshaped in the past 17 years.

## SARS

First Confirmed  
Case  
**16 Nov 2002**

Last Known Chain  
of Transmission was  
broken  
**5 July 2003**

Global Confirmed  
Cases  
**8,422**

No. of Countries/  
Territories Affected  
**29**

Confirmed Cases in  
China  
**5,327**

No. of Mobile User  
Accounts per 100  
people (by 2002)  
**16.2**

Sources:  
WHO Secretariat report,  
WHO cases summary.

**Ms Li** was a journalist back in 2002-2003, and is now an academic researcher. Her research interests include media and gender issues.

What are your observations concerning the role and dynamics of the media during the SARS outbreak, compared to during Covid-19?

In 2002-2003 journalists and news agencies were quite active and professional. When it came to disclosing information related to public health, my colleagues were looking at international standards as a benchmark. Therefore, debates about core issues, such as what caused the disease, could be seen in mainstream newspapers. But in 2020, there was basically only one, unanimous voice allowed. In 2002-2003, commercial media (not affiliated with the government) contributed some good in-depth news reports, as did some conventional print newspapers. But in 2020, only a limited number of in-depth reports by one or two media agencies managed to make themselves heard. Back in 2002-2003, newspapers and magazines played a very significant role in presenting the actual situation.

One new trend worth noting is social media. Some of them produced a few concrete and in-depth reports during Covid-19, which filled in some of the gaps left by traditional media.

What changed as a result of the two pandemics, in terms of social trust, interpersonal connections and how people perceive the media?

During Covid-19, the idea of “no contact” has greatly constrained the scope and space of our daily lives. And with all the reporting and tracking requirements at the workplace, sometimes it is more about not creating trouble for myself instead of actual disease prevention, as compared to SARS, when pressure mainly came from trying to avoid the virus.

The media atmosphere has changed so much since 2003. In-depth reports were more encouraged back then, and I remember so many colleagues with a strong passion for journalism producing critical articles. Since the birth of social media, the way people assess information has been greatly reshaped. General audiences prefer short bits of information, which somehow discourages in-depth articles.

In 2003, newspapers were seen as the authoritative voice that many readers relied on, which is not the case anymore. Public trust in the media has diminished in the past few years, as the government has tightened its management of public sentiment. From a technological perspective, it would seem to be easier to receive information in 2020; but the media was more trustworthy back in 2003. The government has perfected all its tools of information control in the past year, and they certainly did perform well in 2020 to 2021. Although there were a few occasions in 2020 where often-censored voices remained on Weibo and generated a large-scale response from the public – despite the flow control by Weibo administrators – these were only small cracks in this special period. Overall, Covid-19 exposed how sophisticated and “efficient” the information control and management was.

In many countries, “gender” became an important topic during the pandemic. How do you assess the role and impact of Covid-19 in China’s gender debate?

The base of this important topic is that the voices of women were already apparent in public life, which wasn’t the case in 2002 and 2003, during SARS. So Covid-19 was like an amplifier that brought out

some of these voices. But when I look at what actually happened in these mostly online debates, I don't see dramatic positive change. On one hand, the increased attention to gender topics on social media did encourage the media to follow certain topics, including women's unpaid care work, emotional health and gender-based violence, which were seldom mentioned in public discussion. On the other hand, these gender debates among young social media users could be easily stirred by business interests, and different factions among them often fail to find common ground. It is difficult to say whether any concrete changes could occur at the public policy level; most discussions were on "safe and mild" topics that avoided critical debate about fundamental issues. So far there hasn't been any large-scale data about how Chinese women were impacted by Covid-19. Some attempts to start such projects were called off by the authorities.

**Mr Yan** has worked as a driver for a taxi company for over 20 years. He did not stop working during SARS, but in 2020 he had stopped transporting passengers for almost seven months.

How did you first get information about the SARS outbreak in 2002? What had been your main information channels for Covid-19 in 2019?

I had some clients that took my taxi frequently. In 2002, one client saw some news via his Blackberry cellphone on a foreign website and warned me to be careful about some unknown disease. Back then, my main information source was the radio in my car, as I sat in the car the whole day. My company held "safety meetings" twice a month. For Covid-19, the first signal was through the news on TV and my cellphone. Last year, my cellphone was the main "station" to get updated information. My company had a Wechat group, we are required to reply "confirmed" whenever we received a notice in the group.

How was your work impacted, comparing SARS and Covid-19 from a service sector perspective?

I knew that going out was a risk to myself and my family, so I was more selective when taking passengers. In 2002-2003, I avoided going to train stations or airports and often took passengers in office building areas, as I knew those people were relatively "safe". Last year in the seven months without work, I sometimes went fishing in the suburb. The only passenger I had taken was from a car-pooling app. Since he is working in a state-own company, I felt safe to drive him. When I slowly resumed my work after the break, I started with clients that I am familiar with. With the help of taxi apps, I could easily decide whether to take any passenger in a certain area. To deal with the virus, I have strict disinfection procedures in my car and I prepare different sanitisers for passengers. During SARS, what we had was basically alcohol spray. This time the government has invested much more in prevention, with the help of technology. I appreciate that we have clearer instructions to follow, much better than 2003. *(Mr. Yan showed the health code records of his passengers in his cellphone. According to new regulations, this data is to be used by the government for contact-tracing if there is any new case.)*

## Covid-19

First Report to WHO  
31 Dec 2019

Chain of Transmission  
Ongoing

Global Confirmed  
Cases (By 7 July 2021)  
184,324,026

No. of Countries/  
Territories Affected  
Over 200

Confirmed Cases in  
China (NHC Data By  
7 July 2021)  
91,966

No. of Mobile User  
Accounts per 100  
people (by 2020)  
113.9

Sources:  
WHO COVID-19 Dashboard,  
China NHC data 7 July  
2021, China MIIT 2020  
statistics.



Beijing did not have Covid-19 cases reported in the city in Apr-May 2021. Stickers bearing colourful vaccination rates are daily reminders of the ongoing pandemic: "Vaccination rate of residents in this building has reached 80%."

How would you describe the atmosphere at the peak of SARS, compared to the spring of 2020 when Covid-19 was at its height? What about interpersonal connection?

In 2002-2003, the fear was more about uncertainty, which was exacerbated by a lack of information. Strange ways were invented to prevent catching the virus, such as spreading vinegar and drinking herbs, and shared among friends and relatives. People were not so afraid of human contact. In 2020, the pressure was not only about protecting yourself, but also people around you. Since any behaviour that helped spread the virus could be sent to social media, you tended to be very careful. In 2020 our perceived distance between the virus and ourselves had been changing more frequently and explicitly, according to the instant information we received. After a few weeks without new cases, people felt more relaxed because the virus seemed to be far away.

My extended family didn't gather in 2020 Spring Festival as the dinner was replaced by video call, even though most of us were in Beijing. When we re-united in 2021, I was quite happy but my son showed little excitement. The younger generations are already quite used to online-communication. I am afraid that many traditional customs would diminish faster due to the virus-caused "distance". ■■■

# Life in Arrears: Debt and Desperation of Cambodian Migrant Workers

Khy Sovuthy

Landmines, loan sharks and hard labour – life has never been easy for Cambodia’s legion of migrant workers, who navigate a variety of ills and dangers to work perilous jobs in Thailand’s farms, factories and fisheries in order to provide for their families at home. But closed borders, workplace shutdowns, mass layoffs, rising discrimination and a credit crunch brought on by the Coronacrisis have pushed this oft-forgotten community into deeper despair.

## Between debt and desperation

Yoeun Rorn slipped back across the border and into Thailand at around 3am – using the cover of darkness to avoid Cambodian and Thai soldiers on high alert amid a crackdown on cross-border smugglers and illegal migrants.

The 31-year-old had returned to his wife and two children in Cambodia in December, as the coronavirus wrought havoc on migrant communities in Thailand – but with no regular work at home and debt collectors on his doorstep, he decided to make one desperate trip back to the sugar cane plantation where he had worked for years as a migrant labourer.

“I was afraid of arrest,” Rorn told *CamboJA* in March from a hospital bed in North-western Cambodia. “But I needed to pay the bank, so I went to Thailand to ask the boss to loan me some money.”

Rorn arrived at the plantation around sunrise, reported to his former boss and was put to work. By evening he had secured a loan of Thai baht (THB) 4,500 – about USD

150 – and headed back for the border, careful to evade authorities as both governments raised Covid-19 restrictions amid a fresh outbreak in the migrant-heavy community of Samut Sakhon on Thailand’s coast.

Hundreds had been arrested on both sides of the border, anti-migrant sentiment was on the rise and Cambodia was introducing heavy new fines as both countries lurched toward their biggest outbreaks since the beginning of the pandemic – but Rorn had more than that to be afraid of.

A few hours after dark, as he made his way through bushland, Rorn stepped on something hard - a piece of steel - pushing a pin down into a mortar that exploded underneath his weight and tore his leg to pieces, adding him to the list of tens of thousands of Cambodians maimed by landmines and other explosives left undetonated from decades of war.

“I always change my route to evade police, but I know that area, and I did not think there were land mines,” Rorn said of his mission home - on Valentine’s Day 2021 - through parts of Cambodia where international demining efforts have been ongoing since 1994. “I crossed illegally where I thought it was safe, and I lost my right leg.”

More than a month after that fateful night, Rorn was still in the hospital receiving treatment for a wrong step. At the same time, his debts – including the USD 150 loaned from the sugar cane plantation boss – continued to pile up, throwing him into a vicious debt spiral that currently gripped rural Cambodia, where tens of thousands of families already battling drought have been brought to the edge of ruin by mounting debt and the roiling effects of the coronavirus pandemic.



**Khy Sovuthy** is a career journalist in Cambodia, where he has reported at length on migration, labour rights, politics and crime. He is currently a senior reporter at *CamboJA* news, a fledgling journalists’ alliance and media organization in its second year of publishing. Vuthy previously worked at the *Cambodia Daily* for about a decade until it was shut down and then briefly at the *Khmer Times*, covering some of the biggest stories in Cambodia and the region.

Cambodians hold more than USD 10 billion in microloans, for the highest average household micro debt in the world, at more than double the GDP per capita - according to human rights groups who say that microfinance institutions, which began as a service to help the rural poor create wealth, now prey on vulnerable people with no known means to repay loans, forcing them into the arms of unregulated loan sharks.

More than 130 civil society groups declared millions of Cambodians' livelihoods, health and land tenure security to be at risk in a 2020 statement accompanying a

report on debt in rural Cambodia.

## Chasing opportunities

Life has never been easy for Cambodia's army of migrant workers, which before the pandemic numbered more than two million in Thailand – about half of them undocumented – according to the UN.

With scant opportunity in Cambodia, which has a population of about 16 million, one in every eight head to work in Thailand, where they endure poor living conditions and work mostly in fisheries, farms, factories and construction, doing jobs that Thais don't want to do, sometimes under exploitative or slave-like conditions that have been well-catalogued by human rights groups and journalists.

And that was before the pandemic shut down workplaces, bankrupted bosses, closed borders and stilted economies, sending shockwaves through migrant communities all over the world and demonstrating the fragility and importance of those communities in their host countries. Global remittances from migrant workers to their families at home fell by more than USD 500 billion in 2020 and would leak another USD 470 billion in 2021, the World Bank said in its October migration brief.

"The impact of Covid-19 is pervasive when viewed through a migration lens, as it affects migrants and their families who rely on remittances," stated Mamta Murthi, vice president for human development and chair of the World Bank's migration steering group.

When the Thai-Cambodian borders were closed in March 2020, more than 100,000 were reported fleeing their jobs and returning home via official border checkpoints. Rights groups that work with migrants say the number could be twice as high, with many more thought to have returned home improperly, either by using networks of Thai and Cambodian brokers that have established smuggling routes or by trying their luck in navigating their own way home.

But within a few short months, struck by the same lack of opportunity that saw them migrate in the first place – and with the fear of Covid fading in relation to the fears of starvation and financial ruin – many were heading back, dodging authorities to traverse closed borders.

"It's hard to keep track of them at the



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*Vat Cheoun migrated to Thailand in search of jobs and a better life, but returned to Cambodia in Sep 2020. Since losing his job abroad in the fishing industry, he has been farming rice on a small plot of land from his family, waiting to see how the situation will evolve.*

moment,” said Philip Saroeun, a Thailand-based Cambodian legal advisor to migrant workers. “This pandemic has revealed the reality of life for migrant workers. They are very adaptable – if there is work, they will go, and they have to move fast because in the current situation there is always someone else willing to do the job.”

Mass layoffs due to economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic created an over-supply of labour, which plays into the hands of employers, with many migrants willing to accept worse pay and conditions due to increased competition for jobs. It also plays into the hands of entrepreneurial opportunists known as brokers, who provide services to migrants – from smuggling routes, to transport, to job interviews and organizing documents – and feed off the desperation of the vulnerable.

“Now is the time for brokers to make their money,” Saroeun said. “They are always around doing their work but situations like this are like Christmas for them.”

## Hard-pressed

According to interviews with migrants, the brokers have, indeed, enjoyed a windfall over the past year.

When the Thai government announced an amnesty for undocumented migrant workers to come forward and be legitimized in a bid to avoid labour shortages and stop unnecessary movement earlier this year, the brokers were on hand to help facilitate the process – and charge a premium for their services.

While the process – which consists of health checks, registration and permits – should cost about THB 9,000 (USD 300), brokers commonly collaborate with employers and charge up to double the amount, with bosses loaning the money to workers, locking them into the job until their debts are repaid.

As the Thai government warned of a strict crackdown on undocumented migrants following the amnesty, more than 200,000 Cambodians were among the 650,000 who came forward.

“I had to pay,” said Un Chanthorn, an undocumented migrant labourer stranded in Chonburi province after being laid off from his job at a timber processing mill amid rising fears of the virus and anti-migrant sentiment. “My other option was to pay a broker to take me back to Cambodia

– but that that is a long, risky journey and at the end I arrive in Cambodia where there is no opportunity for me to earn an income.”

Authorities on both sides of the border have promised to come down hard on unscrupulous brokers and smugglers, but rights groups say that much of their work goes unpunished.

When Cambodia stepped up border patrols and implemented mandatory quarantine in December after an outbreak in Thailand sent tens of thousands of migrants for the border, the brokers were ready to help navigate safe passage for those looking to avoid the 14-day stay.



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*Migration is often a temporary solution to increase savings and enable a better future life back home. Savat, 5 years in Thailand, came back to Cambodia in Nov 2020. “I’m a vegetable seller in Thailand... I want to go back to earn some more money, to open a business in Cambodia.”*

More than 80 positive Covid-19 cases were detected at the border – but as local news reported a mass exodus from Thailand, Cambodia was seeing a spike in people sneaking back into Thailand, which was highlighted by the arrest and jailing of a district police chief who had allegedly been running a smuggling network that was brought to light after he improperly released suspects arrested in the crackdown.

Adding to the panic, Prime Minister Prayuth and other senior Thai government figures made public statements apparently blaming migrants for the outbreak in Samut Sakhon, which had spread across most of the country and proved to be Thailand's biggest challenge of the pandemic.

“Migrants live on the edge of society and are constantly in fear of being arrested and taken to prison,” Saroeun said. “The more fear, the more regulation, the more confusion that is around, the more money the brokers can charge.”

“That a man stepped on a landmine while attempting to cross the border without assistance would have been a boon for brokers, giving them a new selling point when offering their services,” he said.

## Poor prospects

Back home in Cambodia, tens of thousands of migrant workers are pondering their futures: stay home and try to eke out a living as smallholder farmers, head to Phnom Penh and find a job in a garment factory, take out a loan and start a small business – or, the most rewarding option for so many years: head back across the border in search of work.

With the borders closed, those heading back risk arrest – and minefields – and are vulnerable on arrival, with employers and brokers ready to capitalise on cheap labour.

For Rorn, whose once-itinerant lifestyle has been reduced to a hospital room since he stepped on the landmine, the future poses a different set of challenges. Harvesting sugar cane is no longer an option – nor are the long walks across the border to the plantation that he has become so familiar with over the years.

“The fear of arrest never stopped us going to Thailand – if we didn't go, we didn't have rice to eat,” he said of his years going back and forth to earn a humble living. “But now I've lost my leg and I can't do heavy work, so I won't be going back.”

As Rorn watches his wounds heal, thousands of Cambodians remain in limbo, well down the pecking order in government vaccination rollouts and with visits from debt collectors, one of the few certainties in life.

Conditioned by years of migration, many still look west to Thailand as their eventual salvation, despite the sectors they traditionally work in having been ravaged by the pandemic.

At home, government promises to overhaul formal migration – by abolishing costs and complications that push people into the hands of brokers and smugglers – have yet to come to fruition. And with the failure to diversify local industry beyond garment factories and keep a legion of blue-collar workers at home with their families, many speak of abandonment – but it is a feeling that they have become accustomed to and don't expect to change any time soon. ■■

# Coming Back: Migrant Workers in Prey Veng

Pictures and text by Miguel Lopes Jerónimo for IOM



*Sreyneang used to work in a food factory in Thailand in order to feed her five-year-old daughter. "I dream of starting my own grocery shop [in Cambodia], but can't see any opportunities with this pandemic."*



*Yuk Sokha used to sell clothes in Thailand but since her return in Aug 2020, she has been staying home taking care of kids, surviving on the money her husband sends back from working as a fisherman. A common desire for 71% of returnees, she wants to go back as soon as the pandemic finishes.*

of December 2020 when the following photo essay was created) due to loss of income or just plain fear for their uncertain future, making them face discrimination and the inherent difficulties of finding a livelihood in some of the most rural areas of Cambodia.

These photos were taken in Prey Pnov and Prey Sla communes, in Prey Veng province, as a visual documentation of the challenges migrants face due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent need to return to their home country. But more importantly, these pictures aim to be a celebration of movement and the natural human desire for self-actualization, a promotion of co-development within Southeast Asian nations by supporting its people to move freely and stand stronger as one unified community.

The project was done for the Cambodian chapter of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM-UN Migration), to commemorate International Migrants Day on 18 December 2020. It follows the motto that migration has been, throughout human history, a courageous expression of the individual's will to overcome adversity and to live a better life. This series is not only a way to give voice to migrants and make them feel seen, these are their stories of returning home, of their resilience and will to get back to their lives after the pandemic ends. It's time to reimagine human mobility and its role in lifting livelihoods while helping countries to grow back together in a post-pandemic world.



**Miguel Lopes Jerónimo** ~ Portuguese freelance photographer, curator and vagabond writer based in Cambodia. Passionate about impactful NGO projects, artist collaborations and meaningful exhibitions. With an interest in visual storytelling and art for awareness and social development, Miguel is in search of visual poetry through conceptual and documentary photography. An academic background in emotion AI and experience in social entrepreneurship frames his enthusiasm for philosophy, eco-sustainability, solo traveling, poetic naturalism, and crickets as the future of food.

Southeast Asia was one of the most successful regions in the world when it came to tackling Covid-19, creating great opportunities for fast recovery if cooperation and multilateral policy are harnessed. Although cases and deaths remain relatively low, the economic and social impacts are immense, especially in countries such as Cambodia, where 90% of workers are engaged in the informal economy. The geographical and job market realities between neighbouring countries play a huge role in the economic dynamics and mobility of this region, with Thailand and Malaysia, for instance, being a common destination for hundreds of thousands of Cambodian workers in search of a better life. Farming, construction and factory work, as well as street vending have been regular jobs taken in the recent past by a vast sector of the most underprivileged families. Precariousness, uncertainty and the oft undocumented status of a majority of migrant workers turned them into some of the most vulnerable members of society during this health crisis. More than 120,000 were forced to come back to Cambodia (as

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IOM, as the specialised UN agency for migration, acts with its partners to assist in meeting the growing operational challenges of migration management, advance understanding of migration issues and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants and dedicated to promoting humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all and works with governments and partners to ensure that the SDG goals and targets linked to migrants' rights remain part of government agendas. It does so by providing services and advice to governments and migrants, promoting international cooperation on migration issues, assisting in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, be they refugees, displaced persons or other uprooted people.



*Covid-19 information materials and soap donated by the International Organisation for Migration in local villages as part of their Covid-19 response program in Prey Veng province.*



*Due to the schools' shutdown, having children at home is making it even harder for parents to search for jobs. The Coronacrisis is a major setback in migrant families' dream of providing a better education – and a normal childhood – to their loved ones.*



*Hay Saren (left) used to work in Malaysia for 1 year in the fishing industry. Despite working on the ocean posed less risk than living in cities during the pandemic, he decided to come back to visit his mother (right) in Prey Veng. She was nervous about the virus outbreaks in Malaysia.*





*Of all the interviews with Cambodian migrants who returned from Thailand, 95% express that not being able to find a job back home is their main concern. Almost 4 in 10 households have no income since returning.*



*Phan Sokleap, 3 years in Thailand having a job in a food factory, came back Sep 2020. "I'm so afraid of catching coronavirus. In the factory where I used to work, there were many washing stations, here I need to be so careful on my own."*



*Soung Tha, 5 years in Thailand, came back in Nov 2020. In Thailand he used to receive USD10 per day, but if he was sick for a single day he would receive nothing, but had to pay for expensive living costs. The life of a migrant is often a risky game where one lives day to day without a safety net.*

## Post-script

Discriminatory views of seeing migrants as possible carriers of the virus still exist, even if the process of coming back to the country has been largely following appropriate safety measures, with quarantine at government facilities or at home. Families responsibly stayed apart during the fourteen days of self-isolation the returnee had to go through, with even meals being taken apart from each other. In addition, the issues of reintegration are many, with little savings and few livelihood opportunities waiting for the migrants back home.

Migration is an essential ingredient in the recovery recipe for a world after Covid-19. Between providing a valuable work force in the host country to the importance of remittances to the family back in the homeland, mobility is responsible for many successful stories for a developing country such as Cambodia. Take the example of Yea Naren and Sok Chean, a young couple who managed to build their own house after working for eight years in Thailand as a nurse and as a fisherman. "It's something to be happy and proud about. I feel safer to have my own home for my kids to grow up in."

Migration is one of the many manifestations of the most intimate human drive, a desire for a better life and a will to offer a brighter future to the next generation. From awareness and behaviour change campaigns targeting the general public, to concrete actions on the policy level, the world can benefit from a quicker recovery if migrants are taken into account, not only in an economic sense, but more importantly, as a path towards a more just and inclusive world.

Providing better social services such as education and mental health support – for instance only 57% of the interviewed migrants completed primary education, while another 10% never attended school, and one third of returnees cited mental and psychosocial health issues as their main concern apart from the difficulty of finding a job – and assisting in vocational training, promoting stronger law enforcement in terms of human trafficking and labour exploitation, as well as continuing the extension of healthcare access for vulnerable migrants as some countries did during the pandemic would be a start to creating a more resilient future. A crisis such as the one we faced in 2020-2021 can be the right wake-up call to rebuild better: a fresh start that takes everyone into account. ■■■

Scan QR code below for the online version of this photo story.



# Planting Trees of Hope in Pakistan

Rina Saeed Khan

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Pakistan is trying to unleash a green economy by restoring Pakistan's lost forests and stepping up the protection of natural ecosystems under an ambitious Ten Billion Tree Plan funded entirely by the Government of Pakistan under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan. His government is promoting nature-based solutions across the country, from the high mountains to the coast, to not only address global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, but also to serve as an effective tool for a green economic revival to help the country come out of the coronavirus-induced crisis.

Cricketing legend Imran Khan's two-year old government in Pakistan has taken up addressing climate change as one of its top most priorities. The government's green agenda is built upon the successful implementation of the Billion Tree Tsunami Project (2014-2018) and is founded on the idea that nature-based solutions not only protect and preserve nature, but also have the potential to spur an alternative green economy.

## Protecting nature and creating jobs

Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 crisis, which started in March 2020, provided an opportunity and Pakistan took it to launch a "Green Stimulus" package focused on two objectives: protecting nature and creating green jobs. This included planting more trees and expanding and reviving protected

areas – all of which could generate quick employment while also allowing the country to come out of the crisis on "a nature-positive pathway", according to the Special Assistant to PM Imran Khan on Climate Change, Malik Amin Aslam.

In his view, "The two striking lessons emerging out of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis are firstly, that nature operates with limits and thresholds that demand respect, and when crossed, have consequences. The second lesson emerged with hope – that a renewed and sustainable relationship with nature is possible, and within reach, but needs to be backed by political commitment and collective action."

Aslam, who also serves as global vice-president of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), was the architect of the Billion Tree Tsunami Project that was conceived back in 2014 when Imran Khan's 'Movement for Justice' political party first came to power in Khyber Pukthunkwa (KP) province in the north of Pakistan. The KP government signed up with the Bonn Challenge, a global partnership aiming to restore 150 million hectares of the world's deforested and degraded lands by 2020. In four years' time, the Billion Tree project had restored 350,000 hectares of forests and degraded land in KP to meet its Bonn Challenge commitment.

According to Khan, who was not yet prime minister at the time, "The project aimed at not only planting a billion trees by 2018, but also shifting mindsets in the province and in Pakistan from environmental destruction towards valuing, conserving and preserving our precious natural resources." Years of felling trees for timber for construction and land clearing for devel-



**Rina Saeed Khan** is an award-winning environmental journalist based in Islamabad, Pakistan and is currently serving as honorary chairperson of the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board (IWMB). She was appointed chair of the government-run body that is in charge of managing the Margallah Hills National Park located in Islamabad in November 2020.



*Chir pine and Kachnar saplings ready for plantation in the government Haripur nursery in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.*

opment had reduced Pakistan's forests to under 2% of its land area, one of the lowest levels in the region, according to a 2015 UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report. In comparison, the global average is around 31% according to FAO.

## Mitigate for floods, heatwaves and GDP loss

When Khan won the general elections in Pakistan in 2018 and became PM, he asked for the project to be scaled up to the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme currently being implemented across the country to mitigate the effects of climate change. According to Aslam, "Almost 5 to 6% of our GDP is washed away every year. Climate change is a reality for us. From super floods to heatwaves to glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), we are facing this reality in Pakistan."

Pakistan is in the top-10 list of countries that are the most affected by climate change. According to Germanwatch's annual report, Global Climate Risk Index 2021, Pakistan ranks number eight on the list of countries most affected by climate-related disasters in the two decades from 2000 to 2019. The report highlighted that in this 20-year period, 173 climate-related events had occurred in the country, with economic losses worth Pakistan Rupee (PKR) 581.2 billion (USD 3.8 Billion).

Under the successful Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project, 60% of the

billion trees were grown as a result of protecting natural forests, while 40% came from new plantings done by local communities with the help of local forest departments in the provinces. About 40% of the country's remaining forests are located in KP. The project aimed to turn around deforestation and increase the province's forested area by at least 2%. According to Aslam, the Billion Tree Tsunami Project has actually increased forest cover in KP by 6%.

Rab Nawaz, the senior director of programmes for World Wildlife Fund-Pakistan, who helped audit the tree-planting effort and found a high survival rate for the saplings, said, "The benefits of planting trees have gone far beyond what was expected... the change in attitude towards forests and environment which started in KP has become a national campaign now. People realize that if you plant a tree, you plant hope."

Khan's government, which now rules at the centre and in KP province, says their flagship Ten Billion Tree initiative will create at least 200,000 new green jobs. According to Suleyman Warraich, who recently served as the national project director of the Ten Billion Tree Project, half of the funding will come from the federal government's Public Sector Development Programme and half will come from each province's Annual Development Plan. It is a four-year project fully funded by the Government of Pakistan, with a projected cost of PKR 125 billion (USD 803 million).



Labourers working on sap seedlings.

The Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Project began in July 2019 with plans for the regeneration of forests and planting of trees in all four provinces and territories, according to Aslam, who heads the federal Ministry of Climate Change. The Ministry has prepared seven different plans for all the provinces and territories, ranging from protecting mangroves on the coast to enhancing natural forests in the north, and the planting of new forests in the plains. The project is being implemented by the Ministry along with provincial forest and wildlife departments. “It is not just about planting – it is an ecosystem restoration plan,” explained Warraich. “It will include wildlife protection areas, botanical gardens, zoological surveys, and the natural regeneration of forests and restoration of water bodies.”

When the coronavirus pandemic hit Pakistan last year, the project was halted temporarily because of the countrywide social distancing orders that went into effect on 23 March 2020. However, PM Khan restarted the programme on 1 April 2020. In a tweet on April 11th, he posted: “Pakistan innovates in the time of COVID-19. With daily wagers out of jobs, our govt is employing a number of them as part of the massive Ten Billion Tree Campaign – impacting lives and the planet positively at the same time.” The project was allowed to continue as social distancing could be observed outdoors even though Pakistan was put under a nation-wide lockdown from the end of March, which was extended twice until 9

May 2020. The distribution of COVID-19 in Pakistan is heavily concentrated in its large urban centres and much of its rural areas have escaped the brunt of the epidemic, which has resulted in 15,500 deaths in the country so far.

### Lower wages for out-of-work labourers

Out-of-work labourers were hired at around PKR 500 (USD 3.18) per day to plant trees across the country. “Due to coronavirus lockdowns in the cities, most of us daily wagers couldn’t earn a living,” reported Rahman, a resident of Rawalpindi district in Punjab province last year. By planting trees, he made half of what he might have made on a good day on a construction job, but enough to get by. “This kind of work does not require much training, you just need to be able to dig and they made us wear masks and keep a distance. We had a way of earning daily wages again to feed our families,” he explained. The country-wide lockdowns did not last long in the country as PM Imran Khan decided instead to opt for “smart lockdowns” – imposed only in virus hotspots – instead of sweeping countrywide restrictions. In his view, this has helped in “keeping the economy afloat” and addressing the problems of the poor and the working class while containing the disease, according to a statement issued by the Prime Minister’s Office. Pakistan is currently facing a third



*Chir pine and Kachnar saplings ready for plantation in the government Haripur nursery in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.*

wave of the epidemic with the second highest number of confirmed cases in South Asia after India.

According to Aslam, "Around 84,000 green jobs were created in all four Pakistan provinces since March last year when the lockdowns first began. That includes jobs in setting up thousands of nurseries, planting saplings, serving as guards in natural forest protection and as forest fire fighters." In 2019, only around 20,000 labourers were hired during the planting seasons that take place in the spring and during the monsoon season in July/August. "This tragic crisis provided an opportunity and we grabbed it," Aslam said. "Nurturing nature has come to the economic rescue of thousands of jobless youth and rural women." The forest department mobilised women and educated girls in remote areas to play an active part in the project by setting up nurseries in their backyards. They were given black polythene bags from the forest department to fill with mud and manure, followed by seeds and training on how to sow them and tend to the young saplings. The women who participate also get a government subsidy of PKR 12,000 (USD 77) per month to look after the saplings, which are then used in tree-planting drives.

In Punjab province where few forests remain, the labourers planted indigenous fruit trees, such as mulberry and jujube, mostly near water canals so they could survive. In the first year of the programme, millions of indigenous saplings - including Indian rosewood, acacia and moringa - were planted on state land during the two planting seasons. Trees like neem were preferred for dry areas as they do not require much water to survive. According to Waraich, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the total planting target of 430 million saplings was achieved across the country, and a target of planting one billion saplings in total is set for 30 June 2021. The tree saplings come from hundreds of government-owned and privately-owned nurseries across the country.

The government is currently in the first phase of planting 3.25 billion trees, at an estimated cost of around PKR 105 billion (USD 674 million). PM Khan wants to extend that to almost 10 billion trees by the time his term ends in 2023. The cost includes a geotagging system that will help organisers monitor the trees using GPS. Once the trees grow, they will be monitored by satellite. Using GPS to monitor the growing trees will give accurate figures on how many saplings

have been planted and how many have survived. The programme will be digitising this data along with the jobs data.

The programme will also be independently monitored by a consortium that includes IUCN, WWF and FAO. Entitled Third Party Monitoring and Evaluation of TBTP from 2020 to 2024 in Pakistan, the agreement was recently signed in September 2020. IUCN will facilitate the Ministry of Climate Change in overall coordination and in conducting the biodiversity assessment. FAO will extend support for regular field data collection and periodic forest cover change assessment through remote sensing. WWF-Pakistan will be responsible for field sampling and monitoring.

WWF-Pakistan's Nawaz says that the current scaled up effort of planting trees is "a very good idea to create green jobs and get people employed during the pandemic". But he cautions that planting trees is just one tool in the fight against climate change, saying the government also needs to invest in improving the ability of farmers and city dwellers to adapt to the effects of global warming. Muhammad Niaz, a resident of the coastal town of Gawadar in the country's south who works for a local NGO says, "The Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Project is a long-term, result-oriented effort. After a decade people will see results and thank this government for its green service to the country." Aslam says, "It is early days as yet, but we are trying to unleash a green economy."

## "Green Stimulus" package

Pakistan's "Green Stimulus" package also includes the Protected Areas Initiative. The first phase of the Protected Areas Initiative, launched on 2 July 2020, will focus on 15 national parks that make up a total of 7,300 sq km (2,800 sq miles), spanning from Khunjerab on the mountainous border with China in the north to the area around Astola Island in the Arabian Sea in the south. Some are new national parks and others are older ones that still don't have proper management.

The project aims to create up to 5,000 new jobs, mainly for young people who will work as park guards and custodians, and boost eco-tourism in the country, according to the Ministry of Climate Change. Aslam said the government has earmarked PKR 4 billion (USD 24 million) for the initiative's first phase over the next three years, of

which at least 80% would be spent on creating green jobs and increasing community engagement.

Through the project, the amount of protected land in Pakistan would increase from 13% to 15% by 2023, Aslam added. However, environmental lawyer Rafay Ahmad Alam said the initiative "won't make up for the fact that most of the provincial national park laws are weak and don't provide adequate specifics for conservation, protection or enforcement measures". Aslam agreed that proper provincial legislation is essential and noted that changes to policy are also part of the new plan.

In December 2020 PM Khan also launched the Billion Tree Honey Initiative aimed at increasing local honey production through tree planting and generating more jobs and income. This initiative will formulate a mechanism to ensure quality honey production and livelihoods for beekeepers. Planting of several bee floras, including indigenous trees like acacia and jujube will be encouraged under the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Programme.

The premier is hopeful that this initiative would open various employment opportunities for locals. "When local people see they will make money and earn income, they will protect forests more than anyone," Khan said. "We have 12 climatic zones which are very unique; 12 different zones mean 12 different habitats so we can make honey of different varieties," he added.

The Billion Tree Honey Programme will enhance Pakistan's ability to produce 70,000 metric tonnes of honey annually in less than a decade, said Aslam. He further revealed that through proper training of beekeepers, the quality of Pakistan's honey could be recognized internationally through quality certification and branding. It could potentially generate 87,000 green jobs and an income of PKR 43 billion (USD 276 million) by becoming a honey exporting country.

All these green initiatives have been launched as part of PM Khan's vision for a "Green and Clean Pakistan". His government is trying its best to reverse Pakistan's environmental degradation and improve its forest cover while addressing climate change. In Aslam's view, "Nature-based solutions provide a win-win solution not only for nature's protection to address global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, but also to serve as an effective tool for a green economic revival delivering direct benefits to the people." ■■■

# South Korea's Post-Pandemic Digital New Deal and Gender Inclusion

Jeong-Hyun Lee

Technology is gendered. It may be treated as neutral, but its application and support through government policy impact gendered identities, needs and priorities. South Korea's pandemic response and post-pandemic strategy have inadvertently reversed the nation's progress in promoting gender equality. This article reviews two gendered experiences of the digital transformation precipitated by Covid-19. It points out the absence of gender inclusion in the national policy advocating digital transformation, and the resulting marginalisation of women.

government has used mobile messaging to share virus-related information with the citizens, such as sanitation guidelines, the number of daily infections, and the detailed movements of people who have tested positive. Besides being used to gather and share epidemiological information, digital technologies have played a prominent role in many other activities during the pandemic. When schools were periodically closed in certain areas, classes were conducted on online platforms, where students could meet their teachers and friends remotely. Many offices allowed staff to work from home, using the company's intranet and applications. People who previously commuted to work in the cities were staying at home and adapting to the 'new normal', which meant relying on digital infrastructure that transformed their way of life.

In preparation for the post-pandemic world, South Korea established a new policy, the Digital New Deal, promising digital transformation across different social sectors. The Digital New Deal comes from the national consensus that Covid-19 has expedited structural transformation, enhancing the global digital economy. In its five-year roadmap, the policy emphasises the promotion of high-quality digital infrastructure for government, industry and education.

However, during the pandemic, digital technology has not equally benefited all parts of society. While the 'new normal' has demonstrated what a society reliant on digital technology and non-face-to-face activities would look like, it has also revealed another reality that cautions against an overly optimistic view of digital transformation. There are many aspects of home life that cannot be digitalised, such as house-



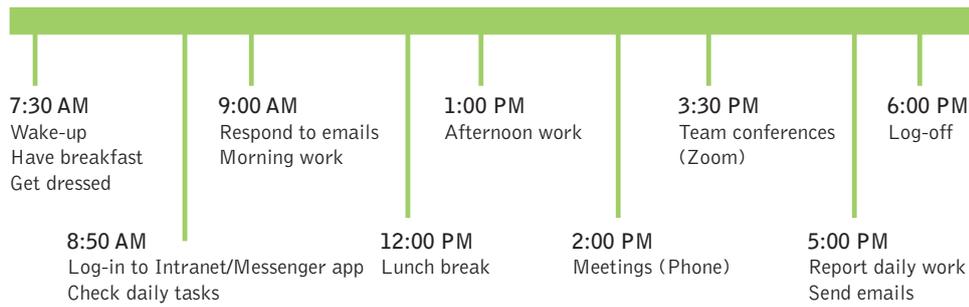
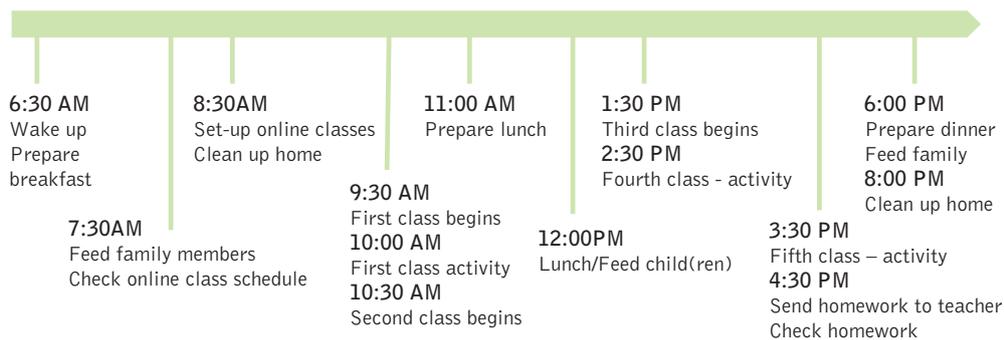
**Jeong-Hyun Lee** (PhD, North Carolina State University) is an Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD) Fellow at the United Nations University in Macau. In her research she seeks to critically examine political and ethical issues related to digital storage and algorithmic processing of emerging media operations. She is currently investigating connected histories related to artificial intelligence and its cultural applications across Asian countries, focusing on how social discourse and algorithmic operations are reinforcing or transforming inequality in the context of globalisation.

## Covid-19 in South Korea: Going digital

In late February 2020, about a month before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic, South Korea experienced its first mass infections at a local church in Daegu. A few weeks later, new cases peaked at 909 in a single day; after that, the number of new cases halved every week, and the first curve was flattened in three weeks from the peak.

Unlike many countries that imposed lockdowns to minimise the spread of the virus, South Korea never shut down its economy or closed its national borders. Among many factors, digital technologies have been central to the South Korean pandemic response, allowing citizens to maintain at least minimum social and economic activity.

South Korea leads the world in smartphone ownership; 93% of the adult population has such a device. The South Korean

**Figure 1. Typical timetable for a telecommuter****Figure 2. Typical timetable for managing childcare and online classes at home**

© Jeong-Hyun Lee

work, feeding the family, and childcare; and these activities tend to be highly gendered.

## Two realities of Covid-19 in digital transformation

A survey published by the Korean Ministry of Employment and Labour on 24 September 2020 stated that 48.8% of workers had experienced telecommuting during the pandemic. Especially, office workers in finance (66.7%), art and leisure (66.7%), education (62.5%), and information and communications technology (61.5%) had the highest rates of working remotely. Apart from workers in hospitality, restaurants, manufacturing, wholesale and retail businesses, a majority of employees worked at home through their digital devices, their company's intranet, and digital networks across the country.

Figure 1 shows a typical telecommuter's daily schedule: logging into the intranet and communicating through email, phone, and video conferences. Surveyed workers reported a 66.7% rate of satisfaction regarding the efficiency of working at home.

The Digital New Deal expands the strengths of telecommuting into two primary areas. First, the policy aims to integrate 5G and Artificial Intelligence into all

industries. One of five projects toward this goal is fostering a non-face-to-face industry to create new jobs in digital industries and start-ups. Second, the project promotes a broader range of digital transformation by funding small and medium-sized businesses in developing non-face-to-face infrastructure and services. This includes shared spaces for video discussions, equipped with high-quality digital infrastructure that enables companies to host and participate in online events and international conferences. South Korea envisions a new normal with digitally connected labourers.

On the other hand, many families have faced another reality at home during Covid-19. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, the Korean government postponed the start of school for children in grades 1 to 12 for about two months. All schools, day-care centres and private educational institutes were closed. Since children had to stay at home, someone had to take care of them. Starting from 9 April 2020, students successively began their semester online, from the upper grades to the lower grades. The new educational system required daily support from home, with parental supervision of online coursework, especially for younger children.

Figure 2 represents a typical daily schedule for a parent or caretaker with at least one



*Women and men may be experiencing different realities during the pandemic.*

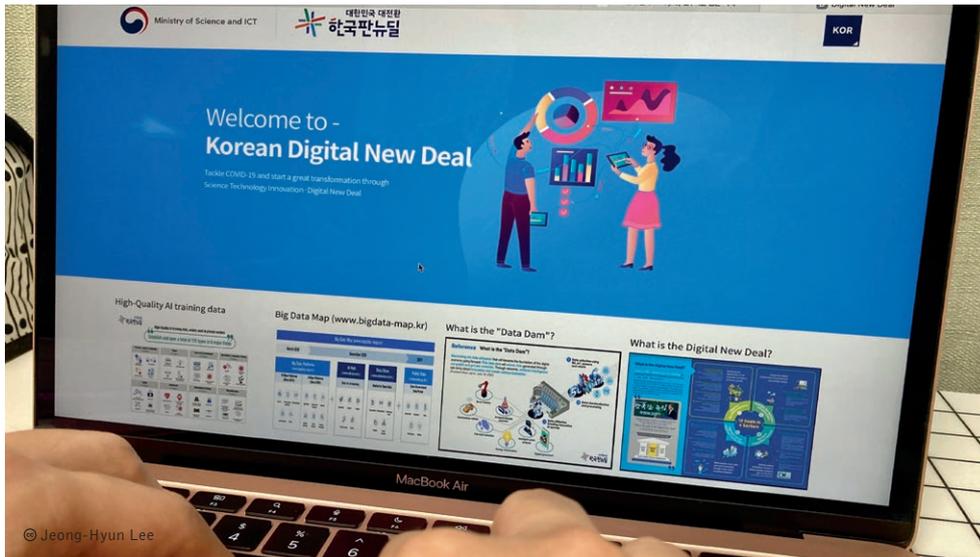
child in an online education program. From August to September 2020, the Womenlink – a private organisation working for gender equality in South Korea – interviewed 89 women about the difficulty of caring for their families during Covid-19. The survey included 25 full-time mothers, 58 workers, and six people who had been laid off. The interview participants reported a substantial increase in domestic labour. With family members staying home 24/7, the repetitive routine of preparing three meals a day generally fell to the wife and mother. When a school offered online education, the mother was encouraged to be a manager/tutor, following up with her children's course schedules as well as their psychological adjustment and stability. The closure of public institutions for childcare and education forced one family member into an endless shift of childcare and housework. Regardless of her employment status, the mother ended up taking primary responsibility for maintaining the home, feeding the family members working and studying at home, and supporting the online classes and assignments of her children.

Moreover, the extra burden of domestic care was found to be impacting many women's performance at work. For working mothers, it was challenging to hold the roles of employee and caregiver concurrently. In the absence of suitable childcare alternatives, many mothers made the decision to quit their jobs, according to Womenlink's survey. Even though the government provided temporary public services such as Emergency Childcare Service and Emergency Childcare Leave, these did not meet the needs of all families with two working

parents. Mothers who were asked to work remotely from home, while their children were also at home, could not draw clear boundaries in terms of time and attention focused on their work and their families' needs. While telecommuting offered a digital solution to the problem of work during the pandemic, responsibility for childcare shifted from the national system to the (usually female) individual.

South Korea has spent more than a decade establishing public institutions and services for childcare and education for all ages, including day-care centres, kindergartens and schools, to decrease gender inequality in childcare, which has traditionally been imposed on female members of a family. Due to Covid-19, however, childcare responsibility came back to the family, specifically its female members. The work of caregivers has not been a part of the digital transformation. When social infrastructure became digitalised during the new normal of Covid-19, female members were excluded from the new system, becoming unwilling supporters of the digital system who made non-face-to-face activity possible by providing necessary face-to-face labour at home. While many industries shifted to digital operations, society left essential domestic labour that cannot be digitalised to female family members. Even though the South Korean Covid-19 strategy using digital infrastructure managed to minimise economic losses, the insensitivity to gender inequality has reinforced traditional inequality in the social system.

The government's pandemic response policy, the Digital New Deal, excludes solutions for the gendered experiences induced



*South Korea's Digital New Deal policy promises transformation across social sectors, but there are highly gendered aspects of home life that cannot be easily digitalised.*

by the pandemic. While the Digital New Deal offers a blueprint for a digitalised economy, there is no specific roadmap for gendered domestic work, which is marginalised in the overall digital transformation of society. The policy sets twelve goals in four major areas, but careful consideration of gender inclusion is entirely missing.

## Moving forward: Inclusion of women in ICT policymaking

Technology is gendered. Policies devised to advance technology inevitably reflect gender divisions and inequalities. The South Korean blueprint for a post-pandemic world, guided by the Digital New Deal, overlooks the political aspects of technology, and the ways in which digital technology configures gender identities, needs and priorities. Without considering other realities of digital transformation, the Digital New Deal in its current form is reinforcing gender inequality and weakening gender digital inclusion. Gender equality is one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The UN advocates for global society to "recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." (SDG 5, Target 4). Unfortunately, the South Korean strategy overlooks the essential role of unpaid care and non-digital domestic

work in maintaining the digitally transformed economy.

Therefore, social and political attention must be given to the population that is being marginalised by the digital transformation. The Digital New Deal exposes how digital policy leaves specific groups of people behind, especially women. Marginalised and gendered experiences should be given greater consideration in the digital innovation process and policymaking. Despite domestic efforts to support digitally transformed systems, the Digital New Deal has not paid enough attention to women's interests and priorities. In fact, it can be called a very masculine project. To guarantee sustainable digital transformation for all, the inclusion of women in the ICT policymaking and digital innovation process should be promoted.

There is a need for gender power relations to be renegotiated in the socio-technical setting. Instead of reinforcing a deep-rooted culture of gender inequality, the new ICT policy should include a blueprint for gender digital inclusion and women's empowerment. The UN's SDG 5 targets women's empowerment through ICT. Gendered voices must be included in the policymaking process, and women's access to digital technologies and their priorities in digital transformation must be examined. The hidden reality of Covid-19 is that it has caused a regression in gender equality. Our vision of post-pandemic digital transformation must be gender inclusive if it is to advance the well-being of society as well as bringing immediate benefits to the economy. ■■■

# The Cultural Psychology of Vaccination and Face Masks

An Interview with Emma Buchtel and Li Man-Wai Liman



**Emma Buchtel** is an Associate Professor of Psychology from the Education University of Hong Kong. Her research interest is on Chinese cultural influences on psychology. She received her PhD in cultural psychology from the University of British Columbia, previous to which she had spent four years in Changsha and Beijing.



**Li Man-Wai Liman** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology from the Education University of Hong Kong. Her research interest is on mental health, decision making, and social relationships from a socio-cultural ecological perspective. She received her PhD in psychology from University of Alberta.

**Interview by:**

**Lucia Siu and Axel Harneit-Sievers**

Heinrich Böll Stiftung Hong Kong

When it comes to decisions about wearing masks or getting vaccinated, there are great differences, between individuals but also between cultures. Understanding the factors involved may lead to more effective public health measures. Are people taking the Covid-19 vaccine for self-protection, civic duty, convenience of mobility – or because they hope to win an apartment in a lucky draw? How does covering the lower half of the face influence emotional expression and people's self-perception? Comparing Asian and European behaviours, Hong Kong-based psychologists Emma Buchtel and Li Man-Wai Liman share their insights on the cultural psychology of vaccination and face mask usage during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the term "vaccine hesitation" has emerged. Do you think people in Asia have a different pattern of vaccination acceptance compared to other continents?

**Emma:** Earlier this year we conducted an online survey on the culture of using face masks and emotional expression, alongside some pilot research questions on the attitudes and practices of vaccination. We surveyed 200 Americans and 200 participants from Hong Kong.

Data from Hong Kong in early May 2021 showed around one-third of our respondents were positive about taking the vaccine, but they were not really concerned about getting infected, thinking that the chance was very low. We were curious: why would they take the vaccine then? Their answers suggested that there were also moral or peer pressure factors behind pro-vaccine attitudes: desiring to protect family and friends, and believing it was their civic duty. Of course, people who took the vaccine also had fewer safety concerns about it, and some hoped to be able to travel more conveniently.

We conducted the survey in late May 2021 when the vaccination rate in Hong Kong was 15%, and around one-third of our Hong Kong participants said that they really did not want to take the vaccine. These participants tended to believe that vaccines were unsafe, that vaccine production procedures were rushed, and they were worried about side effects. However, right after we did the survey, a local business group offered those who were vaccinated a chance to win an apartment in a lucky draw. We hoped this would incentivise more people to get vaccinated. With more people taking the vaccine, this would actually raise confidence and cause a snowball effect; hopefully the vaccination rate would continue to climb. *(By mid-August 2021 Hong Kong had a fully vaccinated rate of 40%.)*

## Survey findings: How do opinions correlate to vaccination practice among Hong Kong respondents?

- Vaccine hesitation: opinion-practice correlations are significant
- Pro-vaccine: opinion-practice correlations are significant
- Correlation is statistically insignificant

	Data from late May 2021	
% of respondents who agree with the sentences:	<b>Vaccine hesitation group</b> (Hong Kong respondents who do not want to get vaccinated)	<b>Pro-vaccine group</b> (Hong Kong respondents who already got vaccinated)
The production and approval of the Covid-19 vaccines was too rushed	98.0%	67.6%
We should be wary of potential severe side effects of the current Covid-19 vaccines	96.7%	79.7%
It's very unlikely that people like me will get infected with Covid-19 here	66.0%	45.9%
Getting vaccinated against Covid-19 is my civic duty	24.2%	89.2%
My getting vaccinated against Covid-19 will help protect my family and friends	28.6%	94.6%

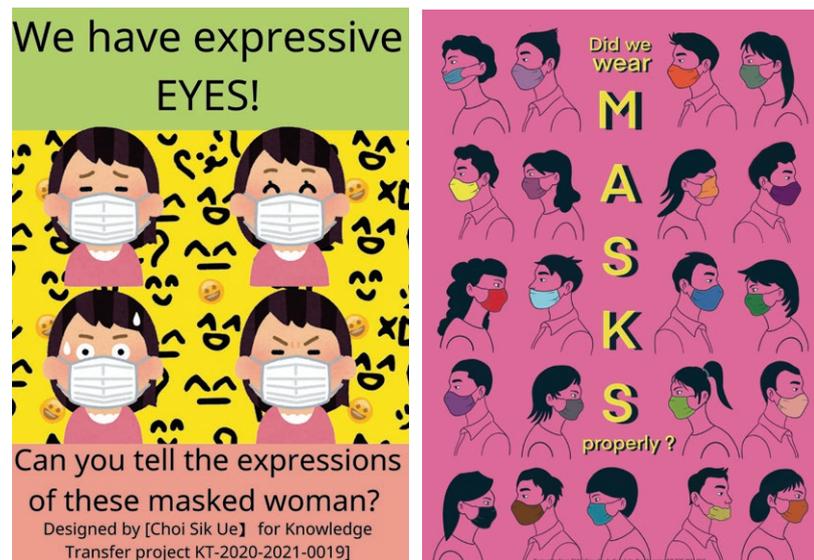
Source: Survey data from project KT-2020-2021-0019 to Emma E Buchtel, Priscilla Song, Joseph Walline, Li Man-Wai Liman, and Laurence J. Wood. Valid sample size: 234

Data from the United States shows that people's attitudes are polarised between being strongly positive or strongly negative about taking Covid-19 vaccines, while participants in Hong Kong tend to be more moderate.

### How do cultural psychologists help us understand people's attitudes and practices during the pandemic?

**Liman:** One possible way to look at the situation is to assess the strength of social norms in a given society, or what researchers call "cultural tightness-looseness" – how well people align with social norms and regulations. In January 2021 a worldwide group of researchers published a paper in *The Lancet Planet Health* using quantitative data from October 2020. The paper showed that nations that are "tight" and abide by strict norms have had more success containing the Covid-19 virus than those on the culturally "loose" end. Cultural tightness may apply to most Asian countries, thus people in those countries were more willing to adjust to new arrangements, such as wearing face masks and accepting the closing of schools; they did not mind following government instructions.

Another dimension is the psychological asymmetry between avoiding loss and achieving gain. In societies that focus more on avoiding risks and losses, people may readily adopt the practice of wearing masks to avoid risk, but they could be more sceptical about taking vaccines due to the risk of side-effects. In cultures that focus more on achieving gains, highlighting the benefits of getting vaccinated or organizing lucky draws may be an effective way to promote vaccination and other public health practices.



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Posters designed by the Education University of Hong Kong students, as part of a project using cultural psychology principles to promote mask wearing in student dormitories and beyond. For information about the face mask project, see <https://www.emmabuchtel.org/masks>

How about freedom; do cultural tightness and adherence to social norms interfere with freedom?

**Emma:** Ten years ago, I hated putting on a mask. I thought masks were not helpful, and that by wearing a mask one would be less able to communicate with others and seem unfriendly. Not until March or April 2020 did I read about scientific evidence that masks are helpful to contain the spread of viruses like Covid-19. Then I began to accept this as something we should do.

Some behaviours can change quickly, such as wearing face masks. But some aspects of culture, such as preferred values, are passed on to children, and these norms only change slowly. Economic development has brought more individualistic lifestyles and choices to societies, and may slowly lead to changes towards individualistic values as well, such as people wanting to be more unique, having more personal opinions, and expressing themselves more.

There is a stereotype that individualism is the same thing as selfishness: however, on a national level, it can be just the opposite. Collectivist societies tend to be poor, so collectivists have to compete with others and tend to be more self-interested and self-protective. When comparing countries, we find that more collective countries are actually more selfish. Greater individualism can also mean greater freedom to help one another. But in the USA right now, unfortunately, many people don't think that wearing a mask helps others.

When we put on face masks, what happens to our social relations and self-perception?

**Emma:** In the United States it is culturally important to show one's smile, and for most of us it is important to be perceived by others as "normal". In the US, wearing a face mask or not is a highly politicised issue, whereas in Hong Kong there is high acceptance of wearing a surgical mask.

This is comparable to wearing a headscarf in Muslim countries. Normality depends on how many people are wearing the same thing.



Fabric designed by students to encourage the use of environmentally friendly fabric masks in low-risk situations.

**Emma:** Psychologists have done some comparisons on how Asians and Europeans in general read faces, and noticed that Asians tend to read a face by focusing on the eyes; while Europeans tend to focus more on the mouth. When we cover the lower half of the face with a mask, many Europeans may feel it is more difficult to express themselves or to read others, whereas many Asians may still feel comfortable reading and expressing by the eyes.

**Liman:** (laugh) When I wear a face mask, I can be more relaxed; there is no need to control my face for others. I think the eyes are more genuine in terms of expression, and there is less to be controlled and regulated.

But still, covering half the face would mean less effective facial expression. I wonder how this would influence very young children, who are supposed to learn about basic social relations through observing other people's faces.

**Emma:** Surprisingly, recent psychological research found that children's ability to read faces was not negatively affected by others wearing masks. In our knowledge transfer project, we organised a student poster design competition to promote the use of face masks, including a fabric mask design competition. Some students printed smiling faces and other affectionate patterns onto the fabric. They are inventing ways to communicate facial expressions and emotions while wearing masks. We also want to raise public awareness about the use of more environmentally friendly fabric masks if we are in low-risk situations.

For example, on campus during summer, I can walk to work without meeting anyone. It would be quite a waste to wear a surgical mask.

How about the level of protection?

**Emma:** Fabric masks are not yet made to a certain standard, so a lot depends on the fit and layering. Multi-layered, well-fitting fabric masks should be OK in many everyday contexts, especially if it's a low-risk situation and you are vaccinated; but of course, in high-risk medical contexts, it is more appropriate to wear a surgical or N-94 mask.

The fabrics and posters are lovely! Thank you for sharing them with us. ■■■

# Remembering the Pandemic: A View from 2030

Chermaine Lee

When humankind finally break free from the threat of Covid-19, people will go back to their normal lives. How will the pandemic be remembered?

Palms sweating and fidgeting, Carly took a deep breath before putting on her virtual reality headset. The morning routine today felt a little more intense than usual.

Appearing in front of Carly was her long-time co-worker, good old Tracy, whose small shack was filled with shelves of dry-looking documents. Working from home for years with the company, Carly knew from lots of VR conferences that Tracy's documents were mostly medical records for her husband's complications from coronavirus – the pandemic that shocked the world a decade ago.

"Morning Tracy!" Carly forced a smile.

"Morning Carly! Your email said there's a special meeting today. Are things okay?" breathily, with the puffy bags underneath her eyes seemingly staring at Carly.

"I am very sorry to tell you that we have decided to let you go, as the company has to downsize its costs," Carly said calmly, trying to pepper her tone with some sympathy.

"As you know, the company's not doing well, and therefore we have to replace more staffers with robots...You are a valuable asset to us, but..."

"But I am not valuable enough to stay behind, earning the money needed to treat my husband," Tracy snarled, with tears then streaming down her wrinkled face.

"The company has already stopped renting physical offices and letting everyone work from home to cut costs. Why are you doing this to me, just why..."

"I am really sorry Tracy, I am afraid I don't have a say in this... I am just a messenger,"

Carly was desperate to go off-screen.

"Of course you are - a messenger who just needs to sit in your two-storey flat in Hiro Koh and stare at the grand view of Thousand-year Harbour," Tracy shouted, before her image descended into black silence on Carly's screen.

Freezing for a fleeting second, Carly then let out a heavy sigh and put aside her headset.

Today was going to be another hellish day, she thinks, while rubbing her forehead to cast away the ruthless headache that has ailed her for years.

Slouching on her windowsill, Carly got lost in the view bounded by high-rises – one probably all couples in their mid-30s dreamed of overlooking every day. Ever since her digital marketing company allowed all staff to work from home permanently due to the global pandemic in 2020, she found it comforting to spend more time with her now 15-year-old daughter and pursue her career goals simultaneously.

Over the last 10 years, Carly pushed through multiple promotions with blood, sweat and tears to eventually snatch the director position at the company. But with more robots being programmed to master digital marketing tasks, she worried that Tracy's sacking would only be the first of a series of layoffs.

"Are you ready to leave?" Her husband Mark's rustic voice disturbed her train of thoughts.

Clad in black, the couple and their daughter, Lucy, made their way to the airport in silence, as they were drowned in their own thoughts.

On the ultra-fast plane that travelled at hypersonic speed to Nom Pahn, Lucy



**Chermaine Lee** is a Hong Kong-bred freelance journalist who covers the city's politics, social and environmental issues, and beyond, for various media in both texts and videos.



hugged herself tight in her coat, with her eyes darting left and right.

“Beep...Beep,” Mark’s buzzing phone woke him up from his nap.

“Check this out,” Mark tapped Carly on the shoulder, showing her the sky-high reading on his phone’s app that monitored Lucy’s social anxiety level.

“Don’t worry – she will feel better after getting off the plane,” Carly said calmly, giving Mark a niggling sense of unease.

Lucy hadn’t been outside of their home for nearly a decade since the conditions of her anxiety and depression had nosedived.

Once a bubbly girl with a pair of water brown eyes that radiated joy, Lucy’s eyes now were hollow and appeared to lose focus, as if she was trapped in a dark room with no visible way out.

It all began when schools suspended physical classes amid the pandemic, forcing all students to attend virtual classes at home.

A few weeks later, Lucy couldn’t focus on anything for over five minutes. Then her frequent crying and tantrums erupted, on top of countless restless nights.

But when it was back to school again, she stopped talking to anyone, including her classmates and teachers.

After multiple dreadful phone calls from the school on Lucy’s panic attacks in class, Carly and Mark decided that their daughter should be home-schooled instead.

Landing in Nom Pahn two hours later, the family of three headed to the Lohas Cemetery in a solar-powered car set on autopilot.

Looking out from the window, Lucy listened to her favourite songs from her headphones, before slowly falling asleep and

drooling.

“Now that Lucy is asleep, can we talk about the experiment?” Carly asked.

Mark did not reply, but crossed his arms and turned his gaze to the front.

“You know that, Mark. The government-funded gene editing programme is the best bet for our kid. He’s due in four months, and if this works, he will not be infected with Covid his whole life. Think about how easy life would be without Covid! Our son won’t have to get vaccinated every six months!” Carly continued.

Furrowing his brows, Mark stayed silent, cocking his head to one side.

“I know you are worried my dear, but didn’t we recover from that financial and emotional black hole a decade ago because we were willing to move on from all those challenges? Look where we are now – I am a director of a digital marketing firm, and your delivery service unicorn start-up is going public next month,” Carly grabbed Mark’s shoulder.

“Do you remember how your start-up managed to insist on using all-electric vehicles for delivery and was the first to deliver cultured meat and insect dishes to people’s houses? Everyone thought it was crazy at the time, but you stuck with the innovation you believed in. No one thought Covid was possible as well, but you know what happened.”

On hearing this, Mark turned his head back to Carly and let out a sigh.

“I guess you are right. We shouldn’t harbour suspicions on anything forward-thinking,” Mark admitted.

The car finally halted at the Great George Cemetery. Mark picked up a bunch



© hbs hk

of white lilies and a piece of thin glass from the car's boot.

The trio menaced their way around tombstones scattered over the vast space, before they stopped at a grave without a tombstone.

Tears welled up in Carly's eyes, as she looked at the dusty grave growling with weeds for years.

"Dad, we are finally here to see you," a teary Carly said. "I...I really miss you, and I can't believe we couldn't come to meet you for the last time before you...you left us."

The family recalled the dreadful phone call 10 years ago. Carly had been checking in on her father, John, every day via video calls after he was admitted into the hospital's intensive care unit for Covid.

During those months, Carly cried night after night for not being able to fly over to take care of the then-76-year-old, going through cycles of hope and fear.

On a Saturday morning, the screechy sound of her vibrating phone sent chills down her spine.

"Hello, Mrs. Webber, would you be able to come to see your father the last time? I am afraid we are losing him any second now," Carly picked up a call from the hospital.

Her mind went blank. She started pacing back and forth in their then-tiny apartment and biting her thumb till the nail broke. She called up the health ministry each hour and wished border restrictions had magically eased, but they were stubbornly intact.

The following months were the darkest time for the family.

Mark had just shuttered the street food stall that his family established decades ago, since his enthusiastic regulars stopped

showing after lockdown measures in their hometown kicked in. Consumed with anxiety over his unemployment, Mark was struggling to pay back the loan that was enough to support his staff's salaries till the end.

Growing scrawnier week after week, Mark also stopped shaving, making his face more tired and crumpled.

Amidst all the challenges that came in waves, there was something worth holding on to, he thought. He wanted to lift his wife out of her deep-seated sorrows.

The couple attended virtual therapies following the death of Carly's father, but their relationship didn't seem to improve – they often found themselves like strangers under the same roof. Mark helped Carly make a video commemorating her father's death to play at a virtual funeral, but he knew deep down that Carly would have a long way to move on.

Standing in front of the grave, Mark put his arm around Carly's shivering shoulders, giving a gentle kiss on her forehead.

He had been there for his wife 10 years ago and was still here for her 10 years later.

Seeing Carly's tears trickle down her face, the usually detached Lucy couldn't resist her tears either.

The pandemic - which took away a family's grandfather, business and spirits, felt like a distant memory to Lucy. Why? Just why?

Lucy took over the thin piece of glass from Mark, erecting it on the grave. The glass, appeared to be an electronic medium, instantly started showing a three-dimensional hologram of John – exactly the same as when Carly had seen him last time.

"Hey sweetie. How's work treating ya?"

this had been the man's typical greeting line, which was extracted from John's limited social media presence.

"Dad, we've missed you," Carly couldn't resist replying.

The John hologram did not answer, and Carly knew it was because John's social media data was not sufficient to support more conversation.

So even an AI hologram device could not help much in reconstructing John's persona. Carly cried even harder, as she strolled down memory lane.

Born in a remote village in Nom Pahn, Carly was raised single-handedly by John. The family barely scraped by with John juggling several jobs to support Carly's education.

The hardworking daughter did not let John down, and eventually secured a job in Hiro Koh that allowed her to send money home each month. Whenever John bragged about his daughter to his neighbours, he would inadvertently show his yellowish teeth from smoking.

Overcome with guilt, Carly still could not figure out what she could have done for John when he was about to leave her forever thousands of miles away.

"Maybe nothing?" Carly wondered, looking at the neighbouring graves that were dug at about the same time.

Ashes were flying here when government workers had to cremate mountains of deceased Covid-19 patients – they rested in the same flames and were now inevitably intertwined.

What Lucy did after that seemed to give her an answer. Being mute for years, Lucy spoke very softly with a husky voice at first,

the volume so low that her parents nearly thought it was the wind's whisper in the vast cemetery.

Holding a paper in her hand, Lucy read to John's grave,

*"Here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud,*

*and the sky of the sky of a tree called life, which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide*

*and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart.*

*I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart."*

When the wind blew again, Lucy's soft voice seemed to send E.E. Cummings' poem all over the empty cemetery. ■■■

Video contribution to Perspectives Asia issue 10

# NEW BRAVE ^ WORLD

“ ”

*What will define a brave new world  
after the Covid-19 pandemic crisis?*



We asked our partners in India about their work, engagements during the times following and continuing from the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and their aspirations for the post-Covid World.

Here is their response for a hopeful world moving forward, with each passing day. (Scan the QR Code)

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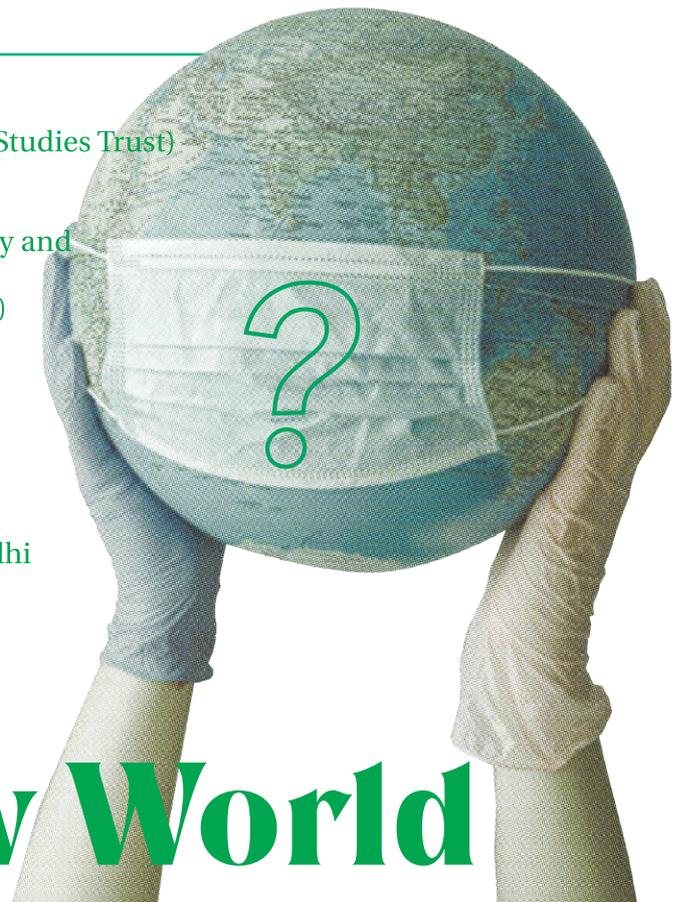
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**Cover illustration by Carmen Lym**

The Vaccine City, the Safe Zone

The pandemic has no doubt brought the world miserable times – lockdowns, restrictions, economic hardship, loss of life and health and so on – leaving life on Earth with exacerbated environmental, social and mental issues to deal with. Illustrating the general phenomena of the world's need to be vaccinated, the artwork gives a broad view of government policy responses to vaccination, vaccine hesitancy and supply, economic and social governance, new directions and initiatives for recovery, and the hope for a better 2021.

**Carmen Lym**, an artist from Hong Kong, uses words, space, symbols and drawings to bridge the subliminal and quiet dialogue between objects, human, nature and the environment.

Embodying the dichotomy of urban/rural, real/imaginary, and verbalization/serenity every day, her in-depth sense and sensibility aspires to, via sketching Mother Earth's geomorphological tenderness and roughness, embrace fortune, grace, the ambiguous and narrative emotions in quotidian scenes. At 'cuddlescuddle', (IG page: cuddlescuddle) a journal that she keeps along her solitary journey, she invites thoughts to manifest through the layers of space and shades of light.



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