POLICY FORUM

Beyond the Great Power Competition Narrative: Exploring Labor Politics & Resistance Behind AI Innovation in China
Yuji He and Hong Shen

The Reeducation Labor Regime in Northwest China
Darren Byler

South Korea’s Dilemma: Foreign Workers in a “Homogenous Society”
Timothy C. Lim

Reproduction-Driven Labor Migration from China
Biao Xiang

Creating Jobs with Renewable Energy in Rural India
Bharath Jairaj and Pamli Deka

India’s Emerging Gig Economy: Shaping the Future of Work for Women
Ruchika Chaudhary

Artificial Intelligence in South East Asia: Upskilling & Reskilling to Narrow Emerging Digital Divides in the Post-Pandemic Recovery
Giulia Ajmone Marsan

The Future of Work
The Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs is the flagship scholarly publication of the Asian Studies Program housed within the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Established in 2014, the Journal aims to provide a forum for scholars and practitioners in the field of Asian affairs to exchange ideas and publish research that further the understanding of the world’s largest and most populous continent.

The views expressed in this issue do not necessarily reflect those of the Journal’s editors and advisors, the Asian Studies Program, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, or Georgetown University.
The Editorial Board of Volume 7 of the *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* has made the collective decision to remain anonymous. In light of recent political developments, we believe that this decision allows all parties involved to maintain their individual freedom of expression. As a student-run journal, we stand behind the academic integrity and rigor of each piece.
CONTENTS
Volume 7 | 2021

1 Editor's Note

POLICY FORUM
The Future of Work

5 Beyond the Great Power Competition Narrative: Exploring Labor Politics and Resistance Behind AI Innovation in China
Yujia He and Hong Shen

16 The Reeducation Labor Regime in Northwest China
Darren Byler

26 South Korea's Dilemma: Foreign Workers in a "Homogenous Society"
Timothy C. Lim

34 Reproduction-Driven Labor Migration from China
Biao Xiang

44 Creating Jobs with Renewable Energy in Rural India
Bharath Jairaj and Pamli Deka

50 India's Emerging Gig Economy: Shaping the Future of Work for Women
Ruchika Chaudhary

58 Artificial Intelligence in South East Asia: Upskilling & Reskilling to Narrow Emerging Digital Divides in the Post-Pandemic Recovery
Giulia Ajmone Marsan
RESEARCH

65 Chasing the Conservative Dream:
Why Shinzo Abe Failed to Revise the Constitution of Japan
Rintaro Nishimura

INTERVIEWS

100 West Papuan Nationalism and #Papuanlivesmatter
An Interview with Veronika Kusumaryati

108 Ethnic Politics in Indonesia
An Interview with Jessica Soedirgo

Send inquiries to:
SFS Asian Studies Program, Georgetown University
Box 571040, 37th and O Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20057
Email: gjaa@georgetown.edu

[iv] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
Editor’s Note

The Future of Work?

A great transformation of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism was the conceptual and spatial separation of “work” and “life.” In practice, however, this division between wage work and leisure has always existed alongside evolving forms of unfree, “informal,” and household labor. Nevertheless, in recent decades, with the digital revolution and the global rise of gig work, freelancing, and temp contracts—the so-called “precarious economy”—the labor regimes developed under industrialization appear increasingly anachronistic. Governments and publics anticipate a new era of work, reigniting debates over the ethics of technology, the organization of labor, and the nature of work itself.

The Covid-19 pandemic has lent new urgency to these debates. An uneven patchwork of government responses has reshaped global and local movements of goods, services, and people, with profound consequences for everyday life and work. Here at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., we shifted to virtual learning on March 16, 2020, triggering a chaotic rush to empty the campus and create an infrastructure online. Dispersed around the world, we experienced social relations mediated by images on a screen. Life felt arrhythmic in its homogeneity; school blended into work blended into leisure.

In reality, the pandemic created a bifurcation of workers and work, one which grew out of existing hierarchies of race, gender, class, and citizenship. As students and white-collar workers sheltered at home, “essential workers,” gig workers, and domestic workers upheld the material infrastructure that sustained them. The cleavage between virtual and “in-person” work maps onto what appears to be an increasing polarization between intellectual and manual labor. And yet, shortages of masks, medical equipment, and vaccines returned good old-fashioned production to the forefront of attention. Are we really on the brink of a radical transformation of work?

This issue of the Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs, produced entirely online, is animated by questions that arose from the editorial board’s own experiences of living/working/studying during a global pandemic. In our Policy Forum, “The Future of Work,” we explore how technological innovation and demographic shifts will impact labor regimes in Asia. We ask how new technologies can generate opportunities for marginalized populations, but also how they can intensify labor discipline, surveillance, and exploitation.
We are also interested in mobility and migration, how government policies and socio-economic pressures create or reconfigure flows of workers in an increasingly interconnected world. In the following pages, our contributors offer fresh and insightful analyses of these urgent topics.

In the first Policy Forum article, Yujia He and Hong Shen move beyond the dominant narrative of U.S.-China technological competition to emphasize how both superpowers must confront the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on labor relations. In doing so, He and Shen draw our attention to the materiality of the labor behind AI, which requires massive inputs of human labor for creating datasets and evaluating algorithms. Crowdworkers in China who perform these more menial tasks suffer from poor working conditions, low pay, and limited opportunities for career advancement. While enjoying higher pay and prestige, more elite tech workers have organized against the 9-9-6 culture of overwork. Finally, He and Shen highlight the ways in which AI technologies threaten workers’ rights to privacy by extending surveillance and discipline within and outside the workplace. They conclude by calling for international cooperation in studying and regulating AI’s effects on workers’ rights.

Surveillance capitalism also pervades Darren Byler’s article on the reeducation labor regime in Xinjiang. Byler describes how the Chinese state’s ethnic policies intersected with the interests of capital to create a system of unfree labor that draws many of its Uyghur and Kazakh workers from internment camps. In his case study of Dina Nurdybai, a Kazakh woman who had been detained in a reeducation camp and then transferred to work in a nearby industrial park, Byler shows that the camps and the factories are conceptually linked and homologous in spatial configuration and organizational structure. They are part of a singular carceral system that aims to transform Muslim populations into “a deeply-controlled unfree working class.”

The next two articles turn our attention to the mobility of labor. Timothy Lim’s article examines the tension between South Korea’s demand for foreign workers and its self-identity as a culturally and racially homogenous nation. In his concise overview of South Korea’s transition from a labor exporter to a labor importer, Lim discusses how the country attempted to reconcile that tension through the creation of a two-track immigration regime that favors ethnic Koreans from China and elsewhere. However, Lim argues that recent institutional developments and public opinion polls indicate increasing support for immigration, suggesting a nascent ethic of multiculturalism.

Shifting the analytical lens to the drivers of migration, Biao Xiang examines an apparent contradiction in unskilled labor out-migration trends in China: why has out-migration remained steady even as incomes rise at home? Based on original research conducted in Northeast China, Xiang argues that labor migration is driven by the time-sensitive requirements of social reproduction. He locates his analysis within post-Reform socio-economic transformations, particularly the creation of markets in education, health care, and property. Out-migration is not determined by demand for labor, but by the ever-rising costs of marriage, education, housing, and medical treatment.
Migration from rural areas sustains urban life in many parts of Asia. The Covid-19 pandemic cruelly exposed the importance and the vulnerability of migrant workers. In India, the abrupt imposition of a nation-wide lockdown on March 25, 2020 left over forty million migrants unemployed and homeless, driving a mass exodus to the countryside. Our next authors Bharath Jairaj and Pamli Deka ask how India can create jobs and achieve sustainable rural development in the post-Covid world. They suggest that the answer lies in developing the renewable energy sector. Identifying the lack of skills and educational qualifications as rural India’s main barrier to accessing renewable energy jobs, Jairaj and Deka argue for greater investment in comprehensive and inclusive training programs.

In our last two Policy Forum articles, the authors examine how marginalized groups can share in the benefits of emerging digital economies. Ruchika Chaudhary draws our attention to gendered experiences of gig work in India. She notes that women find gig work especially attractive because it can be adjusted around their domestic obligations. However, Chaudhary argues that most female gig workers work in feminized (and therefore, low-wage) sectors, where they face unsafe working conditions, precarity, and lack of upward mobility. She calls on policymakers and platforms to develop training programs for women and emphasizes the urgency of reforming social safety nets to encompass new types of workers.

Finally, Giulia Ajmone Marsan examines how Southeast Asian countries can pursue equitable development in the digital economy. She identifies disparities in digital access between urban and rural areas, between large enterprises and small businesses, and between men and women as the main obstacles to growing the digital economy. Ajmone Marsan argues that ASEAN and its member countries can address these gaps through investment in skills training for marginalized groups, public-private partnerships, and increasing cooperation within and between governments.

In addition to the Policy Forum, this issue features an original, peer-reviewed student research paper by Rintaro Nishimura. In a brilliant analysis of Japanese domestic politics, Nishimura attributes Shinzo Abe’s failure to amend the pacifist Constitution to the conflicting interests of domestic actors. Nishimura demonstrates that explanations based on institutional constraints are insufficient without analyses of public opinion and the political calculations of diverse actors.

Finally, the issue closes with two timely interviews with Georgetown University’s inaugural postdoctoral fellows in Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflict Resolution in Southeast Asia. Veronika Kusumaryati spoke about the origins of the West Papuan independence struggle and the rise of Black consciousness among Indigenous Papuans, as expressed in the Papuan Lives Matter Movement. In our second interview, Jessica Soedirgo discussed her research on violence against the Ahmadiyah minority in Indonesia, offering insight into how marginal groups come to be viewed as threats to national identity. We hope you enjoy reading these interviews as much as we enjoyed conducting them.
Editor’s Note

This issue was, as always, a collaborative project. I would like to express my sincere thanks to our authors and interviewees for trusting us with their words and ideas. We cherished the opportunity to engage in dialogue with you. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Green, Dr. Diana Kim, Dr. James Millward, Dr. Ananya Chakravarti, and anonymous reviewers for their generous advice and support. And of course, this issue could not exist without our publisher, Stephanie Gage, who guided us through every step of the editorial process. Every page bears the imprint of her professionalism, dedication, and keen eye for detail.

I would like to end this note by expressing my heartfelt gratitude for the Volume Seven Editorial Board. An extraordinary team of editors rose splendidly to meet the challenges of this unconventional editorial process. As we were scattered across different time zones, editors woke up or stayed up to participate in weekly meetings. We worked together through weekends, midterms, and finals, bound by our shared commitment to asking bold questions and exploring nuances. This issue is the product of your curiosity, talent, and passion. I am proud and humbled to call you my colleagues and my friends.

Now, with great pleasure, we present Volume Seven of the Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs, “The Future of Work in Asia.”

Editor-in-Chief
Beyond the Great Power Competition Narrative: Exploring Labor Politics and Resistance behind AI Innovation in China

Yujia He and Hong Shen

Introduction

A specter is haunting the world—the specter of artificial intelligence (AI). In the eyes of many, the major powers of the world have entered into an arms race in AI development. Policymakers in countries such as the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea justify the clamor for grand strategy and funding for AI research and development (R&D) on the basis of not being left behind in the race to automation. Business leaders and political pundits likewise tout AI and the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” as crucial to cementing international competitiveness and the future global order. It is easy to assume that whoever gets the upper hand in AI development will be handed the key to future economic prosperity, political prestige, and by extension, national power. Such a narrative frames AI development as a competitive race and is especially popular in the context of U.S.-China relations, where the U.S. approach has shifted from engagement...
to “long-term strategic competition,” with maintaining technology dominance as a core concern. ³

This AI competition narrative is flawed for several reasons.⁴ To begin with, knowledge creation and diffusion is no longer confined within one country. Literature has documented the international interdependency of science and technology,⁵ and the role of transnational capital, infrastructure, talents, and business alliances in innovation systems.⁶ In AI-related research, for instance, international co-authorship accounts for on average 35 percent of publications by the world’s top R&D investors across all industries.⁷ In addition, in much of the developing world, governments strategically collaborate with foreign companies for technology adoption and technology transfer.⁸

More importantly, this narrative focused on competitiveness, with its singular concern for utilitarian gains, risks equating technological advances and economic growth with societal well-being. Such an approach conveniently assumes innovation as inherently beneficial for a nation. Yet the development of new technologies and their impact on society is directional.⁹ Innovation does not happen in a vacuum, but within a society with power asymmetries between stakeholders. Such power dynamics shape how innovations are

---


⁷ Helene Dernis, Petros Gkotsis, Nicola Grassano, Shohei Nakazato, Mariagrazia Squicciarini, Birgitte van Beuzekom, and Antonio Vezzani, World Corporate Top R&D investors: Shaping the Future of Technologies and of AI, No. JRC117068 (Seville: Joint Research Centre, 2019).


used, why they are used, and whether they lead to better or worse long-term outcomes for various stakeholders.\textsuperscript{10} Further, the great power competition narrative ignores the transnational interests and struggles of social groups and classes impacted by innovation development and diffusion. By placing innovation within the context of a zero-sum, short-term competition between nations, the narrative ignores the collective interests across borders of groups such as businesses, labor and trade unions, and the public, and their agency in shaping innovation towards benevolent or worse societal outcomes.

In this article, we argue that the lens of great power competition, though important, is insufficient and one-sided. China and the United States are actually facing the same set of challenges posed by the recent development and deployment of AI—its significant impact on human labor. Public imaginaries of AI’s impact mostly concern job displacement, and scholars have documented the replacement of routine tasks by automation among both U.S. and Chinese manufacturers and the impact on workers’ power.\textsuperscript{11} The purpose of this paper, however, is to shed light on the less-explored areas. Using three cases from China, we explore novel forms of relations between labor and capital that have emerged behind contemporary AI developments: how crowdworkers have been put into “farms” for data annotation and algorithm evaluation, how tech workers are exploited to fuel rapid AI innovation, and how new types of algorithmic technologies are used to intensify and reinvent workplace surveillance. We also discuss different tactics workers employ for resistance. We conclude with an alternative, dialectic approach to understanding AI’s impact on labor relations, calling for exchange and collaboration among stakeholders across countries including the United States and China to address the common challenges. Washington and Beijing must thus look beyond the oversimplifying great power competition narrative to deal with the granular human labor costs associated with AI development.

**Hidden Labor Behind AI: Crowworkers in China**

Past scholarship has pointed out that rather than being fully automated, contemporary AI systems have actually been supported by different types of invisible human labor—what


Gray and Suri termed as “ghost work.” Crowdsourced workers have long been an important part of this “ghost work.” As scholars have discussed, many critical fields in contemporary AI (for example, Computer Vision and Natural Language Processing) rely on large-scale human labor for data annotation and algorithm evaluation, which has been increasingly outsourced to a variety of crowdsourcing platforms. An example of a U.S.-based platform is Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk), operated under Amazon Web Services for businesses (known as requesters) to hire online crowdworkers to perform on-demand tasks.

China is an important node in this globalized crowdsourcing landscape. By the end of 2017, there were already 30 million crowdworkers in China serving more than 190,000 enterprises and individuals on a global level. Chinese government policies, such as the “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation program,” contributed to the boom. Moreover, in China, crowdworkers have also been put into “crowdfarms.” Instead of on-demand individuals working on decomposed tasks, crowdfarm workers in China are organized by companies like ZBJ and Epwk, which often take crowdsourced work en masse from requesters, and organize individual workers to complete them. Crowdfarm workers usually work full time with salary and benefits, yet workers also reported exhaustion from overwork and frequent delays in compensation. Some crowdfarm workers have also reported substandard working conditions, such as cramped office spaces that lack air-conditioning. The growing power of crowdfarms in China has also generated increasing pressure for individual crowdworkers. For example, crowdfarms

---

13 Computer Vision is a field of artificial intelligence that trains computers and systems to “derive meaningful information from digital images, videos and other visual inputs — and take actions or make recommendations based on that information” (“What is Computer Vision?,” IBM, https://www.ibm.com/topics/computer-vision). An example of a problem in Computer Vision is facial recognition, to match a human face from digital images or videos against databases of faces to authenticate the identity of the person.
14 Natural Language Processing (NLP) is a field of artificial intelligence that “trains computers to understand, interpret and manipulate human language” (“What is Natural Language Processing?,” SAS, https://www.sas.com/en_us/insights/analytics/what-is-natural-language-processing-nlp.html). An example of NLP in applications is a virtual assistant like Alexa or Siri that interprets the voice command of users and responds accordingly.
often undercut their bids in order to secure more jobs, which has decreased the overall pricing of crowdsourcing tasks on the market. As crowdfarms increasingly dominate the crowdsourcing landscape in China, individual crowdworkers will face the pressure to lower their bids as well.\textsuperscript{18}

As tech firms increasingly outsource labor-intensive tasks like sound recognition and video and image labeling to save costs, crowdworkers in China have become part of the global AI value chain.\textsuperscript{19} While this leads to job creation in number, and may benefit people seeking flexible work, it offers workers unstable pay and limited career advancement. An International Labour Organization (ILO) study of Chinese crowdsourcing platforms cautioned that unpaid time spent searching for tasks, seeking clarifications from requesters and platforms, and contesting nonpayment and negative reviews led to long and fragmented working hours, and effectively lower earnings.\textsuperscript{20} Most microtasks for crowdworkers, such as data labeling or transcription, are simple and repetitive, therefore offering little opportunities for career growth. With future development of AI, these workers may also one day find their tasks becoming fully automated, and their training and work experience obsolete.

Indeed, as Gray and Suri argue, the development of AI has partially contributed to the rise of a “new global underclass” with low and unstable wages, substandard working conditions, and few opportunities to apply their work experiences to new jobs.\textsuperscript{21} The experiences of Chinese crowdworkers offer an important case to illustrate the conditions of this new global class of workers.

**Tech Workers’ Resistance: The 996.ICU Movement**

Tech workers have been a major force behind contemporary AI development. However, rather than serving as the silent “secret source” or the massive “brain power” behind China’s surge in the global AI landscape, Chinese tech workers have mobilized to resist increasingly harsh labor exploitation.

\textsuperscript{21} Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).
Indeed, China offers an important case to illustrate the exploitation of the tech labor force behind the rapid development of AI. A recent example is the 996.ICU movement. Despite being relatively well paid compared to traditional industries, tech employees in China have been asked to work an extended schedule known as the “996 schedule”: 9AM to 9PM, 6 days a week.\textsuperscript{22} The economic downturn and the downsizing of the tech sector in particular since 2018 have cultivated growing discontent toward the 996 overwork culture. This is because the past reciprocal employment relationship has been disrupted—workers still work the extended long hours, but report getting much less compensation in bonuses, with limited career advancement amidst waves of layoffs.\textsuperscript{23} In March 2019, an anonymous user set up the 996.ICU project on GitHub, an online code sharing community owned by Microsoft, complaining that serious labor exploitation would eventually destroy employees’ health and send them to the intensive care unit (ICU).\textsuperscript{24}

Unlike traditional labor movements in the manufacturing sector, during the 996.ICU movement Chinese tech workers employed “networked and disconnected” tactics to introduce public pressure to their employers to cause reputational damage.\textsuperscript{25} This included setting up a repository on GitHub for “blacklist companies” that have a similar overworking schedule, such as Alibaba, Jingdong (JD), and Huawei, and calling on fellow workers and netizens to mail China’s Labor Law, which specifically forbids such labor exploitation, to Jack Ma—the founder of Alibaba who commented that the 996 schedule could be a “huge blessing” for young workers and only backtracked following online backlash.\textsuperscript{26} Workers started to form a shared identity by recognizing themselves as “white-collar working-class developers,” and even framed the movement as a class struggle between the working class and capitalists.\textsuperscript{27} A new basis of international solidarity also emerged. For example, a group of GitHub and Microsoft workers openly supported Chinese workers by calling on Microsoft to keep the 996.ICU project uncensored.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} “996icu/996.ICU,” GitHub, https://github.com/996icu/996.ICU.
\textsuperscript{26} The online call for “Mailing Labor Law to Jack Ma” and the netizens’ posts of the mailed Labor Law copies can be accessed at the GitHub at https://github.com/CPdogson/996action/blob/master/54law/pic.md.
Although the 996.ICU movement was criticized for failing to generate structural changes, it has nevertheless demonstrated the agency of tech workers behind the curtain of China’s AI innovations and their resistance against inhumane working conditions. Similarly, in the United States, tech workers have also mobilized around issues like sexual harassment, gender inequities, and unethical research. Often seen as elitist and difficult to organize, tech workers in both countries are mobilized to resist what they perceive to be unethical and intolerable behaviors in their own industries.

**Watched by the Algorithmic Boss: The Intensification of Workplace Surveillance**

The ubiquity of AI-enabled services has given rise to “surveillance capitalism,” where behavioral data harvested by tech firms about consumers is used to enhance algorithms and provide predictions. This, in turn, is sold to business consumers, essentially rendering users as “free commodities” under surveillance. Such automated predictive analytics have also aided the already pervasive surveillance of workers. Workplace surveillance is often deployed for enhancing productivity and security, but may also result in the erosion of workers’ privacy, and results-based management ignoring workers’ needs. As reported by BBC in 2019, over half of global companies with over USD 750 million revenues used nontraditional surveillance methods, including tracking keystrokes, monitoring emails and monitoring conversations at work. A 2012 report found that 37 percent of U.S. employers tracked the locations of workers on service calls via handheld devices or vehicles. Surveillance has also grown outside the workplace, including GPS tracking on employees’ phones, social media monitoring, and even exercise and sleep pattern tracking. Workforce analytics is predicted to become a USD 1.87 billion industry by 2025. For instance, Amazon has developed AI-enabled tools like wristbands to track

---

29 Kevin Lin, “Tech Worker Organizing in China,” 58.
36 Belton, “How Does It Feel to Be Watched at Work All the Time?”
employees’ activities, and management systems that could fire employees without human supervisors’ involvement. The shift to working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic has further normalized the deployment of algorithmic surveillance tools, such as software running in the background of employees’ personal computers to assess productivity.

Like their counterparts in developed countries, Chinese workers also face an escalation of AI-enabled workplace surveillance, often without their consent and consultation. For instance, an electronics producer in Wuxi introduced an automated management system to monitor workers’ productivity as required by its U.S. headquarters, using data from surveillance cameras and employees’ punch cards. This resulted in dubious situations in salary calculation as reported by workers, such as an automatic deduction of RMB 50 for three seconds over time in the restroom. Another tech firm in Hangzhou mandated employees to use company-provided chair cushions, tracking personal data such as heart rate, breathing and posture to predict workers’ productivity without their consent. Such practices are not limited to subsidiaries of foreign firms or private firms. A state-owned electricity firm in Beijing used a management system that automatically adjusted workers’ bonuses based on their company card activity. When an employee had more than five instances in a month of physically leaving the workplace and using the card during working hours, even for legitimate reasons such as going to the supermarket to buy food, the system would automatically deduct a portion of the worker’s annual bonus. As the company deliberately withheld such surveillance practices from the employees, few employees were aware that their geolocational timeline and spending data were being surveilled.

The prospect of resisting algorithmic workplace surveillance is uncertain. Workers in developed countries can turn surveillance into a “base for organizing,” as several unions in the United States have negotiated employment contracts that bar practices such as the use of GPS tracking for disciplinary action and email monitoring beyond reasonable cause. In other Global North countries such as France, workplace surveillance with-

---

out consultation with the workers’ council is a criminal offense.\textsuperscript{42} In comparison, legal protection of an employee’s privacy rights has been relatively weak in China.\textsuperscript{43} While the draft Law on the Protection of Personal Information, circulated in 2020, offers the potential of requiring consent in data gathering, it remains to be seen how such laws will be finalized and implemented.\textsuperscript{44} Combined with the employer-employee power asymmetry, employers will likely still have significant room to obtain personal data for surveillance.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we drew upon three cases from China to explore novel forms of labor-capital relationships that have emerged with the development and deployment of AI systems. Moving beyond the well-documented impact of AI on manufacturing labor, we shifted our attention to the often hidden and invisible crowdworkers sitting behind many contemporary AI systems, the “white-collar working-class developers” exploited by China’s tech industry, and the everyday workers that have been increasingly monitored and surveilled by algorithmic tools. We also noted new forms of resistance emerging from our cases, echoing many similar practices in the Global North. Indeed, in some cases, a new basis of international solidarity has also started to unfold, as we discussed in the case of the 996.ICU movement.

We therefore echo the scholarship calling for a dialectical, nuanced approach to understanding the changing nature of work in China and in the Global South.\textsuperscript{45} We do not side with the technology-deterministic approach that emphasizes AI’s potential for productivity and economic growth, and an arms-race view of interstate relations as a zero-sum game of catching up in innovation development and adoption. Such an approach favors the benefits accrued to transnational capital and reduces labor to a factor of production to be upgraded, educated, and reskilled in the face of algorithms. It further ignores the agency of labor, and other societal actors, to shape how the adoption of AI will unravel in each society around the world. On the other hand, we also caution against an overly optimistic view that the power of labor in each society, and their collective power across the world, can effectively shape the policy discussions around AI and the course of AI adoption towards more humane outcomes. In developed economies such as the EU and United States, workers have resisted an unfair working environment with the help of relatively strong social protection, labor unionization, and labor policies. Calls against the monopolizing power of Big Tech are also growing among policymakers and scholars, and workers themselves have organized to bargain for their interests. In comparison, as this


\textsuperscript{45} See Huang and Sharif, “From ‘Labor Dividend’ to ‘Robot Dividend.’”
study of China shows, workers are being roped in the global capitalist networks underpinning AI-enabled innovations, while facing precarious working conditions with little guaranteed protection. Understanding of the working conditions currently relies more on personal accounts or news stories than rigorous data, and is further constrained by the workers’ limited awareness of their structural positions of being exploited. Government policies provide limited regulatory guidance or enforcement, and uncertain bargaining power for workers seeking fairer treatment. Similar dynamics have been observed in other Global South countries such as India, Brazil, and the Philippines.46

With increasing diffusion of innovation and the expansion of Big Tech into the Global South, workers in those countries have increasingly become a crucial part of the global value chain of AI. Their working conditions and the issues arising from the labor contentions in such countries will only become more salient. As AI gets increasingly adopted in all corners of life, there is growing scholarly and media attention on the plight of the workers. Whether this would provoke greater consciousness among the workers and the larger society to demand policy actions, however, is an open question. This presents an opportunity for international cooperation, in terms of exchanging information and data, searching for solutions, and formulating and implementing government regulations and best practices.47 Greater awareness, communication, and cooperation among policymakers, practitioners, scholars, workers, NGOs, and other concerned actors is needed. Exchanges across national borders, including among the two largest economies, the United States and China, would be vital, to help ensure workers’ well-being, and the global transition towards a more economically and socially equitable machine age.


Yujia He is an Assistant Professor at the Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce, University of Kentucky. Her areas of expertise are international political economy, science and technology policy, and comparative politics in Asia. She obtained her Ph.D. in International Affairs, Science and Technology (IAST) from Georgia Tech.

Hong Shen is a Systems Scientist in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research focuses on global Internet industry and policy (with an emphasis on China) as well as the social and policy implications of algorithmic systems. She received her Ph.D. in Communications from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
The Reeducation Labor Regime in Northwest China

Darren Byler

Introduction

The goal of factories associated with internment camps in Northwest China is to turn Kazakhs and Uyghurs into a deeply-controlled unfree working class. By turning a population of people regarded as not deserving of legal protections into workers, state authorities and private industrialists hope that they will extend the market expansion of the Chinese textile and garment industry through an ethno-racialized dormitory work regime that squeezes a constant surplus value from “surplus workers.” As state documents described in more detail below demonstrate, this system of controlled labor is “carried” (zaiti) forward by a massive reeducation system—a surveillance and detention mechanism that ensures that interned laborers are coerced into signing work contracts and forbidden to leave the industrial park.

While scholarship and press reports have focused on the political regime responsible for the internment camp system and framed it in relation to human rights discourses, less scholarship has focused on the economic logics of the system and their implications for Muslim societies. The work of Jennifer Pan and others demonstrates how nationwide poverty alleviation programs are related to surveillance and management of disfavored populations in China.¹ This essay shows how the Xinjiang “reeducation labor regime” functions as a limit case of these broader “repressive assistance” programs. Drawing on interviews conducted in 2020 with formerly interned workers who fled across the border to Kazakhstan in 2019, as well as examining industry documents, Chinese media reports, state assessments, and plans, this brief article presents evidence to show that the lives of many Muslims in Xinjiang have been radically transformed by an unfree labor system designed

to turn them into isolated industrial workers and, by extension, transform their societies.²

Xinjiang’s Reeducation Labor Regime

Since 2017, factory owners from cities across eastern China have arrived in Xinjiang to take advantage of newly built industrial parks associated with a reeducation camp system and the cheap labor and subsidies that accompany them. Often, involvement in these “Xinjiang Aid” (jiang ai) projects is also accompanied by political pressure placed on the factory owners back in their home cities.³ Xinjiang Aid is a specific “poverty alleviation” (fupin) and surveillance program that pairs local governments, police agencies, and manufacturers of provinces and cities in eastern China with counties and cities in Xinjiang. This program has been in place since the early 2010s, but its manufacturing and security foci were dramatically intensified as the internment camp system was built. By relocating part of their manufacturing base to the frontier, manufacturers ensure that their businesses will be protected by local authorities at home in eastern China, all while utilizing state incentives such as rent-free manufacturing facilities and subsidies allowing them to expand their production—something that is often described as a “win-win” opportunity. By late 2018, the Xinjiang Reform and Development Commission (XRDC) issued a statement announcing that the camps, or “vocational skills education and training centers” (jiaoyu peixun zhongxin), had become a “carrier” of economic stability because they had attracted so many manufacturers.⁴ Like oil and natural gas, two of the primary drivers of the Xinjiang economy, Uyghur and Kazakh labor were now being described as a resource available for exploitation by the market economy.

It is important to note that not all Uyghur and Kazakh labor that was directed toward these newly built factories came from former detainees. There was a broader process

---

² Since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslims from the Xinjiang have been “disappeared” into a widespread system of internment camps in Northwest China—a space known in Chinese by the name Xinjiang or “new frontier.” Nearly all Uyghurs and Kazakhs, a combined population of around 13.5 million people, have an immediate family member who is either interned in a camp or has been forced to work in one. This project affects every aspect of their lives. The phrase “everyone is gone” or “disappeared” (Uy: adem yoq) is something that is heard everywhere across Xinjiang. Across the entire Alaska-sized region, significant segments of the adult population—particularly men between the ages of 18 and 55—were deemed “extremists” and taken away, leaving behind children who are often sent to residential boarding schools where their native languages, Uyghur and Kazakh, are banned. In the same areas, an intensive family planning campaign combined with endemic family separation produced through the labor and detention system has produced dramatic drops in birth rates. See Joanne Smith Finley, “Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC Counter-terrorism Evolved into State Terror?” Central Asian Survey 38, no.1 (2019): 1-26; Sean R. Roberts, The War on the Uyghurs: China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).


of state-mandated proletarianization underway across the region. In order to meet centrally determined “poverty alleviation” goals centered on placing Uyghur and Kazakhs in Han-owned factory jobs, local officials and their “Xinjiang Aid” counterparts from eastern China were tasked with creating jobs. The workers would be taught to speak Mandarin and embrace state political ideology all while learning to work on an assembly line. Though some of the new workers—called “surplus laborers”—were simply farmers from nearby villages, many of them were the relatives of detainees. And all of them knew that overt refusal of these job assignments could result in their internment in the camps. As another document from the XRDC mandates, local authorities were to “establish a development mechanism linkage between the industrial management of rural collective economic organizations and the industry of education and training centers”—the euphemism used for reeducation camps and associated factories (my emphasis).\(^5\) As documents used by state security workers note, refusing “poverty alleviation” (fupin) schemes, a euphemism that in this context is often used for assigned factory work, was to be regarded as a sign of untrustworthiness and religious extremism.\(^6\)

In many cases, the everyday lives of these workers are confined within the boundaries of the industrial park. Like migrant workers in other parts of China, they are housed in the same space as the site of production. This is something that the labor scholars Pun Ngai and Chris Smith have described as a “dormitory labor regime.”\(^7\) In their work, they illustrate how this type of work arrangement allows factory owners to exploit their workers to a greater extent, demanding overtime and weekend work, garnishing wages to compensate for housing costs, and so on. In her more recent work, Pun shows that a system of subcontracting further insulates company owners from workers, making non-payment for work increasingly common.\(^8\) The same is true in the reeducation labor regime in Northwest China. However, unlike migrant workers in other parts of China, Uyghur and Kazakh workers are prevented from leaving by surveillance systems, material barriers, and the threat of internment. Rather than a system of subcontractors, factories in “Xinjiang Aid” industrial parks are often managed by a combination of low-level police and civil ministry personnel who also work in reeducation camps—a management scheme that blurs the line between private enterprise and state-sponsored internment camps.

Throughout the region, local authorities had also established comprehensive “safe county” surveillance systems that used real ID checkpoints and camera systems to monitor the

---


\(^8\) Pun Ngai, Migrant Labor in China (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).
movements of registered citizens in the county. The factory spaces themselves typically featured “people’s convenience police stations” (bianmin jingwuzhan) or surveillance hubs where movements of detained workers were checked and monitored. Inside the factories, camera systems and minders—often the same guards and community workers who monitor detainees in the camps—watched the workers. In some cases, the factory floors themselves were divided into cubicles locked from the outside, which restricted the movement of the workers. In most cases, though, these forms of interior material confinement appear to have been deemed unnecessary.

In the reeducation labor regime, Uyghur and Kazakh workers are not able to protest their wage garnishments or even stage minor protests such as assembly line slowdowns. Failure to work and perform a docile subjectivity can result not just in losing their jobs, but in detention in the camps. In addition, the surveillance equipment in the factories means that all aspects of their lives are monitored. Factory authorities decide if and when workers can go to the bathroom, what food they eat, if they are permitted to carry or use phones, what language they speak, when and how long they work and sleep, and even how they spend their free time. Since many of them are former detainees, the factory managers and civil servants often appear to treat them as criminals. Many had simply been deemed guilty of minor religion or ethnicity related offenses, such as praying too often, having a passport, possessing Uyghur or Kazakh language books, or offenses such as installing WhatsApp or VPNs. Through my interviews with former detainee-workers, I found that because the system has criminalized them, significant portions of their work is unpaid or underpaid. They are not permitted to freely choose or leave their jobs and, in many cases, are separated from their children and other family members.

Case Study

During a research trip to Kazakhstan in early 2020, I interviewed a number of former workers who had recently fled across the border from China. Most of them had been able to leave, because they had lived in Kazakhstan in the past and had family there who had pressured the Kazakhstan government to intervene on their behalf. Before they left, the local authorities had pressured them not to speak about what they had experienced, often using the threat of punishing their family members who remained in China if they spoke publicly. For these reasons, many of my interviewees asked me not to use their real names. Dina Nurdybai, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of a toddler, was an exception. She felt she had nothing to lose by telling her story.9

Nurdybai was first detained in Nilka County, near the border with Kazakhstan, in October 2017. She later learned that she had been deemed untrustworthy because she had downloaded WhatsApp to contact her relatives in Kazakhstan. She said, “At first I was held in a huge room with thirty other women. We just had to sit on the floor. It

---

was so cold and wet.” Then she was taken from the detention center, what is typically referred to as a county-level jail (kanshousuo), to a purpose-built camp, what is officially referred to as a “concentrated closed education and vocational training center” (jizhong fengbi jiaoyu zhiye peixun zhongxin), where they studied speeches given by Xi Jinping for many hours each day. In the detention center or jail, they were forced to use a bucket as a toilet due to overcrowding. In the camp, they were allowed to go to a bathroom, but both were directly in front of cameras. Soon, they learned to stop thinking about the way the most private aspects of their lives were being monitored and recorded. “We couldn’t speak with each other. I saw people faint. But we didn’t have the right to care about them. They just pulled them away.”

In May 2018, Nurdybai was moved to another facility, an industrial park, that she says the workers were told to refer to as another vocational training center, just as her previous camp had been officially called. She and other workers thought of it as just another camp. The new facility, known officially as the Nilka-Wujin Small to Medium Enterprise Entrepreneurship Base (Nilike-Wujin zhong xiao qiye chuangye jidi), had been built through the partnership that Nurdybai’s home county of Nilka had established with Wujin, a medium-size city in Jiangsu Province in eastern China. Many of the factories that had been set up in the facility were Jiangsu-based companies. As part of the “Xinjiang Aid” scheme, Wujin had invested 70 million yuan (approximately USD 10.7 million) in building the factory, and offered the buildings rent-free to Jiangsu and Nilka-based companies for up to ten years in some cases (in others, the rent appeared to simply be subsidized). There were more than a dozen factory buildings when Nurdybai was transferred to the facility. In the years since, the number of factories has more than doubled.

The factory complex and the camp were directly related. They shared the same organizational structure, including some of the same staff. Nurdybai recalled that nearly all of the workers in the facility were ethnic minority people, most of them women. Nilka County itself is a rare, Kazakh-majority county. It has an adult ethnic minority population of around 80,000. By 2019, 52,000 people in the county, most of whom were drawn from the adult ethnic minority population, had been assigned jobs in and outside of the county. Many women who were assigned work inside the county appeared to be in the factory complex where Nurdybai was transferred. Meanwhile, the brand-new camp and prison structure that had been built nearby remained fully operational.

---

10 “Nileike xian zhongxiao qiye chuangyejidi ruyuan xiangmu yi da 7 jia” 尼勒克县中小企业创业基地入园项目已达7家 [Nilka County SME Entrepreneurship Base has reached 7 projects], Xinjiang Nilka County People’s Government Office, June 23, 2016, https://archive.vn/Nm8wS; “Yili: renzhen xuexi guanche zong shu jizhong yao jiang hua jing shen rang gonggong weisheng fanghu wangshou huren minjian kang” [Yili: Earnestly study and implement the spirit of the important speech of the General Secretary, let the public health protection net protect people’s health], Yili Radio and TV Station, June 27, 2020, https://archive.fo/bNeQM.

According to Nurdybai, there were many women in the factory complex, most of them former detainees from the “concentrated closed education and vocational training center.” She told me, “Everything in our lives was inside the complex. The factory, the kindergarten, the cafeteria, the store, everything is there. In this ‘camp,’ women who had children were allowed to stay together with them at night. Some also had husbands. It was better than the other camp, but still we were not free. We couldn’t have a real phone. We couldn’t take pictures. We couldn’t get any food from outside.” Although there was greater contact between family members, young children were still largely being raised outside of the Kazakh family structure and language environment in the state-run kindergarten. Older children were often only able to visit their mothers once or twice per month. Even phone calls were restricted. The workers were issued phones that had government-issued SIM cards. They were ordered to carry them everywhere they went. But, she said, “We were not allowed to use the phones to talk. They were just for the government to track us.” From Nurdybai’s perspective there was a great deal of overlap between the jail, the camp, and the factory. She thought of them as all part of the same institution, with just slightly different measures of freedom, ranging from toilet facilities to communication with family. The guards were the same in each space, and they often regarded the detainees-turned-workers as criminals.

Inside the complex there were checkpoints between different sections and at entrances to the factories. The factory where she was assigned was partitioned with 20 to 30 workers inside each workroom. The rooms were often locked from the outside. These open-air corrals seemed to have more to do with security than with worker efficiency. Nurdybai heard from a staff member that the camp managers, the factory owners from Jiangsu, saw the workers as dangerous. There were cameras everywhere, even in the bathrooms. At night she and the other workers continued to study Chinese and political ideology. They were not supposed to speak any language other than Chinese. This, she understood, was part of her “reeducation.”

The factory system produced a type of “off-shoring” effect, or what critical economists refer to as “super exploitation.” This means that because their labor was devalued due to their criminalized status and ethnic identification, they were paid less than the legal minimum wage. After a period of time the staff realized that Nurdybai was an experienced seamstress and clothing designer because she had her own clothing company. So, they assigned her to teach the other workers in her corral how to sew school uniforms. She was told that she would be paid more than the others since she was an instructor, but she later learned that like the others, much of her salary would be garnished due to the living costs that were covered by the factory. In the end she received only on average 9 yuan (USD 1.50) per month—far below the minimum wage of around 1,800 yuan (USD 300) in the region. Another woman assigned to a nearby factory complex said in a county government interview that she earned “more than 80 yuan (USD 13) in a
day,” which would make her less of a burden on her family. The interview published by the county government states that the “precise poverty alleviation” scheme would allow workers to earn up to 1,500 to 2,500 yuan (USD 230-380) per month. However, it did not mention the wage garnishment process that numerous former workers like Nurdybai have reported.

Eventually Nurdybai was released from confinement in the factory complex. She was told that she was now on a kind of probation that would last at least six months. During visits from government monitors, which happened every two days, she was told that she would be transferred to work in eastern China. But, after reuniting with her husband, she used a weapon that Uyghurs and Kazakhs across the region have deployed in the face of the reeducation regime: she appealed to the authority of the clinic. “I got pregnant so that I would have an excuse not to go.” On May 15, 2019, after much petitioning, she received permission to travel back to Kazakhstan when her father was hospitalized for an illness. She promised only to stay for a short time. But she plans never to go back.

Back at the factory complex, as recently as 2020, Kazakh and Uyghur women were still sewing government uniforms. Another factory in the complex began to produce disposable face masks, with a plan to produce 3.6 million masks by the end of 2020. Other Uyghurs and Kazakhs in the county were transferred to Wujin to work in factories beginning in 2018. At the same time, the “poverty alleviation” program back in the complex where Nurdybai was held has continued to expand. In 2020, a new garment factory with over 1,200 employees, most of whom were women, was established. One ethnic minority worker told a Nilka County state employee: “I will work here for a long time to increase my income.”
Implications of the Reeducation Labor Regime: Poverty Alleviation as Repressive Assistance

As Jennifer Pan has shown, since the early 2000s Chinese state authorities have embarked on a widespread plan to engage targeted populations, ranging from religious and ethnic minorities to former prisoners and petitioners, with what she terms “repressive assistance.” In numerous locations across the country, programs carried out by grassroots-level neighborhood Civil Ministry employees have been transformed into a program of surveillance and control through a mechanism of authoritarian statecraft Pan refers to as institutional “seepage.” This process describes the way state power begins to shape the effects of seemingly unrelated social programs. What began as a welfare campaign to address poverty among historically marginalized populations, instead becomes a kind of management system that prevents marginalized people from being disruptive. A paradigmatic example of this approach for Pan is the way poverty alleviation programs—which often do offer real aid—simultaneously extract data and profits from targeted groups and foster state dependence, while pulling targeted populations into relationships of obligation.17

Writing in a similar vein, Rune Steenberg and Alessandro Rippa show that a similar pattern has developed in Xinjiang—where “Xinjiang Aid” poverty alleviation programs have provided investment opportunities for paired assistance with other Chinese cities and provinces.18 In the garment factory where Nurdybai worked in Nilka County, Wujin City provided support for the same type of program. Steenberg and Rippa show that since 2014 and the beginning of the People’s War on Terror, a “reeducation” campaign has seeped into “Xinjiang Aid” programs. This means that Wujin factory owners are compelled to employ unfree Uyghur and Kazakh workers in the carceral space of the factory complex by political obligations in their home localities, and the mandates of the Xinjiang Public Security Bureaus who run the camps alongside Wujin Public Security Bureau personnel.19 This is not to say that the Wujin factory owners are good faith actors in this arrangement, as Nurdybai’s experience indicates they appear to be convinced that the women they employ are in fact dangerous criminals. It is also likely that in most cases the ten-year rent-free factory spaces and the ability to garnish wages from the employees make the shift to production to Xinjiang highly profitable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As state documents cited above and this case study show, there is a direct relationship between the factory spaces and the “concentrated closed education and training centers.” Workers such as Nurdybai saw them as interrelated camp spaces, which means that

---

17 Pan, Welfare for Autocrats, Chapter 5.
19 Changzhou Wisdom Salon, “屡破公安部督办大案,这位常州网警小哥,战斗力爆棚!” [Repeatedly breaking big cases supervised by the Ministry of Public Security, this Changzhou Internet police officer is bursting with energy!], Weixin, November 6, 2020, https://archive.vn/xrj4W.
factory managers also understand that they are what stand between the workers and their return or entrance into the camps. They likely have clear knowledge of conditions in the camps and the overreach of the system. Here, the addition of state power to the dormitory labor regime, which has already created unfair work conditions in eastern China, produces what labor scholars refer to as a form of “super exploitation.” That is, the differential legal and material environment of the colonial frontier produces a kind of “off-shoring” effect, where the labor value of colonized Muslim workers is diminished even more than migrant labor in other parts of the country. The surveillant and carceral system turns a dormitory labor regime into a reeducation labor regime producing unfree workers who have no choice but to work even while their wages are garnished. Not only does the system turn Muslim farmers into unfree factory workers, in many cases it also transforms their society by separating parents from each other and from their children, placing the children in state-run residential boarding schools. A study published by state-sponsored Chinese researchers in 2019 noted that a primary purpose of the labor programs was to diminish the importance of Islamic practice and accelerate “social modernization” (shehui xiandaihua) within Uyghur and Kazakh societies. By diminishing and replacing Uyghur and Kazakh cultural and social institutions—their language, their faith, even their family structure—the reeducation labor regime eats into their ability to reproduce themselves as a society. To conclude this brief assessment of this unfree labor system, I offer two recommendations for policy makers and future research.

First, given the evidence of seepage between reeducation camps and job creation programs in Xinjiang, it is imperative that global brands reevaluate their supply chains. The region is the source of more than 80 percent of Chinese cotton and the state hopes to place nearly one in eleven garment manufacturing jobs in Xinjiang. As Nurdybai’s account makes clear, much of this production is geared toward state contracts for uniforms, but some is also intended for the domestic and international consumer market. Policymakers and proponents of fair and ethical manufacturing practices should examine supply chains for connections to “Xinjiang Aid” programs. They should also be cognizant that localities in eastern China, like Wujin, that have a “Xinjiang Aid” program, likely also employ Uyghurs and Kazakhs in unfree conditions where the employers are from. Tracking pairing assistance programs requires examining localities in both Xinjiang and eastern China.

Second, in the absence of investigations of global supply chains by global companies and government agencies, researchers with a working knowledge of Chinese should examine localities in Xinjiang and eastern China for the presence of “Xinjiang Aid” programs. Because these aid programs are promoted by localities as a public good as a way of building public buy-in and obscuring their relationship to carceral systems, they are usually well-documented in public state records. Often, local government institutions will describe the programs in granular detail in public forums hosted on WeChat.

---

searching for localities and their jiang ai programs on Chinese search engines such as Sogou.com—a website that makes public WeChat forums searchable—researchers will discover thousands of documents related to these programs. In addition, small collections of related documents are already archived by the Xinjiang Documentation Project hosted by the University of British Columbia, but they have yet to be translated and analyzed. Examining such documents—again, a task that any researcher with a working knowledge of Chinese can undertake—will begin to further untangle the way Uyghur and Kazakh unfreedom is linked to global economic systems and Chinese state power.

Darren Byler is an incoming Assistant Professor of International Studies at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia and a post-doctoral research fellow in the China Made Project at the Center for Asian Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He is the author of a forthcoming ethnography titled Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City (Duke University Press 2021) and a narrative-driven book titled In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony (Columbia Global Reports 2021). His current research interests are focused on infrastructure development and global China in the context of Xinjiang and Malaysia. He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Washington.

21 See, for example, this collection of documents collected by researcher Timothy Grose, “Online Sources: State Surveillance, Propaganda Work, and Coerced Gratitude,” Xinjiang Documentation Project, https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/blog/fanghuiju/
South Korea’s Dilemma: Foreign Workers in a “Homogenous Society”

Timothy C. Lim

Overview: From Labor Exporter to Labor Importer

For about three decades now, South Korea has needed to “import” foreign workers, especially for low-wage, 3-D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs in the small- and medium-sized business sector. This is a sharp contrast from the early-1960s to the mid-1980s, when the government facilitated the “export” of tens of thousands of South Korean workers in order to bring in desperately needed foreign exchange and alleviate domestic unemployment. The switch from labor exporting to labor importing, however, is far from unusual. Indeed, most capitalist economies that go through periods of high-speed industrialization—especially an industrialization process geared toward international markets—typically experience the same basic phenomenon, which scholars have dubbed the “migration transition.” At the same time, South Korea’s migration transition does have an unusual (although widely recognized) element. Namely, it unfolded in a country that has, since its founding in 1948, defined and prided itself on maintaining a “pure bloodline” that supposedly stretched back thousands of years. While this narrative has always been more myth than reality, it has had a profound impact on South Korean

---

1 I would like to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2018-LAB-2250001).
2 By the end of 1974, there were about 90,000 South Koreans working in 54 countries around the world and on 340 large foreign ships; a construction boom beginning in 1975 led to a rapid increase, especially in the Middle East, where the number of Korean construction workers increased to 160,000 (by 1982) in that region alone. See Ui-Sup Shim, “South Korean Workers and the Middle East Construction Boom in the 1970s,” Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies 2, no. 1 (2015): 37-56.
4 Beginning in the mid-2000s, a number of scholars have thoroughly debunked the presumption of natural or organic homogeneity in Korea. Kim Choong Soon provides a particularly straightforward assessment. “The evidence from Korean … history, and contemporary demographics,” she wrote, “suggests that the conventional view of Korea as a racially and culturally homogenous society may have no foundation at all.” See Kim Choong Soon, Voices of Foreign Brides: The Roots and Development of Multiculturalism in Korea (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2011), xiv.
society. The impact has been most apparent in South Korea’s immigration and nationality regimes, both of which were, for a long time, premised on maintaining, reinforcing, and reproducing the ideal and (socially constructed) reality of a “homogenous nation-state.”

The long-term shift to labor importing for a society premised on a firm belief in the sanctity of ethnic and racial homogeneity creates a strong and potentially intractable tension within South Korea. It is important to understand how South Korea’s government and society have addressed and are addressing this tension with respect not only to (non-professional) immigrant workers specifically, but also to other immigrant groups. It is equally important to address the deeper question: As South Korean society becomes more ethnically diverse, will the ethic of homogeneity continue to dominate or, conversely, will a new ethic of multiculturalism take hold? While I cannot provide a definitive answer, I argue that the ethic of homogeneity has already begun to erode and will likely erode much further. This erosion, however, is not only due to the migration transition; it is also due to a parallel rise in “marriage migration.” Of course, migration trends by themselves do not necessitate far-reaching social change. In South Korea, there have been multiple and intersecting factors at play—including the role of civil society, courts, and immigrant activism—most of which I can only touch on in this short article. My goal is to provide a basic sense of how South Korea has dealt with its emergence as a significant destination for immigrants from around the world and how immigration may be leading South Korea down the path to multiculturalism.

The Dilemma: Foreign Workers in a “Homogenous Society”

The persistent need for large numbers of foreign workers raised a dilemma for South Korean policymakers and bureaucrats. Specifically, how can South Korea incorporate tens of thousands of immigrant workers into a society that was purpose-built (in a manner) to reject them? One “solution,” albeit only a weak stopgap, was to rely on co-ethnics—ethnic Koreans living in other parts of the world. Fortuitously, South Korea’s rising need for foreign labor coincided with the breakdown of Cold War dynamics, which, until the end of the 1980s, were responsible for the construction of an almost impregnable wall between South Korea and a very large ethnic Korean population in China of around 1.9 million, as well as a much smaller population in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), especially Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Once the wall came down, it became possible to tap into a large pool of fairly easy-to-exploit, inexpensive co-ethnic workers, most of whom spoke Korean fluently. Still, the South Korean government was loath to officially or formally open its borders to “unskilled” labor, even if many of the workers shared “Korean blood.” As a result, until 1991, every single immigrant engaged in menial or manual labor was undocumented. Even more, once South Korea was identified

---


6 There were also sizable populations of ethnic Koreans in the United States and in Japan (and smaller communities spread throughout the world), but the prospect of working in extremely low-paying, manual labor jobs with limited protections was completely unappealing to virtually all ethnic Koreans from these more prosperous areas.
as a country in need of immigrant labor, people from a range of poorer countries began to flow into South Korea in hopes of finding a job. The demand for workers willing to take up jobs in the 3-D sector was so intense and unremitting that most easily found positions. This was the unintended and unwanted start of South Korea’s transformation from an ostensibly homogenous society to a “multicultural society.”

The Search for a Permanent Solution

Between 1991 and 2020, the South Korean state made a number of efforts to address the seemingly unfulfillable need for immigrant workers. Throughout the 1990s, the practice of allowing people to enter the country and begin working on an undocumented basis not only continued, but grew. In 1990, there were 18,402 undocumented immigrant workers, and by 1997 that figure had grown to 148,048. At the same time, the government developed a more formal program, the Industrial Trainee System (ITS). The ITS was based on a lie—intended to justify substandard wages and the denial of benefit and labor protections—that full-fledged workers were not workers, but were instead “trainees.” Immigrant workers turned the lie against the government by using the ITS as a convenient vehicle for entering South Korea only to quickly abandon their “trainee” positions. At the same time, activists among foreign workers teamed up with civil society organizations in South Korea to put pressure on the government to reform the system. This led to the creation of an actual guest worker program, the Employment Permit System, or EPS, in 2003 (which took effect one year later). The EPS was a major step forward in that it created a more transparent recruitment system, mandated fairer wages, and provided immigrant workers with the full protection and benefits of the Labor Standards Act. To critics, however, the EPS was still a modern day “slave system” because it did not allow workers to freely change jobs even if they suffered from physical, verbal, or sexual abuse or were not paid. The EPS also placed a strict time limit of four years and ten months of continuous employment within South Korea, a restriction that was specifically designed to prevent (legal) long-term settlement (South Korea allows immigrants to apply for permanent resident status—which can lead to naturalization—after five continuous years of residency).

Another major step was the creation of the “Visit and Employment” or H-2 visa program in 2007. The H-2 program was designed specifically for ethnic Koreans (those from China and the CIS) since they were not eligible for the EPS. Indeed, for a few years, it

---

7 “Multicultural,” in this sentence, is used to refer to the “empirical fact of diversity” as opposed to “multiculturalism,” the latter of which is the normative response to that fact. For further discussion, see Patrick Loobuyck, “Liberal Multiculturalism,” Ethnicities 5, no. 1 (2005): 108-123.
9 There was another similar program, the Industrial and Technical Training Program (ITTP), but this was originally meant for large Korean companies with overseas facilities or subsidiaries. It was only used to a very limited extent.
was difficult for ethnic Koreans from China and the CIS to legally enter South Korea, especially to work. The H-2 program completely changed that by giving those ethnic Koreans privileged access to South Korea (relative to other immigrant workers but not compared to ethnic Koreans from the United States and other western countries). It had all the benefits of the EPS plus a number of “special benefits” including the freedom to change jobs or to not work at all (the “visit” part of the visa). A few years later, in 2010, ethnic Koreans from China and the CIS were also provided an easy path to an F-4 visa—part of the Overseas Koreans Act\(^\text{10}\)—which provided de facto citizenship to visa holders. Technically, ethnic Koreans from China and the CIS were already eligible for F-4 visas, but the government designed the visa program in a way that made it very difficult for them to qualify. Specifically, the F-4 did not allow immigrants to engage in non-professional work. In 2010, however, the government allowed anyone with an H-2 visa to qualify for the F-4 visa as long as they have worked in their non-professional position for one year (later amended). The result was a huge upsurge of F-4 visas issued to ethnic Koreans from China from just 542 in 2009 to 10,113 in 2010 and to a high of 37,539 in 2018.

In the search for a permanent solution, the South Korean government decided that the most viable path was one that afforded privileged treatment and status to immigrant workers with “shared blood.” This decision was neither automatic nor preordained, but once implemented, it established the basis for the current labor immigration regime.

**South Korea’s Unequal Two-Track Labor Immigration System**

In short, the South Korean government ended up institutionalizing a two-track system—one track for co-ethnics from China and the CIS and one for all other immigrant workers. The system has proven to be relatively stable and effective. As a result, the South Korean government has seen little reason to significantly change it in the more than ten years since all of the key elements have been put in place. The EPS, in particular, has been singled out for praise as a “win-win-win” for immigrant workers, host states, and sending countries by the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Labour Organization. At the same time, however, the EPS has been the object of intense criticism, especially by immigrant activists who argue that the protections it promises are largely empty. Instead, they assert that the EPS is rife with abuse and violations of human rights. At a 2018 rally, for example, Al Mamun (vice president of the Migrants Trade Union, or MTU) stated, “The Korean government made this slave system called the EPS that has only created unstable temporary work for foreigners,” turning them into “consumables.”

---

\(^{10}\) Passed in 1999, this groundbreaking legislation provided an easy path to permanent residency and certain rights typically reserved for citizens to ethnic Koreans who emigrated after the establishment of South Korea in 1948. As a result, all ethnic Koreans in China and the CIS were summarily excluded. Korean Chinese and their allies in South Korea, however, immediately challenged the law. For further discussion, see my co-authored article, Timothy C. Lim and Dong-Hoon Seol, “Explaining South Korea’s Diaspora Engagement Policies,” Development and Society 47, no. 4 (2018): 633-662.
rather than human beings (emphasis added). 11 One of the main issues has been the clause restricting the freedom to change jobs. While the government has steadfastly withheld that right from workers in the EPS, it has handed such freedom to co-ethnic immigrants from China and the CIS on a silver platter. The differential treatment of co-ethnic immigrants and all other immigrants is important to emphasize. 12 It speaks to the construction of an immigration system based on a hierarchy of race or ethnicity.

Of course, South Korea is in very good company. Almost every country in the world with significant immigration has, at some point in their not-too-distant history, done the same. Over time, however, most countries reduced or eliminated work-related immigration restrictions strictly based on race or ethnicity. In Asia, however, this has been much less the case. In this view, it would be very easy to assume that for South Korea—a self-defined homogenous nation-state—the unequal two-track system will remain a permanent feature. Yet, this may not be the case.

The Fuzzy Future of Multiculturalism

South Korea has become a “multicultural society,” but this only means that its society has become more racially and ethnically diverse. It does not mean that “multiculturalism” as a normative principle—one premised on the equal treatment of culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse individuals and groups—has been embraced. Indeed, it seems evident that multiculturalism has not been accepted. After all, the very existence of the two-track immigration system that privileges immigrants with “shared blood” over all other immigrants indicates a seemingly clear-cut rejection of multiculturalism. Under the surface, however, the picture is fuzzier. This is partly because a segment of the foreign worker community, from the very beginning of large-scale immigration to this day, has waged a near-constant struggle for labor and human rights. For most of this period, they have had strong and indispensable support from influential groups within South Korea’s civil society. South Korean courts have also at times played a crucial role in protecting and promoting the rights of immigrant workers, including those who are undocumented. A good example of the latter is the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that undocumented workers had the right to unionize. 13 In short, this struggle will continue to problematize

---


the underlying racism and ethnonationalism of South Korea's immigration regime.

The fuzzy future of multiculturalism in South Korea, though, is also due to the rise of “marriage migration.” Between 1993 and 2018, there have been close to 600,000 marriages between a foreign national and a South Korean, an average of 22,785 a year accounting for 7.1 percent of all marriages in South Korea during that period. From the 1990s to 2010, the majority of marriage migrants were ethnic Korean women from China. In the last decade, however, the largest number of marriage migrants came from Vietnam. There are also significant numbers of marriage migrants from the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Japan, the United States, and Pakistan (in the latter case, it is exclusively Pakistani men marrying South Korean women). The rise and persistence of “multicultural marriages” (the government’s official term) has directly raised the issue of how to integrate hundreds of thousands of culturally distinct individuals into South Korean society. The process has been fraught and complicated. It also has been profoundly political, as many marriage migrants—while accepting and even embracing the necessity of assimilating into Korean society—have struggled to maintain a distinct ethnic identity both for themselves and for their children. This has been a difficult and uncertain struggle as they not only have to challenge Korea's ethnonationalist foundations, but also an entrenched patriarchy.

Concrete Steps Toward Multiculturalism

It is not clear how far South Korea will move toward multiculturalism, but every step forward will likely undermine the justification for maintaining an immigration and naturalization regime based on racial or ethnonationalist distinctions. Importantly, there have been signs—albeit small ones—of institutional change. In 2017, for example, the Ministry of Justice announced a change that would allow a very limited number of EPS workers to convert their visa status from E-9 to E-7, the latter of which would provide a path to permanent residency and naturalization. Such a policy change would have been, it is fair to say, unthinkable ten or twenty years earlier. Another potentially important shift is reflected in a 2018 decision by the Cheongju District Court, which ruled that the government could not deport an eighteen-year-old undocumented teenager born and raised in South Korea to two undocumented foreign parents. In the decision, the judge wrote, “Deporting a person like the plaintiff … goes against the spirit of the constitution of a civilized country to protect human dignity and guarantee rights to live.”

It is also worth noting that South Koreans have become increasingly open to the idea of immigrants—regardless of race or ethnicity—becoming “real Koreans.” In a 2018 Ipsos survey, 30 percent of South Korean respondents answered “Yes” to the question

---

“Is a legal immigrant who has lived in South Korea most of his/her life but has not become a citizen a real Korean?” Another 34 percent answered “Not sure,” while only 30 percent said “No.” These results are not much lower than other countries with long histories of immigration, including Australia and the United States. This suggests a sea change in Korean attitudes toward immigrants and openness that simply did not exist a few decades earlier.\footnote{Unfortunately, there are no previous Ipsos surveys asking the same question in South Korea. However, a survey by Shin and Chang in 2000 found that 66 percent of Korean respondents agreed with the statement, ‘‘Blood’ [is] the single most important criterion of national identity.’ If the ‘‘Yes’’ and ‘Not sure’ responses in the Ipsos survey are combined, it suggests that 64 percent of South Koreans no longer strongly believe that ‘blood’ is essential to Korean national identity. See Gi-wook Shin and Paul Yunsik Chang, ‘‘The Politics of Nationalism in U.S.-Korean relations,’’ Asian Perspective 28, no. 4 (2004): 119–145.} Whether this translates into a new social reality for South Korea, one based on multiculturalism instead of ethnic homogeneity, is still very much an open question. There is little doubt, however, that the South Korea of today is already very different from the South Korea of the 1950s or 1960s or even the 1990s. The once highly exclusionary immigration and naturalization regimes—which are admittedly still biased toward individuals with Korean ethnicity—have become meaningfully less restrictive. Despite its limitations, the EPS is one example of this, as it created a legal means for hundreds of thousands of immigrants—those with “Korean blood”—to enter the country to work in non-professional jobs. A small number of EPS workers have even been given a path to permanent residency and naturalization through the creation of a new visa in 2017, the E-9.\footnote{The E-9 visa, created in 2017, is for ‘‘Foreign Nationals of Special Ability.’’ It is specifically designed to allow a very select number of EPS workers (just a few hundred a year) to legally stay in South Korea on a permanent basis, if desired.}

Another significant change is the formal recognition of dual citizenship in 2010. To be sure, this change was originally intended for ethnic Koreans from the United States and other wealthy countries, but activists, including immigrant activists, have pressured the government to include all naturalized citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality.\footnote{See Erin Aeran Chung and Daisy Y. Kim, ‘‘Transnational Marriage: Citizenship and Marriage in a Globalizing World: Multicultural Families and Monocultural Nationality Laws in Korea and Japan,’’ Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies 19 (2012): 195–219.} This change, in turn, has convinced more permanent residents to seek South Korean citizenship. Indeed, one of the biggest changes in the immigration and naturalization regimes is the sheer increase in the number of naturalizations: Between 1985 and 1995, the total number of naturalizations was 538; between 2009 and 2018, that number had jumped to 133,214.\footnote{Korean Immigration Service, Immigration and Foreign Policy Statistics Yearbook (Seoul: Immigration Service, Ministry of Justice, 2018).} While a large chunk of this total are ethnic Koreans, particularly from China, an increasingly large percentage are immigrants without Korean blood. In 2018, in fact, naturalizations of Vietnamese citizens outnumbered Chinese citizens for the first time. While there is still a long way to go in overturning the racial and ethnocracy of the South Korean nation-state—and replacing it with one based
21 My discussion in this article is admittedly quite general and even superficial. However, I discuss all the issues raised here in much greater depth in my recently published book, The Road to Multiculturalism in South Korea: Ideas, Discourse, and Institutional Change in a Homogenous Nation-State (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).
Reproduction-Driven Labor Migration from China

Biao Xiang

Unskilled labor out-migration from China has changed little since the late 1990s. Every year, about half a million workers leave for contract jobs overseas.¹ Ninety percent of them migrate to countries in Africa and Asia to work so-called “3-D” jobs: dirty, difficult, and dead-end.² Despite the significant increase in average monthly earnings in China—from USD 83 in June 2000 to USD 1,071 in December 2019—out-migration did not decrease in the same time period.³ Even more curiously, migrants were willing to pay up to USD 5,000 in the 2010s for a two- or three-year contract job, which amounts to a migrant worker’s one-year salary. Compounding the cost, migrants often have to pay a USD 3,000 “security bond” that is reclaimable after returning to China upon completion of their contracts, provided that they did not violate their contract terms.

Why do workers pay so much to leave China, a rising global economic center, for dead-end jobs overseas? Labor out-migration from China, I suggest, has become “reproduction-driven.” Instead of being compelled by unemployment or poverty, people migrate to accumulate savings quickly to buy houses, get married, pay for their children’s education, and arrange medical and social care. These activities sustain and enhance life on a daily and generational basis, and constitute part of what Marx and Engels termed “social reproduction.”⁴ These tasks are time-sensitive. While jobs in China can yield some savings, overseas work speeds up the process because working hours are longer, payment is more predictable, and daily personal consumption is minimized. It is of course nothing new that labor migrants remit earnings home to pay for education and medical costs, but what makes reproduction-driven migration distinct is that duties of

---


social reproduction have become projects that one is expected to complete by a certain age, to a certain standard, and with significant financial inputs. In the past, additional income earned from migration would be spent on expanding the village house in one’s hometown. Now, migration income earned overseas has become the primary vehicle to maximize savings in order to buy urban property, which has become a necessary condition to secure a marriage in the countryside.

The emergence of reproduction-driven labor migration results from broad socioeconomic changes in China—critically, the monetization of reproduction activities. People’s reproduction needs, ranging from housing to medical care and education, before the 1990s, had been supplied through direct state and/or community welfare provisions that were attached to one’s employment or residence, without involving monetary transactions. But these provisions were withdrawn in the 1990s, and reproduction needs have become consumption items requiring the expenditure of large sums of money. Once reproduction became a matter of investment and consumption, costs kept rising, creating tremendous pressure, especially on the cash-poor population. These conditions have given rise to three characteristics that distinguish reproduction-driven migration from classical labor migration. First, reproduction-driven migrants are more individualized. Second, they are more willing to “invest” in migration. Third, they migrate in response to the pressure imposed by reproduction needs rather than the availability of job opportunities, which means once the need to reproduce arises, reproduction migrants are eager to go overseas as quickly as possible, independent of traditional considerations of job availability.

In what follows, I first describe how migrants experience social expectations regarding reproduction as a temporal pressure, which makes overseas contract jobs a feasible choice for some. This is followed by a description of the distinct features of reproduction-driven labor migration. I then trace the rise of this type of migration to social and policy changes in China since the late 1990s, particularly how housing, care, education, and marriage arrangements are monetized. Finally, I propose policy recommendations to alleviate the pressure of reproduction-driven migration. My analysis is based on field research conducted in Liaoning and Jilin provinces in northeast China, in both urban and rural sites, between June 2004 and November 2017.

Migration for Speedy Savings

Xiao Gang, a pedicab driver in a town in northeast China, told me that he was determined to go to South Korea within a year. “I will never save enough qu xifu qian (literally ‘the money for getting a bride’) here,” he explained, “At home we are careless with spending. We spend according to our mood. We go out to have meals with friends. One meal costs RMB 200 nowadays.” Overseas jobs do not pay higher salaries but can yield higher savings more quickly. In a foreign country, migrant workers have little time for socialization and consumption as they often live in a physically “encapsulated”
life under tight control. Furthermore, overseas jobs generate more savings because of much longer working hours.

“In Japan [the employer] won’t allow you to sit idle. You always work. Working means you are earning!” said Hai Tao, an energetic man in his mid-thirties, and the manager of a recruitment company associated with a county labor bureau in Jilin. Hai Tao told me how he persuaded a construction worker to go to Japan:

I told him that he can make RMB 6000 a month in Japan. He said that he was already earning that amount in China. That is true. A top-level worker can make as much as RMB 300 a day here. Then I asked him, how many months can you work at home a year? Barely six months! [because of the long winter in northeast China and the precarious subcontracting system]. I said to him: You have to ask yourself how much cash you have in your hands at the end of each month, and how much you have in your bank account when you should be married. After talking about this and that, [the point is] he has no savings!

When I started my field research in 2004, many migrants and would-be migrants planned to invest their future overseas earnings in small businesses, such as opening a shop, buying a car to rent out as a taxi, or purchasing equipment to organize a home refurbishment team. By 2010, however, far fewer were contemplating business plans. They were more concerned with matters such as finding a spouse, paying off debts, and buying apartments for themselves or for their children, even though some of them were still in primary school.

Reproduction needs are time-sensitive. One cannot delay a child’s education or medical care. Furthermore, property prices, marriage costs, and medical expenses are ever-rising. The life-cycle time (e.g., the desirable marriage age) and the market time (e.g., price inflation) are related. A man above thirty years old in rural China has to pay a much higher bride price than a man in his twenties. Similar age-related cost hikes happen when paying for education, too. People emphasized to me that if they failed to send their children to good primary schools now, they would have to spend much more later for the kids to catch up with others in life opportunities. Time is money. Migrants pay the USD 8,000 migration cost not only for a job, but for the opportunity to start saving quickly. Recruitment agents who fail to place migrants within a few months lose clients.

Migration used to be a means to earn additional income to improve reproduction conditions. Now, the cost and necessity of reproduction directly drive migration. This change is illustrated in the relation between migration and the real estate market in Qing county, Liaoning province. When I arrived for the first time in 2004, there was consensus

---

5 In Japan for instance, most migrant workers live in dormitories attached to factories, and some are not allowed to go shopping more than once a week. See Biao Xiang, “Transnational Encapsulation: Compulsory Return as a Labor Migration Control in East Asia,” in Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia, ed. Biao Xiang, Brenda Yeoh, and Mika Toyota (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 83-99.

that migrants’ remittances had driven up the housing prices. Properties in the Qing county seat were more expensive than in neighboring counties because the county had a large number of migrants. By the 2010s, the dynamic reversed. Residents no longer complained that migrants drove up housing prices. Instead, people talked about why some of them had to go overseas to work and quickly save money in order to buy a flat in the county seat before it became unaffordable. As purchasing urban property becomes the norm, migration has become an extraordinary means to adhere to social conceptions of “acceptable” living conditions.

New Migration Patterns

Compared to labor migration caused by poverty, reproduction-driven labor migrants come from more varied socioeconomic backgrounds. While classic labor migration often creates a mechanism of “cumulative causation” that turns migration into collective community action, reproduction-driven migration is individualized.\(^6\) While the general categories of reproduction duties are common across households—getting married, giving birth, purchasing a house, paying for their children’s education, and taking care of the ill and the elderly—everyone has different needs in terms of what the duties entail and when they arise. Who eventually decides to migrate, when, and where to, is shaped by individual circumstances.

Reproduction-driven migrants rarely identify themselves as laborers. They aim to earn enough money within a short period of time, which enables them to live a totally different lifestyle. They are less likely than traditional labor migrants to join unions or initiate collective bargaining with their employers. This does not mean that there are fewer conflicts in the workplace, however. Recruitment agents complained to me that the increasing diversity of migrant backgrounds—for instance, failed businesspeople who turn themselves into international labor migrants—made it harder to control them overseas. In fact, according to the agents, tensions in the workplace have increased in the major destination countries—Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Macau. Still, conflicts often burst out as individualized and sporadic clashes, rather than organized contestation.

The final difference between previous migration patterns and reproduction-driven migration is that social pressure and rising costs drive some of these new kinds of migrants to remain away from home for an extended period of time. In classical circular labor migration, migrants who seek to earn supplemental income for reproduction needs go home once their contract expires or the agricultural busy season starts, regardless of how much money they make. Some reproduction-driven migrants have difficulty returning, however, because they feel socially displaced when failing to meet reproduction expectations. There has been a noticeable increase of repeated migration from northeast China over the last fifteen years. People who have just completed one contract now pay to migrate again, something I had never encountered before 2010. There are also migrants who are perpetually “suspended” between China and their destination.

countries because they can never save enough to meet the ever-rising cost of living in China. Migrants keep moving to satisfy family reproduction needs, as well as to avoid the humiliation resulting from the failure to fulfill the reproduction duties expected of them. These new migration patterns are not a function of changes in the demand for labor at the destination, or of fluctuations in employment opportunities at home. They are instead caused by significant changes in social reproduction, namely how people maintain their individual and family life. These changes are institutionally induced, which I shall disentangle below.

The Four Mountains: Marriage, House, Education, Medical Care

When explaining why they choose to work overseas, migrants often refer to “three heavy mountains” (sanzuo dashan). These “mountains” are housing, education, and medical care. For male labor migrants, marriage is an additional fourth mountain that is no lighter than the others. Around 70 percent of labor migrants are men according to statistics from Liaoning province in the late 2000s. The stigma attached to unmarried men in China (guanggun, the “bare sticks”) is well known. This stigma is ingrained in migrant workers themselves, especially those in Japan, who see the low Japanese marriage rate as a sign of moral perversion, and sometimes attribute to this the inhumane experiences that they suffered as migrant workers. The social expectation for universal marriage creates widespread anxiety when coupled with the acute awareness of China’s sex imbalance: 115 males to every 100 females aged 20 to 24 years old (2019).

To increase their competitiveness in the marriage market, male migrants have to offer more. To secure a marriage in a county town in the late 2010s, the groom must provide housing and pay a bride price of RMB 100,000. Other research conducted in a city in northeastern China finds that the bride price increased from an average of RMB 600 in 1977 to the standard of RMB 288,888 in 2016 (the number 8 is supposed to bring

---

7 Jamie Coates describes that Chinese migrants in Japan feel perpetually unsettled, even though they have succeeded in their migration projects, partly because the expectations on their contributions to family life continue rising. See Jamie Coates, “The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the ‘Good Life’ among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo,” Positions 3, no. 27 (2019): 469–497.

8 Miriam Driessen points out that those who migrate to fulfill their reproduction duties paradoxically miss critical time to perform their family roles. This puts them in a “double bind,” and makes it hard to stop migrating. See Miriam Driessen, “Chinese Workers in Ethiopia Caught Between Remaining and Returning,” Pacific Affairs (2021), forthcoming.


good luck), though what counts as a bride price varies from region to region. Additional research in a northeastern village documented bride prices rising from RMB 200 in the 1950s to RMB 28,500 in the 1990s. Grooms are also expected to contribute funds for a car, furniture, jewelry, and wedding banquet—costs that total about RMB 300,000 according to my field data.

“No girl will marry you unless you have a flat in [the] county seat nowadays,” the father of a would-be migrant in a village told me, “Girls with good ‘conditions’ (tiaojian, or looks, age, and socioeconomic background) will also ask about the exact location, how big [the flat] is, and even the condition of the amenities in the condo.” China reformed its welfare-oriented urban housing system in 1998, partly to develop its real estate market to stabilize the economy after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Between 1999 and 2018, the average price per square meter of newly built flats in China jumped from RMB 1,758 to RMB 8,539. In Liaoning, the price doubled in ten years: from less than RMB 3,000 in 2007 to RMB 7,000 in 2018.

Unmarried young men migrate to save enough money to afford properties in the city. Married men—and women—migrate to pay mortgages. The balance of personal home loans increased by a factor of 16.1 between 2004 and 2018. The ratio of mortgage to household disposable income rose from 16.2 percent to 47.6 percent during the same period. Migrants go overseas to “work for banks”; they have to work hard and save because they are “slaves to their house [mortgage]” (fangnu).

Education

Lin Wei, a thirty-three-year-old woman working in a garment factory in Japan, wanted to send her seven-year-old daughter to a primary school in the county seat—this was why she had decided to become a migrant worker. But her husband insisted that the village school was good enough. This was unacceptable for Lin Wei: “Only buxingde (incapable or problematic) families send children to the village school now. Uncaring parents, or [those] who really have no money. Now my husband is one of them!”

---

16 Hengda Research Institute, “China Fertility Report 2020.”
Under the stress of constant quarrels with her husband on WeChat, she snapped and got involved in a fight with her employer. She ran away from the factory and came to a shelter set up by a labor non-governmental organization, where we met. Lin Wei told me her plan: once she settled her back pay with her former employer, she would go home, rent an apartment in the county seat, and bring her daughter there. Indeed, rural-to-urban relocation for the promise of a better education constitutes much of the reproduction-driven migration inside China.

While urban schools supposedly offer a better education than rural schools, they are much more expensive. It is now common practice for preschool children in rural China to attend kindergartens in nearby towns. The vast majority of kindergartens in the countryside are privately owned and require monthly tuition. From 2012 to 2021, private kindergarten tuition increased from less than RMB 650 to over RMB 1000. Some private kindergartens, including those in Jilin province, already charged nearly RMB 1000 per pupil every month in 2017. Kindergarten is of course only a starting point. According to a survey by Sina Education in 2017, average households spent 26 percent of their annual income on education during a child's preschool years, 21 percent of their yearly income from kindergarten to high school, and 29 percent of their income for each year of college.

Healthcare

Those who are most willing to pay high fees to go overseas quickly often have family members in need of major medical treatment. Lu Gang, a thirty-two-year-old man who looked much older, said that he would go overseas at any cost because his father had late-stage cancer. By the time we met, the treatment had lasted for more than a year and had exhausted all of his family’s savings. Lu was willing to pay RMB 70,000 to go to Australia, where he was told wages were higher than the usual destinations. He wanted to work as a truck driver despite his very minimal English: “I drove trucks before. Driving trucks you can pick up odd jobs. I can earn more.”

The burden of medical care is vividly captured by a riddle that circulated widely on Chinese social media in the late 2010s: “Looking from a distance it is like heaven, looking up close it is like a bank [making money], inside it is like a jail [capturing visitors]. What is it?—A hospital!” China’s per capita healthcare expenditure increased from RMB...
There are two unusual features behind this rise. First, medical expenses increased steadily by more than 20 percent per year in the 2000s, unrelated to general inflation. Second, medical costs rose at the same time as the government increased investments in public health. According to the World Health Organization, the share of out-of-pocket expenditure to total health expenditure by individual patients decreased from 60 percent to 36 percent between 2000 and 2018. At the same time, the absolute amounts increased from USD 77 to more than USD 334 in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. In fact, government investments made medical care more costly. A classic case of regulatory capture, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and drug distributors turned public investments into a source of profit. They purchased expensive equipment and medicine, and then over-prescribed them to patients.

Li Chen, a returnee from Japan, took care of her mother with lung cancer in 2017. “The doctors said that [my mother] should do this-and-that test. My mother always said, ‘Forget it.’ But how can we say no to the doctor?” The medicine cost RMB 14,000, and tests cost another RMB 6,000 every month. These figures were kept secret from Li’s mother as this expense would be as devastating as the cancer itself. After Li had several major altercations with her employer in Japan and her recruitment agent in China, she decided to never work overseas again. This put the family in an especially difficult situation. They agonized over how to repay their ever-growing debt. After our meetings ended, I occasionally received messages from Li that she was selling household goods as part of an e-commerce enterprise. But she seemed reluctant to tell me how she was doing and where she was.

The four heavy mountains—marriage, housing, education, and healthcare—are basic human needs. However, they have become mountain-like burdens because of their monetization. The free provision of goods and services that are essential for sustaining life is no longer available. Goods and services have become commodities whose prices are constantly rising. Those without enough money to purchase such commodities, for instance housing or education in the city, are socially displaced. This places tremendous pressure on the vast majority of the population, but especially on low-income families. Peasants with very little liquid cash have suffered even more. As one labor recruiting agent put it, “peasants don’t see cash coming in, but they see cash going out all the time.” Working overseas is a way to earn cash in a concentrated manner. The monetization of reproduction spurred a shift in migration patterns out of China. Under social pressure to fulfill monetized reproduction duties on time, migrants pay high fees for low-end

---


24 “Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (percent of current health expenditure) – China,” World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure Database.
jobs overseas in order to accumulate savings as quickly as possible.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This article began with a puzzle, that over the past two decades, low-skilled labor out-migration from China continues even as wages in China increased and earnings from overseas remained stagnant. I argue that the answer to this puzzle lies in the fact that labor out-migration from China after 2000 is increasingly driven by migrants’ needs to satisfy the duties of social reproduction: forming families, purchasing property, and providing education and healthcare. These reproduction activities—sustaining individual and family life—require substantial financial resources. Work overseas does not necessarily pay better than work in China, but it provides more opportunity to quickly and predictably accumulate savings to meet time-sensitive needs.

The root cause of reproduction-driven migration is the monetization of critical preconditions of social reproduction, such as marriage, housing, and education. The monetization of reproduction means much more than simply the rising cost of consumption goods. Rather, it indicates a fundamental shift in how critical resources are distributed and how people’s lives are organized. Monetization turns the basic needs of life into commodities that one must pay for. Life in turn becomes a competition for material goods and social status: one feels compelled to purchase high-end housing, education, and medical care for the sake of maintaining one’s social standing, even though the expensive items are beyond one’s means and genuine need. Monetization creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the cost of reproduction rises, service providers turn public subsidies and investments into a source of profit, and consumers are forced to pay for high-cost services. This ironically results in welfare provision contributing to the rising cost of care which, in turn, makes the costs of reproduction rise further. Ultimately, this leads people to pay intermediaries high fees to secure positions as migrant workers so they can save money to pay for expenses. Migration driven by reproduction-related pressures has contributed little to migrants’ skills acquisition or capital formation. Such migration helps to improve migrants’ material living conditions, yet its costs are high in terms of financial expenses, mental pressure, and health implications.

The rise of reproduction-driven out-migration from China shows clearly that labor migration is not simply a function of job market supply and demand, or of income disparities. We must take into consideration family planning and reproduction-related financial considerations of migrants and the prevalent social norms of what constitutes a “good life.” As I have demonstrated, these are not purely cultural matters, but are profoundly shaped by institutional arrangements underlying the commodification of reproduction. Conventional development-oriented strategies, such as generating employment opportunities and increasing income levels, will not reduce reproduction-driven migration. Nor will increasing welfare investments be sufficient, as welfare provisions will increase purchasing power and in turn, increase costs. The monetization of reproduction itself must be reversed. To accomplish this, first, the Chinese government must regulate the property market more tightly, for instance by capping transaction prices and freezing
rents, thereby reining in skyrocketing housing prices. Second, the government should increase direct subsidies to public schools—especially those in the countryside—to close the gap in performance between public and private schools. And third, the government should reform the drug distribution system to lessen out-of-pocket medical expenses and prevent hospitals from making profits through over-prescription. These three steps can help dampen and reverse the monetization of social goods and provide relief for workers relying on out-migration to stay competitive in the reproduction race.

**Biao Xiang** 项飙 is a Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford, and Director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany. Xiang’s research addresses various types of migration in China, India, and other parts of Asia. Xiang is the winner of the 2008 Anthony Leeds Prize for his book Global Bodyshopping and the 2012 William L. Holland Prize for his article “Predatory Princes.” His 2000 Chinese book 跨越边界的社区 (published in English as Transcending Boundaries, 2005) was reprinted in 2018 as a contemporary classic, and 自己作为方法 (Self as Method, co-authored with Wu Qi) was named the Most Impactful Book of 2020. His work has been translated into Japanese, French, Korean, Spanish, German, and Italian.
Creating Jobs with Renewable Energy in Rural India

Bharath Jairaj and Pamli Deka

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the challenges faced by India’s rural populations due to a lack of access to reliable electrical connections. In 2019, 39,286 health sub-centers and 795 Primary Health Centers (PHCs) were operating without electricity.\(^1\) Schools are unable to ensure access to digital education mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) because of the lack of reliable electricity connections in many parts of the country.\(^2\) Additionally, food processing units, dairy and poultry farms, and irrigation facilities have all suffered from poor electricity access.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of access to health and education services and livelihood opportunities in rural areas triggered migration to cities and towns, giving rise to urban India’s informal job sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, around forty million informal workers returned to their homes in rural India, having lost their jobs and livelihoods during the lockdowns.\(^3\)

There is an urgent need to prioritize and rebuild the rural economy while ensuring access to reliable health and education services. The post-COVID situation provides an opportunity to embark on a more sustainable path by using cleaner energy sources, while also spurring socioeconomic development. Cleaner energy sources can meet the electricity demand from the health and education sectors and support income-generating activities. Such demand, combined with a rapid uptake of sustainable clean energy, can stimulate employment in the renewable energy (RE) sector for rural India.

Potential for Renewable Energy Jobs

RE supply options are designed and developed based on the energy demand, including the type of demand and the time of day when electricity is required. Where supply from the grid is unreliable or not available, the systems may have to operate independent of the grid, or “off-grid.” The size of the system will vary depending on the number of loads and type of demand. For example, an individual household can rely on a 100-watt stand-alone Solar Home System (SHS) to power lights, fans, mobile chargers, and other essential appliances. An institution like a hospital or a high school will have more appliances and equipment that are drawing power, often on a more consistent basis throughout the day, than an individual household. These institutions require different configurations and battery backup options to ensure power availability even during extreme weather events or when the sun or wind are not available for solar and wind energy, respectively. In villages where there are multiple residential, commercial, and social loads, a micro-grid or a mini-grid powered by RE can provide electricity. In all cases, the source of RE will depend on the available resources in the village—solar, hydro, biomass, or a hybrid of these sources. Designing, implementing, and ensuring the continued operations of these systems requires human resources, thus creating jobs (Figure 1). Many of these jobs will be in rural areas with high RE demand, giving rise to an untapped and unexplored job market in rural India.

**Figure 1: Project lifecycle of off-grid systems and micro-grids. Adapted from IRENA, 2012**

In Bangladesh, which has 5.8 million SHS—and the market is growing—the SHS workforce has created 137,400 jobs. In India, the off-grid RE sector employed around ninety-five thousand people across project life cycles. This is not surprising since the RE dependence of Indian households is relatively low. As of September 2020, only three hundred thousand homes used off-grid SHSs to access a reliable source of electricity. A

---


survey conducted by Smart Power India and the National Institution for Transforming India Aayog (NITI) found that there is a high percentage of agricultural consumers (48 percent) and institutional consumers (22 percent) who rely on non-grid sources of electricity. Of these, only 3 percent of agricultural consumers and 8 percent of institutional consumers rely on solar panels for electricity. The majority of consumers continue to rely on more expensive and polluting diesel generators as the primary source of electricity. This shows the urgent need to explore sustainable, reliable, and clean energy sources to fill existing gaps in the electricity sector.

But, as the India Energy Outlook 2021 highlights, India’s policies have created a conducive environment for the uptake of solar pumps, SHS, mini-grids, and other off-grid and decentralized RE solutions. With such a strong push for more RE, the sector will expand, and the number of potential RE jobs will increase at the grid and off-grid levels. But while the opportunity exists, India’s rural communities are not yet equipped with the necessary skill sets to access such jobs.

Rural India Faces Barriers in Accessing Renewable Energy Jobs

The skill sets required to work in the RE sector vary by type of job, location, and employment duration. Unskilled laborers perform tasks like laying foundation and brick work for the physical infrastructure for RE systems, tasks that do not require formal technical training and offer minimum wages. Semi-skilled laborers acquire their skill sets on the job and perform their role under the guidance of skilled laborers. This kind of labor is expected to be equipped with certification of completion of Grade 10 or Grade “10+2” and training in specific areas like plumbing or electrician courses. The skilled laborers often have the experience of working as apprentices or have completed formal training for employment in the sector. They are paid well and have skill sets that can help them develop their careers in the industry.

The Indian government has been supporting the Industrial Training Institutes (ITI), National Institute of Solar Energy (NISE), and Skill Council for Green Jobs (SCGJ) to develop a curriculum and train youth for RE jobs. Similarly, private and social enterprises have been running skilling programs to prepare youth for semi-skilled and skilled jobs in the RE sector; but access to this training is not easy. An essential requirement to enroll in many of these courses is a graduation certificate from high school, equivalent

---

to completion of Grade “10+2.” In some cases, training programs require even higher thresholds of educational qualifications, like a diploma from an ITI. As a result, many unemployed individuals cannot access or apply for such courses. These requirements act as entry-level barriers for the vast majority of India’s rural population.

Yet the challenges they face are not limited to educational qualifications. Many also lack the necessary soft skills, like client negotiations and communications, to deal with customers and bankers. Training institutes find it challenging to run longer-term programs covering more skills due to limited funds. Another challenge is that training centers, like ITIs, are predominantly located in bigger towns and cities, making programs inaccessible or unaffordable for those who do not live there. Research suggests that this factor is slowing down the inclusion of women in the training programs. For example, reports indicate that some women find it difficult to leave their villages and households to attend the government’s flagship program Suryamitra, which is conducted over three months in a residential training center. The Barefoot College model and SEWA’s (Self Employed Women’s Association) Hariyali program are some examples of successful training programs for women from very remote areas. But these remain exceptions, and the vast majority of training options remain inaccessible to rural Indians.

Even after completing a training program, it is not easy to access RE jobs. Social dynamics like reliance on word of mouth and lack of knowledge about job platforms create challenges in applying for semi-skilled and skilled roles. There is a reliance on local subcontractors who recruit and manage the part-time contractual hires for the unskilled labor force. RE enterprises have also expressed concerns about the quality of training provided by training institutes and the need for necessary technical and soft skills required to perform the jobs they have on offer.

Due to the persistence of these challenges, jobs accessible to rural communities are primarily for unskilled labor, and these are temporary roles. There is no investment in improving their skill sets, thus limiting their ability to find good jobs with reliable income, healthcare and safety benefits, and in-job training opportunities. It is essential to address these challenges when building the RE job market to fuel socioeconomic development in rural India while employing rural communities.

---

10 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
11 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
15 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
16 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
Conclusion: Creating a Conducive Environment for Youth Employment in the Renewable Energy Sector

Training rural youth to empower them to access good jobs requires changes to training institutes' curricula and their approach to admissions. Training institutes must develop courses while keeping the previously discussed challenges in mind. Some have begun to make a difference by focusing, for example, on the candidates' willingness to work and learn, and not their educational qualifications for admitting them to training courses. A few others specifically seek to include candidates without the Grade “10+2” certification. Training institutes run by the government can consider developing such programs for semi-skilled labor.17

Training programs can also be designed in a manner to engage more women. The training facilities, including accommodation conditions, sanitation facilities, and safety aspects, must be considered while designing such programs. The Barefoot College’s training program for women provides simple, yet significant lessons. The program targets women between thirty-five and fifty years from tribal areas to assemble, install, operate, and maintain SHS and small solar systems for community centers.18 Over the years, Barefoot College has trained more than eighteen thousand women from India and other developing countries who have brought light to more than thirteen hundred villages globally.

To provide support to the training institutes that require investments to educate school and college dropouts and combine the technical skilling programs with soft skills training—corporate India can contribute through their Corporate Social Responsibility arms. Banking institutions can also support by providing loans at low-interest rates to students. For example, in Jharkhand, the Pan IIT Alumni Reach for India Foundation (PARFI) has teamed up with the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to provide financial assistance to school dropouts from marginalized communities and has trained more than eighteen thousand youth since 2014.19 Innovations in the funding model for the trainees and the training institutions that can reduce the costs for under-educated youth, and can help attract more people to such courses.

To improve the training programs' efficiency, RE enterprises can cooperate with training institutes to design programs and customize them. Where relevant, access to online job portals and tools to apply to jobs can be improved through partnerships between RE enterprises and the corporate sector.20 Only when features such as providing access to under-educated youth, ensuring women’s inclusion, and connecting trainees to financing and job platforms are embedded in training programs, can rural communities access

17 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
20 Jairaj et al., Can Renewable Energy Jobs Help Reduce Poverty in India?
these jobs. As previously mentioned, these jobs can be semi-skilled or skilled but must come with health benefits, safety nets, and growth opportunities.

With the job market expanding in tandem with the RE sector in rural India, the decentralized RE sector can potentially pave the path for creating such jobs that can provide stability and growth to the rural youth. With the RE enterprises’ efforts, think tanks, and government skilling programs, such jobs will help in the long-term sustainability of RE interventions across the healthcare, education, and livelihood sectors. With improved access to healthcare and educational services, and income-generating livelihood opportunities, India can reduce migration to its cities and towns and strengthen its rural economy. Supporting the rural economy can go a long way in meeting India’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goals around poverty, health and wellbeing, education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable clean energy, decent work and economic growth, and climate action.

Bharath Jairaj is the Director of World Resources Institute (WRI) India’s Energy program, and a Senior Associate at WRI’s Governance Center. Jairaj leads several initiatives and research projects that seek to inform and catalyze India’s transition to clean energy through increased use of renewable energy and energy efficiency. He also leads initiatives to enhance access to reliable and affordable energy such that it leads to socioeconomic development in India. Jairaj is also involved with efforts focused on social inclusion, reducing poverty, and improving governance. Born and raised in Chennai, India, he has a degree in law from the National Law School of India University, Bangalore; a Master of Laws from the National University of Singapore; and a Master’s in Public Policy from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore.

Pamli Deka is the Associate Director for World Resources Institute (WRI) India’s Energy Program and leads its work on energy access, which strives to improve access to reliable, sustainable, and affordable sources of energy for social economic development in India. She works closely with government and development partners to integrate energy access into development planning for improving outcomes across health, education, and livelihood sectors. Pamli holds an MBA from INSEAD and has an engineering degree from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT-Roorkee).
India's Emerging Gig Economy: Shaping the Future of Work for Women

Ruchika Chaudhary

Introduction

India's booming gig economy is attracting millennials (including women) by offering alternative employment opportunities. However, literature on the gendered experience of gig work is scant. The gig economy assumes special significance for women workers, primarily because digital platforms have been regarded as a prospective avenue for enhancing women's participation in the labor market. India has been battling the challenge of low and declining women's labor force participation—it has one of the lowest rates in South Asia. In this context, India's rapidly expanding gig economy may serve to extenuate some of the barriers women face by affording them flexibility in meeting care obligations while participating in the workforce. Although women are increasingly participating in the new opportunities offered by the gig economy, most jobs remain restricted to traditionally female-dominated and low-wage sectors such as domestic work, care work, beauty, and wellness. Gig work is fraught with numerous challenges, ranging from lack of access to the digital economy to security and safety issues, which prevent women's full participation in this sector.

The Grim Reality of Women's Work in India

In 2018-19, the women's labor force participation rate (LFPR) in India was an abysmally low 24.5 percent,\(^1\) compared to 75.5 percent of men\(^2\). Such a significant gender gap in the LFPR is one of India's most pressing challenges, and the coronavirus pandemic has made it worse. Women have been dropping out of the labor force continuously since

---

1 The labor force participation rate is the percentage of the population that is either working or actively looking for work. In other words, LFPR is defined as the number of persons in the labor force (which includes both the employed and unemployed) per 100 persons. This rate is for women aged 15 years and above. Based on Periodic Labour Force Survey Estimates, 2018-19. The gender gap in participation is particularly large and has been widening, in both rural and urban areas.

[50] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
the mid-2000s, which has drawn much social and academic attention. This downward trend in women's LFPR is puzzling, as it was concurrent with high economic growth rates, declining fertility rates, and the rise in girls’ and women's educational attainment. The low rate of women's participation does not mean that they are working less. Instead, it suggests that women perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work, and spend more time on it than men. Women's responsibility for domestic reproductive work limits their participation in the labor market. Once in the labor market, women still face limited opportunities—they tend to perform low-skilled and precarious jobs, are overrepresented in the informal economy (estimated at 92 percent), face structural and societal barriers, and have few learning and career advancement opportunities.

**New Forms of Work: Gig and Platform Work**

The technology-driven gig economy is booming in India. Its rapid growth can be attributed to the emergence and expansion of numerous “on-demand” digital platforms and other e-commerce and online retailing platforms. As a result, the concept of work is changing. The redefinition of labor relations is leading to severe commodification of work, impacting working conditions, the organization of work itself, and workplaces. In other words, this new arrangement is disrupting well-defined structures and changing the future of work and production. The gig economy grew massively during the COVID-19 shutdowns due to significant growth in online retail business. As a result, India has the largest number of gig workers or flexible staff, globally.

Gig work falls outside the boundaries of traditional, standard, or conventional forms of employment relations. The traditional workforce usually has a long-term employer-employee relationship, where the worker earns a salary or a wage payment, receives certain benefits, and is covered under minimum wage and anti-discriminatory laws. The gig workforce, on the other hand, is comprised of workers who are hired to complete a particular task or work for a certain length of time, in which work tends to be project/assignment-based or temporary. As opposed to being “employees” of the platform company, these workers are commonly referred to as “independent contractors,” “freelancers,” or “self-employed,” and working conditions are primarily regulated by each

---

3 Women's participation rates declined from 34.1 per cent in 1999-00 to 27.2 percent in 2011-12.


5 Care work falls outside the traditional economic boundary of production, and therefore, women are not regarded as “economically active” for the purpose of the labor supply statistics.


8 Such work arrangements are often called alternative or non-standard work arrangements, and include temp agency work, freelancing, self-employment, and subcontracted work.
platform's terms of service agreements. There are two main types of platform work, namely “crowdwork,” for which tasks are performed online and remotely, and “work-on-demand via app,” location-based platforms, for which jobs are executed locally. Available literature notes profound differences in these work forms.9

Various studies also suggest that workers are exposed to several challenges whilst engaging in platform work, including a lack of access to decent labor and social protections. They fail to maintain a steady income and are generally faced with a poor working environment. Besides, gig workers cannot unionize and have low bargaining power, which adds to their vulnerabilities in the long run.10 In a recent report, the International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that gig workers’ working hours are long and unpredictable. They earn relatively low wages, and a significant gender pay gap exists on some platforms. The lack of access to social protection, freedom of association, and collective bargaining rights are long-standing challenges for gig workers, and COVID-19 has exacerbated many of these issues.11

Women’s Place in India’s Gig Economy

India’s gig economy is mainly expanding and flourishing, beginning in major cities and spreading into towns. Uber, Ola, Amazon, Flipkart, Urban Company, Swiggy, and Zomato are the gig workforce’s most significant employers. Digital labor platforms are creating opportunities that did not exist before. Women are also increasingly participating in the gig economy due to the flexi-work arrangement and good earning potential. However, these newly available employment opportunities are incredibly gendered in

---

9 Amazon Mechanical Turk, Clickworker and Crowdflower are examples of “crowdwork,” which connect individuals and organizations from all over the world through the internet. In contrast, activities like transportation, food delivery, other moving and delivery services, cleaning, beauty and other personal services, and household maintenance services are channeled through apps which are managed by platform companies like Uber, Lyft, Grab, Ola, Taskrabbit, Urban company, Zomato, etc., where activities are executed in the real world. These work forms are different in terms of how tasks are decided, completed and paid, the type of the assignments/tasks, and the ways in which fees and compensations are billed vary from platform to platform.


nature. Women often end up working in traditional sectors such as domestic work, care work, beauty, and wellness. Women are finding employment as beauty and wellness service providers with big, multi-service aggregator platforms, such as Urban Company, Housejoy, and small-scale platforms, such as DoorTask, Unplan, and HeyDeedee. Though informal in nature, these jobs provide more flexibility than regular and salaried salon-based jobs, and women are better able to balance the realms of production and reproduction and cater to the needs of work and family. They may also prefer these jobs because of prevalent gender norms as well as safety and mobility issues.

No formal statistics are available on the number of gig jobs created so far or the number of gig workers working through several platforms in India. According to BetterPlace, a leading blue-collar recruitment and onboarding firm, the gig economy accounts for more than 1.4 million jobs in India, which include rideshare drivers, delivery workers, beauty and wellness workers, maintenance workers, and the like. According to the Oxford Internet Institute’s Fairwork Project, as of February 2020, three million gig workers were registered on eleven leading platforms in India. According to another estimate by staffing firm TeamLease, the gig economy is projected to employ half of the urban workforce by 2025 and eighty percent by 2030. Additionally, the total number of women in platform-based jobs increased by over seventy percent during 2018-19 (from 40,000 in 2018 to 67,900 in 2019). It is largely believed that the majority of these women work in beauty and wellness or care work, and they are underrepresented in delivery and ride-hailing sub-sectors of the gig economy. According to one study on beauty-work platforms, demand for platform workers is driven by the rise of an upwardly-mobile professional class in the country. This professional class employs informal workers as a

parallel underclass to perform lateral services such as cleaning, security, beauty services, et cetera. The authors concluded that these platforms enable the “professionalization” and subsequent “commodification” of labor.\(^{19}\) Besides, there is also a significant gender pay gap between gig workers, with a bias against women. TeamLease estimated a gap of 8 to 10 percent in earnings between men and women digital platform workers in 2019.\(^{20}\) Moreover, women’s participation in the gig economy boom is constrained by limited access to digital services such as smartphones and mobile internet. As per the Mobile Gender Gap Report of 2020, women in India are 20 percent less likely than men to own mobile phones due to social and cultural reasons, and a mere 21 percent of women use mobile internet.\(^ {21}\)

**Barriers and Issues Faced by Women in the Gig Space**

From our survey of experiences of women gig workers in the beauty segment of Urban Company, a leading platform company, we concluded that women have benefited and can reap the advantages of the flexible work arrangement, gain financial independence, and enjoy enhanced autonomy.\(^ {22}\) Most women found this arrangement suitable as it took care of their household and other unpaid care responsibilities. However, this flexibility comes with the risk of not having a regular and stable monthly income. About 85 percent of the surveyed women joined gig work as it allows them flexibility in working hours. Women in urban areas bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities due to nuclear family structures, so flexibility is an inviting factor for these women. On the other hand, respondents also shared their concern regarding unpredictable hours. Women who had no childcare support or other family members to look after their young children had to forgo service calls that demanded working at irregular hours.

Survey respondents worked for 37 hours per week on average and reported an average income of 1,552 Indian Rupees (INR) per day, contingent on the number of tasks performed (they could earn between INR 35,000-40,000 monthly). This was found to be significantly higher than a typical salon job, for which the average monthly income typically ranges between INR 8,000-10,000, with a relatively long working day of more than ten hours. Nearly sixty percent of our respondents were primary income-earners for their families. Surveyed women shared that they could earn more in this job because of

---


\(^ {20}\) TeamLease Services, “Employment Outlook Report 2019.”


a flexi-work arrangement, which allowed them to combine their family responsibilities with paid work and contribute to their families’ economic welfare.

Still, these women also encountered multiple challenges while engaging in platform work. Workers faced critical issues relating to inadequate access to non-wage benefits, safety, labor and income security, upward mobility, increasing competition, inadequate bargaining power, and freedom of association. Besides, there is a near absence of safety nets for gig workers by and large. Survey findings noted that 92 percent of service providers were not entitled to any other benefits except health insurance. 81 percent of respondents were most dissatisfied with the unavailability of maternity benefits and 63 percent were most dissatisfied with the incentive and increment system.

Respondents also shared they were penalized for declining jobs, sometimes even when the customer made the cancellation. This issue affected over half of respondents, or 53 percent. Insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) reveal that “workers suffer penalties if they cancel or refuse to take the job. But, they are not penalized if they reschedule the service call.” FGD participants also shared concerns about automated ratings and review mechanisms, reporting that “[m]ore than ninety percent of the platform customers do not cite a reason for assigning low ratings.” They also reported not having an adequate mechanism for dispute settlements vis-à-vis customers.

In most cases, respondents reported discontentment with the treatment meted out by both the aggregator company and customers. Women workers are also confronted with significant safety issues as they provide services at private homes. FGD participants shared that “while working, we always have to be alert to ensure our safety; help can never reach [us] immediately.” Lastly, there is minimal opportunity for collective bargaining and freedom of association. In most cases, the gig workers do not know their peers on the platform and work in different localities to cater to diverse customers. In a nutshell, women gig workers have precarious labor arrangements with limited opportunities for long-term career development.

Additionally, COVID-19 further exposed gig workers’ vulnerabilities, and they were among the hardest hit by the pandemic; many workers lost jobs with the platforms, and others experienced massive income shocks. Women workers were disproportionately impacted as various services such as beauty and wellness services, care work, and domestic work were suspended entirely due to COVID-19 lockdowns, or they had to stay at home to tackle their care responsibilities. Fairwork studied thirteen platforms in India to assess the platforms’ policies for COVID-19 and reported that only three platforms (Amazon, Flipkart and Grofers) compensated workers for lost pay, and only two platforms (Ola and Uber) provided deferral of loan and rental costs. The report

23 Similarly, other epidemics, natural calamities, and other disasters could have extremely adverse impacts on these workers. No insurance products are covering such disasters, and these workers have very few protections like guaranteed wages, sick pay, and health care—benefits that are critical in a crisis.
also revealed the lack of labor and income security among platform workers of India. 

The Way Forward

Gig work is seen as relatively favorable to women, who are widely participating in India’s thriving gig economy as it affords them the choice of work and flexible timings. However, they also face intractable problems, such as irregular income, limited upward mobility, lack of effective bargaining power, occupational segregation, and pervasive automated ratings in the gig economy. Besides, the lack of social protection is a growing concern. Despite these difficulties, women are the major beneficiaries of the gig ecosystem. Looking to the future, the gig economy will continue to expand beyond urban areas. Since more and more women will be joining the gig sector, the best way forward would be to bring policymakers and platforms together to discuss the pressing issues related to platform work and ensuring access to decent work for these workers in the gig space.

First and foremost, creating skills training systems is vital in making a suitable and enabling ecosystem for women, so they may achieve mobility into better employment avenues within the gig space. Platforms and policymakers should focus on strengthening skills-based programs to support future-readiness and economic mobility by developing a wide range of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, by shaping digital skill sets and other hard skills, and by increasing availability of timely and impactful skills training by customized training supports. Skills development must adopt a lifelong learning approach, which is essential for maximizing employment opportunities and self-sustainability of workers. Training programs should also include discussions on labor rights and the platform’s anti-harassment policy, and training should be made obligatory for all platform workers. 

Moreover, bridging the sizable gender divide in digital services and improving digital literacy will be crucial for enhancing women’s participation in the gig economy. The effects of COVID-19 have renewed discussion on the importance of medical insurance, sick pay, and other non-wage benefits, and underscored the need to extend social safety nets for gig workers. Hence, there is a need to adapt social protection systems to the emerging forms of work and to design inclusive social protection that covers the social security needs of all workers.


25 There are no particular instances of collectivization among urban company’s gig workers. They do have regular meetings with the management to raise their grievances and other job-related issues. However, workers’ trade unions are non-existent.
Ruchika Chaudhary is a Senior Research Fellow at the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE), an initiative of LEAD at Krea University, New Delhi. Before IWWAGE, she worked with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, and ILO’s Decent Work Team for South Asia and Country Office for India, New Delhi. Her research focuses extensively on labor and employment issues, specifically in the areas of gender equality, non-discrimination and women’s empowerment in India. She has published her research in journals, edited books, and participated in various national and international forums. She received her Ph.D. in Economics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
Artificial Intelligence in South East Asia: Upskilling and Reskilling to Narrow Emerging Digital Divides in the Post-Pandemic Recovery

Giulia Ajmone Marsan

Disclaimer & Acknowledgements: The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of ERIA. The author wishes to thank Natasya Alief Zhafrira for providing research assistance and Nathanael Cheng and Bailey Brya for their support during the editing process.

Introduction

Southeast Asia has become a growing digital hub, home to a burgeoning sector of tech startups and smartphone super apps dedicated to e-commerce, messaging, digital payments, ridesharing, and food delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated the trend of digitization in the region. Governments in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region have emphasized the importance of developing and using digital technologies, including artificial intelligence. The ASEAN region, however, is very diverse and has seen uneven and unequal development of digital access. Three key gaps hinder further development of the digital economy and economic growth post-pandemic. These include gaps in digital use and connectivity between urban and rural communities, between large and small businesses and enterprises, and between men and women. To close these gaps, ASEAN and its members should ramp up efforts to upskill disadvantaged groups and areas, increase government investment, and deepen coordination among public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Southeast Asia, One of the Fastest Growing Digital Economies in the World

Southeast Asia is one of the fastest growing digital economies in the world. The number of digital consumers in Southeast Asia nearly tripled between 2015 and 2018, growing from 90 million in 2015 to 250 million in 2018 to more than 300 million by the end of 2020.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. According to recent estimates, the acceleration in digital consumer growth supposed to occur between 2020 and 2025 took place in

---


[58] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
only one year, as individuals, consumers, and companies continue to move activities online.\(^2\)

The ASEAN region contains a wide variety of levels of economic development, cultures, languages, and religions.\(^3\) Every ASEAN country, however, has felt the effects of the digital economy. Some countries, like Singapore, are global innovation leaders and considerably more tech-advanced than others in the region. Yet even less tech-advanced ASEAN member states are witnessing the emergence of their own tech hot spots driven by a growing number of tech-savvy young and well-educated entrepreneurs. The process of economic integration across the ten ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners in East Asia—Japan, China, and Korea—and the Pacific—including Australia and New Zealand—can benefit this cohort of young and dynamic tech entrepreneurs.\(^4\)

Increased adoption and usage of digital technologies in the region is developing hand-in-hand with the emergence of regional digital champions and so-called “super apps.” Brands such as regional ridesharing and food delivery super apps Grab and Go-Jek, regional e-commerce giants Tokopedia and Lazada, online travel booking agent Traveloka, and Indonesian e-commerce platform Bukalapak—which services small and medium enterprises—are as widespread and well-known in Southeast Asia as their peers in China or the West. These companies are making extensive usage of artificial intelligence (AI) and related techniques to innovate and improve their services for growing generations of ASEAN millennials and Generation Z consumers.

**ASEAN Governments Strategies and Policies around AI**

Many ASEAN governments are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of developing AI strategies and initiatives to promote benefits, mitigate risks, and narrow the emerging divides associated with new technologies. Recent policy initiatives and strategies emphasize upskilling and reskilling as key pillars for a transition towards inclusive digital economies.

In November 2019, Singapore launched its National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, with the vision of becoming a leading global AI player by 2030. This strategy is cross-cutting, with key pillars related to ecosystem and skills development. The largest country in the region, Indonesia, released its national AI strategy in mid-2020. The strategy emphasizes the benefits of AI for health services, transportation, urban development and smart cities, the public sector, education, and food security. Digital connectivity is especially key for Indonesia, a country spread out over thousands of islands with uneven access to

---


\(^3\) The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional block with a common agenda for socioeconomic development comprising ten countries in South East Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

\(^4\) These fifteen countries have signed in November 2020 the mega multilateral trade agreement known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
digital technology. The Indonesian strategy emphasizes the importance of ethics, skills, infrastructure, and data analytics as key components of a well-functioning AI ecosystem. For the development and implementation of any AI-related policy, the strategy also highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement from the government, the business sector, educational institutions, and local communities.

In addition to Indonesia and Singapore, countries such as Malaysia and Thailand see AI and digital technologies as an opportunity to modernize traditional sectors to make them more innovative and productive. For example, new technologies can power drones and sensors to assist farmers with monitoring fields and crops in rural areas, deliver telemedicine to smaller islands and remote locations, provide digital banking for unbanked populations, or monitor and protect the rich biodiversity of the region and its cultural heritage. In Malaysia, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the Center of Artificial Intelligence for Future Industry are working together to promote the development of an AI ecosystem, targeting the banking, manufacturing, education, and healthcare sectors. Local universities and research institutes are investing in AI-related research and training. In Thailand, interesting AI developments are emerging in the healthcare sector, like Vaja, a Thai language speech recognition technology used in more than seventy Thai hospitals.

At the regional level, several ASEAN-wide master plans and strategic initiatives have been established with the aim of further developing and integrating the digital economy of the region. These strategies emphasize digital connectivity and infrastructure, skills development, the realization of smart cities, the transition towards Industry 4.0, and generally how digital technologies, including AI, can be effectively leveraged to “build back better” during the post-pandemic recovery.

**Emerging “Digital Divides” and Skills Development**

Although ASEAN governments have taken steps to foster the digital economy, key gaps still exist that hinder innovation and expose social inequities. One of the consequences of the fast technology and economic developments in the region is the emergence of three digital “divides”: between rural and urban areas, firms of different sizes, and men and women. These divides are slowing down innovation and delaying adoption of digital technologies, including AI, evenly across communities. The way different groups of individuals and firms will be able to acquire the skills necessary to use digital technologies in general—and AI in particular—will be critical in mitigating and addressing these emerging divides.

The first divide is the geographic divide between urban places with high digital connectivity and less connected rural areas. Southeast Asia combines hyper-connected mega cities with remote rural areas where internet connection is barely present. For example, in Indonesia, the largest country in the region, there is a yawning gap in access to a reliable and stable internet connection between the most populous island Java, where the capital city Jakarta is located, and the myriad of smaller islands in the eastern part.
of the country towards the Pacific.

The second divide is between large firms and domestic micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). While usage of AI or machine learning tools is on the rise, it is not yet ubiquitous across most ASEAN companies and organizations, including MSMEs. For example, recent estimates by leading consultancy firms show potential for significant economic gains from increased investments in AI. The awareness of the potential of AI technology is growing rapidly in the business sector. According to a recent McKinsey report, in 2011, only 6 percent of large firms mentioned terms such as big data, AI, machine learning, Internet of Things, or advanced analytics in their annual reports, compared to more than 30 percent in 2016.  

While large local digital champions have successfully embraced emerging technology, however, the vast majority of ASEAN MSMEs—which represent between 97 and 99 percent of firms and between 60 and 80 percent of total employment across ASEAN—still use very basic digital technologies and tools, if any. ASEAN MSMEs often lack the skills and the tools necessary to adopt AI and digital technologies in their business models and daily activities.

The third digital divide is the gender divide. Southeast Asia compares relatively favorably in terms of basic equal access to digital technologies between women and men. When looking at more sophisticated forms of access, such as the share of women in tech companies as entrepreneurs, founders of startups, and business leaders, or in computer science and engineering education careers, however, there is considerable room for improvement. For example, women represent less than half—between twenty and forty percent—of the workforce in telecommunications and other information and communications technology (ICT) activities in all ASEAN countries where data is available. Moreover, across ASEAN, women entrepreneurs tend to own and manage small businesses, which are less reliant on digital technologies, as mentioned above.

In a region where the digital economy has grown very rapidly and where the pandemic has already disproportionately affected women, it is particularly important to narrow the gender digital divide to promote diversity, inclusive economic development, and

---


innovation. For all these reasons, increased participation of women and girls in the post-pandemic digital economy has been identified by regional policy makers as a key pillar of the recovery as mentioned in the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework.  

Increasing Digital Risks

In addition to addressing the three digital “divides,” ASEAN policymakers need to seriously consider the many risks associated with AI, big data analytics, and other emerging digital technologies. Many countries in the region are not yet equipped to tackle serious cybersecurity threats against individuals, consumers, and institutions. Privacy considerations regarding the collection and usage of data need careful debate and analysis of benefits and risks associated with different models and options both domestically and with respect to cross-border data flows. There is also very little knowledge on the way data used to train AI and machine learning algorithms may result in potential biases and discrimination affecting groups under-represented in the digital landscape, such as rural communities, women, and ethnic minorities. Investments in research and development (R&D) around AI and related technologies remain considerably low in most countries in the region, raising another barrier to solving these challenges.

Skills Development to Address Digital Divides and Risks

Skills development is crucial to give ASEAN economies the footing to succeed in the fast-growing digital economy. To address the rural, MSME, and gender digital gaps, ASEAN governments should invest in upskilling people affected most by these inequalities. In rural areas, investments in digital infrastructure combined with training and skills development of the population will be key in the post-pandemic phase to make economic recovery less uneven. At the same time, targeted investments to train MSME leaders and increase female representation will sharpen ASEAN’s competitive edge.

In addition to skills development, digital education and literacy is also key to addressing AI and cyber risks. Better digital skills are not only important for economic recovery, entrepreneurship, and innovation, but are also crucial to address the emerging risks associated with AI and digital technologies more broadly. Investments in training for digital data literacy, increased awareness among the wider population of digital environments, and even basic understanding of how data is harvested and how AI algorithms work are key elements of any digital education seeking to empower people to effectively harness new technology. These are also issues that policy makers should consider to combat the misuse and popular skepticism of technology. Policy initiatives should include dedicated programs to raise awareness and tackle threats as diverse as fraudulent transactions in e-commerce, breaches in privacy and misuse of personal data, discrimination arising from biases contained in big data sets and AI, and identification of fake news coming from unreliable sources in the digital sphere.

---

Further Steps: Increased ASEAN Public-Private Coordination

ASEAN governments can also build on existing policies to increase cooperation and integration in three key areas. The first step is increasing interagency collaboration among different ministries and policy departments. Ministries in charge of skills development and training should work in concert with government departments dealing with innovation, infrastructure development, social, and economic issues. Second, governments should also make efforts to engage higher education and the private sector. The level of public and higher education in many ASEAN countries still lag behind more advanced economies. To address this, some ASEAN countries have begun experimenting with international agreements to connect national higher education systems with foreign entities with the aim of increasing the quality of education and training, with a focus on digital upskilling and reskilling. This is an important mechanism and should be expanded further. ASEAN policymakers should also consider policies that attract and retain highly skilled digital professionals. The newly established Singaporean Tech. Pass, a work visa scheme aiming to attract up to five hundred foreign tech experts to the city state, has just been implemented and can provide a useful policy example to other countries in the region.

Finally, together with educational institutions, the private sector has an important role to play when it comes to skills development for more inclusive digital economies. Partly to tackle the lack of cutting-edge higher education and training to provide digital-related skills in the population, interesting public-private partnerships are emerging across ASEAN. These have been catalyzed by the pandemic. While many countries were implementing social-distancing measures and recommending citizens to “stay home,” several domestic and foreign tech champions have proactively developed initiatives with the support of national governments, local universities or regional entities, such as the ASEAN Secretariat, to train individuals to go online and support previously disconnected MSMEs in marketing and selling products online through e-commerce platforms and social networks. Some of these initiatives specifically target groups of individuals that are traditionally less connected, lack digital-related skills, and are more affected by the emergence of the above-mentioned “divides,” such as people in rural areas and women entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the already rapid growth of the Southeast Asian digital economy. This acceleration is bringing many opportunities to citizens, firms and societies at large while also favoring certain groups more than others. Policymakers need to monitor and address the emerging digital divides—between urban and rural, larger firms and MSMEs, men and women—to promote inclusive post-pandemic digital economies. One of the most effective ways to promote inclusion is to equip vulnerable groups in the population with adequate skills to be able to compete and thrive in the post-pandemic future.
Investments in connectivity and infrastructure alone are not enough. They should be combined with skills development programs to make sure that MSME workers and people living in less connected rural areas not only have access to technology, but also have the knowledge to use technology in a meaningful way. Investments in skills development programs should also benefit women and girls to ensure greater representation in science and engineering careers and leadership positions. Finally, individuals need to be empowered by increased education to be equipped with the knowledge to understand the risks and reject biases associated with digital technologies including AI.

These different steps must include integrated and collaborative approaches across different ministries and policy departments and across different actors of the digital ecosystem. Government institutions together with the business sector, education and training organizations, and civil society collectively have an important role to play in shaping the digital development of the region and to foster inclusion in the digital economy.

---

**Giulia Ajmone Marsan** is the Director of Strategy and Partnership at the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA). She is based in Jakarta, Indonesia and works in close collaboration with policymakers across the Asia-Pacific as well as regional and global organizations to support the ASEAN process of socio-economic integration. Dr. Ajmone Marsan works and publishes on a broad range of topics including science, technology, and innovation policy; SMEs, entrepreneurship, and start-up creation; skills and the future of work; the digital economy; and the digital gender divide. Before joining ERIA, Dr. Ajmone Marsan worked as an Innovation Economist at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where she contributed to the activities of several directorates, such as the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities, and the Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in Applied Mathematics from the Polytechnic School of Turin, Italy and a Ph.D. in Economics and Complex Systems jointly awarded from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France and the IMT Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy.
Chasing the Conservative Dream:

Why Shinzo Abe Failed to Revise the Constitution of Japan

Rintaro Nishimura

This paper examines the role of domestic actors in shaping Japan's constitutional debate during Shinzo Abe's time as prime minister. Based on a holistic analysis of the prevailing literature and the role of the public, leadership, and other political actors, this study finds that Abe was unable to garner enough support from the public or fellow lawmakers to push his version of proposed revisions to the Constitution of Japan. The paper identifies the wide spectrum of views that exist on the issue and how revising the constitution is viewed as a challenge against prevailing norms. Public opinion remains opposed to revision and the inability of lawmakers to build consensus on what to amend stymies the process further. Abe seems to have had a grasp on the political climate, opting to pursue constitutional revision largely for electoral purposes.

Introduction

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced his decision to step down in August 2020.¹ Japan's longest-serving prime minister left behind a mixed legacy defined by electoral and foreign policy achievements, as well as a period of economic stagnation and string of political scandals.² But what best defines Abe's political career will undoubtedly be his desire, and ultimate failure, to revise the seventy-four-year-old Constitution of Japan (COJ). Although Abe’s failure to amend the COJ is often attributed to institutional hurdles, this paper argues that varying interests among domestic actors—from public resistance to militarism, to the prime minister’s agenda, and lawmakers’ scattered interests regarding what exactly to amend—ultimately determined the fate of his political

This paper attempts to understand why attempts to revise the COJ failed under Abe. Scholars point to the roles of norms and institutions in shaping Japan’s national security policy, but little has been said about domestic actors. Some argue that norms have continued to restrain leaders from shifting policy and rewriting Article Nine, the provision that renounces war and prohibits maintaining war potential.  3 Sheila Smith writes that “while changing public attitudes toward Japan’s military have accompanied a rising interest in the constitutional debate, these two trends do not yet add up to a public majority wishing to rid the Japanese constitution of Article Nine.” 4 Tom Berger adds that realist and liberalist theories fail to account for the unique constraints Japan has faced, stating that anti-militarism remains strong among citizens. 5 Others disagree, claiming that anti-militaristic norms would have forced leaders to adopt a neutral-state status free of military commitments. Those like Richard Samuels believe pacifist ideals have been left behind, but that Japan’s post-war leaders have voluntarily remained committed to them. 6 This implies that conservative leaders have been constrained by institutional norms but can overturn policy if deemed necessary.

Now that Abe has stepped down, it is worth reassessing how effective these constraints continue to be. To some, Abe was a conservative ideologue willing to break with his predecessors by freeing the limits imposed by the constitution. 7 Christopher Hughes asserts that the 2014 Cabinet decision and subsequent legislation to reinterpret the COJ indicates a trajectory away from tradition. 8 While common practice, Abe’s ability to undermine the Supreme Court—which refuses to rule on political issues—and the Cabinet Legislation Bureau—traditionally in charge of constitutional interpretation—was seen as wading in uncharted territory. 9 Yet to others, Abe was a pragmatic realist who strengthened Japan’s status and presence in the world. 10 He is seen as a politician

---

8 Christopher W. Hughes, “Japan’s Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision,” in Demilitarization in the Contemporary World, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 150.
striking a balance between conservative ideals and pragmatic statecraft.\textsuperscript{11} These scholars have focused on Abe's adaptability to work within the prescribed constraints, while identifying the gap between conservative rhetoric and restrained actions taken by his cabinet.\textsuperscript{12}

This paper has three main findings. First, institutional and procedural hurdles exist, but are not the decisive factor. While certainly cumbersome, comparative data shows the COJ is not especially difficult to amend, and that few other nations have proposed fundamental changes to their constitutions. The relatively short COJ also allows leaders to utilize legislation to pass significant changes under fewer conditions.\textsuperscript{13} At first glance, these are sweeping changes to Japan's security policy, but a thorough examination reveals that other proposals more radical than these have been blocked. Second, much like past studies find, norms continue to play a sufficient role as a bulwark against fundamental changes to security policy. Public opinion data during the Abe years suggest that net support for constitutional revision was highest when Abe returned to power in late 2012 but has been on a general decline ever since. Abe's ideological side may have put off the average voter and made constitutional revision look more like political ambition than strategic necessity. Politicians remain divided on the idea as well. Although support for revision remains more consistent across political parties than citizens, the inability to come to consensus on what to revise has similarly constrained leaders. Third, domestic actors and their electoral calculations matter. An analysis of surveys conducted before the 2017 and 2019 Diet elections indicates that Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians and their corresponding factions were not as enthusiastic about revising Article Nine as Abe and his faction were.

The diverse priorities of elected representatives lend credence to the idea that Abe was unable to consolidate support for constitutional revision. Instead, Abe understood these diverse interests and adapted accordingly, attempting to package Article Nine with other amendments such as educational and electoral reform. The overwhelming evidence points to the fact that Abe was a pragmatic realist who persisted with constitutional revision not because he had a winning strategy, but to appease interest groups for their vote in future elections.\textsuperscript{14} The paper also examines the role of the Komeito Party, the LDP's junior coalition partner whose ideology is often at odds with Abe's party.\textsuperscript{15} An analysis of electoral data from national elections since the coalition began finds that the LDP

\textsuperscript{12}See, for instance, Liff, "Japan's Defense Policy: Abe the Evolutionary," 81; and Nakanishi, "Reorienting Japan?," 407.
\textsuperscript{13}Hughes, "Japan's Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision," 138.
partnered with the Komeito mostly for electoral purposes. With both bases declining, the coalition has devised a win-win election strategy by compromising on key issues, most notably Article Nine.

The Truth about Procedural Hurdles to Revise the COJ

The oft-cited argument for failure to amend the COJ points to procedural barriers. Article Ninety-six of the COJ stipulates that an amendment is ratified once passed by an absolute supermajority in both Houses and a majority of votes cast in a national referendum. Abe claimed that the supermajority condition made the constitution “rigid,” proposing to lower the requirement to a simple majority. One could surmise that this formidable barrier forced prior governments to reinterpret rather than revise aspects of the COJ. Adam Liff writes that “constitutional revision was not politically feasible … In contrast, from the perspective of LDP leaders, effective reinterpretation by elites, though suboptimal on strategic and nationalist grounds, was possible.” While reinterpretation helped leaders expand the scope of Japan's defense posture, much of it was incremental.

Japan instead took steps to expand its defense capabilities without amending the COJ. The most significant, of course, was the 2014 Cabinet decision and ensuing bundle of legislation that revised Japan's long-standing ban on collective self-defense (CSD) to allow overseas military missions in cooperation with other countries. While this reinterpretation may have reduced the need for full-scale revision, so long as the LDP remains in power, the party is likely to continue its pursuit of amending the COJ on a dual track, arguing that the deteriorating security environment and accusations about the Self-Defense Forces' (SDF) unconstitutionality warrant such an approach.

Constitutional revision remains the sole option to achieve normal state status. But even that process requires time, given the COJ's uniqueness. Data from the Comparative

19 Liff, “Policy by Other Means,” 146.
Constitutions Project (CCP), a project which aims to provide systematic data on constitutions to comparative legal scholars, finds that the COJ is one of the shortest constitutions and covers very little of what is included in other constitutions.\(^\text{21}\) Besides basic individual freedoms and core principles like Article Nine, the COJ leaves most other issues to be legislated by the Diet. This has resulted in leaders utilizing reinterpretation, which is significantly easier than revision. Conversely, the lack of guidance provided by the COJ must be offset by greater deliberation and crafting of the law. Although revision has been intermittently discussed since the 1950s, the National Referendum Law governing how to conduct the citizen vote was only enforced in 2010, making it a rather recent piece of legislation.\(^\text{22}\)

This procedural explanation has two glaring flaws. In 2016, Abe and fellow pro-amendment parties held a two-thirds supermajority in the Diet.\(^\text{23}\) Despite meeting the condition he had criticized prior, Abe failed to proceed with constitutional revision. This points to the fact that the procedure itself was not what prevented him from succeeding. In a comparative study using data on 558 constitutions compiled by the CCP, McElwain and Winkler conclude that the COJ’s amendment process ranks “average” in procedural difficulty.\(^\text{24}\) More than 78 percent of studied constitutions fell into the same category, with 35 percent requiring a referendum as an additional condition.\(^\text{25}\) Germany’s Basic Law, often compared to the COJ, requires an absolute two-thirds majority of the Bundestag alongside a simple two-thirds in the Bundesrat; despite this, it has been amended more than fifty times.\(^\text{26}\)

The Indian constitution is one of the most amended constitutions, having been revised over a hundred times. Most amendments to it require a special majority—fifty-one percent of two-thirds of parliamentary members present and voting—for an amendment to pass.\(^\text{27}\) The lower hurdle explains why India’s constitution has been amended more frequently. South Korea has a similar amendment procedure to Japan, requiring a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly and support from a majority of at least half


\(^{24}\) McElwain and Winkler, “What’s Unique about the Japanese Constitution?” 263.

\(^{25}\) Kenneth M. McElwain, “Why Did Abe Fail to Change the Japanese Constitution?” (speech, online, October 15, 2020).

\(^{26}\) McElwain and Winkler, “What’s Unique about the Japanese Constitution?” 263.

the eligible voter population in a referendum.\textsuperscript{28} Although employing similar processes, the South Korean constitution has been amended nine times. This suggests that easier processes help, but cannot explain variation among similar constitutions.

Another flaw is that Japan’s amendments are significantly different compared to those of other countries. In other words, the process may matter less than the actual content. The LDP proposals would fundamentally transform the COJ’s identity as a pacifist constitution. It would, in effect, fundamentally transform Japan’s post-war identity. Considering the Japanese public’s disdain for the wartime militarist regime and citizens’ ready embrace of the COJ, resistance to such changes is likely to be high.\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, nations such as the United States and Germany tend to amend their constitutions to curtail executive power, or for electoral reform, much less consequential than changes in Japan.\textsuperscript{30} Focusing on the number of amendments diverts attention from the content being revised. A study of content confirms that the COJ is inherently more difficult to revise due to the nature of the provisions in question.

\textit{“Domestic Brakes”}

This section takes a theoretical approach to understand how prevailing ideas, opinions, and interests on constitutional revision have acted as an intended or unintended brake on the ambitions of conservative leaders. It will examine three actors—the public, the leader, and other political players—and the complicated process of forming consensus among these groups.

\textit{Public Opinion}

Tom Berger best captured public opinion through his discussion of the “political–military culture,” or the cultural beliefs and values that shape a given society’s orientations toward politics.\textsuperscript{31} He argues that the incremental nature of military development in Japan owed to the reluctance of society to accept force. A similar conclusion is made by Adam Liff, who wrote that “widespread public discomfort with Abe’s ambitious security reform agenda … was the most conspicuous restraint.”\textsuperscript{32} The interesting contradiction has been the Japanese public’s strong support for the LDP despite its nationalist and militarist

---


\textsuperscript{29} For a recent example, see Matsushita Hideo 松下秀雄, “#KokuminTōhyōKaiseianniKōgiShimasu’Kakusan wo Kini Kaiken Tetzuzuki wo Tokoton Kangaeta”「#国民投票法改正案に抗議します」拡散を機に改憲手続きをとことん考えた [I Scrutinized the Constitutional Amendment Process After ‘#IProtesttheRevisedNationalReferendumLaw’ Went Viral], Asahi Ronza, May 25, 2020, https://webronza.asahi.com/politics/articles/2020052400008.html?page=1.


\textsuperscript{32} Liff, “Policy by Other Means,” 163.
tendencies. Most scholars believe support for the conservative party has little to do with constitutional revision, and more to do with a weak opposition, stable economy, and general favorability among all age groups. Political party approval ratings prove this, as the majority of voters seem to begrudgingly support the LDP, frequently saying they have “no other option.”

Figure 1. Net Change in Public Opinion Polls Asking: “Should the Constitution Be Amended?”

![Figure 1](image-url)

---


Figure 1 illustrates the results across four major media outlets representing a wide spectrum of political views. The graph suggests that, although net support for constitutional revision fluctuates over time, all polls in early 2013 registered high support months after Abe’s return to power. Support begins to wane as the “Abe effect” wears off, with the Nikkei poll registering a sharp plummet after the Abe Cabinet reinterpreted the constitution to permit CSD in 2014. The negative trend is consistent across all four outlets, indicating constitutional revision does not sit well with any ideological group. Since 2014, net support has settled between plus five to ten percentage points. Only the left-leaning newspaper, Masaki Miki (政木みき) and Hiroshi Aramaki (荒牧央), “Kenpō wo Meguru Ishiki no Henka to Ima” [Changes in Views on the COJ to the Present], NHK, October 1, 2017, https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/yonron/pdf/20171001_9.pdf; Ayumi Teraoka, “Japanese Public Opinion on Constitutional Revision in 2016,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 1, 2016, https://www.cfr.org/blog/japanese-public-opinion-constitutional-revision-2016; THE SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM (@fumiomatsuda), 2018, “Kenpō ‘Genjō lī’ Tonjūhachi Paasento” [Cabinet under the Abe Cabinet] = 58%, 朝日新聞世論調査 https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/35651.html; “Nisen-nijūnen  Kinkyū Jitai Sengenka no Yoron Kansoku Repōto” [2020 Public Opinion Observation During the State of Emergency], Nikkei Research Inc., June 5, 2020, https://www.nikkei-r.co.jp/files/user/pdf/news/newsrelease7250_repo20200605.pdf; "Naikaku Shijiritsu Nisen-jūhachinen Shigatsu" [Cabinet Approval Rating April 2018], NHK, April 10, 2018, https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2018_04.html; Marikko (@3qjutqyXHDzt0AK), 2020, “Kenpō Kaisei, Sansei Yonjūroku Paasento… ” [Support for Constitutional Revision at 49%], Twitter, May 3, 2020, 8:17 a.m., https://twitter.com/3qjutqyXHDzt0AK/status/1256724466735837184.
Asahi Shimbun, registers consistent negative support.

This data supports the argument that, over the years, Abe unintentionally dampened the mood for constitutional revision. Despite having a strong mandate early in his second term, support steadily declined to below the pre-Abe (2008-2012) levels across the board. This indicates that Abe’s ideology and policies triggered the opposite effect among voters. And while one can argue that Abe’s push for CSD exhausted his political capital and prevented a successful attempt at revising the COJ, the later sections of this paper reveal that the underlying obstacle at the end of the day is the lack of consensus among lawmakers and their sensitivities to public sentiment.

**Abe’s Personal Role in Shaping the COJ Debate**

Political debates tend to revolve around policy positions and groups that continue to exist over time. Cass Sunstein and Jack Balkin both find that, while ideas may persist because of their merits, they also endure because of who bears them and how successful that group is at staying relevant.36 The LDP’s policy position on revising the constitution has persisted over the post-war period and eventually passed on to Abe. This makes the former prime minister’s role in the discussion difficult to ignore. In 2006, before he first became prime minister, Abe showed his intent to revise the COJ, writing, “a strong state is not a potential threat to political liberty that must be restrained by constitutionalism and civil society. It is the ultimate guarantor of national independence in a dangerous world governed by the law of the jungle.”37 This realist worldview has shaped his vision of a strong Japan—a nation that can be proud of itself and reclaim its place in the world where survival is contingent on a competent state.38

However, Abe’s politics are a mixture of contradicting characteristics that stem from conservative ideology and pragmatic realism. Abe was a nationalist who desired to see his country revived as a great power, and constitutional revision was just one of many nationalist aspirations.39 He justified an accelerated departure from postwar pacifism by sustaining economic reform.40 External threats, such as North Korea’s missile development, were evoked to convince citizens that his hawkish policies were necessary, not

---


37 Harris, The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan, 50.

38 Hughes, “Japan’s Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision,” 140.

39 Even after stepping down, Abe continues to call for constitutional revision. Endo Shuhei 遠藤修平, “Abe-shi ‘Jieitai wa Kenpō Ihan ni Shūshifu wo’ Nigata de Kōen, Kaiken Uttae” 安倍氏「自衛隊は憲法違反に終止符を」 新潟で講演、改憲訴え [Mr. Abe Urges Constitutional Revision During Lecture in Nigata, ’Put an End to Claims That the Self-Defense Forces Are Unconstitutional’], Mainichi Shimbun, March 27, 2021, https://mainichi.jp/articles/20210327/k00/00m/010/225000c.

an extension of his ideological ambitions. On the other hand, the pragmatic side of Abe instead made long-overdue reforms to adapt to an increasingly “severe” security environment. In times of unpopularity, he curtailed any attempts to force through hawkish policies, indicating to citizens he was no radical ideologue. This balancing act has contributed to the often-conflicting narrative surrounding his intentions.

A study of Abe’s rhetoric throughout his second term demonstrates this balancing act. Last year, I along with other researchers from Northeastern University conducted a text analysis using Lexos Software to count the number of times specific words connoting “nationalism” or “patriotism” were used in Abe’s speeches to the Diet. The annual inaugural speech to the legislature is an overview of the prime minister’s agenda for the year and covers a range of topics from education, to the economy, and national security.

Figure 2. Examining Abe’s Speeches for Nationalist Rhetoric (2013–2020)

---

41 Magcamit, “The Fault in Japan’s Stars,” 627.
42 See Appendix 1 for a list of words flagged as invoking nationalism or patriotism.
Figure 2 is a graph of the most frequently spoken words during a sample of twelve Diet speeches between 2013 and 2020. Abe regularly uses “future,” “responsibility,” and “together” to persuade fellow lawmakers to support his policies. For example, at the 198th Diet session beginning in January 2019, Abe calls upon fellow Diet members to “fulfill this responsibility” to establish a new set of ideals through constitutional revision. His use of strong language indicates seriousness to pursue constitutional amendments, as well as an emotional appeal to citizens that this is a necessary reform for Japan’s future.

Usage of words such as “constitution” or “self-defense” are less frequent but spike in certain speeches. The word “constitution” is mentioned in 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2020. These years coincide either with a period following an electoral victory, a major security-threatening event, or an impending term limit. The speeches made in 2017 were special in many ways, as Abe mentions the COJ by name, and begins those speeches outlining security issues. The standard format for speeches is to start with the economy and mention security issues in the concluding sections. However, the speeches in 2017 fail to follow that pattern, most likely due to the continued North Korean missile tests the previous year (for the 193rd session speech) and the firing of a missile over Japanese territory in September (before the 195th session speech). Overall, Abe carefully selected words that promote constitutional revision when electoral prospects were unharmed.

---


external threats could justify such a move, or when he was facing a time limit himself.

Consortium among Policymakers?

Another significant constraint on any leader attempting to undertake constitutional revision is the difficulty of probing what each lawmaker’s interests are. Fred Willhoite asserts that disagreement on the how and what of political issues are inherent parts of a constitutional democracy. 46 This is especially true for controversial cases such as revising the COJ. Conservative leaders must find ways of reaching across the aisle while accommodating intra-party interests. As this section will reveal, although amending the COJ itself is largely uncontested among most political parties, it is the exact nature of the revisions that remain contested. Japan's political party system and the LDP's unique factionalism make it especially difficult to reach a consensus and sustain that for sweeping change. 47

The LDP is best described as a coalition of factions. 48 Each faction is led by a powerful politician, most of them vying to become the leader of the party. They enter into temporary alliances with other factions to accumulate power and influence the direction of the party. Here, consensus is highly valued and allows every member to voice their opinion. The most commonly cited example is the preliminary review process (jizen shinsa) for any policy or legislation; it requires unanimous consent from every LDP Diet member to be passed up for a cabinet decision or a vote in the Diet. 49 In the case of constitutional revision, unanimous consent has been a major roadblock, with most proposals receiving some criticism along the way. It is therefore wrong to consider the debate over revising the COJ as one between the LDP and opposition parties.

47 Chinen, "Article 9 of the Constitution," 79.
Table 1. Notable Proposals to Revise Article Nine of the COJ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chief Changes Proposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ichiro Ozawa (Liberal)</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1. Add 3rd paragraph to permit individual and collective self-defense (CSD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Add new article encouraging participation in international peacekeeping activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yukio Hatoyama (DPJ)</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1. Explicitly state possession of armed forces under conditions that it will not be used for acts of aggression and that conscription will not be employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasuhiro Nakasone (LDP)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1. Rewrite 2nd paragraph to clearly state right to self-defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Add 3rd paragraph that establishes claims to CSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junichiro Koizumi (LDP)</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1. Rewrite 2nd paragraph to rename SDF as the Self-Defense Army (jieitai)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadakazu Tanigaki (LDP)</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1. Delete 2nd paragraph and rename SDF as Defense Force (kokuhō-gun)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Insert statement saying nothing in A9 can prevent the exercise of the right to self-defense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows five drafts that vary on how to revise Article Nine. The 1999 proposal by Ichiro Ozawa was an attempt to rewrite the “imposed” constitution. Ozawa was a nationalist who sought to expand Japan's rights to individual and collective self-defense. Unlike other conservatives, he believed Japan should send the SDF on international peacekeeping missions alongside UN forces. Critics argue that his proposal to add a third paragraph contradicting the first two only made things confusing. That same year, Yukio Hatoyama of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) drafted a rebuttal to Ozawa's draft. He agreed that the COJ should include a provision about the SDF, but disagreed on the inclusion of CSD to restrain Japan's ability to use force. As the opposition party, the DPJ vehemently opposed the LDP’s overreliance on the United States. The contradiction here is that, although he desired to distance Japan from Washington, Hatoyama also rejected the extension of self-defense capabilities which would become necessary if that happened. A year later, the late-former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who took part in the initial debates in the 1950s and 1960s as a freshman lawmaker, published his proposal to amend the COJ. Nakasone argued that then-prime minister Shigeru Yoshida had given in to the dominant ideology of pacifism when the COJ was enacted. He sought to redress this by rewriting the second paragraph to accept self-defense and add a third permitting CSD.

The last two major proposals were published in 2005 and 2012. The former was proposed by Junichiro Koizumi, a populist prime minister who promised to destroy the old LDP allergic to reform.⁵¹ His draft proposed rewriting the second paragraph to rename the SDF as the Self-Defense Army, in effect upgrading its status to a normal military. This is largely viewed as a compromise made by Koizumi following the dismal 2003 general election in which the LDP lost a significant portion of its Lower House seats. With the proposal, Koizumi sought to pacify the party elite who disliked his reformist agenda. The 2012 proposal was announced by then-president Sadakazu Tanigaki during the LDP’s opposition days.⁵² The radical proposal, fully endorsed by Abe as “LDP-like (Jimintō rashii)” a few months after he replaced Tanigaki, called for the removal of the second paragraph and inserting a statement that nothing could prevent the right to exercise self-defense.⁵³ It also removed “self-defense” from the name SDF, renaming it the Defense Force and establishing a military tribunal for crimes committed by officers on the job.⁵⁴ It was criticized for heightening the risk of conflict with neighboring states who could misinterpret this as a reversion to imperial Japan. Other proposed amendments were left intentionally vague to permit a wide scope of activities. Tanigaki, a relatively left-leaning LDP lawmaker, later said the draft made unrealistic demands just to raise awareness on the issue.⁵⁵ Much to conservatives’ dismay, even Abe eventually shelved it, instead proposing in 2017 a four-point plan that watered down his most desired amendment to a mere naming of the SDF in the text of Article Nine.⁵⁶ These exemplify that, while it is relatively easy to agree on principles, it is difficult to agree on specifics.

---

Electoral Calculations

Political theorists have developed three models to explain party behavior: the vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking models. The LDP is an interesting case where the rational pursuit of electoral votes requires it to focus on consolidating its political base. While Koizumi alienated the core rural base to win larger shares of independent, urban voters, Abe reverted back to courting the well-established rural vote. This switch was a result of what lawmaker Seiko Noda called a shift to the right to accommodate the views of groups that had supported the LDP during its opposition years. In particular, studies point to the 2012 COJ draft as signaling a further shift to the right and most likely proposed for symbolic reasons to reward these supporters. This section argues that such electoral calculations have played a significant role in constraining amendments to the COJ. Specifically, it will examine the role of individual interests within the ruling coalition between the LDP and its junior coalition partner Komeito, and a waning base, as “brakes” on revision.

The “Constitution Factor” in Elections

Abe was remarkably sensitive to public opinion, compromising on key issues such as constitutional revision. He employed the common political “bait and switch tactic” of focusing on economic issues prior to an election and sidelining constitutional issues. During the 2018 LDP presidential election, Abe’s rival candidate, Shigeru Ishiba, criticized him for watering down the 2012 COJ draft. These shifts were less an ideological defeat than a realistic adjustment to the political environment. This balancing between ideology and pragmatism has contributed greatly to the confusion among the electorate as to where Abe’s true intentions lie. And, to the extent that he was adapting to this political environment, so were other politicians.

A survey conducted by Asahi Shimbun and Professor Masaki Taniguchi of the University of Tokyo asked 1,140 Lower House and 428 Upper House candidates a series of questions regarding election issues, including one about constitutional revision. It yielded several results. First, 97 percent of LDP respondents in the 2017 Lower House survey supported amendments to the COJ, while only 64 percent of Komeito respondents

61 Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory,” 125.
63 See Appendix 2 for full table of responses.
did. Reluctance from Komeito is best described by its deputy leader Kazuo Kitagawa, who in 2017 questioned the necessity to revise the COJ urgently.\(^\text{64}\) Second, out of the 97 percent of LDP candidates who supported amendment of the COJ, only 42 percent named Article Nine as their top priority. This indicates that, despite Abe’s best efforts, less than half of the candidates sought the same objective.

The second survey registered less support for constitutional revision, with only 64 percent and 13 percent support from the LDP and Komeito candidates, respectively.\(^\text{65}\) This can be explained by the dwindling enthusiasm for amendments among the electorate, and the Upper House being known as the “house of good sense,” free from political partisanship. Out of those who supported constitutional revision, a majority listed several different priorities. Unsurprisingly, while 73 percent supported inclusion of the SDF in Article Nine, only 17 percent called for the inclusion of CSD. Finally, it is important to note that opposition to constitutional revision within the largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP), has grown over time. This signifies the CDP’s consolidated position as the main opposition since its establishment ahead of the 2017 election.\(^\text{66}\)

The same dataset shows that there was a diverse and dispersed coalition backing Abe’s prime objective. Abe’s Hosoda faction takes the largest share of the pie, followed by unaffiliated members (muhabatsu) and the Asō faction. However, there were some notable omissions, such as current Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Taro Kono, and Shinjiro Koizumi. It is also worth noting that two faction leaders—Fumio Kishida and Shigeru Ishiba—did not select the same first priority as Abe during the 2017 election. These results support the conclusion that factions have a diverse set of interests, and that Abe did not have full support within the party to push his version of constitutional revision.

Further evidence is found in campaign brochures from past elections. These brochures provide insight into campaign pledges made by each party, usually listing policies in order of importance. Leading up to the 2019 election, Abe reportedly put strong emphasis on constitutional revision at forty of the forty-eight locations where he made stump speeches.\(^\text{67}\) This is in stark contrast to the party’s official brochure which mentions it


\(^{65}\) See Appendix 3 for full table of responses.


as the last major policy initiative. In fact, LDP brochures frequently place this issue after other topics, such as economic growth and social welfare. The Japan Communist Party, in contrast, positioned it second out of nine main issues. It is revealing that, while Abe individually promoted revising the COJ, the party avoided making it the primary issue of the election.

The Peculiarity of the LDP-Komeito Partnership

One of the most perplexing coalitions in contemporary politics is the LDP-Komeito coalition government (renritsu seiken). The two parties could not be more different. The LDP is a right-leaning conservative party with nationalist elements. Komeito, meanwhile, is a pacifist party founded by the Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai (SG). Before the birth of the coalition in 1999, the LDP had run an anti-Komeito campaign to win the 1995 election. This goes to say that the marriage did not occur from ideological alignment, but rather from rational vote-seeking behavior. In fact, several scholars have described the relationship as a win-win situation—the LDP relies on SG, one of the largest and most reliable voting blocs in Japan, while Komeito gains political influence, despite being a small party holding less than thirty seats in the Diet. In particular, SG garners around twenty thousand to twenty-five thousand votes per single-member district and can easily swing an election in favor of an LDP candidate.

It is understandable that Komeito holds a sizable “veto power” on contested issues,
notably constitutional revision. The party agrees with constitutional revision, but opposes revising Article Nine. To borrow Liff and Maeda’s words, Komeito is able to “punch significantly above its weight” to serve as a “brake” (hadome) on the more radical proposals advocated by its senior partner. For example, multiple scholars credit the junior party’s role in watering down the 2015 security legislation formally permitting CSD. It is said that Komeito forced Abe to reword one of the conditions for CSD, to limit its use to when an armed attack occurs against Japan and “a country in a close relationship,” closing the door to the possibility of aiding any country around the world. Policy compromises indicate both the importance of Komeito and the balancing act between maintaining the coalition and pushing radical policies for the right-leaning LDP base.

Still, with the LDP having won six consecutive elections under Abe, it seems irrational to compromise on policy. But a closer examination of the electoral landscape reveals that the LDP is not as dominant as widely perceived. In recent years, the party’s vote share in national elections has declined from approximately 30 percent in the 1980s and 1990s to 15-20 percent in the last few elections. Komeito is also losing votes, with the 2019 Upper House election registering its lowest proportion of votes since the coalition was formed. A plummeting base serves as the chief reason for the two parties to continue cooperating despite their ideological differences. In addition, the LDP has a stronghold in rural areas, while Komeito gets votes in urban areas. These bases do not compete, minimizing friction when selecting candidates, and resulting in no contested races since 2000. Between 2000 and 2017, Komeito has also reduced the number of electoral seats it competes for from eighteen to nine, largely following its declining vote tally. Finally, Komeito endorsements for LDP candidates have remained above 80%

---

76 Hughes, “Japan’s Remilitarization and Constitutional Revision,” 149; Smith, Japan Rearmed, 154.
77 Liff and Maeda, “Electoral incentives, policy compromise, and coalition durability,” 64.
78 See, for example, Hughes, “Japan’s Strategic Trajectory and Collective Self-Defense,” 113; Liff, “Policy by Other Means,” 92; and Nakanishi, “Reorienting Japan?,” 413.

[82] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
percent since 2005, reflecting the LDP’s dependence on organized votes (soshiki hyō) in exchange for policy compromises.\textsuperscript{84}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Abe years saw a delicate balancing of ideological ambitions and pragmatic statesmanship. At times, Abe pandered to right-wing interest groups by advocating a radical proposal to rewrite the postwar constitution. At other times, he was more reserved and compromised on key issues, such as preserving the second paragraph of Article Nine. Abe’s persistent pursuit of constitutional revision, even at the expense of watering down the original draft, highlights how the issue came to define his political identity. There was no turning back, and this inconsistency rather frequently contributed to confusion over his real intentions, thereby further alienating public support. Abe’s failure is evidence of lasting domestic resistance to, and a lack of political consensus for, constitutional revision.

As many constitutional scholars have warned, expanding the scope of the SDF’s capabilities will require amendments to be legally consistent.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore, Japan’s changing security environment may warrant such an expansion. Concerns include North Korea’s ever-salient nuclear weapons program, and China’s maritime assertiveness, as evidenced by its new coast guard law.\textsuperscript{86} Despite the Biden administration’s efforts to reassure allies, there is also some doubt over the durability of U.S. security commitments with the shifting power balance in the region.\textsuperscript{87} Future prime ministers will encounter the same issue: convincing domestic actors that revising the COJ, and therefore moving closer to a normal state, is a necessary and non-ideologically motivated change.

There continues to be ample resistance to hawkish security policy and revising the COJ.


Last year, the LDP failed to materialize talks to acquire “enemy counter-strike capabilities,” or the ability to strike at foreign bases before missiles are launched. This is the result of a lack of consensus within the coalition. On the constitution, Prime Minister Suga has opted to value deliberation with opposition parties in the Diet’s Commission on the Constitution (Kenpō Shinsakai). Unlike Abe, who for the most part neglected reaching across the aisle, Suga understands the need to give the impression that this is a unified act, not an independent push by pro-amendment parties. The party is also crafting a new draft, likely to seal off a return to the 2012 draft that hardliners such as Ishiba desire. Forming consensus will be an arduous task given the multitude of views and opposition to creating a new draft.

That is not to say the COJ is unshakable. Just in the last few months, the LDP has successfully chipped away a few hurdles that stand in its way. At the party convention in March, Suga said he expects “some conclusion” on the revised National Referendum Law this Diet session, and reiterated his determination to achieve COJ revision, a key pillar of the LDP’s original platform. The Lower House Commission on the Constitution passed the bill on May 6, a few days after the seventy-fourth anniversary of the COJ, making it highly probable the revised law will be passed by both Houses during this Diet session. The party has also implemented public relations campaigns targeted at women and younger generations through posters and comics. Much like the soft social control tactics utilized for citing “public bads” like nuclear power plants, these tools may take years to have effect, but can shape otherwise malleable opinions on the issue. This is especially true in Japan, where younger citizens lack interest in politics and

88 “Japan’s defense plan won’t include strike capability acquisition,” Mainichi Shimbun, November 6, 2020, https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20201106/p2g/00m/0na/029000c.
89 “Jimin ga Kaiken Gen-an Kisou linkai Tachiage e Jūninen Irai, Tōnai no Teikō wa Nezuyoku” 自民が改憲原案起草委員会立ち上げへ 12年以来、党内の抵抗は根強く [LDP To Establish a Drafting Committee First Since 2012, Strong Opposition from Within Party], Tokyo Shimbun, October 9, 2020, https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/60669.
90 Suga said the ruling coalition and opposition agreed to arrive to some conclusion (nanraka no ketsuron wo eru) on the National Referendum Law. He also said revising the COJ is a pillar of the party’s platform (waga tō no tōze). See, Suga Yoshihide 菅義偉, “Dai Hachijūhachikai Jimintō Taikai Suga Yoshihide Sōsai Enzettsu” 第88回自民党大会 菅義偉総裁演説 [88th Liberal Democratic Party Convention Speech by President Yoshihide Suga], Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, March 21, 2021, https://www.jimin.jp/news/information/201354.html.
end up supporting the LDP without much thought. The most recent public opinion polls also show net positive support for revision, stemming from the view that stronger emergency powers are necessary to deal with disasters like COVID-19 and respond to the increased threat from China. Accordingly, there will be a degree of uncertainty as to whether resistance will endure in the decades to come.

94 “Do the Youn g Lean Right? Mainichi Polls Show Strong Youth Support for Abe, LDP,” Mainichi Shimbun, October 9, 2017, https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171009/p2a/00m/0na/014000c.
Appendix

Appendix 1.
**Words connoting nationalism/patriotism:** national security, responsibility, security, our nation, nation, strong, strong Japan, together, strength, power, determination, defend, defense, defence, patriotism, rectify, crisis, pride, best, threat, threatening, future, devote, devotion, revive, reviving, revived, restore, restoring, restored, severe, severely, reinforce, reinforced, reinforcing, reinforcement, resolute, warning, warn, vigilant, vigilance, mission, safety, safely, confidence, lost, loss, serious, seriously, carve out, carve

**Words connoting Constitutional revision:** constitution, article9, article 9, article, article nine, articlenine, war, war power, selfdefense, self defense, collectiveselfdefense, collective selfdefense, collective self defense

Appendix 2.\(^{96}\)
See full tables at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j15BHuL8JVok7PaKUJYxYc-gA55qfJQY1/view

Appendix 3.\(^{97}\)
See full tables at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j15BHuL8JVok7PaKUJYxYc-gA55qfJQY1/view

Born and raised in Tokyo, Japan, **Rintaro Nishimura** is a fourth-year undergraduate student studying political science at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. Nishimura is Managing Editor of the Northeastern University Political Review, a student-run platform for publishing articles on contemporary domestic and international politics. He writes on international relations in East Asia, mostly focusing on Japanese foreign policy. His articles have appeared in The National Interest, The Diplomat, and Northeastern University Political Review. His current research interests are focused on Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy and defense policy.


Bibliography


“Constitution Amendment Procedure.”

“Do the Young Lean Right? Mainichi Polls Show Strong Youth Support for Abe, LDP.”
Mainichi Shimbun. October 9, 2017. https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171009/p2a/00m/ona/014000c.


[98] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
CALL FOR PAPERS

The Journal welcomes original social science research papers written on issues relevant to politics, security, economy, culture, and society of contemporary Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. “Contemporary” is understood broadly as recent, but not necessarily as current. We are pleased to consider articles with historical background sections so long as such analyses are crucial for advancing core arguments.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submissions should be emailed to gjaa@georgetown.edu as MS Word documents. Please do not submit in PDF format. Authors should include a short bio in the email text, but must avoid any self-identification in the manuscript as we send our articles out for anonymous review.

Document: Manuscripts must be typewritten and double-spaced in Microsoft Word, with 1-inch/2.5-centimeter margins on all sides.

Length: Manuscripts should be 5,000–7,000 words in length.

Style: Authors must follow The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th ed.

Citations: All citations must be formatted as footnotes. Please also include a full bibliography at the end.

Abstract: Authors must include an abstract (100–200 words) that effectively and concisely summarizes his/her study.

*Submissions must not be plagiarized, copyrighted, or under review elsewhere.
West Papuan Nationalism and #PapuanLivesMatter

An Interview with Veronika Kusumaryati

Indigenous Papuans have sought independence from Indonesia for over five decades. Since 1969, racial discrimination, exploitation of natural resources, militarization, and the arrival of Indonesian settlers have fueled the ongoing fight for an independent West Papua. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Indigenous Papuans expressed identification and solidarity with anti-racist struggles in the United States through the creation of the Papuan Lives Matter Movement. The Journal sat down with Veronika Kusumaryati, postdoctoral fellow in the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University, to discuss the rise of Black consciousness among Indigenous Papuans and the entangled histories of colonialism, race, nationalism, and development in Indonesia. Dr. Kusumaryati also spoke about how her work in film intersects with her anthropological research.

Journal: How did you become interested in studying colonialism in Southeast Asia? What led you to focus your research on West Papuan nationalism?

Kusumaryati: I initially came to the United States to study the post-1998 (post-democratic reform) media landscape in Indonesia. I studied film and media as an undergraduate in Indonesia. Later I went on to enroll as a Ph.D. student at Harvard University. In my first year as a Ph.D. student, I wrote a paper on the internet in West Papua and its role in opening up information in this remote and highly militarized area. My Ph.D. advisor, who worked on Indonesia, read the paper and asked me to look into the situation in West Papua. I returned with a report on what I saw and heard there, and with her encouragement, decided to focus on West Papua as my research site. As an Indonesian, I had never been to West Papua before this visit but had often heard about the military operations and “development” (or lack thereof) there. Thus, visiting West Papua and confronting a situation that I had never seen in any other part of Indonesia was rather unsettling. It was not my original intention to study colonialism, but in places like Indonesia, the legacy of colonialism is still thoroughly felt. Southeast Asia, in particular, has a diverse and fascinating history of colonialism. We were colonized by various European powers (the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Malaysia and Singapore, the
Spanish and Americans in the Philippines, the Portuguese in Timor-Leste, the French in Indochina, crypto-colonialism in Thailand, and then the Japanese across the whole region). We have a lot to learn from the history of these various systems, especially when the structure and ideologies from that period are still in place today. As for West Papua, I am interested in their claims of Indonesian colonialism. I used to take nationalism for granted, but after experiencing West Papua, I have a lot of questions about Indonesian nationalism and Papuans’ reasons for not taking part in it.

Journal: What are the origins and goals of the #Papuanlivesmatter movement? Where does this strain of activism sit within the current system of political governance within West Papua? How does it relate to Indonesia’s colonial past?

Kusumaryati: Before the murder of George Floyd, Papuans had staged protests against Indonesian racism. In August 2019, for instance, a group of Papuan students in Surabaya was subjected to racist treatment. The incident began with a rumor that the Papuans had flushed an Indonesian flag down the drain. Another rumor said that they pulled the flag down and replaced it with the Morning Star flag of the Papuan independence movement. On the evening of August 16, the eve of the celebration of Indonesian independence, members of the ormas (paramilitary groups) and Indonesian security forces surrounded and screamed at the Papuans and told them to go back to West Papua. They also called them “monkeys.” Incidents like these show that while Papuans are Indonesian citizens, they are treated differently by other Indonesians. Secondly, this incident also demonstrates that Papuans have been fighting against this discrimination and diminishing. When George Floyd’s murder sparked global protests, Papuans saw themselves as Indonesia’s George Floyd. They started to use the hashtag #Papuanlivesmatter to point to their shared struggle. Similar to anti-racism protests in the United States, Papuan protests also called for an end to anti-Black racism by Indonesians.

While they share similar goals with the Black Lives Matter movement, Papuans’ anti-racism movements are different in several respects. Firstly, West Papua’s protests are aimed at Indonesian racism, which is founded not only on the legacy of white supremacy and the colonial racial order, but also on Indonesian supremacy and the denial of Papuan Black identity. Secondly, their anti-racism protests go hand in hand with their struggle for self-determination. Papuans still consider Indonesia a colonial state and, therefore, consider Indonesian racism as a component of the Indonesian colonial system. This last point concerning Papuans’ anti-racism protests is especially difficult to digest for most Indonesians, as most remain committed to the idea that West Papua is a foundational

1 Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld defines crypto-colonialism a situation where “countries claim to have avoided colonial domination but in reality are heavily dependent on, and indirectly but materially subject to, intrusive control by Western colonial powers” (2012, 214). He gives an example of Thailand which had never been under any colonial rule but was and continues to depend on more dominant powers. See Michael Herzfeld, “The Crypto-Colonial Dilemmas of Rattanakosin Island,” Journal of the Siam Society 100 (2012): 209-223 and Michael Herzfeld, “The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism,” South Atlantic Quarterly 101 (2002): 899–926.
It is important to note that West Papua was only incorporated into Indonesia in 1969—twenty-four years after Indonesia’s independence. West Papua was transferred from the Dutch to Indonesia through the New York Agreement, a framework sponsored by the United States. The transfer was partly inspired by a racist idea that Papuans were not ready to govern themselves. This history continues to shape how Papuans see themselves within Indonesian society. Papuans have been fighting for their independence since 1965, and as a result, Indonesia chooses to carry out intensive military operations in the area. Today, West Papua remains the most militarized area in the country, where daily human rights abuses are perpetrated by Indonesian security forces. On the other hand, the Papuan Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Free Papuan Movements, also kills a significant number of Indonesian civilians accused of being military spies. The Papuan Lives Matter movement calls for an end to the militarization and human rights abuses. It also calls for an end to the everyday racism that Indonesian settlers (and Indonesians in general) commit against the Papuans.

Journal: Is the #Papuanlivesmatter movement part of a larger political conversation in Indonesia around race and indigeneity or is it a standalone movement?

Kusumaryati: This is uncertain. In Indonesia, race is not part of the popular political lexicon. I would say that Indonesia perceives itself as a race-blind society. The conception of race in Indonesia always points to the legacy of colonialism, where race was the organizing principle of colonial societies. When Indonesians talk about race, they focus on the Chinese Indonesians who, during Dutch colonialism, played the role of colonial mediators. During the authoritarian period of the New Order (1966-1998), the government used the designation of SARA (suku, ras, dan agama) to refer to ethnic, racial, and religious differences. Any discussion on SARA is perceived to be against the Indonesian nationalist slogan of “Unity in Diversity.” The Indonesian Criminal Code, especially Articles 156 and 156a, are also often used to punish expressions of SARA. The Papuans’ identification with Black identities and the Black Lives Matter Movement through Papuan Lives Matter thus poses a difficult problem for many Indonesians. Indonesians understand that racism exists, but it is either “there” (in the United States or Europe) or it is mainly understood in relation to Chinese Indonesians. In Indonesia, the West Papua “problem” is frequently understood as a problem of ethnicity or separatism from Indonesia. Before Papuan Lives Matter, most Indonesians did not think racism was part of Indonesia’s problem in West Papua. Now, with the global influence of Black Lives Matter, young Indonesians have become more open to discussions of race and racism in West Papua.

Papuans themselves assume multiple, intersectional identities. They are Black, but also indigenous and Christian. They also have their own tribal or ethnic identification. These multiple identities shape Papuans’ articulation as Black people. In their international campaign, Papuans use their multiple identities to navigate different institutional arrangements of global politics. Thus, they participate in global indigenous movements,

**Journal:** How do other ethnic groups in Indonesia respond to West Papuan claims that Indonesia is a colonizer? How have indigenous Papuans reacted to infrastructure and other development projects initiated by the state?

**Kusumaryati:** Indonesia is comprised of more than seven hundred ethnic groups, and the nation's founding principle of “Unity in Diversity” implies that we are one nation even though we are all very different. Thus, Papuans’ protests really touch upon this foundation. Indonesians understand that most Papuans live in poverty, even though they have many natural resources. They understand that development has not successfully improved the living standards of the Papuans, and that many Papuans have been killed by the Indonesian security forces. However, Indonesians tend to blame Papuans and non-Papuans alike for corruption and the lack of development, as well as for the failure of Indonesian nationalism in West Papua.

For Papuans, on the other hand, development is a tricky word. Papuans feel that they are in need of development. They are eager to participate in various schemes of improvement, but in their experience, development has always meant the plunder of their natural resources, the expropriation of their customary land, militarization, and the arrival of more Indonesians, who in turn, dominate their economy and monopolize any opportunities available for them. So, it is incorrect to say that Papuans do not like development, because the development they have experienced has always brought them harm. Consider, for instance, the construction of the Trans-Papuan Highway in the Central Highlands. The Indonesian government planned to build 4,325 km of roads connecting the western part of West Papua to the eastern part, with the intention of easing West Papua’s isolation and accelerating development in the region. However, the government did not consult communities impacted by the construction. They also brought the Indonesian security forces to be involved in the project. While the government understood that Papuans have had traumatic experiences with the security forces, it still invited their participation. This is an unsound policy. Another example is the government’s policy of developing large-scale palm oil plantations. Most Papuan communities are dependent on their forests for their livelihoods. Instead of developing a green economy based on Papuans’ intimate relationship with the forests, the government opted to welcome corporations to develop large-scale plantations that took over Papuan lands. This carbon-heavy development model is promoted because government officials want money, not because they sincerely want to aid the Papuans. The problem of public policy in West Papua is exacerbated by racism and the denigration of Papuan cultures. Papuan intellectual Benny Giay calls this a policy motivated by a hermeneutic of suspicion.

**Journal:** How has the #Blacklivesmatter movement responded to #Papuanlivesmatter? Are these two movements in dialogue with each other?
Kusumaryati: I have not heard of any response from the Black Lives Matter movement, but I think that both share and exchange solidarity as Black movements.

Journal: How effective have West Papua’s social movements and nationalist groups been at utilizing new media?

Kusumaryati: It depends on to which social movements and nationalist groups one refers. In general, digital media has played an important role for West Papua’s social and political movements. Many NGOs use the internet to broadcast their human rights investigations. Political activists use the internet to propagate their calls for Papuan self-determination. Papuan youths have an affinity for digital media. Online platforms, such as Papuan Voices, Papuansphoto, and sastrapapua.org, have become important platforms for Papuans to show their work online through videos, photos, and writing for a broader audience. Papuans avidly use social media for various purposes, from dating and studying, to staging movements. The West Papuan Liberation Army also uses the internet to publish releases aimed at Papuan and international audiences.

Yet, the most extraordinary aspect about the use of the internet in West Papua is how it becomes the battleground of an information war between the Indonesian government and Papuan movements. As I write in my forthcoming paper, “#Papuanlivesmatter: Youth Political Movements and Black Consciousness in West Papua,” during the anti-racism protest in August 2019, the Indonesian government shut down the internet for thirty-three cities and regencies across West Papua. This internet blackout violated Indonesian law and has been protested by civil society organizations.² The government argued that the blackout was meant to “prevent fake news from spreading.” They also argued that it conforms with the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law. Passed in 2008, the ITE law makes use of the SARA provision. The Indonesian government and security forces have also carried out an aggressive campaign against the Papuan independence movements through the circulation of false information (hoaxes) and the creation of hundreds of fake accounts. This operation aimed to sow confusion about the reality on the ground in West Papua and counter any discourse against the Indonesian government and security forces.³ Thus, we see how important the internet is for the government and the Papuans alike, and how the control over information needs to be

---

² The civil society group filed a lawsuit against the president and the Communications and Information Ministry in January 2020. This group comprised of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (Safenet). The Indonesian press legal aid (LBH Pers), the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI), KontraS, Elsam, and the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR) provided lawyers.

understood not only in relation to a conflict situation like in West Papua but also broadly, digital rights that affect citizens.

**Journal:** What role do you think visual representation and communication has to play in anthropology or social science more broadly (e.g., in spreading awareness and resources about a particular social issue)? How does your work in film studies intersect with your anthropological work?

**Kusumaryati:** I am involved in several media initiatives with my Papuan interlocutors and friends. I recently produced a film with Ernst Karel entitled Expedition Content, which focuses on Michael Rockefeller’s recordings in West Papua. The film has been screened at the Berlin International Film Festival, Cinéma du Reel in Paris, and Lincoln Center in New York. The film will have a theatrical release in North America this summer (2021). I think it is important for social scientists to understand how media works and use that understanding to develop more inclusive and innovative methods for research. Social scientists can use film and other media to broadcast our findings or discoveries. We can also use multimodal mediums as a way to engage with our subjects. I find that both academic and non-academic communities are more receptive to our research findings through non-textual formats, such as visual or aural media. My interdisciplinary background as an anthropologist and visual artist helps me to be a better scientist because the people involved in our research are also multidimensional beings.

**Journal:** What impact does the study of colonial legacies have for Indonesian politics?

**Kusumaryati:** As a nation-in-the making, Indonesia still faces myriad problems concerning the legacy of colonialism and the future of the country. We have a problem concerning majority-minority relations. Our democracy is not strong enough to deal with different forces that want to bring Indonesia back to authoritarianism. As we also see in the United States, democracy cannot be taken for granted. We have to defend it. Thus, a deeper understanding of conflicts (such the one in West Papua), racism, and the role of the military in democratic societies is desperately needed. As an educator and anthropologist, I seek to educate my students and fellow Indonesians about the enduring imprimatur of the past on contemporary society in West Papua and how notions of democracy, human rights, and justice are still far-removed from the daily lives of these people.

**Journal:** Can you describe your ethnographic research methodology for your upcoming book on indigenous politics in West Papua?

**Kusumaryati:** During my dissertation research, I used various methodologies to carry out research in West Papua. As an anthropologist, I am trained to conduct ethnographic research using participant observation. The term “fieldwork” for anthropologists usually means intensive observation of certain phenomena for a certain amount of time (at least one year) and participation in the activities that are being observed. This process also includes structured and semi-structured interviews with key informants with the purpose of gaining their perspective on the phenomenon being observed. Here, researchers can
use a traditional method of inscription, such as writing, to document their observations. They can also use a camera or a sound recorder. In West Papua, for example, I recorded numerous events, such as elections, using a digital camera. I produced photos, videos, and sound recordings.

Secondly, I am also interested in history and how history shapes the contemporary situation in West Papua. To understand racial stratification in the region, for example, I undertook archival research in the Netherlands, Indonesia, and the United States. I made use of the government’s archives, missionary archives, and scientific archives to explain continuity and rupture in the identification of Papuans as Black people. The last method I used was digital ethnography. I documented how and why people use the internet. I followed a lot of social media accounts that were relevant to my research. I recorded trends, incidences, or platforms that were prominent or simply interesting. Combining these methods, I managed to gather a large dataset to support my dissertation. Though my book title continues to change, for now, my working title is Recursive Colonialism: History, Experience, and Political Consciousness in West Papua.

Journal: How has being connected with the Georgetown and Washington policy communities supported and enhanced your scholarship?

Kusumaryati: I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to work and interact with the Georgetown community. Georgetown's connection with the broader Washington policy world is such a refreshing change from my previous role as a Ph.D. candidate. As I am currently affiliated with Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and not the Department of Anthropology, I am challenged to better explain my research to a broader audience outside my field. The fellowship's support has also allowed me to broaden my research scope, rewrite my book manuscript, publish additional articles, and more importantly, prompted me to think about my project after I wrote it as a student. Lastly, I welcome the opportunity to talk more about West Papua among U.S. policymakers because the fate of this one territory may very well depend on decision-makers in Washington, DC.

Journal: As a recent Ph.D. graduate with a burgeoning career in academia, where do you see your future scholarship intersecting with the policymaking process?

Kusumaryati: I have always been interested in connecting my work with the broader public sphere, including policymakers. Though policymakers are perhaps less interested in the work of social scientists, I think engagement with the public sector and civil society is important. With our deep grassroots knowledge and data-driven approach, we social scientists have much to offer in the debates and decisions that affect people's lives. In Indonesia, I often work with the church, which is an important development actor in West Papua, and various civil society organizations such as human rights groups. I work with them based on the mutual understanding that each of us uniquely contributes to the creation of a more just world. Last year, I happened to work with a consulting firm that advises the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
I really enjoyed the experience and opportunity to exert some influence on policy. I plan to continue this engagement through my research and in other potential roles as a consultant or subject-matter expert.

Veronika Kusumaryati is an Ethnicity, Religion, and Conflict Resolution Postdoctoral Fellow in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Her scholarship engages with the theories and historiography of colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality. She has published her research in Landscape Architecture Frontiers, Indonesia, and the Asia-Pacific Journal of Anthropology. With Ernst Karel, she also produced a film entitled “Expedition Content,” which has been screened at the Berlin international Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel at Centre Pompidou, and Lincoln Center. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology with a secondary field in Film and Visual Studies from Harvard University.
In 2005, the Ahmadiyah, a small minority Muslim sect in South and Southeast Asia, began experiencing increased religious persecution and discrimination in Indonesia. Why did an economically and politically marginal group, constituting less than one percent of the national population, suddenly become targets of violence and repression? The Journal invited Jessica Soedirgo, former postdoctoral fellow in the Asian Studies Program at Georgetown University, to discuss her research on this question, which is the subject of her book project, The Threat of Small Things: Patterns of Repression and Mobilization Against Micro-Sized Groups in Indonesia. Dr. Soedirgo also spoke about her methodological approach to fieldwork, emphasizing the importance of “active reflexivity,” as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the direction of Indonesian politics.

Journal: How did you become interested in ethnic and religious conflict in Southeast Asia? What drew you to focus on micro-sized groups in Indonesia, the subject of your book project, The Threat of Small Things: Patterns of Repression and Mobilization against Micro-Sized Groups in Indonesia?

Soedirgo: There is a saying that “research is ‘me’-search,” and that definitely applies to my own experience. I grew up in Canada but am of Chinese-Indonesian heritage. One of my first moments of political consciousness was the transition to democracy in Indonesia, which was accompanied by different kinds of political violence. In the capital city of Jakarta, anti-Chinese violence erupted quite early on and this political moment was really something that I thought about a lot.

This historical moment got me interested in political science and ethnic conflict. I originally wanted to study the secessionist violence in Aceh or Christian-Muslim sectarian violence in Indonesia’s eastern province of Maluku. By the time I got into my Ph.D. program, however, that conflict had thankfully de-escalated. What was going on at the time was lower-level violence that largely did not involve killing, but did involve arson and mob vandalism. I became interested in understanding why a group that I had never heard of—the Ahmadiyah—were suddenly victims of this kind of violence.
Your research explores how and why the Ahmadiyah sect is treated as a threat. Could you talk about the conclusions of your book project and some of the arguments that you found either surprising or particularly interesting?

Soedirgo: Let me answer this question in two steps. First, the Ahmadiyah is a heterodox sect of Islam. The main aspect of difference between Ahmadis and orthodox Islam is that the Ahmadis believe that the founder of their sect, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, is a prophet. In contrast, orthodox Muslims believe that there can be no prophet after the Prophet Muhammad.

In Indonesia, the sect suddenly became targets of violence in 2005. This struck me as strange, as the group represents less than one percent of the national population. As such, they did not pose a political threat, they were pacifist, and were not economically privileged in any way. And so, part of what the book project tries to answer is why would this group be seen as threatening?

I argue in my book project that the Ahmadiyah sect does not pose a material threat, but they pose what I call a visible constitutive threat. Essentially, the Ahmadiyah sect represents a challenge to who counts as Muslim, which is a foundational category in the Indonesian nation. It is this destabilization of categories that is what makes Ahmadis threatening to Muslims.

In addition to trying to understand the nature of threat, the book project also tries to understand why violence against the Ahmadiyah began in 2005. The argument that I am trying to make is that this violence has to do with decentralization and the ways in which the shift of political power from the national level to the local level changed incentive structures and gave more opportunities to religious hard-liner groups to access political power and resources. It also made politicians more susceptible to local pressures, and many of these local communities have been concerned about the threat posed by the Ahmadiyah.

What insights does your research provide for understanding the democratic process in Indonesia, the region, or democracy in general?

Soedirgo: I think my research speaks to this growing global shift from pluralism to illiberalism. We see that happening all over the world, and I think a key mechanism of that in the Indonesian context and beyond is anti-minority mobilization that enables conservative voices to gain political power.

Understanding what makes these anti-minority calls to action powerful is thus important. And while material threats are important, I think we need to be able to think beyond the material components of threat. My work suggests that even these small minorities can be threatening simply because they challenge the understanding of who belongs to the group in a visible way. This suggests that perceptions of threat are shaped by elements such as representation in politics, media, the celebration of festivals and ceremonies, and
even the everyday ways that minorities mark public space through signage, institutions, and dress. My work asks us to pay attention to these nonmaterial factors.

Journal: Looking back at your research, how would you suggest that policymakers in Asia operationalize your findings to disincentivize political actors from utilizing this anti-minority rhetoric and activity as their platform?

Soedirgo: This is a really tough question, as I am still navigating the normative implications of my work. My findings suggest that the public visibility of minority groups shapes whether or not members of the majority group view them as a threat. For governments that do want to protect minorities—and I am very aware that many of them do not—I think this work can signal which minorities are more likely to be targeted and when. For example, there might be particular activities that will make minorities more visible, and so it would be worth it to invest much more in terms of safety and protection during those particular times. I also think my work reemphasizes findings from other scholars such as David Guss and John Gillis, who see public spaces as sites for contestation, and how normalizing certain symbols and practices can contribute to changing what it means to be a member of a particular category.

I think a really good example in the Indonesian case is Chinese Indonesians. Like I mentioned, one of my entry points to being interested in politics was that Chinese Indonesians were consistently targets of violence during the transition to democracy and in the Suharto era. There were many attempts to manage the visibility of this group during the Suharto era. For example, there was a ban on the celebration of Chinese festivals to ensure that the Chinese community was invisible because their identities were considered outside of the national project. That has changed because those boundaries of nationhood have shifted. The Chinese are now visible, and they do celebrate Chinese New Year, for example. I think we can think of public spaces as spaces for challenging narrow views of what it means to be American, for example, or what it means to be Indonesian. My work also talks about decentralization as incentivizing violence. So, again, I think this echoes work by scholars like Dawn Brancati who show that decentralization can have negative effects. Yes, decentralization can have a lot of positive effects. It can increase political accountability, but it can also magnify local concerns and tensions in ways that can bring harm to minority communities.

So those are two things—the way that visibility shapes threat perception and political decentralization may increase intergroup tensions—might be helpful to policymakers.

Journal: In your recent article “Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge,” which you co-authored with Aarie Glas, Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University, you argue that researchers should include reflections on their positionality in their research process and in their published work. Could you briefly explain why active reflexivity matters in social science research, and how more social scientists can apply these ideas to their work?
Soedirgo: We wrote this article at the suggestion of our mentor, the late Lee Ann Fuji, who wrote several important texts on reflexivity and research. We owe her a great debt. The assumption of the large scholarship on reflexivity is that our social location—our gender, our class, our age, etc.—influences the kinds of knowledge we produce. So, if our social location impacts the kinds of questions we ask, the data we are able to gather and how we interpret that data, we should pay attention to this dimension of social science research. I think that social science research is fundamentally a human enterprise, and so we should not pretend that the bodies that we inhabit do not have an effect on the research we produce.

Journal: How did you practice active reflexivity in the research process for your book project?

Soedirgo: Maybe the better question is how I did not practice active reflexivity. Aarie and I wrote our article on active reflexivity because we tried to be reflexive but were not actively so. For my book, I was studying religious conflict, so obviously, I thought that my religion mattered. I am also Chinese Indonesian, which is important given the context and I am a woman. I thought these dimensions of my identity would matter, as most of the people that I would be interviewing would be Muslim, men, and pribumi (indigenous Indonesians). I had assumed that as long as I thought about religion, ethnicity, and gender, I would be fine. But I think that was a very static assumption of what positionality looked like, because people are different, and they hold different priorities. It was a mistake to assume that religion and gender would be the only things that shaped the answers I received.

Reflecting on my research, I realized that age and level of education were also influencing my research interactions. When you are in academia, you often forget that it can be somewhat intimidating to talk to someone who has more formal education than you do. Also, I am Chinese Indonesian, but I was raised in Canada not Indonesia, so that made a difference as well. Thus, my assumptions about positionality were the entry point for writing this co-authored article.

Journal: Your research highlights structural issues, such as economic inequality and weak governance, as factors leading to discrimination, extremism, and fundamentalism. How do you think your work fits into the broader conversation about social justice, racism, and inequality, especially within large, multiethnic democracies?

Soedirgo: My work does not touch on material aspects as much, but I suppose that my work fits into broader conversations of social justice, racism, and inequality by highlighting the role of public visibility. It has been interesting to see how my work has parallels with the American experience, and the Canadian experience as well. I think we are starting to realize that symbolic politics is really important and the different ways that people claim space are fundamentally political. Caring about a flag or the name of a street may seem inconsequential on the face of it, but they are about groups and group hierarchy. My work helps further our understanding of why these things matter. By
furthering understanding of why these things matter, we can better address the effects of these concerns.

*Journal:* You have also written extensively on extremism and fundamentalism in Indonesia and the 2019 Indonesian general election. How do you see the coronavirus pandemic impacting this split political discourse between Islamist and plurality parties in India, especially considering Jokowi’s reelection?

*Soedirgo:* First of all, there are a lot of other people—Sana Jaffrey, Greg Fealy, Marcus Mietzner, and Alex Arifianto to name a few—who have written more extensively about COVID-19 in Indonesia. I will say that in the case of Indonesia, COVID-19 will likely continue to exacerbate the polarization of the country, which has been growing over the last five, six years. Part of this polarization will likely come from the use of covid as a pretext for repressive activity. In fact, we have been seeing some really interesting developments around religious cleavages and growing polarization in Indonesia even in the last two to three weeks [in late November and early December]. Habib Rizieq, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, probably the largest Islamic hard-liner group in Indonesia, was in self-imposed exile, but returned to Indonesia [in early November.] Since he has been back, there have been a lot of protests in support of him. He has contravened a lot of COVID-19 restrictions by gathering. That is very interesting because Rizieq has been a very outspoken critic of Jokowi.

*Note:* Habib Rizieq was arrested in December 2020 for violating Covid restrictions. Eventually, the Jokowi government banned the Islamic Defenders Front from operating due to the organization’s frequent violations of law and order.

*Journal:* How has being connected with the Georgetown and Washington policy community supported and enhanced your scholarship?

*Soedirgo:* I have been doing this postdoc remotely in a pandemic, but I am looking forward to coming in January. It is definitely different, and I am sad to not have those opportunities to meet people in the hall and to have spontaneous conversations about research. Still, I have still been so warmly welcomed into the Georgetown community. I think it has been really exciting to be able to talk to people about my work, and people have been very generous with their time.

Beyond that, it has been great to be able to attend these virtual talks and be exposed to new, interesting, and exciting work, as that is what makes me want to write and work. Additionally, being part of the School of Foreign Service and listening to policymakers come and give talks has really forced me to think more carefully about the policy implications of my work.

*Journal:* As a recent Ph.D. graduate with a career in academia, where do you see your future academic scholarship intersecting with the policymaking process, and what are some research directions you hope to pursue in your next position as an Assistant
Soedirgo: I have slowly come around to the idea of deeper engagement with policy communities. I was somewhat resistant to this because the more you learn about something, the more you realize you do not know that much about it. I continue to feel like I do not know much about religion and politics and violence in Indonesia, but in reality, if you spent years studying a country, and years looking at a political phenomenon, you probably do have something to say about it. The first step in writing policy is that you have to understand the roots of the problem that you are trying to solve, and often these problems are very complex so providing deep area knowledge is where my work will intersect with the policymaking process. This is what I believe academics can contribute to the policymaking process, the information that you have painstakingly connected is something that should be shared and should be a public good.

In terms of what is next, the priority is definitely getting the book out!

Jessica Soedirgo is a postdoctoral fellow at the Asian Studies Program at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. She is affiliated with the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. She has published on the topics of ethnic and religious conflict—particularly in Indonesia—as well as qualitative research methods. In April 2021, she will begin as Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam.
Front cover photo: Food delivery driver delivering products to customers who order online (Adobe Stock).
ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Chasing the Conservative Dream: Why Shinzo Abe Failed to Revise the Constitution of Japan

Rintaro Nishimura

INTERVIEWS WITH

Veronika Kusumaryati
on West Papuan Nationalism and #Papuanlivesmatter

Jessica Soedirgo
on Ethnic Politics in Indonesia