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# WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

PROF TIM BUNNELL



This year marks ARI's 20th anniversary. Plans for celebration of 'ARI at 20' began in early 2020 but, like almost everything else over the past year, were disrupted by pandemic-related restrictions and uncertainty. Nonetheless, thanks to the Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement committee led by Prof Naoko Shimazu, the Institute is hosting a range of academic and public activities in 2021 around the anniversary theme of 'leading global scholarship on Asia'. The nature and format of those activities are highly varied and dispersed, but will gain momentum from the anniversary month of July, and culminate in a gala event which will be held in November.

Overall, the intention is to treat this symbolic year as an opportunity to look not only back at the past two decades, but also to the future. The year 2021, then, is a time for strategic recalibration of how ARI can lead Asia-centred humanities and social science research in new directions that have global reach and impact, as well as to reflect on existing institutional accomplishments.

I wish to note one very important institutional change that took place even prior to the start of anniversary year. Last December, Prof Tommy Koh stepped down from the Institute's International Advisory Board (IAB), having served as its Chair since ARI was established in 2001. I thank Prof Koh most sincerely for his remarkable commitment and dedication to ARI. The ARI that we know and celebrate in 2021 would not have come into being or flourished without the advice and support that Prof Koh provided over a span of twenty years. However, I also look forward to working together with Prof Koh's successor, Prof Tan Tai Yong. Prof Tan has already made significant contributions to ARI, including through having served as a member of the Management Board for over a decade.

Given that Prof Tan is President of Yale-NUS College as well as ARI's new IAB chair, it is a happy coincidence that the Institute's latest external grant success involves collaboration with Yale-NUS College. In April, it was announced that Singapore's Social Science Research

Council (SSRC) has awarded funding of around \$782K to Yale-NUS College and ARI for a two-year project titled 'Linking the Digital Humanities to Biodiversity History in Singapore and Southeast Asia'. Arising from an HSS Seed Fund grant based at ARI, this 'Type A' Social Science Research Thematic Grant (SSRTG) is jointly hosted by Yale-NUS College (PI Anthony D. Medrano, who is also an Associate of ARI's Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster) and ARI (Co-PI Stefan Huebner). The project is also supported by the NUS Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, NUS Libraries, and NPARKS. Collaborators include the National Library Board, the NUS Department of Geography, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, the University of the Philippines Diliman, and the Yale-NUS College Library. Building on work carried out through the seed grant and internal ARI research funding, the project will create a Geographical Information System that illustrates the history and present state of naturalised species (alien species that were translocated to a new bioregion and successfully established themselves there), and their connections to environmental change. Congratulations to Dr Medrano and Dr Huebner. I hope that this project will be the first of many successful research funding collaborations with Yale-NUS College.

Yale-NUS College also features prominently in cluster leadership changes at ARI. From July, Assoc Prof Ho Kong Chong will commence a joint appointment at



# MESSAGE FROM PROF TOMMY KOH

CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD, 2002 TO 2021

CHAIRMAN, EXTERNAL REVIEW COMMITTEE, 2005, 2012, 2017

Yale-NUS College, where he will become Head of the Urban Studies programme, and so I will resume leadership of ARI's Asian Urbanisms Cluster (succeeding A/Prof Ho). Prof Naoko Shimazu, whose tenure is also at Yale-NUS College will, in turn, replace me as Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster leader. A third research leadership update concerns the Identities Cluster: Assoc Prof Jamie Davidson from the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) will begin a joint appointment to lead that cluster, also starting from July 2021. Research leadership diversity at ARI—not only representing a range of departments and disciplines within FASS, but now also including outstanding humanities and social science scholars from other parts of campus on intra-NUS joint appointments—is fully appropriate for a university-level research institute.

Scholarly renewal and diversification through *external* appointments have of course been much more difficult over the past year, and challenges remain. On the one hand, restrictions on travel into Singapore eased in the latter part of 2020 with the result that, since December, ARI has welcomed three postdoctoral fellows. In addition, at the time of writing (in mid-April), two more postdoctoral fellows have received the necessary working approvals, along with one visiting senior research fellow. On the other hand, some researchers recruited to start work in Singapore last year have still not received the necessary visa approvals, and some of those who are here are separated from dependants. Challenges remain, and I appreciate that conditions continue to be very tough for some colleagues, as well as would-be colleagues who are still overseas. At the overall institutional level, however, I remain optimistic that conditions will improve during 2021, and look forward to celebrating this anniversary year together.



Twenty years ago, NUS President, Professor Shih Choon Fong and University Professor, Wang Gungwu, asked to see me. They explained that NUS had already achieved a global reputation for the excellence of its teaching and research in medicine, engineering, science and law but not yet in the humanities and social sciences.

To correct this imbalance, the university planned to establish the Asia Research Institute. They requested me to chair the International Advisory Board of ARI, for the first five years. I happily accepted the request and five years have stretched to twenty years. If Professor Shih Choon Fong were to ask me, whether his vision and aspirations have come true, I would say, yes.

First, ARI is recognised by the world, as a leader in the field of research on Asia. ARI's research into Asia's changing families, Asian migration, Asian urbanism, science, technology and society, religion and globalisation, to name a few, has been very well received by the scholarly world. Some of the research contained new facts and new insights.

Second, ARI has become a magnet and a hub. It has attracted outstanding international scholars, to work in a very collegial and conducive environment, with regional and local talent. Together, they have explored new ideas and new ways of thinking about research on Asia. They have been pushing the boundaries of critical scholarship on Asia.

Third, ARI has been working with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, to nurture and mentor talented young scholars from Singapore, the region, and the world. ARI has also encouraged the scholars to transcend the boundaries of faculties, departments and schools, to think holistically, and to be able to work with colleagues across such boundaries.

In conclusion, I believe that ARI has lived up to our expectations. I feel very privileged to have been associated with the Institute during the first twenty years of its illustrious journey. I congratulate it on its 20th anniversary and wish it even greater success in the years ahead.

# OPINION: MYANMAR'S BRUTAL CRACKDOWN UNLEASHES POLITICAL CHALLENGES TO TATMADAW

DR GERARD MCCARTHY

On 1st February 2021 Myanmar's military seized power, nullified the November 2020 election and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and democratic leaders. The coup was initially intended as a short, sharp intervention into Myanmar's political system aimed at re-writing the rules of the electoral game to advantage their political allies.

The generals initially promised to then hold elections in mid-2022, evidently hoping their proxy—the Union Solidarity and Development Party—would claim more seats in parliament and form government. Yet the coup and subsequent repression of protesters have instead set off a democratic uprising which is irreparably altering the country's political future.

By late March demonstrations against the new dictatorship were only intensifying despite brutal crackdowns. Broad swathes of Myanmar's population cutting across classes, generations and ethno-religious identity took to the streets and had gone on strike, bringing the country to a standstill. The protests are part of a loosely organised civil disobedience movement (CDM) which has led public sector employees, banking staff, doctors and nurses, factory and port workers and even some soldiers and police to walk off the job in protest of the new dictatorship. Meanwhile, since the coup, legislators elected in November 2020 have formed a parallel government, the Committee Representing the Union Parliament (CRPH), which has appointed ministers, has its own United Nations ambassador, and is developing its own system of neighbourhood and village administration.

While security forces initially showed some restraint in response to protests, in late February the armed forces,

or Tatmadaw, reverted to brutal suppression and terror tactics. Water cannons and rubber bullets gave way to tear gas, machine guns and headshots of unarmed protesters by snipers. By late March, at least 500 protesters had been murdered by security forces, while more than 3,000 people had been arrested—the majority of whom remain in detention. Yet the determination of protesters and the CDM has only intensified in the wake of increasingly shocking tactics. As many feel they are fighting against an indefinite return to brutal dictatorship, Myanmar is now stuck in an escalating cycle of protest and repression.

Central in the weeks and months ahead will be whether the brutality of crackdowns and the resolve of the mass movement fracture the loyalty of junta collaborators, especially within the security apparatus. The Myanmar army has proven resilient to intense domestic disdain and international isolation previously, a track record which makes a large-scale mutiny from within the ranks unlikely.

Yet as the crisis rolls on new political alignments are emerging, forming cracks in the junta and potentially the security apparatus. Of particular importance are ethnic Rakhine political elites, including the Arakan Army (AA). Based on the Myanmar side of the border with Bangladesh in Myanmar's west, since 2014 they fought an escalating



insurgency against the Tatmadaw in an effort to secure inclusion in political dialogue about the federal future of Myanmar and secure political autonomy for the ethnic minority Rakhine community. In December 2020, after years of increasingly bloody confrontations with Tatmadaw forces, AA agreed to a ceasefire with the Myanmar army only weeks prior to the 1st February coup. The junta likely baited Rakhine political elites with the offer of a better deal when they seized power, leading them to stay quiet about the military's brutality in the weeks following the coup. Senior members of the Arakan National Party even joined the junta's State Administrative Council, despite earlier criticising the military's threat of a coup.

Pausing the Rakhine conflict allowed the Tatmadaw to focus on repressing populations in lowland areas after it seized power. Yet as protests have continued and the country has edged closer to economic disaster, the Arakan Army has changed its tune. In late March it joined other ethnic armed groups such as the Karen National Union and Kachin Independence Army in expressing concern about violence towards civilians and declaring itself to be 'with the people'. The move came after the committee of elected representatives, the CRPH, announced it was 'about 80%' of the way to negotiating the terms of what it calls a 'federal army' with Myanmar's various ethnic armed groups at its core.

With junta collaborators quietly repositioning themselves in the face of backlash, and ethnic armed groups coordinating directly with elected parliamentarians, entirely new political possibilities are emerging. The famously unified Tatmadaw, which has stuck together through atrocities and crackdowns over decades, now faces major challenges to its internal cohesion. The damage is mounting to the

Tatmadaw's institutional and commercial interests from the political and economic crisis the actions of the junta leaders have provoked. The commercial interests of the Tatmadaw in particular have taken a battering since the coup with runs on their banks, new sanctions, and the withdrawal of foreign investors from prominent joint ventures. A domestic boycott of military companies is also gaining steam, including of small businesses owned by the families of soldiers and police—many who are more reliant than ever on selling goods within the community for their livelihoods. As the crisis rolls on, those meant to inherit command of the military in the future may begin to reassess their loyalties. As the campaign of social shame and boycotts against military and police and their more local-level family businesses intensify, many will be reassessing whether standing down or siding with the mass movement may be more strategic and moral than brutalising civilians.

Regardless of how the crisis unfolds, what is clear is that Burmese politics has been transformed by the 1st February coup. Beyond the new alignments of elected legislators and armed groups, barely unionised industries have unified in the wake of the coup as workers have formed the vanguard of the mass movement against dictatorship. With protesters demanding a new or an amended constitution, and the defanging and democratisation of the military, the social forces and democratic uprising provoked by the coup have opened political possibilities totally unimaginable only months ago.

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**Dr Jung Yoonhee** was appointed to the pre-editorial board of the *Asian Journal of Innovation and Policy* on 3 March 2020.

**Dr Carola Lorea** gave 3 invited lectures: 'Singing Knowledge: Sound, Seed and Siddhi Across the Bay of Bengal', *The Columbia University Seminar on South Asia*, 16 November 2020; 'Responses to COVID-19 in South Asia', *Main Spring Event for the Dhar India Studies Programme*, Indiana University, 9 March 2021; and 'Objectivity and Bias in the Social Sciences', ISS International School, Singapore, 16 March 2021.

On 3 March 2021, Dr Lorea also became Invited External Reviewer for the National Science Centre of Poland (OFS),

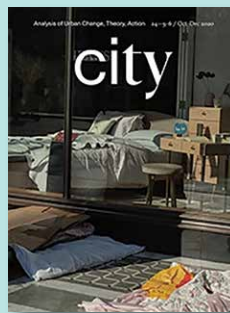
to be a reviewer of major research grant proposals funded by the Polish government, in the area of history, religion and social studies of South Asia.

**Prof Brenda Yeoh** gave an invited public lecture, 'Spatial Politics and Transient Migrant Workers in Global-City Singapore', *SEAC Lecture*, LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 9 March 2021.

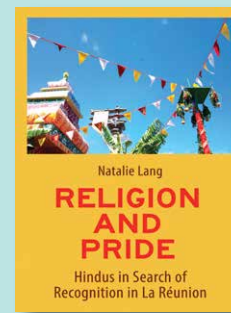
She was also appointed Member, CityScan Steering Committee, 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2022; Advisory Board Member, *Asian Studies Review*, January 2020 – 2022; and Editorial Board Member, *New Mobilities in Asia Series*, Amsterdam University Press, from June 2020.



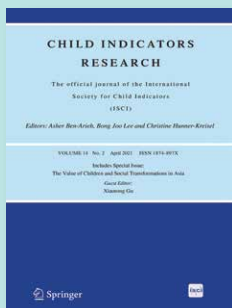
**Eric Kerr & Rich Ling (guest eds)**  
Special Section: *Platforms, Precarity, and Entrepreneurship: Mobile Communication in Asia*  
*The Information Society* 36(5), 2020



**Michiel Baas, Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, & Brenda S. A. Yeoh (guest eds)**  
Special Feature: *Migrants in Global Cities in East Asia and the Gulfs*  
*City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 24(5-6), 2020



**Natalie Lang**  
*Religion and Pride: Hindus in Search of Recognition in La Réunion*  
New York, Berghahn Books, 2021



**Xiaorong Gu (guest ed)**  
Special Issue: *The Value of Children and Social Transformations in Asia*  
*Child Indicators Research* 14(2), 2021



**Shaun Lin, Yang Yang, Henryk Alff, Mark R. Frost, Marina Kaneti, Tim Oakes, Jonathan Rigg, Alessandro Rippa, June Wang, & Tim Winter**  
Review Forum Reading Tim Winter's *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2019)  
*Political Geography* 84, 2021





Research Fellow Theodora Lam (15 years) and Senior Research Fellow Michelle Miller (10 years) received long service awards for their dedicated service to NUS, in January 2021.



**Dr Dan Zhang** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Asian Urbanisms Cluster on 9 December 2020. She has a PhD (Architecture) from the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Her research

focuses on the reuse of heritage buildings, urban tourism, and heritage tourism. At ARI, she will conduct comparative research on urban heritage tourism in cities in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore.



**Dr Lin Hongxuan** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster on 10 January 2021. He is concurrently Senior Tutor with the NUS Department of Southeast Asian Studies. His research interests lie in the

intersection between Islam and Marxism in Indonesia, and the articulation of progressive Islamic ideas across the Muslim world. At ARI, he will be working on a research project tentatively titled 'Progressive Islamic Discourses Circulating Across a Maritime Muslim World'.



**Dr Jin Yi** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Asian Urbanisms Cluster on 14 December 2020. He obtained his PhD in human geography and urban studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science in January 2019.

His research expertise includes urban redevelopment, urban governance, critical spatial theory, industrial heritage, city and everyday life, and qualitative research methods. At ARI he will explore mobile vertical urbanism and the governance of vertical cities in East Asia.



**Dr Patrick Daniel Quinton-Brown** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Identities Cluster on 22 January 2021. He holds a D.Phil. in international relations from Oxford University. He is interested in North-South relations, the

origins and development of the institutions of international society, colonialism and the history of international law. At ARI, he will be investigating the changing character of Asian, African, and Latin American practices of non-intervention, and the relationship of these practices to a shared Third World or Global South identity.



**Dr Yuanhao Zhao** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Identities Cluster on 2 February 2021. He received his PhD (Near Eastern Languages and Cultures/Folkloristics) from the Ohio State University.

He is a folklorist with research interest in material culture, narrative study, and folk life in general, and especially among Muslim minorities in China. His current research projects include Chinese Muslims' death-lore, Chinese Muslim identities in narratives, and discursive struggles around on-going public hygiene campaigns in China.



**Dr Helena Binti Muhamad Varkkey** commenced appointment as Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster on 22 April 2021. She received her PhD in international studies from the University of Sydney. Her research interests

include the political economy of transboundary haze, ASEAN environmental governance and the global politics of palm oil sustainability. In ARI, she will be involved in the Transboundary Environmental Commons in Southeast Asia (TECSEA) project.



**Ms Rohini Anant** commenced appointment as Research Assistant in the Asian Migration Cluster on 4 February 2021. She is currently awaiting examination of her Master's dissertation which explores the discursive politics of Singapore's on-demand gig economy. Her research

interests include labour geographies, labour politics and migration studies and she is especially keen on examining these issues in Singapore and South Asia.



**Dr Jeffrey B. Abalos** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Changing Family in Asia Cluster on 3 May 2021. He received his PhD in demography from Australian National University. His research interests include population ageing, population

health, marriage and cohabitation, and divorce and separation. In ARI, he will work on his research on one-person households in the Philippines.



**Dr Ashawari Chaudhuri** commenced appointment as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Science, Technology, and Society Cluster on 10 February 2021. She obtained her PhD in anthropology and STS from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. She is a

socio-cultural anthropologist whose research is guided by two broad themes: firstly, forming connections and conceiving of a third way between binaries like local and the global, religion and science, technology and society, farmers and scientists; and secondly, experiences of time and methods of time reckoning.



# PARTING WORDS FROM ASIAN URBANISMS CLUSTER LEADER DR KC HO

DR MATTHEW WADE



Assoc Prof Ho Kong Chong, or KC Ho, as he is known at ARI, led the Asian Urbanisms Cluster for three years, from 2018 to 2021, and will be moving on to head the Yale-NUS Urban Studies Programme. He spoke with cluster fellow, Matt Wade, to reflect on his tenure at ARI and on the future of urban studies in Asia.

**Matt:** Can you talk about some of the successes in the cluster while you were the leader?

**KC:** My predecessor Mike Douglass had a fantastic agenda and vision for the cluster. When I took over, I wanted to do a lot more in terms of the policy side of things. Urban studies has a practice component, and I wanted to reflect that. I remember four projects in particular.

The first was urban gardening. Fiona Williamson and Minna Valjakka, both research fellows at the cluster, came together for this project. We applied and got a Humanities and Social Sciences grant. We wanted to compare gardening in different Asian cities—Hong Kong, Seoul, Taipei, and Singapore. It addressed community, urban ways of life, and had a policy bridge. In Taiwan, there were indigenous communities that were urban foragers. It was just fascinating. Seoul was interesting too because then-Mayor Park wanted to use urban farming as a way to increase youth employment. So you could see the links between the community and local governments for cities.

The second was a conference with the Institute of Water Policy, *Water and the City*. The role of cities and its water supply is crucial. We looked at ways in which water and its social, economic, and political practices continue to impact urban places.

The third was the conference that Yun Hae Young and I organised together with the SEANNET group led by Paul Rabé and Rita Padawangi on neighbourhoods and city-building knowledge, something near to my heart because my own book tapped into that. We tend to see a very top-down approach to neighbourhoods, how residents become either beneficiaries or victims of policies, but here's another way to see how neighbourhoods could contribute to practices that are important for the city.

*Citizens and the City* is also an important forum that is a continuation of the *Activate!* series where activists, policy makers and academics come together. I am really proud to say that every single member of the Asian Urbanisms Cluster brought their expertise to chair a session on a topic which they were passionate about!

**M:** Do you have a vision for the future of the field of urban studies in Asia?

**KC:** (Laughing) It's a funny question to ask somebody like me! But, after researching five cases in East and Southeast Asia for my book, if you ask what's my sense, then it's the challenge of good governance. It's so difficult to get the politics right, for people to participate at a level that ensures results. For this to happen, the state must move beyond an authoritarian posture but also avoid a post-

political stance. I really thought the Seoul mayor had done it. These participatory moments—in which the government is open enough to engage its citizens—they're rare. I saw in Taipei and Seoul moments where it was possible.

In my 'In The Beginning' talk, I flashed an image of the coffee machine. I have been an associate with ARI for a long time, both in the Asian Urbanisms and Asian Migration clusters, even when ARI was in Bukit Timah. Every time I went I would have coffee from the ARI coffee machine. So I guess I'm jumping to the next part, about why I leave. My three years leading the cluster has been wonderful. But after the publication of my book in December 2019, I looked at what I should be doing with the time I have, and I felt very strongly that my time should be given to local, Singapore-based projects that have a policy relevance. More and more I see myself as a policy sociologist. Urban policies are so powerful, and the people who become implicated share a common fate, good or bad. I've given a lot more attention in three very big projects, one on social mixing, one on the planning for the Paya Lebar Air Base new town, and lastly one looking at low-income workers. I wanted deliberately to move to those things and I had to give up something. And so I've given up the coffee machine, Matt.



**M: Why is the coffee machine a special symbol for you?**

**KC:** Because I love coffee! And the ARI coffee machine is one of these everyday routines that have a special meaning. The pantry is where you have these conversations, not just with cluster members, but across ARI. You know, Erik Harms wrote a paper that talks about the coffee shop and how it generates and sustains a set of relationships, and I've always thought the pantry and the coffee machine do that. I mean I'm a neighbourhood sociologist, right? And so you look for things that make people conscious about where they live, who their neighbours are. So, I am giving up the coffee and the pantry with great regret!

**M: Would you talk about any special moments that you shared with your team?**

**KC:** There are very few places that have a great administrative staff. These colleagues of mine, they are so professional, and so personable. It's an amazing team that is in place, and that just makes our life and our work so much easier. And I want to thank them for that.

**M: Any final thoughts?**

**KC:** No, I want to come back to ARI now and then, and bring my coffee cup. Hang out in the pantry and see who's around.

**M: Do you have a special mug? Can you describe it for us?**

**KC:** It's a light blue mug that somebody bought for me in a cafe somewhere in the Yunnan Province. The cafe was named after a Catholic monk who brought coffee beans to China. It's a special cup for me. I will send you a picture so you can include it in the newsletter.

**M:** Well, I'm sure I speak on behalf of everyone at ARI that we really appreciate everything you have brought to the Institute. We will definitely miss you here!

# INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITIES AND POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

DR YI'EN CHENG

This virtual workshop, held on 5-6 November 2020, gathered academic researchers, university practitioners and students to reflect on experiences across nearly a year of living with COVID-19, and to discuss possible scenarios and futures of international student mobility and higher education in the Asia-Pacific region set against global trends.

The workshop was particularly concerned with how the global pandemic is reshaping cross-border educational activities and student mobilities, and what post-pandemic futures we can imagine and how we can create the conditions for them to be realised.

The workshop brought together 15 speakers Zooming in from different parts of the world such as New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Abu Dhabi, and Hong Kong, and spread across a total of four panels discussing the topics of institutions and students, pedagogies, notes from the UK, and institutional responses. On the topic of international student mobilities, the workshop raised three key points.

First, the pandemic has been framed as a test or experimentation for higher education and society at large. These terms are useful for reminding us to view the pandemic as a period of suspended time and space, noting that this suspension is experienced differently across different students and institutions. Some experience it as waiting while others find opportunities to reinvent, some experience prolonged anxiety and feel 'stuck' while others take detours more readily.

Second, since the pandemic's impacts on higher education and student mobility were first noted, the discussion has largely focused on how to simulate repairs of glitches in the infrastructures of higher education and international student mobility. Conversations that emerge across the workshop point to the need for not returning to the old normal, but to collectively carve out new conditions that may recalibrate power imbalances, discriminatory policies, unequal distribution of resources, and more. This also relates to the question of value. How can international students be coded through a value regime that is well beyond the economic logic?

Third, extending the question of value, there is the urgent question of how to care for international students. While we acknowledge that a new social contract between universities and students is due to be in place in post-pandemic times, many more questions remain about care in higher education in times of crisis: what about student carers, and what provisions and inclusionary practices are there for this group of students? How do we begin to value care in university settings, and the value of the work that people are doing as a result of their care duties?

Organised by Dr Yi'En Cheng and Prof Brenda Yeoh from the Asian Migration Cluster along with Asst Prof Yang Peidong from the Nanyang Technological University, this workshop raised numerous critical questions and reflections, for both researchers and practitioners, and serves as one of the many ongoing platforms set up around the world to examine the pandemic's impacts on higher education and student mobility. The workshop contributes to the research interests of the Asian Migration Cluster where ongoing projects are being developed around geopolitical shifts and their impact on new knowledge spaces, young people's mobilities, and Asian regionalism.

A website for this workshop has been set up to digitally archive the contents arising from our discussion: <https://covidism.wordpress.com/ism-and-post-pandemic-futures-asia-pacific/>



# PERSPECTIVES ON THE VALUE OF CHILDREN AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN ASIA

DR XIAORONG GU

Understanding how children are valued in Asia could shed light on major social issues facing this region, including sustained low fertility, population ageing, shifting family dynamics, and social stratification. In November 2018, the Changing Family in Asia Cluster held an international conference, *The Value of Children in Asia: Economy, Family and Public Policies* to explore this under-studied topic. Selected papers presented in the conference were recently published in a special issue in *Child Indicators Research* (edited by Xiaorong Gu). The special issue contributes to existing literature in the following ways.

## Expanding the conceptual scheme of value of children studies

The issue explores multiple dimensions of the value of children in contextualised analyses. Two articles interrogate the value of children's education. Gu documents that in post-reform China parents predominantly value a child figure who is 'emotionally priceless and educationally achieving', which interacts with socioeconomic resources to shape their parenting practices. Tong et al. empirically confirm that children's educational outcomes are consequential for parents' subjective well-being. Gender dynamics and norms matter. Chen and Yi report a significant interaction effect between education and gender on Taiwanese youths' values: elite-educated women rate significantly lower values of children (instrumental and emotional), likely due to greater tensions between women's gendered familial role and professional life. Tong et al. find that Chinese mothers' subjective well-being is correlated with children's learning efforts and their grades, while fathers respond only to children's grades, reflecting gendered parental involvement in children's education. Utomo et al. reveal that higher education exerts a limited, though distinct, impact on women's child-related values and fertility behaviours in Greater Jakarta. Hu and Chiang's analysis of Taiwanese young adults' fertility preferences indicates that not every child is valued in the same way.

Rather, respondents articulate different values by children's birth order, suggesting that policy interventions should devise different incentive structures for couples with different fertility preferences.

## Advancing a broader research agenda

The issue advances a sociological agenda to embed value of children analyses in broader sociological inquiries. The two papers on Taiwan illustrate the validity of the value of children as a mechanism to shape an ultra-low fertility regime in East Asia. Value-based theoretical models also offer great potential for explicating the links between cultural beliefs, family processes and social stratification. Gu applies the value of children as a theoretical model to investigate how cultural beliefs and socioeconomic resources jointly shape parenting strategies in contemporary China. Tong et al. further demonstrate how the 'education project' in Chinese families bears on parents' well-being. Other articles illustrate how broader social-political and economic processes affect children's values. Tran et al. report substantial regional (South versus North) gaps in respondents' valuation of children, reflecting the impact of a complex political geography and history in twentieth century Vietnam. De Silva and Goonatilaka examine how environmental factors (political strife and natural disasters) trigger societal reflections of the value of children in Sri Lanka, contributing to the country's recent uptick in fertility trends.

### Transcending the discourse of a linear trajectory of value transformation

This issue uncovers heterogeneous and complex trajectories of value transformations in Asia, challenging the dominant discourse of a linear economic-to-emotional progression of children's value based on western experiences. The Chinese case reveals that while the economic value of young children may have declined, children's long-term economic value, reflected in families' pursuit of children's education as a 'project', weighs heavier in an increasingly competitive yet unequal society. Vietnam has not witnessed a rising emotional value of children over time. Rather, compared to previous birth cohorts, the youngest cohort (born after economic reform in 1986) reports the lowest emotional and instrumental values of children, suggesting a possible individualisation process among youths in a rapidly changing society.

### Conclusion

Collectively, the articles demonstrate the importance of taking the value of children seriously not just as a site of fertility analysis but also as a venue to examine processes of the familial, social, cultural and political transformations in Asian societies. For details of each paper in the special issue, visit: <https://link.springer.com/journal/12187/volumes-and-issues/14-2>.

### Reference

Gu, X. R. (2021). The Value of Children and Social Transformations in Asia. Special issue of *Child Indicators Research* 14(2).

## ASIAN URBANISMS CLUSTER

The Asian Urbanisms Cluster has been awarded the UParis-NUS Research and Innovative Teaching grant to collaborate with colleagues in Paris on the theme of the governance of diverse cities in Europe and Asia. The project will run until 2023 and aims to produce a Massive Open Online Course, as well as a handbook, drawing on the expertise of a diverse and multidisciplinary team from both institutions. The AUC also held two workshops in 2021. Dr Natalie Lang, a postdoctoral fellow with both the Asian Urbanisms and Religion and Globalisation clusters, organised the conference *Urban Religion, Gender, and the Body*, an asynchronous conference held in January 2021, which took the gendered body as a lens of analysis to study the relation between religion and the city. Another conference, *Building City Knowledge from Neighbourhoods*, was held on 11-12 March 2021, a collaboration between ARI and the Southeast Asia Neighbourhoods Network (SEANNET) of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), organised by Assoc Prof Ho Kong Chong, Dr Yun Hae Young, Dr Rita Padawangi, and Dr Paul Rabé. The conference featured 17 papers that collectively advanced insights on how the neighbourhood can create knowledge with best practices and alliances that can strengthen the city-building effort.

# IDENTITIES

ASSOC PROF JAMIE SETH DAVIDSON

The Director of ARI, Prof Tim Bunnell, assumed the duties of interim head of the Identities Cluster in January 2021. Assoc Prof Jamie Davidson (Political Science) will take over as cluster leader in mid-2021.

A core research project of the Identities Cluster, called *Making Identity Count in Asia*, was concluded in March 2021. Funded by a Social Science Thematic Research Grant from the Singapore Social Science Research Council that commenced in 2017, the project involved discourse analysis of elite and mass conceptions of national identity in countries across Asia. Assoc Prof Ian Chong (Political Science, and Cluster Associate) led the project through to completion as principal investigator following Prof Ted Hopf's departure from NUS in late 2020.

In recent months, Postdoctoral Fellow Eve Warburton published two collaborative journal articles. One article, which examines polarisation and democratic support in Indonesia, appeared in *Party Politics*. The other was published in *Third World Quarterly* and explores class identity and representation, also in Indonesia. Eve recently presented her research at Stanford University, City University of Hong Kong, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Dr Amit Julka (Cluster Associate) appeared twice as a panellist for the weekday talk show *Keh Kar Hi Manenge* on News 18-Urdu, a popular Indian news channel. The first discussion, telecast on 7 January 2021, was titled 'Crisis in America: Mayhem at US Capitol' (<https://cutt.ly/0kT1dVT>). The second, which aired on 21 January, concerned the topic 'Biden in Motion: Executive Orders on Day One' (<https://cutt.ly/tkT1Utz>).

An article by Dr Sabina Insebayeva (Postdoctoral Research Affiliate) has recently been accepted for publication in *Europe-Asia Studies*. It explores the connection between symbolic politics and identity building in Central Asia. On 7 January 2021, Sabina also organised a guest lecture by Prof Bahar Rumelili, of Koç University (Turkey). The lecture, titled 'IR Theory for a World of Anxiety', was a part of the Virtual Academic Visitor programme at ARI. Lastly, Sabina hosted the workshop *Identity Politics and Foreign Policy: Non-Western Perspectives* on 18 January 2021. Its speakers included Dr Yinan He (Leigh University, USA), Dr Bahar Rumelili (Koç University, Turkey) and Dr Thorsten Wojczewski (King's College, London, UK).

Finally, Postdoctoral Fellow Patrick Quinton-Brown hosted a virtual workshop titled *Conceptual Vocabularies and the Bandung Spirit*, 25-26 March 2021. The four workshop presentations were organised around the motivating questions of: If a particular international identity was forged at the 1955 *Asian-African Conference*, on what concepts, practices, narratives, and problems did that identity rest? What remains of their relevance today? Papers were presented by colleagues from Johns Hopkins, NUS, San Francisco, Vassar, Waterloo, and Yale-NUS College.



14 MAY 2021

**ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON BRI AS METHOD: FORGING THEORETICAL AGENDAS**

17 - 20 MAY 2021

**THIRD CHINA MADE WORKSHOP: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CHINESE INFRASTRUCTURES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

12 - 16 JULY 2021

**16TH SINGAPORE GRADUATE FORUM ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

23 – 24 AUGUST 2021

**SENDING STATE REGIMES AND INTERNATIONAL SKILLED MIGRATION: ASIAN PERSPECTIVES IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL MIGRATION**

23 - 24 SEPTEMBER 2021

**CULTURAL HERITAGE, DIGITALISATION AND URBAN DIVERSITY IN ASIA**

21 - 22 OCTOBER 2021

**INTERROGATING THE NOTION OF 'CULT' AS A SOCIAL FORMATION IN ASIAN RELIGIONS**

1 - 3 NOVEMBER 2021

**SITES AND PROCESSES OF ETHICAL LEARNING: RELIGION AND SELF-MAKING IN ASIA**

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**Details of events are available at [ari.nus.edu.sg/upcoming-events/](http://ari.nus.edu.sg/upcoming-events/)**

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# FLOURISHING IN OLD AGE: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LEISURE FOR OLDER ADULTS IN ASIA

DR BENNY TONG

The ageing of populations around the Asian region has been accompanied by dramatic shifts in demographic, socio-economic, cultural and family structures. Increasingly, Asians enter their later years not as frail dependants, but as individuals with desires and varying capacities to exercise their agencies to achieve fulfillment and well-being in old age.



One prominent area of life in which such desires are manifested is their participation in leisure activities. Picking up on this growing trend, Prof Jean Yeung, Assoc Prof Thang Leng Leng, and Dr Benny Tong from the Changing Family in Asia Cluster organised and hosted an international online conference, *Leisure for Older Adults in Asia*, on 19 and 20 January 2021. The two-day event brought together scholars engaged in the empirical study of leisure activities of seniors in societies including Singapore, China, India, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

The keynote speaker, Prof Gordon Mathews from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, opened the conference

by critiquing from the perspective of leisure the moral and political imperatives of currently popular discourses of 'productive' ageing, and proposing the alternative measure of 'happy' ageing. The first day of the conference featured four panels: social class issues, gender issues, the relationship between leisure and senior health, and digital leisure practices. The second day featured three other themes spread across four panels: conceptualisations of well-being, community building, and images, identities and subjectivities. There was a good mix of quantitative and qualitative papers presented, many within the same panel/theme. Each session comprised either two or three speakers who addressed in turn their findings relating to the panel themes based on empirical research conducted in various social contexts across Asia.

The discussions were invigorating and critical, pointing out the crucial role of leisure in the construction of senior lifestyles and navigating the socio-economic and political contexts of ageing in contemporary Asia. The participants also built up a common understanding of the need for more academic research that can better explain the processes through which leisure activities are experienced by seniors, in addition to analysing the determinants or effects of participation. These issues remain understudied, yet are highly important conceptually and practically, especially in terms of policy impact. Addressing this gap, the participants are working towards publishing a special journal issue based on the papers presented, to be published in the near future.