

SEPTEMBER 2022

# CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



## CHINA AND EAST ASIA

### Local Resistance

**Zero-COVID and the Siege of Shanghai**

Dali L. Yang

**Desinicizing Taiwan**

Ming-sho Ho

**Okinawa's Burdens**

Gabriele Vogt

### States of Development

**A Korean Age of Inequality**

Myungji Yang

**Timorese Growing Pains**

Douglas Kammen

**Migration and Urban Transformation in the Philippines**

Arnisson Andre C. Ortega and Evangeline O. Katigbak

### Plus:

**Sino-Russian 'Friendship'**

Ed Pulford

**Voracious Chinese Readers**

Michel Hockx

# CURRENT HISTORY

FOUNDED IN 1914

SEPTEMBER 2022

VOL. 121, NO. 836

## Editor

JOSHUA LUSTIG

## Associate Editor

MARK THOMPSON

## Senior Editor

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

## Copy Editor

SHERRY L. WERT

## Contributing Editors

CATHERINE BOONE

London School of Economics

HOLLY CASE

Brown University

URI DADUSH

Bruegel

DEBORAH S. DAVIS

Yale University

ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO

The New School

LARRY DIAMOND

Stanford University

MICHELE DUNNE

Carnegie Endowment

BARRY EICHENGREEN

University of California, Berkeley

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

Georgetown University

SUMIT GANGULY

Indiana University

MICHAEL T. KLARE

Hampshire College

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

Northwestern University

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Council on Foreign Relations

PAMELA McELWEE

Rutgers University

MICHAEL McFAUL

Stanford University

RAJAN MENON

City University of New York

JOSEPH S. NYE JR.

Harvard University

Ebenezer Obadare

University of Kansas

MICHAEL SHIFTER

Inter-American Dialogue

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

University of California, Irvine

•

## COMING IN OCTOBER

# Russia and Eurasia

RUSSIA'S FEBRUARY 2022 INVASION OF UKRAINE jolted the region and the world. Defying expectations of its collapse, the Ukrainian state withstood an offensive aimed at seizing Kyiv, demonstrating that the preceding eight years of conflict had prompted effective reforms. Yet Vladimir Putin, harnessing an ideological crusade, has continued bombarding Ukrainian cities, turning millions into refugees as the war's repercussions roil global markets for energy and food, and neighbors seek NATO's shelter. *Current History's* October issue will cover these developments and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **The Making of Ukrainian Resilience**  
Serhiy Kudelia, Baylor University
- **Life in Wartime Russia**  
Jeremy Morris, Aarhus University
- **Russia's Patriotic Education Campaign**  
Francine Hirsch, University of Wisconsin–Madison
- **Lithuania's Border Anxieties**  
Neringa Klumbytė, Miami University, Ohio
- **Hard Times in the Pamirs**  
Till Mostowlansky, Geneva Graduate Institute
- **Art and Politics in Kazakhstan**  
Diana T. Kudaibergenova, University of Cambridge
- **Eurasian Imperial Dreams?**  
Adeeb Khalid, Carleton College

*Current History* (ISSN 0011-3530) (Online: ISSN 1944-785X) is published monthly (except June, July, and August) by University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. See [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions) for single issue and subscription orders, and claims information. Postmaster: send address changes to University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. Copying and permissions notice: Authorization to copy article content beyond fair use (as specified in Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law) for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by The Regents of the University of California for libraries and other users, provided that they are registered with and pay the specified fee through the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). To reach the CCC's Customer Service Department, phone 978-750-8400 or write to [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com). For permission to distribute electronically, republish, resell, or repurpose material, use the CCC's Rightslink service, available at [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory). Submit all other permissions and licensing inquiries to [permissions@ucpress.edu](mailto:permissions@ucpress.edu). Copyright ©2022 by Regents of the University of California. *Current History*® and *History in the Making*® are registered trademarks. Periodicals postage paid at Oakland, CA and additional mailing offices. U.S. and Canada.

Printed in the United States by The Sheridan Press.

# CURRENT HISTORY

September 2022

Vol. 121, No. 836

## CONTENTS

- 203 **China's Zero-COVID Campaign and the Body Politic** . . . . . *Dali L. Yang*  
For its draconian approach to containing the novel coronavirus, the party-state ramped up its coercive powers. The siege of Shanghai revealed the heavy costs of uncompromising lockdowns.
- 211 **Desinicizing Taiwan:  
The Making of a Democratic National Identity.** . . . . . *Ming-sho Ho*  
As the Taiwanese people's pride in their tolerant, inclusive democracy has grown, they have become less inclined to identify as Chinese, or to consider their island homeland as a part of China.
- 218 **The Politics of *Parasite* in South Korea.** . . . . . *Myungji Yang*  
Economic inequality has become pervasive in South Korea, fraying the social fabric and undermining the national image of a developmental paragon.
- 224 **Okinawa's Unsettled Membership in Japan** . . . . . *Gabriele Vogt*  
Fifty years after its "reversion" to Japan, the burden of hosting US military bases is one of the perceived injustices that have limited the southernmost prefecture's sense of national belonging.
- 231 **A Season of Youth in Timor-Leste** . . . . . *Douglas Kammen*  
Two decades since its violent birth, Southeast Asia's newest nation is stable and at peace with its neighbors, but domineering elder statesmen and reliance on oil revenue raise concerns.
- 237 **The Urban Geographies of  
Philippine Transnationalism.** . . . . *Arnisson Andre C. Ortega and Evangeline O. Katigbak*  
From gated communities in Manila to island resorts, overseas migration and other international connections are putting their stamp on everyday life in the Philippines.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 243 **Ukraine and the Limits of China-Russia Friendship.** . . . . . *Ed Pulford*  
Notwithstanding claims that their bond knows no limits, leaders in Beijing and Moscow have a history of official friendship that tends to last only as long as it remains expedient.
- BOOKS**
- 246 **China's Booming Fiction Industry** . . . . . *Michel Hockx*  
A survey of contemporary Chinese literature illuminates the country's huge appetite for fiction in new online formats, going beyond the usual foreign focus on political dissidents.

# CURRENT HISTORY

September 2022

*“The pursuit of zero-COVID is fundamentally an application of party-state power.”*

## China’s Zero-COVID Campaign and the Body Politic

DALI L. YANG

On September 8, 2020, as governments and societies in the rest of the world scrambled to cope with the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic, China’s leaders convened a nationally televised ceremony in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People to recognize a long list of organizations and individuals for contributions to the fight against the virus. In a speech that lasted an hour and 15 minutes, President Xi Jinping declared that China had not only controlled the pandemic, but was also the first major economy to resume growth—and that this “fully demonstrates the remarkable advantages of China’s Communist Party leadership and our socialist system.”

For years, Xi has exhorted Chinese officials and the Chinese people to embrace the spirit of *douzheng*—“fighting spirit” or “spirit of struggle.” He employed this martial language during the US-China trade war, and again in directing the efforts to contain the novel coronavirus. He invoked *douzheng* 31 times at the September 2020 ceremony.

China’s pursuit of zero-COVID has leaned on the capacities of the Communist party-state. When cases are identified in any city or locality, the full weight of the party-state system is brought to bear on controlling suspected carriers of virus, often with guidance or direction from provincial and national authorities and the help of public health professionals enlisted from other localities. Besides the role of epidemiologists in conducting contact tracing and assessment, the efforts to control outbreaks have depended heavily on diagnostics, especially nucleic acid testing on a mass scale, and digital contact tracing.

The zero-COVID enforcement regime, with its focus on *fangkong* (prevention and control), is de facto a form of undeclared emergency rule. As it became the top priority under Xi’s leadership, officials across China routinely invoked martial language in mobilizing resources, deploying personnel, and imposing controls on targeted populations. The Chinese regulatory state is known to be illiberal, but the zero-COVID regime goes even further and is downright dictatorial.

Wherever outbreaks occur, cities, communities, and families have been subjected to draconian lockdowns and stringent home confinement. As the SARS-CoV-2 variants became more contagious, larger cities with more resources and greater capabilities also fell under this regime—culminating in the long siege of Shanghai in the spring of 2022, which revealed the enormous economic and social costs of the uncompromising zero-COVID policy.

### PILLARS OF FEAR

The Chinese zero-COVID enforcement regime is sustained on two pillars of fear. First is the pervasive public fear of catching and dying of COVID-19, known in China as the novel coronavirus pneumonia. This fear spread nationally in early 2020 when Wuhan and the rest of Hubei province were sealed off from the rest of China, in the first major outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Massive amounts of medical aid from around the country were rushed to Wuhan’s rescue. Many residents died, while some of the most traumatic images from the Wuhan lockdown were subjected to heavy censorship.

In the ensuing two years, Chinese official and social media highlighted the poor handling of the pandemic around the world and lavished attention on suffering in Europe, the United States, India,

---

DALI L. YANG is a professor of political science at the University of Chicago.

and elsewhere. Such coverage has reinforced the pervasive fear in China, leading to verbal attacks on those who might carry the virus, primarily Chinese returning home from abroad. China has adopted strict controls on international travel and stringent quarantine measures. Xi has not traveled outside China since his visit to Myanmar in January 2020.

Chinese experts repeatedly reminded policymakers and the public of the benefits of the zero-COVID strategy and the dangers of abandoning it. In November 2021, Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), estimated that China would have had 47.8 million infections and 950,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the absence of the policy.

The second pillar of fear is specific to officials in the post-Wuhan lockdown period of *fangkong* routinization. Chinese officials, especially those in sub-provincial leadership posts, can improve their promotion prospects by meeting targets for superior performance, or may be punished for economic failures. Under the zero-COVID regime, prevention and control of outbreaks has become the foremost priority for local officials. Based on information released in official media and by the Communist Party's disciplinary arm, a Bloomberg analysis found that more than 4,000 officials had been punished over 51 outbreaks around China as of April 2022.

As provinces announced emergency responses to the epidemic, China quickly swung into campaign mode. Provincial and sub-provincial authorities set up command headquarters and leading groups; communities and other organizations, such as hospitals, universities, and state-owned companies, were mobilized. Such campaigns had occurred many times in the history of the People's Republic of China.

Whereas the typical mass campaign involves the mobilization of the masses to attend and stage rallies and other public activities, the essence of the infectious disease *fangkong* campaign is the *demobilization* of society: keeping individuals at home to reduce interactions and cut the chains of viral transmission. In this regard, the anti-epidemic campaign bears striking similarity to China's draconian birth-planning policy: both are top-down efforts to control human bodies.

After the Wuhan lockdown, the *fangkong* campaign in the rest of China was remarkably effective through the end of 2021. Some cities, mostly in border areas, were forced into extended and painful lockdowns. But these were largely accepted as sacrifices necessary for the national good.

During the lockdown in Wuhan and the rest of Hubei, local authorities invoked the "state of emergency" provision (Article 50.1[1]) of the Public Security Administrative Punishments Law to enforce prevention and control measures. Local authorities in subsequent periods frequently invoked this provision as they sought to avoid punishment for having runaway outbreaks on their watch, even though no emergency had been declared. They also routinely used the law to punish those who refused to comply with *fangkong* measures such as stay-at-home orders or mandatory testing.

### PROOF OF SUPERIORITY

Addressing provincial and ministerial officials in January 2021, Xi said that in a global environment characterized by *luan*, or chaos, China was an oasis of stability. During the pandemic, he said, "highs and lows are obvious in the quality of leadership and of national institutions in different countries. The trend of the times is in favor of us."

For Xi and most of China's elite, China's superior performance in 2020–21 was yet more proof of their system's capacity for centralized decision-making and the mobilization of resources to "accomplish big things." Xi's January 2021 speech was disseminated throughout the governing class, promoting the narrative that China was winning while the West, led by the United States, was in rapid decline. The massive push to vaccinate the Chinese population with China's own vaccines in 2021 was another boost to this soaring confidence, which blinded the leadership to the weaknesses of Chinese vaccines and discouraged consideration of possible alternatives.

Even before the pandemic, Chinese official media had begun to lavish praise on Xi, China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. Its laudatory reports on his pandemic response were part of a growing trend of personal idolatry that appeared set to propel him to a precedent-breaking third term as China's supreme leader at

---

*Shanghai, like Wuhan in early 2020, became the focus of a national campaign.*

---

the 20th Communist Party National Congress in the fall of 2022.

The growing pride in the superiority of the Chinese pandemic response was accompanied by the silencing of critics, such as citizen journalists. There was also heightened control over research into the origins of the novel coronavirus and the response in Wuhan.

When the US government raised questions about China's initial handling of the Wuhan outbreak, China's "wolf warrior" diplomats escalated the dispute. On March 12, 2020, Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted a suggestion that the pandemic started in the United States and was brought to Wuhan by the US military. Such aggressive statements contributed to a rising tide of anti-American cyber nationalism and played a role in inflaming US-China relations.

## RENEWING COMMITMENT

In July 2021, an outbreak of the Delta variant occurred in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province. The Delta variant was highly contagious, yet cases were mostly asymptomatic or mild for the vaccinated, making it hard to detect. The Nanjing outbreak eventually spread to 16 provinces, putting Beijing on high alert. The State Council, through the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism (JPCM), dispatched a work team to Jiangsu.

With a total of 1,272 confirmed cases, this was China's biggest post-Wuhan outbreak at the time. It prompted discussion in expert circles and intense debate on social media about the zero-COVID strategy and whether China might need to "live with the virus." Dr. Zhang Wenhong of the Shanghai Huashan Hospital was the lead public advocate for such an approach. He argued that the virus was here to stay and that China should prepare to reopen through effective vaccination. Zeng Guang, a retired China CDC chief epidemiologist, reinforced Zhang's message two weeks later. The growing public interest in exiting the zero-COVID policy elicited a firestorm of criticism. A popular refrain on Chinese social media cast the "coexistence with the virus" argument as an insidious Western conspiracy to hurt China.

Xi in the summer of 2021 called for accelerating the pace of COVID vaccination as well as recommitting to the "dynamic zero-COVID policy." This was a dual insurance strategy designed to showcase China's growing capabilities. "Dynamic zero-COVID" was a step up from the dogmatic focus on eradicating cases, and it reflected a confidence that

Chinese cities could routinely manage small outbreaks. It called for precision *fangkong*: outbreaks would be curbed rapidly through a combination of nucleic acid testing, contact tracing, and differentiated control measures.

Xi's urgings primed local authorities for quarantines and lockdowns ahead of the coming winter. Heeding his call to overcome attitudes that could undermine *fangkong* measures, officials at different levels of the hierarchy demanded that subordinate levels make extra efforts. This became known as *cengceng jiama*, or "ratcheting up [demands] level by level."

Most of the Chinese population enjoyed a COVID-free life, hearing little of the stringent lockdowns of border cities and communities in Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Xinjiang, and Yunnan. In April 2021, the party secretary of the city of Ruili in Yunnan was fired for allowing outbreaks on his watch. Ruili was then put under lockdown for a total of 160 days. Businesses were decimated, and many residents deserted the city. Yet such suffering was relegated to the margins of the narrative of national success.

Toward the end of 2021, the city of Xi'an in Shaanxi faced an outbreak of the Delta variant and imposed "enclosed management" on its population, including a strict two-week lockdown beginning on December 27. The dramatic lockdown of the most international city in China's northwest had many residents complaining of food shortages and the scarcity of non-COVID medical services. The city drew negative publicity when a pregnant woman lost her baby after being denied access to hospitals.

## ECONOMIC CONCERNS

Even before Xi'an lifted its lockdown in late January 2022, the Omicron variant was already looming on the horizon. The hyper-transmissible variant was widely seen as the biggest challenge yet to the zero-COVID strategy. Yet China was able to contain Omicron outbreaks in Shenzhen, Tianjin, and Beijing in January 2022. It went on to do the same for the 2022 Winter Olympics in the Greater Beijing area. But concerns were rising about the economic costs of pandemic restrictions and lockdowns.

The Xi'an lockdown dramatically elevated risk awareness among officials around the country. Ahead of the lunar New Year, the biggest travel season of the year, authorities in many places imposed strict requirements and barriers to

inbound travel, including for residents trying to return home. Because the newer variants were much more contagious, the definition of close contacts became ever more expansive. The identification of a single case frequently led to the lockdown and quarantine of an entire building.

As grassroots leaders adopted stringent measures and harsh tactics to meet the “wartime” demands for *fangkong*, they also ratcheted down economic activities and provoked public resentment. The State Council asked local authorities to implement central government *fangkong* policies faithfully and refrain from escalating requirements.

At this point, multiple Omicron outbreaks occurred around the country. Hong Kong had been battling a fifth wave of COVID-19 since December 2021. On March 9, 2022, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that the territory sought more medical aid from the mainland for testing and treatment. Hong Kong reported a record 264 COVID-related deaths on March 13, as contingents of medical teams began to arrive from the mainland. Meanwhile, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan traveled to northeastern Jilin province on March 13 to push for mass testing and screening in response to a stubborn outbreak.

Confronted with these threats, a March 17 Politburo Standing Committee meeting chaired by Xi was devoted to the pandemic situation. Xi indicated that he was open to a more pragmatic strategy, asking officials to “strive to achieve the maximal prevention and control effect with the lowest possible cost, and minimize the epidemic impact on economic and social development.” The State Council issued revised guidance for organizing nucleic acid testing in cities by “areas,” rather than indiscriminate mass testing of all municipal populations. Yet all this talk of easing *fangkong* burdens rang hollow for Jilin. Two days after this meeting, the entire province was put under “static management,” a euphemism for imposing a lockdown without going through official national authorization.

## THE SHANGHAI MODEL

Until early March 2022, Shanghai had been the model for effective pandemic response and good governance. According to Wu Zunyou, the China CDC chief epidemiologist, Shanghai had experienced 12 outbreaks over two years. Each outbreak was so quickly contained that none surpassed 25 cases.

Frequently contrasted with interior cities such as Wuhan and Xi’an, Shanghai won a reputation

for precision-targeted *fangkong* measures. As many cities resorted to costly mass testing of their entire populations, the megacity with a population of more than 25 million had eschewed that approach. Instead it used big data to rapidly trace the sources of pathogens, zero in on close contacts, define high-risk groups, and delimit the scope of prevention and control.

The Shanghai model was put to the test in early March 2022. Experts in Shanghai and the China CDC concluded by March 11 that Omicron infections were scattered in multiple city districts. The outbreak was initially centered on the Huating Hotel, which housed recent arrivals from Hong Kong.

As more cases were identified, Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang, a key Xi disciple, convened an emergency meeting of the municipal COVID *fangkong* leadership group on March 8 to demand more aggressive responses. The next day, major communities such as the campuses of Shanghai Jiaotong University and Tongji University were closed off on orders from the Shanghai *Fangkong* Office. On March 12, as more children and youth tested positive, the Shanghai Education Commission suspended all offline education activities and moved instruction for all grades online.

These steps went beyond the precision *fangkong* measures Shanghai had been known for. The Omicron variant tends to spread asymptotically in a highly vaccinated population, making it difficult for the *fangkong* system to identify all infections and cut off transmission chains. On March 15, the Shanghai health leadership warned of “multi-point sporadic outbreaks, multiple chains, stealthy transmission, and rapid spread.” With 955 positive cases already identified, Shanghai faced “the toughest test” since the Wuhan outbreak.

Officials conducted rounds of “grid-style screening” in “key areas” March 16–17. For every such area, two rounds of PCR testing were conducted, while the target population was ordered to remain “stationary” to reduce the chances of further transmission. Those who tested positive, including asymptomatic cases, were quarantined in centralized facilities.

Unknown to the public at the time, nursing homes and elderly care facilities in Shanghai were hit hard in March. The vaccination rate for seniors in Shanghai was below average for China. But few deaths in these facilities were classified and reported as COVID-related.

The sense of risk was made more acute by Hong Kong’s failure to stem the tide of new cases. The

number of cases in Hong Kong surged to an average of more than 60,000 per day in early March and surpassed 1 million in total by mid-March, out of a population of 7.5 million. Once a model of containment success in 2020–21, Hong Kong now reported the world's highest COVID-19 death rate, largely because its elderly population was poorly vaccinated.

Still, the Shanghai municipal leadership excluded the lockdown option. Shenzhen, next to Hong Kong, took the opposite approach. On March 13, the Shenzhen leadership, on the advice of its health experts, imposed citywide controls it called “slow life.” It conducted repeated PCR testing of the entire population March 14–20, though it allowed essential services to continue. These measures quickly brought the number of new cases down to single digits and allowed Shenzhen to regain a semblance of normalcy by March 21.

Meanwhile, Shanghai's efforts began to unravel. As the number of newly identified cases jumped to four figures per day, there was much speculation that the city would have no choice but to lock down. Pressure on Shanghai was growing as cases spilled over into dozens of other cities, especially in neighboring Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Local authorities in the vicinity of Shanghai and beyond adopted stringent quarantine measures for individuals coming from the city, including truck drivers, impinging on Shanghai's commercial interactions with the rest of China.

## THE SIEGE OF SHANGHAI

In this context, Xi intervened again, ordering the Shanghai leadership to escalate epidemic control measures. National experts were dispatched to assess the situation. To preserve the veneer of provincial-level responsibility for health issues, the national intervention was at this point mostly behind the scenes.

On the evening of March 27, the Shanghai leadership announced that beginning the next day, the city would enter a two-stage lockdown, officially called “strict closed-off management.” First the areas east of the Huangpu River (Pudong and adjacent districts) and then the rest of the city would undergo four-day lockdowns, coupled with mandatory testing. It was later revealed that the Shanghai leadership made this decision “under the guidance of the National Expert Group.”

From the end of March through the beginning of April, when Shanghai was induced into suspended animation, none of the top municipal

leaders appeared at the daily press briefings to explain the situation or speak to the public directly. Officials such as Commerce Director Gu Jun had to respond to questions about problems with supplies of groceries and other necessities, as well as access to medical services. Gu stated that medical organizations were required to continue operations, and that the municipal and district governments were working to ensure adequate supplies of groceries both online and offline. In the control zones, emphasis would be put on facilitating online group purchases, with contactless deliveries to residential areas.

On the evening of March 30, the Shanghai leadership convened an all-city cadre meeting, with video links to the leaders of every Street and Town administrative unit (the lowest rungs of the urban party-government structure). Li, the party secretary, announced the adoption of “comprehensive *fangkong* measures, including static management, PCR screening, epidemiological investigation, and cleaning and disinfection in all areas and for all people.” For all practical purposes, he had declared a de facto full lockdown. Yet Li did not bother to invoke relevant laws or legal authority, nor did he use the Chinese phrase for lockdown. The exact wording he used was “territory-wide static management,” or simply “static management.”

Residential areas were graded into three zone types—lockdown, control, and precaution—depending on their numbers of positive cases. Residents in the lockdown zones were strictly forbidden to set foot outside their homes. Leaders of residential committees, at the urging of submunicipal officials, often adopted stricter controls in the non-lockdown areas than mandated by municipal policies. Many nonresidents without fixed abodes in Shanghai, including migrant workers, were left exposed to the elements.

From April to May, most residents were compelled to stay inside, in what could be called the great lock-in of Shanghai. Some had been locked in since March 9. Their experience of home confinement went on longer than the Wuhan lockdown, which officially lasted 76 days.

Yet the Shanghai authorities studiously avoided saying that the city was under lockdown or sealed off, maintaining that travel was still permitted. In practice, it required enormous persistence and ingenuity for anyone to obtain the needed negative test results, plus a release from the local community and arrangements for transportation.



## A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

Whereas Xi had played up his personal role in leading the war on COVID-19 in Wuhan and beyond, he stayed behind the scenes in the Shanghai crisis, giving internal instructions and using the Politburo for decision making. Neither he nor Premier Li Keqiang set foot in Shanghai in April or May 2022. But once Shanghai entered de facto lockdown, it became evident that the city was the focus of a national campaign. Key pieces of the toolkit for bringing Wuhan under control were reused in Shanghai, albeit with important modifications.

Sun, the vice premier, had been the leader of the Central Guiding Group in Wuhan/Hubei and had overseen epidemic responses elsewhere over the past two years. On the morning of April 2, she rushed from Jilin to Shanghai. For the remainder of the Shanghai campaign, Sun represented the central authorities as the zero-COVID superintendent. Though China's largest city and economic powerhouse had sought a gentler path in dealing with the pandemic, it was now being forced to follow the dictates of the national zero-COVID policy.

From March through mid-May, more than 37,000 personnel belonging to 22 medical teams—from other provinces and the People's Liberation Army—joined the campaign in Shanghai. Most were there to help with sample collection and PCR testing. The total number of personnel deployed from the rest of China to the campaign in Shanghai was much larger but only partially known. Among them were armed police units from Shandong. Such units are under the command of the Central Military Commission, chaired by Xi.

The pursuit of zero-COVID rested on the strengths of China's stability maintenance regime and, in turn, reinforced it. Members of the armed police units and the regular police on pandemic duty were clad in white hazmat suits. By the end of the Shanghai campaign, the suits had become a symbol of "white terror" to many residents. Police wearing the suits broke into private homes to forcibly take residents who tested positive to quarantine centers; white-suited cleaning staff forced their way into homes to carry out indiscriminate disinfecting operations.

In early May, the Politburo Standing Committee publicly criticized Shanghai for "inadequacies" in its work. Since Li, the party secretary, was a top candidate for promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee at the 20th Party Congress, he faced heavy pressure to perform. The pursuit of zero-COVID is fundamentally an application of party-

state power. And in the Chinese party-state hierarchy, externally appointed officials such as Li are more prone than locals to using coercive tactics to maintain stability.

Cadres and staff at the street and town levels were tasked with overseeing, managing, and assisting residents. They in turn leaned on the residents' committees to manage the frontline details. Technically self-governing entities, these committees are under party leadership, and functioned primarily as extensions of the party-state during the Shanghai lockdown. They are thinly staffed, especially for the massive amount of work they are assigned during a health emergency, and they lean heavily on property management staff. They also work with homeowner associations and volunteers. How residents coped with the demands of epidemic *fangkong* depended greatly on the resources and capabilities of their gated communities.

## SEVERE SHORTAGES

The Shanghai *Fangkong* Office had stated that essential services would continue to operate and that food and necessities would be well supplied and reasonably priced. Given its reputation for good governance, the lessons of lockdowns in Wuhan and elsewhere, and repeated assurances that Shanghai would not be put under lockdown, what else would one expect from this city known for variety, sophistication, and meticulous attention to detail?

Yet for much of the lockdown period, the word that best described the situation in Shanghai was "shortage." The abrupt shift to indefinite lockdown in the name of "static management" left the population unprepared. People in the eastern half of Shanghai went into lockdown on March 28 expecting controls to be lifted, or at least eased, on April 1. They had not stored up enough food and necessities for a citywide lockdown. Those in the other half of the city went into "static management" in somewhat better condition, but soon were also running low on provisions.

Government-imposed measures made it difficult to get supplies to residents. The arbitrary and brutal disruption of transportation and delivery services, plus the closure of most stores, virtually guaranteed chaos as well as profit opportunities for the well connected. Trucks were stranded on highways and had great difficulty entering the city. Even the largest delivery platforms, such as Alibaba and JD, operated under severe restraints as demand rose astronomically.

Residents in home confinement had to scramble to order food and supplies online, paying high prices if they were lucky enough to find goods available. Older adults living on their own, and less likely to use smartphones or to be adept at making online purchases, were especially vulnerable. Yet it was those with nonresident status in Shanghai who experienced the most deprivation, though they received little attention. Many were cut off from their jobs and incomes, but unable to leave Shanghai. Some of them, according to an interviewee, changed beyond recognition due to malnutrition during the lockdown.

Frontline physicians noted that there were many cases of severe electrolyte disorders, a situation that had been seen only in poor rural areas in the past. The official media largely avoided reporting cases of deaths from hunger and starvation. But a glimpse of the widespread hunger in Shanghai can be found in the daily update from Health China for April 24: it stated that the deaths of 51 patients with COVID-19 that day were all caused by underlying diseases. One of the diseases listed was “severe malnutrition.”

Neighbors came together to help each other, often through barter. Yet there were also many reports that local neighborhood staff forced residents to purchase more expensive food and supplies through group orders organized by the staff. Supplies from the government were sometimes substandard or spoiled, revealing not only bad management and waste, but also malfeasance. In response to a public uproar over suspected corruption and profiteering, some subdistrict officials were punished.

## CARE DENIED

One justification often invoked for lockdowns is that they prevent the health-care system from being overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients and keep it available for others. But even though most residents were vaccinated, Shanghai drastically limited access to emergency medical services and care for those with serious chronic conditions, repeating the mistakes made earlier in Wuhan and Xi'an.

Patients and their families first had to seek approval from the residents' committees to leave their homes. Then they had to find transportation, when use of private vehicles, taxis, and shared ride services was suspended and ambulances were in limited supply. Hospitals subjected patients to stringent testing requirements before commencing any diagnosis and treatment.

These and other obstacles contributed to tragic deaths, most of which received scant attention in the official media. A volunteer effort to document and commemorate lockdown deaths identified more than 200 due at least in part to denial of access to medical care. The official number of COVID-related deaths in Shanghai stood at 595 as of June 11, 2022.

Physicians who treated patients with severe illnesses noted that the conditions of many older adults were aggravated during the earlier phases of the lockdown, when most hospitals stopped treating patients. In the words of one frontline doctor: “The normal medical order was disrupted. This is a man-made disaster!”

## INDISCRIMINATE TACTICS

Well before the entire city was put under lockdown, Shanghai had already converted some exhibition centers into quarantine quarters. Yet the explosive growth in the number of infections far outstripped the supply of quarantine space.

Leading medical and public health experts in Shanghai had favored a gentler approach, pointing out that relatively few of those infected had severe symptoms, unlike in Wuhan. They advocated allowing some to self-isolate at home under certain conditions. Instead, the political leadership insisted on quarantining everyone who tested positive, plus their close contacts and secondary contacts. This supercharged the political-administrative hierarchy and affiliates, particularly the residents' committees, for an indiscriminate campaign. The compulsory quarantine campaign put inordinate pressure on the health system as well as grassroots leaders, staff, and volunteers, causing some to quit.

The interests of individuals, including children and the elderly, were an afterthought for the quarantine campaign overseers. Initially, children who tested positive were taken into quarantine and separated from their parents; the practice was eased only after vociferous public complaints. Elderly and incapacitated people who tested positive were sent to quarantine facilities with little consideration for their conditions.

The quarantine operation expanded daily and spilled into neighboring provinces. Many were taken to quarantine sites before construction was completed and had to wait outside for hours until they opened. The spartan conditions at some of the makeshift quarters, coupled with inaccuracies in testing and in the Shanghai data system, created widespread fear of being quarantined and either having one's condition aggravated or catching COVID-19.

By early May, the numbers of both confirmed and probable cases in Shanghai had declined precipitously. The city had also learned to cope with major inconveniences and eased some of the strains that plagued it in early April. But sentiment in many residential buildings had turned less cooperative after more than a month of stringent lockdowns, scarcities, and broken official promises.

On May 6, 2022, the day after a high-profile Politburo Standing Committee meeting, the Shanghai leadership convened a “mobilization meeting for Resolutely Winning the Battle to Protect Great Shanghai.” District and lower-level leaders pledged to fulfill targets for further reducing the number of confirmed cases. District leaders in turn held their own mobilization meetings. Neighborhood committee leaders signed “military orders” for controlling positive cases and allocated targets to residential subdivisions.

As authorities ordered residents into a “silent period,” warning them not to venture outside, they condoned the use of highly intrusive and alienating tactics in this final offensive. Fences and barbed wire went up around buildings. When a positive case was identified in an apartment building, all of its residents were deemed close contacts or secondary close contacts and subject to removal for quarantine, followed by intensive disinfection of their homes.

These efforts reinforced the perceptions of many Shanghai residents who saw similarities between the zero-COVID campaign and excesses in the Mao era, such as the campaign to kill sparrows at the start of the Great Leap Forward and the violence perpetrated by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. They referred to the personnel in white hazmat suits as “White Guards.”

The extreme tactics met with resistance. Residents shared images of people being forcibly taken to quarantine centers and of homes subjected to indiscriminate disinfection. When people tested positive at home using rapid antigen tests, building residents shielded them from PCR testing. Some vowed to die rather than be taken to quarantine and have their possessions damaged by disinfection. Faced with such widespread public objections, including challenges by a group of legal scholars, authorities narrowed the scope of the more extreme measures.

## PYRRHIC VICTORY

In mid-May, the Shanghai authorities announced that most of the city was free of new cases. In early

June, residents in most communities were allowed to freely exit and enter, regaining a semblance of normal life. Since then, they have learned that this semblance of normality is conditional and precarious. A community is returned to quarantine if new cases are detected.

Judging by their rhetoric and practices, it appeared likely that policymakers and experts in Shanghai had been inclined to follow a policy of mitigation instead of stringent lockdown. The relatively low number of deaths in spite of at least 600,000 infections provides evidence that a mitigation approach could have worked. There is also little doubt that the de facto lockdown could have been managed more competently to avoid much of the ensuing misery.

By imposing the siege on Shanghai, Xi Jinping and the Chinese leadership again demonstrated that Beijing calls the shots. Yet the Shanghai lockdown and its broader regional impact also dealt a severe blow to the Chinese economy. For residents who had thought Shanghai would do better than other cities in China in dealing with COVID-19, the shortages and other lockdown woes have served as a painful wake-up call. The party secretary, Li Qiang, declared victory in the battle to defend Shanghai, but it was a Pyrrhic victory at best.

In 2020, Xi rode the Wuhan victory to new heights of public support. As the pursuit of zero-COVID drags on and more people go through painful lockdowns, his legacy as China’s supreme leader is bound up with how he manages China’s coexistence with the virus. The high socioeconomic costs associated with draconian *fangkong* measures have begun to weaken the social foundation for the policy. National pride over the successful containment of the pandemic is giving way to uncertainty and anxiety. For a growing number of people, especially younger generations with less secure jobs, fear of quarantine and lost livelihoods has replaced fear of the virus.

With Xi in command, the pursuit of zero-COVID has prompted the Chinese body politic to mount vigorous and even violent defenses against the coronavirus and its human carriers. In doing so, the Chinese state has further fortified its capabilities to dominate society. Regardless of how China navigates its exit from zero-COVID, these enforcement capabilities will linger. They have already been used for other purposes of societal control. They also further differentiate China from societies under the rule of law. ■

“Taiwanese identity emerged as an insurgent gesture under Japanese colonialism, endured forcible silencing under postwar authoritarian rule, and then propelled Taiwan’s democratization on many fronts.”

## Desinicizing Taiwan: The Making of a Democratic National Identity

MING-SHO HO

Since late February 2022, as the world’s eyes have been riveted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in another corner of the Eurasian continent the distant warfare has generated polarized responses across the Taiwan Strait. Before launching the assault, Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to Beijing to meet his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, signing a joint agreement declaring that the Sino-Russian bond had neither “limit” nor “forbidden areas of cooperation.” Once the war in Ukraine broke out, while China’s officials avoided clearly endorsing Putin’s military adventure, its netizens overwhelmingly rooted for a Russian victory. By contrast, in Taiwan, the government joined the democratic West in condemning the Russian act of aggression, and Taiwan’s political parties across the ideological spectrum voiced antiwar views. A spontaneous campaign soliciting donations for Ukraine sprouted among citizens and businesses, collecting NT\$930 million (US\$31.2 million) as of the end of April 2022. As dozens of solidarity rallies took place in Taiwan’s major cities, Taipei 101, the island’s iconic skyscraper, beamed the blue-and-yellow Ukrainian national flag in the evenings.

Clearly, the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have drawn contrasting lessons from the war in Ukraine. Patriotic Chinese have been sympathetic to Putin’s irredentist attempt to restore his nation’s former glory—Xi has been engaged in a parallel project. But Taiwanese easily identified features they share with Ukrainians: above all, being part of an existentially threatened small democracy on

the doorstep of a saber-rattling authoritarian behemoth.

In a way, the divergent perceptions of the Ukrainian war were a throwback to the era of the high Cold War, when Taiwan stood on the international front line of the “Free World,” containing the spread of communism. During that period, both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan claimed to be the legitimate government of the whole of China, and both tacitly assumed that Taiwanese were Chinese. As the Cold War waned in the late 1980s, Taiwan’s government began to allow visits to mainland China and commercial transactions. Reform-era China had an insatiable appetite for foreign technologies and money, and thus became the prime destination for Taiwan’s outbound investment and migration. Restrictions on China-to-Taiwan activity were lifted later, but the change was equally swift. In the mid-2010s, the number of mainland Chinese visitors to Taiwan reached its peak, comprising more than 40 percent of all international tourists coming to the island.

Riding on the high tide of globalization, there was an expectation that political boundaries would blur and mindsets would converge. It was thought that growing economic interdependence and more frequent people-to-people contacts via tourism, study, marriage, and religious and cultural exchanges would bring Taiwanese and Chinese closer—and perhaps facilitate the PRC’s avowed goal of bringing Taiwan back to the “fatherland.” Yet as the prism of the war in Ukraine has vividly revealed, Taiwanese and Chinese see the world differently, and the gap continues to widen.

PRC officials have persistently embraced an ethnonationalistic understanding of Taiwanese as

---

MING-SHO HO is a professor of sociology at National Taiwan University and director of the Research Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Ministry of Science and Technology (Taiwan).

a part of the “Chinese race” (*zhonghua minzu*) because of their biological, cultural, linguistic, and other linkages. But the emergence of a Taiwanese national identity that saw the self-governing island as an entity distinct from China was the driving force for Taiwan’s transition to democracy. Contrary to the PRC’s claim that the Taiwan independence movement’s pursuit of *de jure* statehood originated from a coterie of “political agitators” or from “international anti-China forces,” this article surveys the origins and development of this indigenous identity from a longer historical perspective.

### COLONIAL ORIGINS OF A NEW IDENTITY

In a posthumous article published in 2018, the China historian Arif Dirlik characterized Taiwan as “the land colonialism made.” From the seventeenth-century Dutch (1624–62) and Spaniards (1626–42) to the Japanese (1895–1945), and arguably to the ROC’s era of martial law (1949–87), Taiwan was ruled by foreign regimes whose functioning depended on collaboration with island residents without incorporating them institutionally. In all these periods, there was a strict division between the rulers and the ruled. Taiwan was reduced to an instrumental role serving the geopolitical goals of each regime as a trading outpost, an area of territorial expansion, or a bastion for military counterattack against mainland China.

Protracted colonial rule became a central topic in the pro-independence narratives that began to gain currency in the late 1980s. A frequent trope was that Taiwanese had not been allowed to “be their own master for the past four hundred years.” Lee Teng-hui, the first native-born president, famously expressed such sentiments of “the sorrows of being born as Taiwanese” in 1993.

Nationalistic narratives are prone to assuming the prior existence of a homogeneous *demos* and to seeing the ensuing history as the unfolding of this people’s potentialities on the way to a destined goal. Often, this *telos* justifies the imaginary need for a common origin. In this case, the problem with the story of “four hundred years of servitude” is the fact that there were no “Taiwanese” or “Chinese” four hundred years ago, in the modern sense of personal identity.

Taiwan was originally inhabited by Austronesian peoples (now known as the indigenous peoples, comprising around 2.4 percent of the population). Settlers from the Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong came in the sixteenth century, and waves of immigrants driven by demographic pressures on the mainland displaced and assimilated Taiwan’s indigenous peoples. Throughout the Qing reign on the island (1683–1895), Chinese settlers and their offspring did not develop a “Taiwanese” identity, since they tended to identify themselves with reference to their ancestral places in the mainland (Zhangzhou or Quanzhou) or language (Hakka). The absence of an island-wide appellation coexisted with the lack of a Chinese national identity. The latter emerged as an invention of Chinese intellectuals in the wake of a string of military setbacks for the Qing Dynasty at the hands of imperialistic powers, in particular the defeat in the 1894–95 Sino-Japanese war that resulted in the handover of Taiwan to Japan.

Taiwanese mounted a campaign of armed resistance against the Japanese that lasted until 1915. However, it would be an anachronism to characterize these pushbacks as “nationalistic,” since they were not motivated by a Chinese national identity. That Taiwan in the

early twentieth century was little affected by rising Chinese nationalism is further evidenced by the fact that the 1911 Revolution in China, which succeeded in overthrowing the Manchurian monarchy, drew only weak responses in Taiwan. Instead, the so-called Wilsonian moment of 1918, when the United States unleashed the principle of national self-determination as a global norm after World War I, generated a visible impact in Taiwan: intellectuals began to closely observe the contemporary strivings of Irish, Indian, and Korean independence movements.

The founding of the Taiwan Cultural Association (TCA) in 1921 marked a new beginning for the island’s anticolonial movement, attracting a more cosmopolitan and educated younger generation. It was also the coming of age of a Taiwanese identity. TCA leaders contended that Taiwan was more than a territorial possession of Japan—it belonged to Taiwanese and the world. Learning from contemporary anticolonial movements, the TCA strived for home rule by demanding the establishment of

---

*Taiwanese and Chinese see  
the world differently, and the  
gap continues to widen.*

---

a Taiwan Parliament. As TCA activists published newspapers and gave speeches to raise awareness, the 1920s witnessed the flourishing of Taiwanese nationalism.

The period also saw the emergence of more radical peasant and worker protests, which helped lead to the establishment of the Taiwan Communist Party (TCP) in 1928. Following the guidance of the Moscow-based Third International, the TCP was the only political force that advocated for national independence. Yet the TCP operated clandestinely in its brief three years of existence, and thus its radical demand went little noticed beyond its small inner circle.

The rise of an overarching Taiwanese identity was a direct result of colonial discrimination that treated Taiwanese “Islanders” (*hontojin*) as inferior to Japanese “Inlanders” (*naichijin*). The political movements of the 1920s sought equality and dignity. But they were also made possible by colonial modernization, including infrastructure development and mass schooling, which rendered previous subethnic or native place distinctions less salient. “Taiwanese,” as a political category, came about as an unintended consequence of the Japanese colonialism that homogenized the island inhabitants into a community of shared fate.

In this way, Taiwanese historical experience departed from that of regional neighbors. Whereas Koreans, Vietnamese, and Okinawans in their anticolonial struggles could refer to their previous political independence (under the Choson Dynasty, Dai Nam Kingdom, and Ryukyu Kingdom, respectively), Taiwanese did not possess such mnemonic resources. The Qing Dynasty no longer existed and republican China paid scant attention to Taiwan.

In contrast, Hong Kong’s small size, proximity to the mainland, and status as a “borrowed space” (a popular saying in colonial Hong Kong) meant that its future was inseparable from China’s. Chinese nationalism inspired the city’s anticolonial struggles throughout the twentieth century. The 1925–26 Canton–Hong Kong Strike and the 1967 Riot represented the greatest challenges to colonial rule; both anti-British episodes originated from the spillover of revolutionary struggles on the mainland. In Taiwan, without a glorious past to revive or a fatherland to rely on, mainstream Taiwanese activists under Japanese rule chose a moderate course on home rule rather than raising revolutionary demands such as independence or retrocession to China.

## LONG MARCH TO DEMOCRACY

The first sprouting of Taiwanese identity failed to achieve concrete results due to government repression. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Japan’s militarist transformation and wartime mobilization led to a coercive assimilation policy (*kominka*). After Japan’s defeat in World War II, the victorious Allied powers decided to return the island of Taiwan to Chinese rule without consulting the local people. For the Taiwanese, this reencounter with their “fatherland” proved to be tragic and traumatic. The ROC officials who took over the island were condescending, incompetent, and corrupt. Taiwanese hope for political liberation soon evaporated.

The February 28 Incident of 1947 was an island-wide uprising against neocolonial predation, articulating demands for democracy and autonomy. Bolstered by military reinforcements dispatched from China, the ROC regime brutally cracked down on the revolt and singled out Taiwanese leaders for systematic elimination; some scholars estimate that up to 20,000 were killed. In the wake of the 1947 massacre and the ensuing White Terror, alleged sympathizers of the Chinese Communist Party were ferreted out, and Taiwanese became leaderless, apolitical, and marginalized.

Meanwhile, the ROC suffered a string of military defeats in the civil war against its communist rivals and finally retreated to Taiwan in 1949. The Nationalists brought about one million mainland migrants (most of whom were forcibly drafted soldiers) to the island, which had roughly five million natives at the time, thus planting the seeds of postwar ethnic tensions. The Nationalist regime was able to consolidate its tenuous hold following the 1950 outbreak of the Korean War, when the government embarked on an ambitious reengineering of Taiwan into an anticommunist bastion. Taiwanese were forcibly resinicized: Chinese Mandarin was declared the national language, while other languages, including Japanese, Southern Fujianese, and Hakka, were restricted in public use. Taiwanese anticolonial movements in the colonial era were erased from public memory, and the education system promoted a China-centered curriculum saturated with the official narrative of Chinese nationalism.

The ruthless suppression of the Taiwanese longing for autonomy immediately engendered the pro-independence movement, pioneered by the Hong Kong–based Formosan League for

Reemancipation in 1948. (Formosa was the name for the island circulating among Western sailors since the sixteenth century, and because it had emerged earlier than the Chinese name “Taiwan,” it became a preferred choice among independence-minded islanders.) The overseas campaigners were first based in Japan; then, following a rise in the number of US-bound students, the center of gravity shifted to North America, leading to the establishment of the World United Formosans for Independence in 1970. Yet the diasporic mobilization failed to penetrate into the hermetically sealed island due to the regime’s repressive control.

In 1964, Dr. Peng Ming-min, a professor of political science at National Taiwan University, penned a Declaration of Formosan Self-Salvation with his student associates. The statement contended that the regime’s avowed goal of retaking the mainland by force was no longer feasible, and that native Taiwanese and mainlanders should work together to overthrow Chiang Kai-shek’s dictatorship over Taiwan and establish a democracy. The police raided a print shop to forestall the document’s circulation and arrested Peng and his comrades. The incident showed that Taiwanese identity remained a subversive force against the authoritarian rulers.

Facing the diplomatic crisis of losing its United Nations seat to the PRC, the Chinese Nationalist regime slightly eased its control in the 1970s. Chiang’s son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, recruited young Taiwanese into the ROC government, which was dominated by mainlanders, and allowed the partial election of representatives at the national level. The relaxation enabled the rise of an opposition movement that challenged the government via electoral channels. While political independence remained taboo and the government labeled discussion of Taiwanese identity as “splittist,” the younger generation in the 1970s launched a movement of what sociologist A-chin Hsiau has identified as “cultural nativism.” Intellectuals associated with the movement unearthed the history of resistance movements and literature under Japanese colonialism.

In the 1983 national election, opposition candidates raised a joint demand for self-determination. They contended that the island’s political future should be decided by “eighteen million Taiwanese residents,” rather than in a closed-door negotiation between Chinese Nationalists and Communists. From the mid-1980s onward, Taiwan

underwent a rather smooth political transition to democracy, culminating in the first peaceful turnover of power, to the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), in 2000.

Taiwan’s march toward democracy was bound up with desinicization in several senses. First, legally speaking, Taiwan was still involved in the Chinese civil war: martial law remained in effect until 1987, and counterinsurgency mobilization measures lasted until 1991. These outdated wartime regulations served as an excuse to freeze constitutional rights and freedoms so as to perpetuate authoritarian rule. The unfinished Chinese civil war still prevented Taiwanese from freely speaking their minds.

Second, Taiwan needed to extricate itself from its legal and military preoccupation with mainland China in order to practice island-wide electoral democracy. Chinese Nationalists had restricted national-level elections by claiming Taiwan was a province of China.

Third, desinicization was related to Taiwan’s ethnic politics. The privileged mainlanders (13 percent of the population, according to the 1990 census) monopolized political power, while native Taiwanese were excluded. As Lee Teng-hui put it, the goal of Taiwan’s democratization was “Taiwanization (*bentuhua*) of Taiwan.”

Viewed from another perspective, the gradual process of democratization also meant the incorporation of the insurgent Taiwanese identity into ROC institutions. The opposition to the Chinese Nationalists had first raised the revolutionary demand for political independence; after electoral channels widened, it morphed into a pro-democracy movement. Once it was working inside the institutions, the opposition had to give up some of its pro-independence aims, such as changing the country’s name and flag. This partly explains why two DPP governments (2000–2008, 2016–present) have made limited progress on the agenda of political independence.

## YOUTH VS. CHINESE MEDDLING

Taiwan’s democratization was driven by Taiwanese identity, and the island was also lucky enough to have accomplished its political transition before the rise of China. But its politics took an unexpected turn in 2008, when the DPP was voted out of office amid popular discontent, particularly over financial scandals involving President Chen Shui-bian’s family. Ma Ying-jeou led the Chinese Nationalists to an electoral

comeback, winning the presidency on a platform of deepening economic and cultural exchanges with mainland China. In retrospect, the 2008 transition marked the nadir of Taiwanese identity, which was associated with the disgraced Chen. At the same time, as the fast-growing Chinese economy drew the world's attention, Taiwanese also favored more open measures to seize the opportunity.

With the DPP in disarray after its electoral defeat, Taiwan's civil-society actors unexpectedly surged to challenge China's increasing encroachment. In November 2008, as the newly installed Ma government rolled out the red carpet to receive a PRC envoy, pro-independence protesters were roughed up by the police. Student activists seized the moment and launched the Wild Strawberry Movement to protest the excessive policing and human rights violations. The name was a response to elders' complaints that young people were "as fragile as strawberries," similar in connotation to calling someone a "snowflake" in English.

Student rallies were held not only in Taipei, but in Taiwan's central and southern cities as well. Although these actions failed to sway the government, they marked an awakening from the prolonged quietude since the Wild Lily Movement of 1990, a seven-day student sit-in protest that succeeded in obtaining the government's promise to expedite democratic reforms. In the aftermath, student activists rebuilt their campus-based organizations and developed a nationwide network. Empowered by new digital media, student actions often outpaced and outsmarted the government, gaining public attention.

Student activists also engaged in a controversy over a media monopoly in 2012. The dispute originated with a vocally pro-PRC media tycoon's bid to enlarge his control over the domestic cable television system via a merger. Previously, opposition to the deal had been limited to academics; the involvement of students brought an instant national spotlight. The protesters contended that the transaction was more than a business deal—the pernicious influence of the “China factor” was undermining Taiwan's democracy from within. The regulatory authorities decided to set stringent conditions for the merger, which ultimately did not materialize.

---

*Taiwan's march toward  
democracy was bound up with  
desinicization.*

---

As Taiwan's student activists were battling the media monopoly, Hong Kong's students, led by Joshua Wong, were campaigning against the implementation of a national curriculum. It soon dawned on both groups that younger Taiwanese and Hongkongers were confronting the same Chinese influence campaign in mass media and education. This belated realization opened the way for mutual exchanges and cross-fertilization among youth activists and civil society organizations, whose collaboration continues to the present day. This has been evidenced by the surge of Taiwan's spontaneous rallies in solidarity with Hong Kong's 2019 protests against a law allowing extradition to China, and humanitarian aid provided to Hong Kong refugees fleeing the effects of national security legislation enacted in 2020.

The Sunflower Movement of 2014 was the climax of this wave of student activism. It involved a 24-day occupation of Taiwan's national legislature in opposition to a free trade agreement with China. Unexpectedly for such a radical protest, it enjoyed popular support. Though the Chinese Nationalists justified the proposed trade deal as an economic win-win for Taiwan and China, the opponents cited the procedural injustice of secret negotiations and lack of public consultation. They warned that the deal would adversely impact Taiwan's small- and medium-sized firms in service sectors, worsen income inequality, and bring other problems. As the movement's momentum dwindled in the final week, student protesters were able to secure a split within the ruling party: a group of lawmakers gave in to the demand to legislate the procedure of cross-strait negotiation before reviewing the trade agreement. The students claimed victory while executing a peaceful retreat.

The driving force behind this unusual protest was the popular fear that further economic integration with China would lead to a change in Taiwan's democratic way of life, if not a step toward annexation by the PRC. In my analysis of 1,678 postcards and letters that were mailed to the occupied legislature, 59 percent of the messages referred to democratic values and 55 percent mentioned Taiwanese identity (Taiwan as the motherland, pride in being Taiwanese, and so on), whereas references to other values (nonviolence, generational justice, and opposition to free trade) were insignificant.



The Sunflower Movement amounted to a powerful expression of Taiwanese identity as a form of democratic nationalism. In its wake, the ruling party suffered back-to-back electoral defeats, paving the way for the second DPP government to take office under Tsai Ing-wen in 2016.

## SHARPENING CONTRASTS

The PRC, loath to see the comeback of the DPP, began to exert coercive pressures. The number of mainland tourists started to decline in 2016; the number of mainland students began falling in 2019. Having witnessed the power of youth activists, Beijing unveiled a series of benefits for Taiwanese students and young professionals to attract them to China. At the same time, the PRC intensified its “united front work” to co-opt Taiwan’s various civil-society actors (religious groups, neighborhood organizations, and so on). But international politics were working in favor of a Taiwanese democratic identity.

After Xi Jinping took power in 2012, the PRC adopted a more assertive approach in the international arena, alienating its regional neighbors. Its imposition of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (which required self-reporting of incoming aircraft) sharpened tensions with Japan and South Korea, since it covered islands controlled by those nations. Meanwhile, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and in the Himalayas antagonized Vietnam, the Philippines, and India.

In 2018, the administration of US President Donald Trump imposed a series of punitive tariffs on China’s imports on the grounds of violation of intellectual property rules, and China retaliated with its own measures. The trade war between the world’s two largest economies had far-reaching consequences. Taiwan responded by diverting its investments from China to Southeast Asian countries or reshoring assembly lines, since China-made products carried political risks. The shift away from China chimed with the policy of Tsai’s government to deepen collaboration with Southeast Asia and South Asia in order to reduce economic dependence on China.

In 2019, Hong Kong saw a citywide protest against the measure to legalize the extradition of suspects to mainland China courts. The campaign evolved into a months-long struggle, as the

protesters adopted more disruptive and violent tactics. The police used force to suppress the movement; police brutality resulted in shocking images circulated in the international media. In 2020, Beijing unilaterally imposed national security legislation that effectively terminated the high degree of autonomy that had been promised to Hong Kong upon its handover to the PRC in 1997. Since the “one country, two systems” design was originally intended for Taiwan, but was first put in practice in Hong Kong, Taiwanese were horrified by the worsening situation in Hong Kong. The protest flared during Taiwan’s electoral season as Tsai was seeking her second term; many believed that the movement gave a boost to the DPP, which succeeded in retaining both the presidency and its legislative majority.

Finally, Taiwan’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened its international standing as a sanctuary of democracy and public health. Whereas Chinese mishandling of the initial outbreak in Wuhan and the subsequent cover-up led to the global pandemic, Taiwan immediately imposed border restrictions on mainland visitors

when Wuhan declared a lockdown on January 23, 2020. The early intervention minimized Taiwan’s domestic cases of contagion and death. With its strong capacities in the machinery industry, Taiwan quickly boosted the

production of face masks and other protective gear, and launched the #TaiwanCanHelp campaign to send donations of these materials abroad in April 2020. It would be difficult to find a more glaring contrast between an irresponsible and authoritarian China and a humanitarian and democratic Taiwan.

This helped Taiwan garner international goodwill. When Taiwan suffered from a shortage of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021, in part due to the obstruction of a Shanghai-based firm, countries like the United States, Japan, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland gave some of their vaccine supplies to Taiwan.

On the domestic front, Taiwan’s democratic national identity was consolidated by the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2019; it became the first Asian country to realize marriage equality. Although disputes over the issue had evolved over more than a decade, involving robust mobilizations by conservative Christians, contentiousness declined after the passage of the new marriage law.

---



---

*Can this democratic national  
identity be sustained over  
the long haul?*

---



---

The empowering of lesbian and gay citizens helped project Taiwan's image as an inclusive and tolerant society in the international arena, in sharp contrast to China's official insistence on traditional masculinity and femininity.

### THE FUTURE OF TAIWANESE IDENTITY

Taiwanese identity emerged as an insurgent gesture under Japanese colonialism, endured forcible silencing under postwar authoritarian rule, and then propelled Taiwan's democratization on many fronts. In this transformation, the meaning of being Taiwanese changed from an ethnic label for native-born inhabitants to a more inclusive national identity. As more and more island residents identify themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese (62.3 percent versus 3.2 percent,

according to a 2021 survey by the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University), this identity is strongly associated with preferences for democratic values and social tolerance.

But can this democratic national identity be sustained over the long haul? Taiwan's desinicization has angered China's leaders and its vitriolic netizens, increasing the likelihood of a PRC decision to use military force. This is how the ongoing Ukrainian war becomes relevant for Taiwan's own identity and future. A democratic nation needs to cultivate the will to self-defense: demonstrated resolve to defend its own existence is the strongest deterrent against annexation by force. It remains to be seen whether the Taiwanese identity can rise to this challenge in an era of expansionary dictatorships. ■

“In the two and a half decades since the economic crisis, social inequality has become more visible, and precariousness is now a part of daily life for many in South Korea.”

## The Politics of *Parasite* in South Korea

MYUNGJI YANG

To outsiders, South Korea may evoke two contrasting and even contradictory images. One is of a globalized, wealthy economy symbolized by successful multinational companies such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, splendid cityscapes with futuristic high-rise buildings, and the rise of an affluent and big-spending (upper-) middle class. As noted by many scholars, South Korea has been an exemplary model for developing countries, having achieved both rapid economic growth and a comparatively low level of income inequality. After three decades of government-sponsored development projects, a war-torn nation that was one of the poorest in the world has become the tenth-largest economy, often referred to as the “Miracle on the Han River.” During the period of fast growth, from the 1960s to the 1980s, many people from rural, underprivileged backgrounds improved their living standards via new education and employment opportunities, climbed the economic ladder, and became members of the middle class.

This bright image is often at odds with what is depicted in South Korean cultural products about the lives of economic losers suffering from low incomes and growing household debts. Even before the recent international success of the Academy Award-winning movie *Parasite* and the Netflix television series *Squid Game*, which highlight the country’s growing inequality and precarity, a flood of domestic narratives had focused on economic inequality, particularly among young people. Popular phrases like “Hell Chosun” (alluding to the feudal society under a Korean dynasty that ruled from 1392 until Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910) and “gold spoon versus

dirt spoon” reveal a deep-seated sense of frustration, resentment, and anxiety about limited opportunities, increasing economic divisions, and diminished future prospects.

So how can we understand these two conflicting images of South Korea? Was the so-called economic miracle real? And why did a country celebrated for achieving both rapid growth and relatively low income inequality suddenly become an example of rising economic precarity?

While some statistical data, using the Gini coefficient, indicate growing income disparity after the economic crisis of the late 1990s, this may obscure what people actually experience and feel. Examining patterns of disparity in different areas, and the ways in which social discontent over increasing inequality is manifested and politicized, will advance our understanding of the politics of social inequality—how perceived inequality leads to changing political preferences and collective action.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic has now lasted more than two years and has exacerbated existing social disparities, a conversation about inequality is more urgent than ever. In this essay, I will describe how different forms of inequality have evolved in South Korea over the long term, what narratives and collective sensibilities have formed around these issues, and how they have shaped South Korean politics in recent decades.

### FROM OPTIMISM TO PRECARIOUS LABOR

It is generally accepted that income inequality has been rising in South Korea over the past two decades. The media has frequently reported on the growing income gap, economic polarization, and the increasingly squeezed middle class as major societal concerns that threaten social harmony and stability. Not only does inequality diminish economic efficiency and productivity, it

---

MYUNGJI YANG is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa.

can also be demoralizing for the majority who do not have access to investment capital.

The general South Korean public also perceives that inequality is a critical problem. In a social survey conducted in 2019, an overwhelming majority of citizens (86.5 percent) agreed that the income gap in South Korean society is “too large.” The idea of social inequality evokes powerful responses that have shaped political and policy debates during election campaigns, and both major political parties—the conservative People Power Party (PPP) and the liberal/reformist Democratic Party of Korea (DPK)—try to build their constituencies by addressing the problem. Yet the ways in which they view the causes of and potential solutions to increasing inequality are in stark contrast.

Inequality began growing in South Korea in the late 1990s, but this does not mean that it was an unimportant issue before then. The developmental state’s policy of “growth first, distribution later” in the 1970s and 1980s favored big business over the interests of workers and the rural sector. There were significant economic disparities between rural and urban areas, between white-collar and blue-collar workers, and between rich and poor. But the economy was rapidly expanding, and most people could hope to benefit from increasing wages; optimistic expectations of better living standards in the future predominated.

Then the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s hit the South Korean economy hard, overturning existing norms and practices and completely changing the rules of the game. As a condition of receiving a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, the South Korean government was required to carry out comprehensive economic reforms. Many powerful *chaebol* (family-owned business conglomerates) with enormous debts were restructured through mergers and acquisitions. Underperforming banks and financial institutions had to be shut down. But the most dramatic changes happened in the labor market.

Labor reforms aimed to increase flexibility and reduce inefficiency through massive layoffs and a more flexible employment regime. In the course of this labor market restructuring, hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs overnight. Lifetime employment ceased to be the norm, and irregular employment (*pijŏnggyujik*) began to proliferate as an increasing proportion of the working population was shifted to temporary jobs or short-term contracts.

This new labor regime increased income disparity among workers. A small number of employees with relatively well-paying, permanent, regular jobs in big corporations could still do well. But a much larger number of people were employed in lower-paying irregular jobs, which were often temporary and precarious. The 2008 global financial crisis continued these trends that began in the late 1990s.

As of August 2021, the number of irregular workers was at its highest level ever, at 8.06 million, or 38.4 percent of wage workers. Not only are irregular workers paid much less (in 2018 and 2019, their average monthly income was about 54 percent of regular workers’), but they work more hours per week on average than do their regular counterparts. Irregular workers are rarely eligible for benefits, such as retirement funds, bonuses, overtime pay, and paid holidays, all of which are available for most regular workers. Thus, workers’ status in the labor market—whether they are regular or irregular employees—has effectively become a class marker in South Korean society since the late 1990s.

## DOWNWARD MOBILITY AND ANXIETY

Many white-collar workers and corporate managers—members of the prototypical middle class—lost their jobs and their comfortable lifestyles as well. Displaced workers suffered from both financial hardship and psychological damage. As the American sociologist Katherine Newman pointed out in her 1999 book on the downward mobility of American middle-class families, “Occupational dislocation may occur suddenly, but its consequences can take six or seven years to become fully evident, depending upon the resources the families can tap.”

Economic dislocation and financial insecurity caused South Korean families intense strain and distress, resulting in acute discord and often divorce or suicide. Among member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, South Korea has the highest suicide rate, with 28.7 deaths by suicide per 100,000 deaths, compared with the OECD average of 11.3. The suicide rate in South Korea rose sharply in 1997 and has remained high ever since.

As many citizens experienced financial precarity or witnessed the economic failure of others on a daily basis, anxiety, distress, and fear became the dominant characteristics of postcrisis South Korean society. Except for the very few who own stable assets and property, most salaried middle-

class citizens feel anxious about the future for themselves and their children, fearing that they will slide down the economic ladder. In various surveys, South Koreans have demonstrated more pessimistic views about their futures than counterparts in other East Asian countries.

Even those who earn good salaries feel that they could be laid off and fall into poverty at any time. In fact, high poverty rates among the elderly (around 40 percent, three times higher than the OECD average) substantiate the observation that as people age, they become more vulnerable to economic precarity. With no extensive pension system, except for teachers and civil servants, Korean senior citizens are likely to experience downward mobility unless they have enough savings or assets to independently maintain their quality of life.

### BURDENED YOUTH

In the post-crisis years, while many middle-aged workers were experiencing financial ruin, younger people struggled with limited economic opportunities. The market for well-paying, permanent jobs in the Korean corporate sector was highly competitive. Most young people lacking financial support from their parents had to work several part-time jobs to pay their tuition and bills. Struggling daily to make ends meet, they were disadvantaged in the job competition with their wealthier peers, who could afford to fully commit themselves to preparing job applications and strengthening their resumes.

A small number of young people were able to acquire well-paying, permanent jobs, while the rest had no choice but to become irregular or underemployed workers, consigned to precarious lives. Moreover, economic precarity prevented many young adults from becoming fully independent of their parents. Financial insecurity often made dating and socializing with friends burdensome, and many delayed or even gave up on having romantic relationships, getting married, and having children, in what was known as “abandoning the three major tasks” (*samp’o sedae*).

The economic crisis also resulted in a strong preference among young people for public sector jobs. The jobs they desired most were in education and the civil service, which guaranteed employment up to the age of 65 and offered decent benefits. Rather than seeking new challenges and ventures, most South Korean young people tended to avoid risks and instead pursued stability.

### WINDFALLS FOR A FEW

Although the 1997 economic crisis produced economic losers on a large scale, looking only at this side does not capture the entire picture. There was also a small segment of people who benefited from the crisis, using it as an opportunity to advance themselves.

Because it caused real estate and stock prices to temporarily plummet, the crisis provided an excellent investment opportunity for those who had sufficient funds to deploy. When the markets rebounded, they made tremendous profits. Their financial resources and surplus assets insulated them from precarity. Their wealth allowed them to lead visibly affluent lifestyles, with expensive apartments, frequent vacations abroad, and shopping for luxury products. As more people accumulated family wealth through real estate price appreciation or ownership of extra properties, they could also provide gifts to their children when they got married or bequeath substantial amounts of money and property to them.

Economic polarization in South Korea has progressively intensified since the late 1990s. The income gap between the top and bottom 10 percent has grown larger, and the combined incomes of the top 10 percent now amount to 45 percent of the entire national income.

Whereas previous scholarship on economic inequality tended to focus on income and wage disparities in the labor market, scholars have increasingly focused on nonwage components. In his influential 2013 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, French economist Thomas Piketty argued that economic inequality increases when the rate of return on capital is greater than the rate of economic growth over a long period. He demonstrated that since the 1970s, as the relative share of capital (measured by the national wealth-to-GDP ratio) has risen among Western countries, increasing returns on capital have accompanied growing wealth inequality. Inheritance and property ownership often contribute to wealth inequality as well.

Inspired by Piketty’s work, a group of South Korean economists have estimated the relative share of capital in the country and found that the ratio of capital to income in South Korea is higher than the average for OECD countries. Even worse, this pattern has accelerated within a relatively short time span. The overheated real estate market and the enormous profits it generates may have contributed to the higher proportion of capital in the South

Korean economy. Total earnings from real estate amount to more than 30 percent of annual GDP.

## THE PROPERTY DIVIDE

Massive urban development and inadequate regulation have caused real estate values to rise substantially since the 1961–79 Park Chung-hee regime. Economic development in South Korea went hand in hand with speculative urban development. The authoritarian state allowed *chaebol* to profit greatly from land speculation. Financially savvy individuals also reaped tremendous unearned income through property speculation during periodic real estate booms.

According to the urban historian Jungmok Son, land prices in the exclusive Gangnam area in Seoul increased a thousandfold between 1963 and 1979. Koreans' current unwavering belief that real estate will bring windfall profits can be dated back to that period. Faith in real estate investment as a means of capital accumulation and economic mobility has since become a strong social norm.

Property ownership has shaped individual paths of class mobility and social inequality in South Korea. The real estate market provided a golden opportunity for those who had access to the information and resources necessary to invest.

But those who could not afford to buy a home suffered from constantly having to move while watching their dreams of becoming homeowners slip away over time as housing prices skyrocketed. The top 10 percent of households in South Korea own 67.7 percent of the land, making the property divide an even worse problem than income inequality.

Today, continually rising property prices and a lack of affordable housing complicate the lives of young Koreans and exacerbate wealth inequality. Those who can purchase a home thanks to higher incomes or their parents' financial support benefit from rapidly rising property values, which can amount to several years' wages. The rest, who are not from well-off families and whose incomes and savings cannot keep pace with housing price appreciation, must tighten their belts and pinch every penny in the hope of one day buying their own homes.

In the fictionalized depiction of this divergence in *Parasite*, among all the contrasts between the two rich and poor families who intersect in the movie,

the most striking is the difference between their living spaces. The rich family enjoys a huge, beautifully designed house with a manicured lawn, whereas the poor family's home is a small basement apartment with almost no sunlight and hordes of camel crickets. During the summer rainy season, their apartment regularly floods. The stigma of living in a basement dwelling is represented as an unpleasant, inefaceable odor adhering to the members of the poor family. Even as they pretend to be highly educated and economically stable, they cannot completely hide their smell.

## MOBILIZING DISCONTENT

In the two and a half decades since the economic crisis, social inequality has become more visible, and precariousness is now a part of daily life for many in South Korea. Public concern over these trends has steadily become a more important factor in the country's politics.

Growing inequality is now a common global phenomenon, but people in different countries respond to it in different ways. Their reactions can

differ according to how political narratives are framed, what political resources are available, and how social discontent is organized and mobilized. Outcomes may be progressive when disgruntled citizens ally themselves

with political groups pushing for more inclusive policies. These outcomes could include more opportunity, expanded social safety nets, and increasing equality. In contrast, there can be regressive consequences if right-wing populists gain traction and deploy extremist and exclusionary rhetoric attacking immigrants and minorities, a phenomenon we are now witnessing on a global scale.

Popular narratives in South Korea demonstrate that Koreans harbor an acute sense of resentment about severe social inequality. The "Hell Chosun" discourse, which went viral in 2015, reveals this sentiment: it characterizes South Korea as a dystopia where intense competition, inequality, and social injustice are rampant. In this "hell," no matter how hard you work, you will never get ahead unless you are "born with a silver spoon in your mouth." Seen this way, success is not the outcome of effort and merit, but rather is the product of fate, which seems to be sealed from the moment of birth.

---

*The developmental state favored  
big business over workers  
and the rural sector.*

---

Yet this widespread sense of resentment is not solely based on diminished economic opportunities. The “Hell Chosun” narrative sees South Korean society as operating in a deeply flawed and unfair way, favoring the rich and powerful few. Many members of the upper class are believed to have made their fortunes through illegitimate means. These elites, referred to as *kapchil* in Korean, are seen as abusing the power they derive from their prominent positions by exploiting the less powerful. Workers are treated inhumanely by their bosses or customers, and tenants are cheated by their landlords.

Recent scandals involving members of *chaebol* families, such as incidents of verbal abuse and even physical assault against their employees, have deepened this prevalent perception that their superior status leads to high-handed and violent conduct. One notorious example was the December 2014 “nut rage” incident, in which the vice president of Korean Air (who was the daughter of the chairman and chief executive) was so dissatisfied with the way a flight attendant served her a package of nuts that she insulted the attendant and ordered the plane to return to the gate, delaying takeoff from New York for nearly an hour. She was subsequently convicted of obstructing air safety by a South Korean court and served five months in prison.

Even though South Korea is a democratic country, the powerless are exposed daily to exploitative work environments with harsh labor practices. Manual workers are often subjected to dangerous working conditions without any proper protection. Rates of work accidents and fatal injuries are much higher in Korea than in its OECD counterparts.

As an expression of rage against elites and their unjust abuses of power, the “Hell Chosun” discourse had the potential to energize people to work for social mobilization and transformation. This collective resentment erupted with the Candlelight Protests of 2016–17. A corruption scandal involving conservative President Park Geun-hye (Park Chung-hee’s older daughter) and one of her longtime friends was the immediate trigger, yet at the center lay deep concerns about unequal opportunity structures. It was a historic moment: millions of citizens took to the streets, and widespread pessimism about South Korean society was replaced by collective effervescence.

As citizens condemned the accumulated wrongdoing of the government, they also imagined a brighter future, sharing hope and confidence that they could build a better society together. The

protests finally led to Park’s impeachment and removal from office, ushering in a more progressive government in a nonviolent regime change. Commentators celebrated the occasion as a victory for civil society and democratic citizenry. The candlelight rallies seemed to have had a happy ending. Park was later convicted on corruption charges and sentenced to prison. The rule of law appeared to have been restored. Moon Jae-in of the DPK won the May 2017 presidential election with a promising reform agenda.

## DISAPPOINTMENT AND BACKLASH

Calling itself the “Candlelight Government,” Moon’s administration took office under the slogan “Equal opportunities and fair processes.” Although it eased tensions with North Korea, responded to the pandemic promptly and effectively so that casualties stayed low, and enacted social welfare measures such as raising the minimum wage and expanding the health care system, the Moon government largely fell short of citizens’ high expectations for social and political reform.

As the wealth gap continued to grow, many felt betrayed and turned against Moon’s reformist DPK. Moon had promised to regulate real estate speculation and stabilize housing prices, but even after more than twenty policy measures were implemented, housing prices continued to soar, and numerous property owners found ways to circumvent the regulations. Meanwhile, several major scandals engulfed high-profile government officials, including accusations of sexual assault, academic fraud, and property speculation.

Though some of the allegations were exaggerated by conservative media, they led many to distrust Moon’s government and conclude that the so-called progressive forces were prone to institutional inertia and not interested in real change. This gave rise to the ironic spectacle of a corrupt, conservative establishment accusing progressives of supporting the status quo and undermining “fairness” and “social justice.”

In the 2022 presidential campaign, Yoon Seok-yeol, the candidate of the conservative PPP, capitalized on voters’ disappointment and frustration with Moon’s government while fueling social division. He defeated the Democratic Party’s nominee to succeed Moon, Lee Jae-myung, by a slight margin in the March election.

One of the PPP’s most prominent strategies was to feed the country’s gender divide by exploiting antifeminist sentiment among young men in their

twenties, stirring a conservative backlash against #MeToo protests and Moon's policies promoting gender equality in the country with the biggest gender wage gap among developed nations. Promising to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Yoon appealed directly to this group of male voters. PPP leader Lee Jun-seok argued that quotas for gender equality violate meritocratic values and principles of fair competition, resulting in reverse discrimination against men. Just as right-wing populists in Western countries have scapegoated immigrants and minorities by accusing them of taking jobs away from native-born people and threatening the existing social order, South Korean conservatives used young men's discontent and anxiety about their limited future prospects to gain their support while othering and excluding young women.

The housing and property markets in Seoul were also factors in the outcome of the presidential race. The 14 electoral districts won by Yoon corresponded to areas where real estate prices had risen rapidly during the Moon administration, and where homeowners were dissatisfied with Moon's policies increasing their tax burden.

In a 2014 study on the political attitudes of homeowners, political scientist Ben Ansell argued that those who benefit from house price appreciation become less supportive of both redistribution and social insurance spending. Since higher house prices become a form of private insurance, demand from homeowners for social insurance diminishes. In South Korea, homeowners whose property values increased strongly supported the conservative presidential candidate who promised to lower their taxes and deregulate the real estate market.

## WINNER TAKES ALL?

The return of a conservative government after a five-year hiatus does not bode well for reducing social inequality and promoting labor rights. Although the Moon government's labor policies failed to improve workers' lives, Yoon has taken a blunt anti-labor stance. Showing a lack of understanding about basic labor protections such as the minimum wage and the 52-hour workweek, he also demonized the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, accusing it of corruption.

As for rising inequality, the conservatives have merely argued that fairness can be realized only when individual merit and talent are most valued. According to this line of thinking, individual

success is purely the outcome of hard work and competence, whereas poverty is the product of lack of effort and bad life choices. This unyielding belief in individual responsibility and meritocracy not only is completely blind to unequal opportunity structures, but also contributes to legitimizing social inequality and hierarchy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing income disparities. This opens up a critical opportunity to discuss the problem and implement effective policies. But the November 2021 OECD report *Does Inequality Matter?* points out that despite common concern over income disparities, support for redistributive government interventions has not risen to the same extent in most OECD countries.

Myungsook Woo and Eun Young Nam's 2021 study of perceptions of inequality in South Korea and Japan finds that, while Koreans are well aware of disparities in their country, this does not lead them to demand more government intervention to promote equality. Koreans tend to believe that it is fair for economic rewards to be distributed based on individual effort, and they also view large income differentials as fair. Thus, instead of expanding the social safety net and redistributive policies, Koreans are likely to choose individual, market-based solutions. This aligns with the conservative approach, which places greater responsibility on individuals.

The challenge of tackling inequality lies in different groups of people holding distinct and sometimes irreconcilable views. In this age of inequality and precarity, I am reminded of Karl Polanyi's observation: The development of capitalism has been shaped by the increasing tension between capital accumulation and social justice and between economic growth and equity.

Unless unbridled capitalism is reined in and the state acts to redress increasing inequality, South Korea's future will be bleak and fraught with massive social dislocations. A winner-take-all society, in which the marginalized must endure unbearable burdens, will inevitably accelerate the collapse of the social fabric.

The current political landscape seems to give a contradictory picture—widespread economic anxiety and discontent on the one hand, political reluctance to push for more equality on the other. Yet such perceptions are not unchanging over time. The challenging task for political leaders is to provide the public with accurate information and to find common ground for effective policymaking. ■



“The interplay of military base politics, economic development, and collective identity has dominated all facets of life in Okinawa for decades.”

# Okinawa’s Unsettled Membership in Japan

GABRIELE VOGT

In May 2022, Jinshiro Motoyama, an Okinawan graduate student, went on a hunger strike. He sat in front of several high-profile addresses in Tokyo, including the prime minister’s office, the defense and foreign ministries, and the headquarters of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP). His demonstration publicly blamed those institutions for failing Okinawa.

Motoyama commenced his protest 50 years after American administration of the islands, which had begun immediately after the US military’s victory in the gruesome 1945 Battle of Okinawa, came to an end in 1972. As early as the mid-1960s, then-Prime Minister Eisaku Satō had famously vowed to strive for Okinawa’s reversion to Japan, which according to Satō would mark the end of the postwar period for the nation. Yet half a century later, 70 percent of US military forces in Japan are still stationed in Okinawa rather than being spread more evenly throughout all prefectures.

In light of this continuous, massive military presence, many Okinawans today ask whether they, too, have moved past the postwar period. With his hunger strike, Motoyama demanded a substantial reduction of the US military’s presence in Okinawa, insisting that the prefectural government have a place at the table in negotiations on which approach should be taken to demilitarize the islands.

Motoyama is hardly the only critic of the unequal burden-sharing between Okinawa and the other prefectures. A 2022 Kyodo News survey of 1,500 residents of Okinawa, ages 18 and older, found that 94 percent approved of the 1972 reversion to Japan. Yet 83 percent said Okinawa’s burden in hosting the US military was too large

compared with other prefectures, and 93 percent said they were discontented with a persistent economic gap between Okinawa and other prefectures. Moreover, 70 percent of respondents said they identify more as being Okinawan than Japanese.

Okinawans are angry about the chronic imbalances in their relations with Japan, which they perceive to be injustices. Over the decades, this resentment has increased Okinawans’ emotional detachment from the Japanese nation-state and strengthened local identity, the stronghold of the prefecture’s political opposition to a seemingly unalterable structure of domestic burden-sharing in Japan.

The interplay of military base politics, economic development, and collective identity has dominated all facets of life in Okinawa for decades. With the extension of Japan’s borders in 1972 to encompass Okinawa, a new Japanese state was formed. The question of whether a new nation has developed within those borders since then is more difficult to answer.

This question draws on Benedict Anderson’s argument in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson argues that one core element of any nation is solidarity among its members. Most progressive politicians and members of Okinawa’s numerous civic groups say an act of solidarity extended by the Japanese people and the national government indeed remains a precondition to foster their sense of belonging to Japan. Equality in base politics and economic development must be achieved before emotional bonds between the members of a new nation can emerge.

## LAND STRUGGLES

Grasping contemporary Okinawa’s position in Japan—the in-betweenness of its membership in the nation—requires understanding the historical

---

GABRIELE VOGT is chair in Japanese studies at the Japan-Zentrum at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich.

path that manifested itself in the persistent imbalances in these relations, as well as a close-up look at the manifold struggles and disappointments in contemporary Okinawa. Most crucial is the feeling that locals' policy demands have been continuously neglected.

Three perspectives help to explain how the high concentration of military bases in Okinawa and its entanglement with the island prefecture's economic development and collective identity evolved. The first perspective focuses on path dependency, stemming from the existing military infrastructure on the islands. The Imperial Army of Japan built airfields on the main island for use in the Pacific War, infrastructure that was taken over by the victorious US military. In the early years of American administration on Okinawa, civilians mainly in the central and northern parts of the main island were interned in camps, their land was taken from them, and a new military infrastructure was built. Monetary compensation for the land that was seized started to flow only after a massive wave of local protests in the 1950s.

In addition to rental payments, the developing base economy brought some modest earnings to Okinawans who ran bars and restaurants in the vicinity of military installations, and to the civilian employees on bases. But only a few profited from the base economy. Demands for conversion of the land occupied by the US military to civilian use became a core theme of the movement advocating for Okinawa's reversion to Japan, beginning in the mid-1960s.

The amount of land that was eventually converted remains a huge disappointment to Okinawans. In 1972, there were 87 US military bases in Okinawa, covering 286,608 square kilometers. Forty years after the reversion to Japanese administration, there were still 33 bases on 231,763 sq km. Only about 20 percent of the landmass used by the US military in Okinawa in 1972 has been converted to civilian use since then.

The land struggle is multifaceted, with political, economic, and cultural aspects. The fiercest clash over Okinawan land in recent history dates to the administration of Governor Masahide Ōta. In 1995, while many people in Japan and around the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Okinawans continued to live close to US military facilities, with all the attendant

noise, pollution, and accidents. A horrific gang rape of an Okinawan schoolgirl by three US servicemen that year sent shock waves through the island. And Joseph Nye, then US assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, published a report recommending continued large-scale forward deployment of US soldiers in Okinawa.

It was in that year, as antimilitarism heated up in Okinawa in the wake of these events, that the governor decided to refuse to sign lease contracts for land used by the US military, which needed to be regularly renewed. Ōta was eventually ordered by the Supreme Court of Japan to sign the contracts in the summer of 1996, but that spring, for a short period, some land was used by the US military without proper leases in effect. Shōichi Chibana, who was already well known for publicly burning the Japanese flag as an act of protest against the imperial system in 1987, seized the moment and entered the grounds of a US military facility in Yomitan, which included land that historically had belonged to Chibana's family. He held

a picnic on the lawn with his family, and they celebrated being reunited with their ancestral kin on this ground.

Not all land struggles are fought so creatively, but economists have long argued that the base economy is detrimental to Okinawa.

Military bases occupy close to 20 percent of the landmass of the main island but generate only 5 percent of Okinawa's gross domestic product. Meanwhile, certain examples show how successfully the economy can grow in areas where land has been converted to civilian use. Shintoshin, in the northern part of Naha, the capital of Okinawa, is an excellent example. The land, which had been used as a residential area for US military personnel and their families, was returned to the city. Community spaces, apartments, and a shopping mall were built. They now contribute substantially to steady economic growth in Naha, and the mall draws customers from across the island.

## STRATEGIC LOCATION

The second explanation for the concentration in Okinawa of the US military (and, increasingly, units of Japan's Self-Defense Forces) is a geostrategic one. Before the reversion of the islands to Japanese control, the Americans called Okinawa

---

*The question of national  
belonging for Okinawans  
remains unresolved.*

---

the “Keystone of the Pacific.” The slogan was even put on the number plates of military vehicles. Okinawa indeed played a central role in US regional strategy, not least for air operations during the Vietnam War.

Starting in July 1965, B-52 bombers flew from Okinawa to attack North Vietnam. Student protests began in the city of Koza, and young people sent messages expressing solidarity with antiwar protesters in the United States and around the world. Public intellectuals pointed to the irony that Okinawa—the land of the former Ryūkyū Kingdom, which had taken pride in its pacifism in international relations—now had practically become an ally in a war, and had to bear the guilt of Vietnamese civilian casualties.

Given the improvements in weapons systems since the Vietnam War, it might not make that much difference anymore whether they are deployed from bases in Okinawa or in other Japanese prefectures. The kinds of weapons deployed in Okinawa before 1972—and as we now know, most likely after 1972 as well—have included nuclear arms. They cannot be stored in other prefectures due to Japan’s nonnuclear principles (no possession, no production, no introduction), as spelled out in the Japanese Constitution. The fact that nuclear weapons continued to be deployed in Okinawa even after the reversion of the islands to Japanese administration clarifies the special status that Okinawa has had when it comes to domestic burden-sharing.

This status was manifested further in 1979 when the magazine *Sekai* published what has become known as the emperor’s message. It had been sent in September 1947 by Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) to US occupation forces, offering them continued free use of military bases in Okinawa for 25 to 50 years, or even longer. The proposal amounted to a trade-off, ceding Okinawan land in exchange for Japan being allowed to regain its sovereign status more quickly. The nuclear question and the emperor’s message resonate with Okinawa’s collective identity to this day, symbolizing some of the core issues of the unresolved question of national belonging for Okinawa and its people.

## EXOTIC DESTINATION

The question of identity is closely linked to the third perspective that explains the concentration of the US military in Okinawa compared with other provinces. Geographically, Okinawa is much closer to Taipei, and even Shanghai, than it is to

Tokyo. Many Japanese think of Okinawa as merely a subtropical vacation spot. They appreciate its natural beauty and its local culture, which offer a somewhat exotic experience in the safety of a Japanese-language environment. They typically pay little attention to its history or to locals’ concerns over their relations with Tokyo.

The popularity of Okinawa-born pop idols like Namie Amuro and others started a boom in the 1990s that raised demand up north for anything Okinawan. Trademark dishes based on Okinawan farm products became available in Okinawa-style restaurants across Japan. Okinawa became a must-see destination, particularly for couples’ vacations. Today, resort weddings make up a good chunk of tourism in Okinawa; in 2021, the number of such events rebounded nearly to pre-pandemic levels.

So-called dark tourism also draws many to Okinawa. Such visits may include stops at battle sites, military goods shops, and of course the various war memorials that are a mandatory destination for many, particularly school groups that embark on peace study tours to Okinawa. The school trips have changed in recent years, as some of my interviewees have remarked. An official in the Okinawa Tourism Bureau reported that school trips nowadays tend to be shortened by one day, presumably to lower costs. Visits to memorials, which were once allocated a full day, are now often compressed into half a day, rather than cutting time spent at the beach or on Naha’s famous Kokusaidōri shopping street.

The peace study tours also typically include encounters with locals who share their own or their family members’ memories of the war. A volunteer peace guide for school groups from other prefectures mentioned that he had recently begun to decline some requests for tours after students failed to demonstrate interest in what he had to tell them. The question is whether these tours can be reformed in order to generate genuine interest in Okinawa among visitors from other prefectures, not just in the easygoing parts of a visit.

Within Japan, Okinawa is compartmentalized as an exotic and fun place. To be sure, Okinawans play this tune rather well, too. Nature and traditions (real and invented) are marketed heavily to capitalize on their popularity with Japanese holidaymakers. For Tokyo, this cliché framing is convenient—it makes it easier to maintain the unequal burden-sharing of hosting US military bases. Okinawans’ outcries over the injustice

barely resonate in Japan. It is hard for most Japanese to feel solidarity with a people they still perceive as somewhat different.

This difference is associated with physiological features, such as shorter average height, more body hair, and rounder eyes, and has been a source of discriminatory othering of Okinawans for a long time. The so-called Human Pavilion at the 1903 Fifth Domestic and Industrial Exhibition in Osaka, which showcased different people from around the world in a crude way, included Okinawans. Decades later, and much more subtly, the othering of Okinawans based on their physiological features continued. Higashi Mineo, a prize-winning Okinawan author, spelled this out clearly in his 1976 autobiographical novella *Churakaagi* (“Good-lookin’”): on his first day at work in Tokyo, the protagonist hears that people are irritated by him simply because of his prominent cheekbones. Prejudices against Okinawans based on their different looks and other ascribed characteristics, such as their alleged non-punctuality—reflected in the term “Okinawa time”—remain prevalent in Japan today. A Tokyo career woman in her thirties once told me that she thinks of Okinawans as Japan’s poor country cousins.

Amid this atmosphere, politicians have no incentive to risk any show of solidarity, such as offering to host US military units in their prefectures to ease the burden on Okinawa. Such an offer would imply environmental hazards and safety risks for their own constituents and would be extremely unpopular.

## BASE POLITICS

The first two perspectives on why a heavy US military presence in Okinawa persists to this day—the available infrastructure and its geostrategic location—may have declined in relative importance over the five decades that have passed since the reversion. The third perspective seems to be the decisive one these days. Okinawa is deliberately marginalized within the nation-state (beyond its already marginal geographic position) to solidify a convenient status quo.

Nothing better illustrates this strategy of the national government than the saga of the relocation of Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Futenma. The strategy resembles a bouncy castle. No matter

how hard Okinawans jump, the government’s base relocation plan briefly deforms itself only to immediately bounce back to its original shape in terms of policies and politics.

On February 24, 2019, a prefectural referendum was held on the question of whether to continue with the construction of a new US military base in Henoko, which was to eventually replace MCAS Futenma. Motoyama and a group of fellow students did the heavy lifting of securing the consent of city councils—a precondition for any referendum to be conducted in Japan—and mobilizing voters to turn out. On referendum day, the turnout reached a modest 52 percent—nothing extraordinary compared with the few other referendums that have been held in Japan, or even with the turnout for local elections.

Of the ballots cast, 72 percent were in opposition to the ongoing construction. In absolute numbers, 434,273 voters opposed the base plan, slightly more than the votes garnered by gubernatorial candidate Denny Tamaki when he ran successfully on an anti-base platform in the September 2018 election. The referendum’s outcome sent another clear anti-base message, the second in six months, to the national government in Tokyo. Nonetheless, then-Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and his cabinet decided to move forward with construction.

On March 16, 2019, some 10,000 people gathered for a protest rally in Shintoshin Park in Naha. I attended the rally and saw and heard anger boiling up in the crowd over the national government’s decision to flatly ignore the referendum. The tense atmosphere was further fueled by the presence of several speaker trucks deployed by Japanese right-wingers. The trucks constantly circled the streets surrounding the park, broadcasting messages of pride in the Japanese nation-state and the US–Japan alliance, at deafening volume.

Amid this eerie scene, one could feel the deeply rooted despair of Okinawans at the state of contemporary Japan. Politicians take for granted the burden that Okinawa continues to bear, and people in other parts of Japan seem to be indifferent to it—or worse, unaware of the striking imbalance in domestic burden-sharing. Several activists at the rally asked if Japanese democracy was even worth anything in Okinawa.

---

*Many Japanese think of Okinawa  
as merely a subtropical  
vacation spot.*

---

To be clear, the prime minister did nothing wrong legally by declining to act in accordance with the outcome of the referendum. Japan's Local Autonomy Law states that referendums are non-binding. Although a referendum reflects the will of the electorate and thus has symbolic strength, it is a weak political instrument. But it is risky for political leaders to ignore a policy preference as clear as the one registered in the 2019 referendum.

As political theory scholar Patti Tamara Lenard argues in her 2012 book *Trust, Democracy, and Multicultural Challenges*, the core value of a functioning and healthy democracy is trust. No democratic system can survive without citizens' trust in the electoral system, in their political representatives, and in protections for minorities. Japanese democracy is famous for the low levels of such trust displayed by its citizens—an attitude that is particularly acute in Okinawa, where many think of themselves as a minority within the state.

Moreover, many stress that Okinawans are a minority that is not sufficiently protected, one whose interests can be blatantly ignored in the Diet, the lower house of the Japanese parliament. The handful of Okinawan lawmakers is unable to overcome the majority that clearly favors the status quo of unequal burden-sharing. Recent history has shown that what we might call the status quo alliance of Japan's 46 other prefectures is strong enough to block even a prime minister's attempt at policy reform.

In the 2009 elections, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) won 308 of 480 seats in the Diet and ousted the LDP government. One of the DPJ's campaign promises was to revisit what by then had become known as the Futenma relocation problem.

Back in 1996, during Governor Ōta's land-lease fight, the governments of Japan and the United States, under the respective leadership of Prime Minister Ryūtarō Hashimoto and President Bill Clinton, had agreed to reduce the US footprint in Okinawa. Their to-do list was extensive, and some items were accomplished, such as the reversion from military to civilian use of the land used for the Sobe Communication Site. Due to its distinctive round shape and enormous size, this installation in the village of Yomitan was known as the "Elephant Cage." This was the site where Chibana and his family staged their famous land-claiming picnic. But the central commitment of stopping operations at MCAS Futenma, located in the densely populated city of Ginowan, and relocating

the US units has yet to be met, 26 years after the agreement to do so was reached.

There have been numerous back-and-forths in the saga of the Futenma relocation project. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama of the DPJ intended to move the Futenma units outside of Okinawa, but that position cost him his job in 2010, less than a year after taking office. In virtually every prefecture where he sought agreements to host US military facilities to alleviate the burden on Okinawa, he encountered resistance. The rebuff displayed the strong not-in-my-backyard character of prefectural-level politics, which proved impossible for a weak prime minister to overcome.

Hatoyama's plan also met with skepticism from the US government, not least because it was accompanied by a call for reforming Japan's position as a junior partner, and in the long run for more equality in the US–Japan military alliance. Although President Barack Obama agreed to relocate some 8,000 US marines to Guam, it was clear that a replacement facility for MCAS Futenma in the immediate vicinity of its current location remained a firm demand of the US military, which had no intention of giving up its leadership position in the bilateral alliance.

After his resignation, Hatoyama was persona non grata in Okinawa for a while, but at some point he started showing up at the Henoko demonstrations against the planned construction of the replacement facility. Rumor had it that he spent more time with protesters in Okinawa than with fellow politicians in Tokyo. In a 2012 snap election, Shinzō Abe of the LDP returned to power as prime minister, pursuing a more hawkish foreign and security policy than his DPJ predecessors.

## CITIZENS' NETWORK

During Abe's term in office, which lasted until 2020, construction work for the replacement facility started, and citizens' protests intensified and sometimes turned violent. Large-scale protests in Henoko had begun in 2004 with a sit-in staged by local residents, many of them elderly villagers. They set up large, open tents where people could drop by and join the protesters at the beachside camp, close to where ships were scheduled to start offshore landfilling work for the sea-based replacement facility.

I visited this tent camp several times and talked to the protesters. As we watched a group of US soldiers working out on the beach in adjacent Camp Schwab, a woman in her nineties told me

she pitied them for having to run in the full sun at noon. She also said she felt sorry for them because they probably came from socioeconomic backgrounds that left them with few other possible career trajectories. I asked her if she did not feel the least bit angry while watching them—after all, she identified as a pacifist. She replied that the source of the injustices borne by Okinawans lies in Tokyo, not with the US soldiers stationed in Okinawa.

Indeed, in line with Article 6 of the bilateral US–Japan security treaty, Japan provides land to be used by the US military, but ultimately the location is the decision of the government in Tokyo. The unequal burden-sharing in Japan thus is mainly a domestic policy issue.

At the March 2019 rally in Naha, following the referendum, Suzuyo Takazato, a veteran women's rights activist and longtime advocate for a base-free Okinawa, lamented that Okinawans' political will has been neglected in Japan for decades. Shōgo Kawasaki, a young activist, called for members of his generation to come forward, be politically active, and advocate for a future in which Okinawa has a stronger position within the Japanese state.

Both Takazato and Kawasaki are leading members of the so-called All-Okinawa network, the central organizer of the rally. The network spans generations of Okinawan activists, various regions beyond Naha, the capital, and positions outside the traditional dichotomy between progressive and conservative political camps. This makes the network, which has been a strong presence in Okinawa for almost a decade now, truly remarkable.

Its first major success was to lift independent candidate Takeshi Onaga to the governorship in 2014. Onaga was a prime candidate to harness the broad support that the network was able to generate in the prefecture. He previously had served as mayor of Naha, when he was an LDP politician. He had won the mayoral election in 2004 against Takazato, already one of the prefecture's most prominent progressive political figures.

Onaga was also close to local business circles, and many progressives were initially hesitant to support his 2014 campaign. But he turned out to be a strong advocate for Okinawa, both in Tokyo and internationally. His campaign message was the same as the core aim of the All-Okinawa network:

---



---

*Okinawans' outcries over unequal  
burden-sharing barely resonate  
in Japan.*

---



---

to bridge the gap between conservatives and progressives by setting aside ideology and instead focusing on Okinawan identity. His speeches would often start with a few sentences in *uchinaguchi*, the local language. His policies included establishing an *uchinaguchi* day and finding other ways of bringing Okinawan culture back to the forefront of people's daily lives.

The All-Okinawa network for a while seemingly managed to bridge the gap between the two largest groups in Okinawa's political landscape. One group adheres to a narrative of victimhood, asserting that Okinawa has been constantly subjected to Japanese aggression throughout history—as in the 1609 Satsuma invasion that turned the Ryūkyūs into a vassal state of the Satsuma domain, or the 1879 Ryūkyū Shobun marking the end of the annexation of the former kingdom into the newly formed Meiji state of Japan. Members of this group are aligned with various political parties that stand in opposition to the LDP. Those who support the LDP, for their part, would interpret some of the same historical events not as acts of aggression, but as administrative steps that aspired to build

a unified nation of “Japan with Okinawa/Ryūkyū” based on common cultural roots.

## IDENTITY RIFTS

In the course of striving to form a joint identity for political purposes, conflicts naturally arise. In Okinawa, voices in the regions beyond Naha claim that their identity was not protected but instead was bulldozed in the process led by Onaga. They particularly take issue with the increasing usage of *uchinaguchi*, which resembles the standard language of Shuri, just north of Naha, where the Ryūkyū Kingdom's administrative center was located. These critics allege that *uchinaguchi* has been promoted in a manner that ignores the broader array of local languages. Old rivalries between Shuri and other parts of Okinawa have surfaced in this contemporary language debate.

A generational rift has also emerged. Many young voters are more conservative and more likely to support LDP candidates at the ballot box than are older generations, citing economic reasons for their stance. Although there are exceptions, including Motoyama and Kawasaki, most people engaging in civic or political activism are of retirement age. Younger people tend to be more

apolitical. The appearance of both regional and generational conflicts suggests that existing rifts are surfacing within the island, which might presage a diminishment of the All-Okinawa network's bridging power.

The fiftieth anniversary of the reversion to Japan makes 2022 a highly symbolic and emotional year in Okinawa, putting the question of belonging at center stage, for private citizens and those active in politics alike. It is also a year with several municipal elections and a gubernatorial election on the calendar. Tamaki will run for reelection as governor in September and is expected to face former Ginowan Mayor Atsushi Sakima in a replay of the 2018 race. This time, several LDP victories in municipal elections provide Sakima with some momentum.

The outcome of the gubernatorial election in particular will reveal how strong the All-Okinawa network is, and if it is still able to bridge the

different camps in Okinawa for the sake of forming a strong, unified prefectural opposition to the national government. Ultimately, this year will be decisive for the question of whether the nation-building process of a "Japan with Okinawa" model will proceed—and if so, in what way.

In May, parallel ceremonies celebrating the anniversary were held in Tokyo and Okinawa, and Emperor Naruhito gave a video address acknowledging the hardships that the Okinawan people have faced throughout history. His statement may have been a tentative show of solidarity extended to Okinawa by a representative of the Japanese nation-state. But the prospect of more tangible results eventually emerging from this new emperor's message is dependent on whether actual policy reforms follow in order to address the unequal burden and many injustices that Okinawa continues to bear for the sake of Japan's national security. ■

“Since the achievement of independence in 2002, national leadership in Timor-Leste has remained firmly in the hands of a small number of individuals from the generation of 1975 . . . .”

## A Season of Youth in Timor-Leste

DOUGLAS KAMMEN

On May 20 of this year, the people of Timor-Leste celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their independence. Remarkably, in 2002, independence was declared not by a national leader but by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, on a makeshift stage in a dusty field at the stroke of midnight, making Timor-Leste the first new country of the twenty-first century. Hopes were understandably high, though at times unrealistically so: young Timorese talked about their country becoming the next Bali, even the next Singapore, and stories circulated that vast subterranean wealth would be revealed.

At the time, the people of Timor-Leste had much of which to be proud. They had achieved independence against all odds and had demonstrated unanimity in the 1999 referendum that brought an end to the 24-year Indonesian occupation. Their struggle, in the apt words of longtime supporter Noam Chomsky, had been “a remarkable testament to what the human spirit can achieve.” The East Timorese people were darlings of the international community and media, and above all the United Nations, which had administered the territory for two and a half years. And the country had proven leaders, the most notable of whom were the wily resistance leader José Alexandre “Xanana” Gusmão and 1996 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureates José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo.

Twenty years later, independent Timor-Leste is bedeviled by the nature of politics in a small place—its total land area is slightly larger than that of the Bahamas, the population just 1.3 million—where rivalries and feuds persist and poverty is widespread. Because of this, the balance sheet of the new nation-state at the end of its adolescence is

decidedly mixed. On the positive side of the ledger, the young country is socially stable, politically democratic, and has formed healthy relations with its much larger neighbors. Today, according to the Freedom House rankings, Timor-Leste is the most democratic country in Southeast Asia. On the other side of the ledger, Timor-Leste is one of the most oil- and gas-dependent countries in the world, and, thanks to the vast expansion of government budgets, the state has become the preeminent economic actor.

Between the poles of political success and economic limitations, linguistic, regional, and political identities have simmered, percolated, and at times exploded. But over time they have settled into a largely bipolar system that hinges less on political parties than on a handful of elder statesmen who have dominated the landscape and personified its shortcomings.

### TURBULENT ORIGINS

Timor-Leste’s pathway to independence was shaped profoundly by four and a half centuries of Portuguese imperial presence. From the arrival of the first Portuguese carracks in 1515 until the mid-eighteenth century, the Portuguese presence was limited to a few tiny settlements on the north coast, annual voyages from Macau to trade for sandalwood, and sporadic efforts to woo or bully the many local micro-polities into recognizing the suzerainty of the Portuguese crown. In 1750, the viceroy of Goa, under whom distant Timor was administered, lamented that there were only a handful of white Portuguese on the island, “whose fruit was not so much that which they gathered in the vineyard of the Lord as that which they begat in the freedom and licentiousness in which they lived.”

Colonialism proper did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century, when a border agreement was

---

DOUGLAS KAMMEN is an associate professor of Southeast Asian studies at the National University of Singapore.



reached with the Netherlands Indies and a rudimentary administrative system was laid out, mapping the entire territory. Even then, the Portuguese presence was precarious, rebellions were frequent, and the territory was run at a financial loss. In 1861, English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace wrote that Dili, the seat of Portuguese administration, was “a most miserable place.”

From these inauspicious beginnings, worse was to come in the twentieth century. The colonial state crushed the last major indigenous revolt in 1911–12 at a cost of tens of thousands of lives. The Japanese occupation (1942–45) was even more brutal, with an estimated 80,000 deaths. When World War II ended, Portugal not only reoccupied the territory but, in an effort to ward off international calls for decolonization, redesignated its far-flung colonies as “overseas provinces” of an indivisible nation. Far from bringing an end to administrative neglect, the result was a territory with little infrastructure, an anemic economy in which most of the population relied on subsistence agriculture, and scant education beyond the fourth grade. Portuguese Timor was a backwater in an increasingly anachronistic empire.

The first signs of nationalist consciousness emerged in the early 1970s among the small coterie of Timorese educated at the Liceu (senior high school) in Dili and the Catholic seminaries. The turning point came in 1974, when a military coup by left-leaning officers brought an end to the long night of the reactionary Estado Novo regime in Lisbon. With the announcement of immediate decolonization of the empire, Timorese seized the moment. Three new political entities were formed (though political parties were still illegal). The Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), led by mestizos in the colonial administration, argued for ten years of tutelage under Portugal before independence. The Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor-Leste (abbreviated as Fretilin), modeled on the revolutionary parties in Portugal’s African colonies, called for an immediate act of decolonization. A third, much smaller group, called Apodeti, favored integration with Indonesia.

Indonesian operatives fanned the differences between the parties and accused Fretilin of being a Marxist party, helping to prompt a brief but bloody conflict between UDT and Fretilin in

August 1975. Fretilin emerged victorious, only to find itself facing an impending Indonesian invasion. In a desperate appeal for help from abroad, Fretilin President Francisco Xavier do Amaral declared independence on November 28, but to no avail. Nine days later the Indonesian military invaded. Fretilin forces waged stiff resistance from base areas in the mountains, but by late 1978 the last of these had fallen, and most of the population was under Indonesian control. Many were herded into “resettlement camps” where they suffered from hunger and disease. Miraculously, however, the resistance not only survived but adapted. Gusmão presciently recognized that military victory was not possible but nor was it necessary; all the resistance needed to do was to outlive the Suharto dictatorship.

That moment arrived in 1998: in the face of a biting economic crisis and widespread demonstrations demanding democratization in Indonesia, President Suharto resigned. The following year, Indonesia, Portugal, and the UN reached an agreement to hold a referendum on the future of

Timor-Leste. Despite the widespread use of terror and violence by the Indonesian military, the result was an overwhelming (78.5 percent) rejection of Indonesia’s offer of broad autonomy, and hence a vote for independence.

The Indonesian military and its civilian militias responded by scorching the territory—leveling an estimated 70 percent of all physical infrastructure and forcibly moving hundreds of thousands of people into Indonesian territory.

## TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

With the final withdrawal of Indonesian troops and a parliamentary vote in Jakarta formally relinquishing Indonesia’s territorial claim, the East Timorese people and the United Nations found themselves in an unprecedented situation: there was no state. As a result, for the first time in its history, the UN directly administered an entire (future) country. Unfortunately, the UN and many observers treated Timor-Leste as a blank slate. Timorese political forces were at times overlooked and at other times engaged only selectively, thereby undermining the fragile cross-faction unity nurtured in the lead-up to the referendum.

The design of the new state emerged piecemeal, rather than from whole cloth. Over a two-year

---

*Independent Timor-Leste is  
bedeviled by the nature of  
politics in a small place.*

---

period, the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor restored security in the territory, introduced the US dollar as the official currency, and held elections both for a Constituent Assembly tasked with writing a constitution (which, given the solid Fretilin majority, was borrowed in large part from Mozambique) and for the presidency—a largely ceremonial position, though with veto powers. Gusmão won the 2002 presidential election in a landslide.

The result, on the eve of Annan's declaration of Timor-Leste's independence, was a rapidly deepening rift between Fretilin, led by Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, and an opposition that drew heavily on the generation that grew up under Indonesian rule, led by Gusmão. Alkatiri (born in 1949), a member of the country's small Arab community, had been a founding member of Fretilin in 1974. Gusmão (b. 1946) was appointed to the party's central committee the following year. But their paths soon diverged. Alkatiri left the territory days before the Indonesian invasion and spent the long years of the occupation in Mozambique under the one-party rule of Samora Machel's Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo).

Gusmão, by contrast, was one of the few Fretilin central committee members to survive the Indonesian onslaught in the late 1970s. At a national reorganization conference held in the mountains in 1981, Gusmão was elected Fretilin political commissar, commander-in-chief of the party's armed forces (Falintil), and head of a new Revolutionary Council of National Resistance; the party name was changed to Marxist-Leninist Fretilin. In an about-face, however, in 1987 Gusmão announced that he had left Fretilin and had removed Falintil from the party structure, making it a nonpartisan force open to all Timorese regardless of political affiliation. Broadening the resistance was strategically brilliant and greatly enhanced Gusmão's stature, but these moves created a lasting schism with Fretilin leaders both within the territory and abroad.

## THE NEW STATE

Since the achievement of independence in 2002, national leadership in Timor-Leste has remained firmly in the hands of a small number of individuals from the generation of 1975, divided by the schism between Fretilin and its opponents, personified above all in Gusmão. As prime minister from 2002 until 2006, Alkatiri presided over an underdeveloped state with few

resources. The state budget was a measly \$55 million in 2002–3, and rose only marginally over the next two years. Nevertheless, Alkatiri boasted that Fretilin would rule “for fifty years.” The most important accomplishments of his government were in the realm of economic policy. A 2005 law created a national Petroleum Fund, into which revenue from the country's offshore fields was to be deposited. The law set strict limits on withdrawals to ensure that the fund would last in perpetuity for the benefit of future generations.

In opposition, Gusmão challenged many Fretilin policies. His allies in the Democratic Party, led by members of the younger generation raised during the occupation, waged verbal attacks on what they perceived to be Fretilin's authoritarian tendencies. They were soon joined by the Catholic Church, which opposed the government's proposed policies on sex education and reproductive rights.

In 2006, violence broke out among sections of the country's new security forces and then spread, pitting people from the three eastern districts (collectively called *Firaku*) against those from the western districts (called *Caladi*). The result was fierce fighting in Dili and the displacement of more than 100,000 people from their homes, many of whom were forced into makeshift camps where they languished for more than a year. A number of foreign journalists and observers rushed to declare Timor-Leste a failed state.

The 2006 crisis was partly a product of grievances within the army that, left unaddressed, had led to walkouts and finally a decision by the high command to dismiss 600 soldiers. It also had origins in competition over housing in Dili, misinformation, and disputes among politicians over control of the revenue that was beginning to accumulate in the Petroleum Fund.

After the return of UN peacekeepers, political leaders on both sides of the conflict agreed that elections were the appropriate way to resolve the crisis. When the balloting was held in 2007, Fretilin came in first with 29 percent of the vote (good for 21 out of 65 parliamentary seats), but found itself unable to secure partners with which to form a coalition government. Interim President Ramos Horta called on Gusmão's new party, CNRT, which had won a mere 18 seats, to cobble together a governing coalition, which it dubbed the Parliamentary Majority Alliance. Gusmão was elected prime minister, but an election that most hoped would heal the wounds of the crisis instead had aggravated

them. And the economic situation was dire, with severe shortages of imported rice and other basic goods. To make matters worse, the following year a renegade military police commander attempted to assassinate Gusmão and Ramos-Horta, though both survived.

Thanks to the Petroleum Fund, Gusmão came to power with far more resources than Alkatiri's government had enjoyed five years earlier. His immediate strategy was to buy peace. The government reached an agreement not only to pay the "petitioners" from the military the equivalent of three years' salary (\$8,000) for unfair dismissal, but also to make payments to veterans from the eastern districts whom the military had secretly mobilized as a counterforce against rebel soldiers. In addition, the government offered compensation to those who lost property during the crisis, eventually totaling a reported \$225 million.

To address food shortages, the government granted contracts worth more than \$20 million to the private sector to import rice, and rewarded veterans with contracts to distribute subsidized rice to the districts, in both cases prompting accusations of nepotism and corruption. But the policies worked: peace had in fact been bought. And in the process, Gusmão had laid the foundation for a new ruling strategy based on financial incentives rather than meaningful consent.

## BOOMING BUDGETS

This new ruling strategy was a direct outgrowth of crisis management, but it also benefited from fortuitous timing. The onset of the global financial crisis in late 2007 spurred a supercycle of high global commodity prices that, excepting a brief drop in 2008, lasted for six years. Sky-high oil and gas prices were a windfall for Timor-Leste's Petroleum Fund, enabling the government to pass larger and larger budgets, in blatant violation of the sustainable income rule.

The original state budget for 2008 was \$348 million, but a midyear rectification brought it to \$483 million. In 2012—an election year—the rectified budget came to an astonishing \$1.8 billion. In response to criticism that the level of spending was unsustainable, Gusmão argued against the "mistaken policy of savings," and even tried to override the need for parliamentary approval.

The government's stated aim was to jump-start the economy—Gusmão promised that Timor-Leste would join the ranks of middle-income countries by 2030. But the allocation of these vastly increased budgets was also informed by political calculations: to shore up popular support, the government introduced a series of direct cash transfers. In 2008, pension schemes were introduced for the aged and disabled and for households headed by women; by 2016, there were 94,000 recipients. A series of revisions was made to the pension plan for veterans of the resistance, with the number of beneficiaries skyrocketing from 2,000 in the program's first year to 33,000 by 2015, and more applications approved thereafter. Along a second track, the government sought to reward clients and buy off potential opposition by granting lucrative contracts for rice importation and rural electrification.

With a new 120-megawatt national power plant up and running, electrification reaching most of the country, and the GDP growth rate at 10 percent, Gusmão's coalition easily won the 2012 elections. Gusmão secured a second term as prime minister, and his ally Taur Matan Ruak, a longtime guerrilla fighter and former commander of the new military, defeated the Fretilin candidate for the presidency.

This electoral mandate, together with the continued inflow of revenue from high oil and gas prices, encouraged ever grander schemes. The government proposed construction of an ambitious Petroleum Corridor along the underdeveloped south coast that would include a supply base, onshore oil and gas processing, a new divided highway, and construction of planned towns. Disagreements with oil and gas operators over onshore processing have dragged on, however, crimping these plans.

A second megaproject involved designating Oecusse, the exclave surrounded by Indonesian West Timor, as a Special Zone of the Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste (ZEESM). The long-term plan called for public-private joint investment of \$4.1 billion for construction of a new port and airport, an entirely new planned city, and even a world-class university. Gusmão convinced his long-time foe Alkatiri to head the project, thereby buying off the leadership of the opposition.

---

*The design of the new state  
emerged piecemeal.*

---

Yet actual spending on the megaprojects has been far more modest than the initial plans envisioned, and it remains unclear what will become of them. Meanwhile, and far less noted, the true megaproject of the Gusmão years has turned out to be veterans of the resistance, a crucial political constituency that exercises outsized influence in rural areas.

The veterans' budget had already surpassed \$100 million in 2015—more than the funding for health and agriculture combined. Even that figure is dwarfed by a proposal the government made earlier this year for a massive amendment to the state budget that would allocate \$1 billion for a veterans' fund. "The veterans scheme," scholars Lia Kent and Naomi Kinsella observe, "is bolstering a vision of citizenship that is based on a militarized identity. It perpetuates the idea that a person's role in the (armed) Resistance is a key factor in determining their status to speak as a 'legitimate' East Timorese and, consequently, their access to political and economic power."

Beyond issues of who gets what, the questions that loom over Timor-Leste are how long the country's finite oil and gas reserves will remain in production, and how long, at current rates of spending, the Petroleum Fund will last.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURES

Timor-Leste is not just a young country; it also is a country with an extremely young population. At the time of the 1999 referendum, 52 percent of the population was below the age of 18 (and therefore ineligible to vote). Today, approximately half of the total population was born after the 1999 referendum; another 40 percent was born or came of age during the Indonesian occupation; only 10 percent is from the generation of 1975 or older. This makes Timor-Leste the nation with the second-youngest population in Asia (after Afghanistan), with an average age of 20.8.

The rapid increase in children and youth since 1999 has occurred despite—and because of—significant improvements in other demographic areas. Life expectancy, which was a mere 36 years in 1974, has increased from 58 in 1999 to nearly 70 today. The birth rate soared in the five years after the referendum, peaking at 6.18 births per woman in 2002, but it has fallen to under 4 today. Maternal and infant mortality, though still high by global standards, have also declined.

With annual population growth still at nearly 2 percent, and little in the way of job creation, youth

unemployment has remained a pressing challenge. After independence, thousands of young Timorese made their way to Portugal, and from there onward to the United Kingdom, where many found work in factories in Northern Ireland and in dining halls at universities in England. (I encountered one of my former students from the National University of Timor-Leste cleaning a bathroom in an Oxford University hall in 2017.) Within Timor-Leste, high unemployment fueled membership in competing martial arts groups, which at times have contributed to violence, as in 2006, and subsequently swelled the ranks of political upstarts.

Even more problematic are changes in the distribution of Timor-Leste's population. The capital district, Dili, has grown from a population of 100,000 in 1999 (accounting for 11.3 percent of the country's total) to 329,000 today (25 percent). With about four-fifths of that number living in areas designated as urban, Dili has become one of Asia's biggest primate cities, a term coined by geographer Mark Jefferson to measure the relative size of cities in a country. Urban Dili now dwarfs the next largest urban center, Baucau, at 14 times its size. By comparison, Bangkok, long cited as a classic case of urban primacy, is only 8.6 times the size of Thailand's second largest city. Along with its absolute size, Dili also dominates Timor-Leste's economy, educational opportunities, and political life.

## POLITICAL TUSSELS

A combination of fiscal policy and fatigue pulled the country out of the depths of the 2006 crisis, bringing a few years of solid growth and the formulation of grand development plans. But politics were never far behind. In November 2013, a little more than a year into his second term, Gusmão surprised the nation by announcing that he planned to resign the following year—September was floated as a possible date—in order to facilitate a transition to a new generation of leaders.

His plan was almost immediately put on hold, however, because of a new threat to national security. In late 2013, former Falintil commander Paulo "Mauk Moruk" da Gama, who had lived in the Netherlands since surrendering to the Indonesian military in 1984, returned to Timor-Leste, declared the establishment of a revolutionary council, and called for the government to resign. Parliament promptly passed new legislation enabling military operations against Mauk Moruk

and his supporters, which was quickly extended to include a ban on martial arts groups and measures threatening press freedoms. Mauk Moruk was killed, and many of his fighters were captured.

With the crisis averted, in early 2015 Gusmão tendered his resignation and orchestrated the appointment of Rui Maria Araújo, a respected doctor and long-time Fretilin member, as his successor. Gusmão became minister for planning and strategic investment, retaining significant power over the allocation of budgets and influence over the direction of state policy. Some Timorese viewed Gusmão's maneuver as a clever co-optation of the opposition, others as a genuine bid to create national unity; but the underlying factor that enabled the creation of a temporary political cartel that left no one out was the size of the state budget.

The 2017 election brought new tensions to the young country. To the surprise of many, Fretilin narrowly won a plurality of seats in parliament and managed to form a minority government, headed once again by Alkatiri. Within months, however, the government was brought down by a no-confidence vote. As in 2006, Fretilin charged that this was nothing less than a constitutional coup. When fresh elections were held, the Gusmão-led three-party Alliance for Change and Progress won 34 out of 65 seats in parliament, and Taur Matan Ruak became prime minister.

The political tussle of 2017–18 and declines in oil production hit the economy hard, with independent analysis suggesting a 4 to 5 percent contraction of the economy. Two years later, the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic placed further brakes on growth.

The 2022 presidential election was hotly contested, with 16 candidates from across the political spectrum. Two old faces dominated the first round, leading to a run-off in April in which

Ramos-Horta, now 72, cruised to victory with a 24-point win over Fretilin's Lu Olo. The old guard remained entrenched.

## rites of passage

The twentieth anniversary of Timor-Leste's independence is above all a marker of the achievement of statehood. But even that apparently simple fact remains hotly contested. Fretilin and others disaffected by international involvement in the country's affairs have long insisted that independence was declared (by Fretilin!) on November 28, 1975, and that—as the constitution pushed through the Constituent Assembly in 2001 states—May 20 marks the restoration of independence. Political leaders (and many observers) on the other side of the divide view this as an attempt to monopolize the country's history for political gain.

In light of the country's contentious history, the efforts that have been made to mark the foundation of the nation and interpret its identity bear close attention. On this count, the commemoration of a quite different anniversary seven years ago is particularly telling. In 2015, as part of the new ZEESM mega-project in Oecusse, Timor-Leste held a major celebration of the first arrival of the Portuguese in 1515. The government issued a press release detailing a long list of commemorative activities, with the title “500th Anniversary of the Affirmation of the Timorese Identity.”

At first glance, it might seem peculiar to premise national identity on ahistorical claims about the first arrival of Catholic missionaries and, by implication, the myth of four and a half centuries of colonial rule (whereas colonialism proper did not begin until the mid-nineteenth century). But doing so is a convenient way to elide claims and counter-claims that continue to divide the generation of 1975 and to paper over the increasingly tenuous links between that generation and those born and raised within an independent Timor-Leste. ■

“[T]here is tension between the fulfillment of the housing dreams of overseas Filipinos and the dispossession of marginalized Filipinos who are forced to make way for new urban development projects.”

## The Urban Geographies of Philippine Transnationalism

ARNISSON ANDRE C. ORTEGA AND EVANGELINE O. KATIGBAK

Arriving at Ninoy International Airport, Filipinos returning from overseas are greeted by numerous real estate promotions, from large banners featuring property developments in Mega Manila—the megalopolis comprising Metro Manila and parts of the Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog regions—to luggage trolley advertisements depicting idealized suburban family scenes. These ads seek to grab travelers’ attention with catchy monikers that invoke hope and nationalism, such as “We Build the Filipino Dream,” “A Fresh Start to Live Big,” “Own A Piece of Paradise,” and “We Help Find Your Home, *Kabayan* [Compatriot].” In shopping malls, booths showcase the latest residential developments in towns and cities as real estate agents distribute flyers to potential clients. Some of these booths explicitly target returning Overseas Filipino Workers, with signs featuring the abbreviation OFWs in extra-large type: “Welcome OFWs and locally employed.”

These marketing efforts demonstrate the intimate relationship between real estate and the Filipino diaspora. For more than a decade, real estate in the Philippines has been booming, primarily fueled by demand from Overseas Filipinos (OFs). Urban transformations driven by new property developments are intertwined with the diaspora. This nexus is just one of the many urban-transnational entanglements that are reshaping vast tracts of land in the Philippines.

It is a truism that the Philippines is a nation that relies on its overseas citizens. The country has

a long history of sending migrant workers overseas, and the government is directly involved in facilitating the deployment of OFWs and providing support services. Migrating overseas as a means to seek better economic opportunities has become a common practice among Filipinos. The diaspora is one of the world’s largest, with approximately 10 million overseas Filipinos, and it sends home much-needed remittances that buoy the national economy, accounting for roughly 10 percent of gross domestic product in 2020. Because of their economic contributions, overseas migrants are often heralded as the country’s *bagong bayani* (new heroes).

Given the serial reproduction of this celebratory trope, there is a need to critically examine and take stock of the diverse impacts of the diaspora in the life-worlds of Filipinos in the Philippines. Here, we focus our attention on how the diaspora is interconnected with urban transformation in the Philippines, drawing on research in peri-urban villages, islands and coastal communities, and gated subdivisions. Examining the diverse ways in which OFs are implicated in urban change reveals the everyday geographies engendered by these transnational transformations.

### DIASPORIC ENTANGLEMENTS

“Return, Reside, Reinvest” was among the initial publicity slogans in 2007 for one of the largest property developments south of Metro Manila, seeking to attract OFs to a project promising both urban sustainability and suburban tranquility. Whereas the traditional conception of return migration alludes to the process of going back to a migrant’s place of origin, in the context of the Philippines, where a culture of migration has permeated the national consciousness, return does

---

ARNISSON ANDRE C. ORTEGA is an assistant professor of geography at Syracuse University. EVANGELINE O. KATIGBAK is an associate professorial lecturer at the Department of International Studies, De La Salle University (Manila).

not necessarily mean that migration ceases. Instead, return is just part of an ongoing back-and-forth movement that interconnects the Philippines with overseas locations where OFs typically work or reside.

What emerges from this process is a cross-border simultaneity of lives and networks, practices, ideas, and capital—an interlinked entanglement that scholars call transnationalism. Place and context shape transnational mobilities—transnationalism is not frictionless. Within the Filipino diaspora, the Philippines remains a critical terrain that moors and directs the transnational mobilities of OFs.

Urban transformation in the Philippines, particularly in the form of gated subdivisions and high-rise condominium buildings, is intertwined with diasporic desires to provide housing for families back home and ensure a steady flow of income through property investments. Such projects are heavily marketed to OFs by developers aiming to capture a slice of the diasporic market. Their strategies include navigating the transnational geographies of OFs by holding overseas property caravans or roadshows, sponsoring activities and booths at Filipino community events, and establishing overseas satellite offices or affiliate branches.

These firms make regular appearances in cities with sizable Filipino populations, from Dubai and Singapore to Sydney and Rome. At Toronto's Taste of Manila street festival, one of the largest Filipino festivals outside the Philippines, stalls offer stacks of promotional flyers for Philippine properties. Developers also host an array of activities in their overseas caravans, from concerts to wealth management workshops, all designed to entice OFs into purchasing properties back in the Philippines. Such transnational strategies are complemented by laws, such as the Pag-IBIG Fund Law of 2009, which requires OFWs to contribute to a government-mandated housing loan program. Several banks have also initiated OF-specific mortgages.

Fueling the circuits of urban capital are remittance monies sent by OFs. Aside from the formal Philippine real estate sector, remittances are also used for home improvement projects, renovations, or purchases of land in the origin communities of OFs. In various parts of the Philippines, enclaves of mansions occupy entire neighborhood blocks of provincial towns and pockets of concrete

two-story houses emerge from the rice fields—all residences of the families of OFs. These mansions are a tangible manifestation of the ways in which remittances have physically transformed the homes and communities of OFs.

Remittances do not only take a financial form. Scholars use the term “social remittances” to underscore how ideas, values, identities, and social capital flow from host to home communities. Also pertinent to urban narratives in the Philippines are “emotional remittances,” referring to how money, ideas, and material things that travel back and forth among family members in different parts of the world are imbued with meaning and feelings.

The reconfiguration of the urban landscape due to Filipino transnationalism is also bound up with enduring land-related struggles of the Philippines' marginalized populations—peasants, indigenous peoples, and the urban poor. To make way for new urban development projects, vast tracts of land in various parts of the country have been converted or redeveloped. Several of these areas are associated with the dispossession and displacement of the landless poor. There is an emerging contradiction between the diasporic dreams of OFs and the aspirations of poor and landless Filipinos.

Land issues did not figure prominently during the 2022 Philippine election campaigns. Only a handful of political figures linked to real estate won national seats. Relative to the total number of voters in the Philippines (55.5 million), the number of overseas voters is quite small—roughly 600,000. Nevertheless, their influence is substantial; there were abundant accounts of politicians and parties courting OFs for campaign funds and votes, including their influence over their relatives' votes in the Philippines.

Land issues did not figure prominently during the 2022 Philippine election campaigns. Only a handful of political figures linked to real estate won national seats. Relative to the total number of voters in the Philippines (55.5 million), the number of overseas voters is quite small—roughly 600,000. Nevertheless, their influence is substantial; there were abundant accounts of politicians and parties courting OFs for campaign funds and votes, including their influence over their relatives' votes in the Philippines.

## SUBURBAN CONTRADICTIONS

To entice the diaspora, gated suburban developments in towns and cities throughout the Philippines are often marketed as “world-class” spaces that reward “hardworking” OFs. They tend to conjure a sense of exclusivity, security, and wealth with an architectural aesthetic that draws on various foreign influences, from British to Mediterranean. Consider a promotional flyer that features a gated suburban development in Rizal province, east of Metro Manila:

---

*The diaspora is interconnected  
with urban transformation.*

---

Your dream community in the East. Here, your residence is Mediterranean type. Modeled after the classic, cozy homes in that part of Europe, it blends perfectly with the splendid views at Eastwood Residences. Imagine—the breathtaking sunrise, cool, clean air, lush gardens as far as the eye can see . . . all these can be yours only here at Eastwood Residences.

This attempt to create a “world-class” veneer is an approximation of a stereotypical American suburban layout and structure—bungalow houses, lawns, cul-de-sac roads, playgrounds, and multi-purpose community halls. To guarantee security, these developments are often surrounded by perimeter walls with a gate and guard post. A typical development has a homeowner association that sets rules and regulations for residents.

As spaces evoking a sense of wealth, modernity, and order, these gated subdivisions appeal to a yearning for an ideal way of life back in the Philippines. This is a Filipino dream that seems impossible to achieve when viewed from outside the gates, where infrastructure and services are inadequate and mismanaged. But life inside the gates also presents challenges to the diasporic aspiration of returning home to an idealized family setting. Sustaining suburban living requires a regular inflow of remittances to cover expenses: mortgage payments, everyday household expenditures and bills, and monthly payment of homeowner association fees. A family member must continue working overseas and earn a much-needed salary to be sent back home. The stereotypical suburban appeal of a complete family life is in a perpetual state of deferral.

Life in these gated communities thus is far from the rosy ideal depicted by marketers. In a town in Rizal province, many housing units have been purchased by families with members working abroad. One of these is the family of Manny, a “house-husband” living with his children in a house he acquired while he was working in Dubai. In an interview, Manny complained about the cracks in the walls of his house, and became sentimental as he recounted his struggles working overseas. To him, the cracks represented cracks (*bitak*) in his dreams (*pangarap*) for his family. Making matters worse, his house was on the verge of foreclosure because he had been unable to make the monthly mortgage payments. His wife, who took an offer to work as a caregiver overseas, had troubles with her job and could not send enough remittance monies.

Jenny, an entrepreneur who goes back and forth to Dubai every year, resides with her son and two

other relatives in a two-story mansion in a high-end gated subdivision south of Manila. Jenny and her husband chose the subdivision because it was “quiet” and “secure,” which were critical considerations for their son, who was left under the care of Jenny’s mother and another relative while they worked overseas. So far, she and her husband are content with their transnational set-up; their son is well cared for and seems to be thriving. Yet despite Jenny’s aspirations being enshrined in their suburban mansion, the couple still consider their situation to be lacking, simply because they are not with their child. Jenny contends that they “do not have any choice.” In order to sustain their life in the subdivision and ensure the future of their son, they need to continuously work overseas. This contradiction between suburban domestic ideal and overseas work underpins the lives of many households in gated subdivisions.

## GENDER AND ISLAND TRANSFORMATIONS

Gender matters in transnationally induced urbanization in the Philippines. In several islands and coastal communities, primarily those that have become major tourist hubs, Filipina bodies are at the forefront of urban accumulation, the process by which property values increase and new developments are built. Here, issues of gender, race, and transnational mobilities interconnect.

As an archipelago, the Philippines is typically marketed as a tourist destination boasting picturesque islands with pristine beaches and azure seas. Over the past few decades, islands and coastal regions in the central and southern Philippines have experienced dramatic transformations. Far-flung fishing villages and beaches have become bustling “world class” tourist hubs teeming with resorts, restaurants, and other enterprises.

Tourism-driven development has produced demographically diverse urban conditions, as these islands attract migrants from various backgrounds—lower-waged migrant workers from other islands, foreign retirees, and tourists. At the core of these island transformations are Filipinas, particularly those in interracial relationships with foreign men, who invest in island properties and establish tourist enterprises. These enterprises stimulate a mode of urban change reliant on the transnational mobilities of tourists, expatriates, and capital.

Enabling these island transformations are national efforts aimed at attracting foreign retirees



to move to and invest in the Philippines. In particular, the Special Resident Retiree's Visa, issued by the Philippine Retirement Agency, encourages relocations of foreigners to the Philippines, provided that the applicant is at least 35 years old and willing to either invest in properties or deposit a minimum of \$25,000 into a bank designated by the Philippine government. This state-supported program further reinforces the already entrenched transnational pattern of retirement migration into the Philippines, typically involving male Caucasian retirees who partner with younger Filipina women. The Internet offers a plethora of websites, message boards, and self-published DIY e-books that promote retirement to the Philippines as a route to "living like a king," surrounded by idealized Filipina women.

In several islands and coastal areas, these interracial relationships have become major pathways for transnational urban accumulation, leading to the rapid transformation of many communities. The Filipina partner is critical to accumulation: since foreigners technically cannot own land in the Philippines, Filipinas serve as a front for property purchases.

In a coastal municipality in the Visayas, a region that is fast becoming a major tourist destination, one of the oldest and most popular resorts is owned and operated by Anna, a Filipina who moved to the island with David, her Canadian husband of two decades. Anna hails from Central Visayas and met David during one of his visits to a resort in Palawan. After the couple married, they decided to invest in a relatively remote municipality. With substantial capital from David's retirement savings, the couple purchased large parcels of coastal land and built a resort, with Anna serving as the official owner of the property.

Over time, the resort grew and became popular through word of mouth, bolstered by David's personal network. The resort sparked an economic boom for the town, leading to the establishment of other resorts in the area, many of which are similarly owned by Filipina-foreigner couples. In her role as resort manager and owner of the property, Anna became a prominent figure in the town and developed important networks with town officials, despite being occasionally belittled as a woman. Throughout, Anna has supported her family and relatives by providing financial assistance and jobs at her resort. Anna's story perhaps

reflects a new twist on the idealized Filipina who carries multiple burdens: supporting the spouse, family, community, and locality.

Though not all interracial couples are as successful as Anna and David, resort ownership among Filipina-foreigner couples is not uncommon, particularly in tourist hubs. On many of these islands, as more foreigners converge and marry Filipinas, clusters of resorts owned by Filipina-foreigner couples emerge, creating a transnational landscape. These resorts, in turn, become meeting sites for foreign tourists and prospective Filipina partners, generating a cumulative process of transnationally induced and gendered modes of urban transformation in the islands.

### WHO BELONGS IN LITTLE ITALY?

In the peri-urban town of Mabini in Batangas province, located south of Metro Manila, a village colloquially known as "Little Italy" illustrates how the building of homes serves as a marker of the portability of place. Little Italy earned its name in popular media thanks to the imposing houses of migrant families that make a curious contrast with the rural beginnings of the village. The community has had a long history of migration to Italy since the late 1970s. Through these transnational connections, the social and material characteristics of the community have markedly changed.

For Italy-based OFs, these houses represent the fulfillment of their personal and familial dreams, suggest a sense of belonging, and represent a yardstick of success. The houses double as emotional investments, manifesting the idealized migration success story. Migrants tend to prioritize the construction of grand houses as part of their "heroic" aspirations to improve the lives of their families back in Mabini. Some see these multi-million-peso homes as "trophies" of the migration experience.

One of the transnational migrants, Mario, is critical of this relentless desire to build extravagant homes. In our discussions, he often talked about how his migrant cousin incurred a heavy debt to build his mansion: "That house was built on debts. . . . No one lives in that house except my cousin's aged father," a man in his late eighties. Other mansions in the village are "empty," merely serving as material expression of a migrant's

---

*A culture of migration has  
permeated the national  
consciousness.*

---

successful sojourn abroad. Non-migrant residents of Mabini express their dismay in terms such as these used by Lita, a non-migrant villager: “I really don’t get it—migrants build houses, fill them with classy appliances that they are unable to use because they live in Roma.”

Many community residents attribute the spread of these new houses to the changing values of the migrant villagers and a rampant sense of jealousy and boastfulness. Mario believes that building houses has become a fad (*uso*) in the village, as one family competes with another in grandiosity. Other villagers likewise view the rush to build grand houses as stemming from the so-called *gaya-gaya* (imitation) mentality.

These Italian-themed mansions also manifest the logics of portability of place that ground specific socialities—people’s inclinations to form communities across transnational spaces. For migrant villagers, “Italy” refers not only to a country in Europe; it is also an imagined extension of their village and family life, largely because of the constant flows of bodies and material and social remittances that are exchanged among them. The home in the sending locality—the “original” home—provides spaces of familiarity and belonging. For migrants, such spaces may be difficult to negotiate in destination areas, given the differences in lifestyle and cultural norms. So another home is created there, bearing semblances of the original home but accommodating the characteristics of the receiving place as well, reflecting a sense of continuity amidst change.

Kinship ties to which migrants have been accustomed at their original home are transported to another place, contributing to the recreation of home in the host region of Italy. With the construction of new houses in Little Italy, migrant villagers continue their place-making practice, this time by incorporating elements of their Italian experiences into the village. Emotional and economic geographies are intertwined in this place-based reproduction of transnational experiences.

Little Italy also reveals the interconnectedness of transnational mobilities with other forms of migration. Migrant villagers often hire left-behind relatives or internal migrants to clean their houses and, following local traditions, to turn the house lights on and off as necessary. Most in-migrants to the village are originally from the Bicol region in Southern Luzon. In Little Italy, the term “Bicol” is used to refer both to these people and to

a small area of land owned by transnational families in the village but now occupied by the in-migrants. In this way, “Bicol” invokes socially constructed categories of marginalized places and people occupying the fringes of the community’s social and territorial borders. In effect, Bicol in-migrants reside in the *barangay* (village) but are not considered members of the social structure of the community.

The outsider position of the Bicol in-migrants is also manifested in the materialities of their living conditions. Situated far from the *centro*, the secluded cluster of houses in Bicol is several meters away from the main *barangay* road and accessible only by foot. Though some of the large migrant-built houses in the village are unoccupied, extended families live in the small houses in Bicol, where a single-room house has an average of seven inhabitants. Newly arrived relatives, hoping to find a job in the village, tend to be accommodated in these small houses.

Making their living conditions even worse, Bicol houses are made mostly from temporary materials like nipa-thatched roofs and bamboo. The rationale behind the use of such materials is the uncertain duration of the migrants’ stay and their relative exclusion from village affairs. They often refer to themselves as “squatters” in the village. The hiddenness and temporariness of the houses of the Bicol in-migrants symbolize their marginality in the community.

## DREAMS AND TENSIONS

It is difficult to speak of urban change in the Philippines without accounting for the diaspora. The three examples that we have provided here are far from exhaustive. They are indicative of the deeply entrenched and diverse transnational processes that have reshaped a variety of local contexts in the Philippines.

Although most studies of transnational urbanism focus on processes shaping global cities, what we have offered here is an accounting of how such processes occur in various urban forms, whether in a gated community or an island tourist hub. We call for further examination of these processes in different contexts, beyond Manila or the confines of a metropolitan urban area, since much more can be learned from the diverse dynamics that accompany transnational mobilities and urban change.

Urban practices and economic decisions about whether to invest in real estate, build a mansion,

or establish a beach resort are also emotional investments. Migrants as well as their families left behind retain their national and local loyalties, honor familial promises, and aim to achieve idealized Filipino dreams. But there is tension between the fulfillment of the housing dreams of overseas Filipinos and the dispossession of marginalized Filipinos who are forced to make way for new urban development projects.

As property development catering to the diaspora and the emerging middle class continues to grow in the Philippines, it is worth reflecting on how such development impacts the poor—and how poverty is a major reason millions of Filipinos still want to go abroad. Perhaps it is time for policies and programs that attend to the plight of marginalized Filipinos, instead of projects that will further facilitate their dispossession. ■

# Ukraine and the Limits of China-Russia Friendship

ED PULFORD

In early February 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Following a script to which both men have grown accustomed over the past decade, and with few concessions to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Xi and Putin held unmasked discussions at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, attended the Games' opening at the "Bird's Nest" stadium, and posed for photographs with their national flags, smiling in the glow of international and interpersonal friendship. On February 4, the two sides released a joint communiqué, the latest in a series of ambitious statements of Sino-Russian alignment, which declared each party's commitment to a "Friendship" with "no limits."

Three weeks later, this limitlessness appeared to be put to an immediate test. Ahead of Russian forces' renewed invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the Chinese government had seemed more relaxed than its Western counterparts. As Washington and London warned that the estimated 190,000 Russian troops gathering on Ukraine's borders were poised to attack, Beijing advised "all sides" to exercise restraint and alluded to "complex factors" underlying the situation. Since then this broad—if sometimes awkward—alignment has continued. Both the Chinese Foreign Ministry and official media have downplayed apparent Russian atrocities, blaming Ukrainian civilian suffering on NATO expansion.

This tacit support for Putin's bloody military misadventure has been particularly striking given the Chinese government's decades-long emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity as core principles of the global order. Everything from world leaders' meetings with the Dalai Lama to the 2010 award of the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned

dissident Liu Xiaobo has drawn accusations of "interference in China's internal affairs" from Beijing. One might therefore assume that one country's full-scale military invasion of another would also meet the standard of "interference."

But such assumptions would be naïve, both in today's cynical age of posturing strongmen and when considering the history of official capital-F Friendship between China and Russia or the Soviet Union. The dynamics of this relationship over time, including during crises comparable to the current Ukraine war, reveal that their Friendship is usually more expedient than claims to limitlessness would imply—whether in its constant over-the-shoulder focus on what a certain "third power" is doing, or in its troubled negotiations with its own history.

## SOCIALIST ROOTS

As the 38th encounter between Xi and Putin since 2013, the Winter Olympics meeting—at which no other major world leaders were present—seemed the latest sign of an interstate bond going from strength to strength during the twenty-first century. Friendship has been the guiding motif throughout. In 2018, Putin was awarded the Order of Friendship of the People's Republic of China (PRC) medal at a ceremony where Xi described him as his "best friend and confidant." Beyond rarefied summitry and high politics, the Russian leader has also become something of a cult figure in China, spurring a boom in Putin-themed self-help books that celebrate him as an idealized embodiment of leadership and manhood.

This intensifying Friendship has coincided with cooling relations between both countries and "the West." As recently as 2008, the PRC government was willing to criticize adventurist Russian foreign policy, voicing "concern" at Putin's invasion of Georgia, which came just as the Summer Olympics—with the current and former US Presidents

---

ED PULFORD is a lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Manchester and the author of *Mirrorlands: Russia, China, and Journeys in Between* (Hurst, 2019).

Bush in enthusiastic attendance—opened in Beijing that August. Yet by 2014, the year President Barack Obama skipped Russia's Winter Olympics in Sochi, Beijing's response to Putin's first invasion of Ukraine was closer to its stance today: while not formally recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea, the PRC abstained from two United Nations votes condemning Moscow's actions, citing the "complexity" of the situation.

Today's interstate bond may thus seem tied to Xi-Putin bonhomie in an emerging multipolar world, but Friendship has roots deeper than the personalities of these two men. Russia and China's contemporary relationship is defined by a Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation signed in 2001 by Putin (early in his first presidency) and Xi's predecessor-but-one Jiang Zemin. In its language and atmospherics, this declaration in turn drew on a formal Friendship that flourished in the 1950s between China and the Soviet Union. Under a treaty signed by Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin during the former's 1949–50 visit to Moscow, this Friendship was also defined as "eternal," and it stressed principles of reciprocity and sovereignty that resonated strongly in an era of global decolonization.

If Sino-Russian amity has recently peaked in what the PRC calls Xi Jinping's "New Era," and is described—per the 2022 communiqué—as "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era," symbolic aspects of the relationship have crucial twentieth-century antecedents. These matter because, notwithstanding the emphasis on limitlessness and self-determination, earlier iterations of the relationship also saw each party having to respond to military interventions launched by the other into neighboring states.

## SOCIALIST INVASIONS

In November 1956, Soviet forces entered Budapest to suppress an uprising that had deposed Hungary's Moscow-sponsored socialist government. With Friendship defining Sino-Soviet relations, the Chinese response was mixed. At first, a late-October editorial in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mouthpiece *People's Daily* stressed the need to respect Hungarian sovereignty, but a few days later Beijing's position changed to one condemning the new "counterrevolutionary" leader Imre Nagy, who wished to withdraw from the

Warsaw Pact. Amid the violence of the ensuing Soviet invasion around 2,500 Hungarians were killed. While Budapest-based Chinese students sheltered in the PRC Embassy, pro-China Hungarian intellectuals were denied similar protection.

Beijing's initial hesitancy to back Moscow in 1956 hinted at troubles to come. A few months previously, at a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow (a milestone the CCP will reach in October 2022), Nikita Khrushchev denounced his predecessor Stalin's "cult of personality." Khrushchev's "secret speech" was only part of a broader de-Stalinization program at home and a "thawing" of Soviet relations with capitalist rivals internationally. But it captured a growing divergence between Soviet politics and those in China, where Mao—who remained a Stalinist despite being treated with disdain by Stalin during his 1950 Moscow visit—was nurturing his own cult. By the early 1960s, Sino-Soviet ties had soured into outright enmity.

As ideological solidarity and official Chinese admiration for the Soviet "older brother" gave way to bitter mutual recriminations, the USSR's next mission to rein in a straying socialist satellite elicited less ambiguity from Beijing. The 1968 summer invasion of Czechoslovakia was Leonid Brezhnev's response to the Prague Spring, a set of liberalizing reforms under Alexander Dubček that threatened Soviet supremacy. Two years into the violently Maoist Cultural Revolution, *People's Daily* decried Moscow's hypocritical claims that the invasion upheld tenets of socialist internationalism: "[H]ow is this respecting 'territorial integrity'? Where is the 'noninterference in internal affairs'? Where is the 'friendship,' the 'unity'? This vile shamelessness has reached an extreme!" fumed an editorial on August 30, 1968. Such outrage reflected concerns that the intervention might portend a Soviet invasion of China. These fears snowballed into a small war several months later over a river islet on the Sino-Soviet border.

A tense decade later, the dynamics of invasion and condemnation were reversed. In February 1979, Chinese forces entered northern Vietnam in response to the Vietnamese Communists' opposition to the Maoist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Ahead of the invasion, Moscow had sealed a Friendship Treaty with Hanoi in November

---

*Interstate Friendship may best  
be cultivated at arm's length.*

---

1978 and provided advisers and matériel to the Vietnamese military, much like today's Western support for Ukraine. Most disconcertingly for Beijing's new government, led by Deng Xiaoping, Soviet forces were also marshaled up to China's borders with eastern Russia and Mongolia, a looming threat that included airborne divisions from thousands of miles away in Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.

Unlike the Russian forces massed on Ukraine's borders in early 2022, however, these divisions did not end up crossing into China. Deng's forces withdrew from Vietnam a few weeks later, and a disastrous confrontation between socialist nuclear giants was averted. In fact, the years that followed saw improving relations between Beijing and Moscow. Formal contact was cautiously resumed throughout the 1980s. By 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting Beijing, and just over a decade later, Jiang and Putin signed their treaty. The Friendship we know today was back in ascendancy.

## TRIANGULATION

This brief history of Friendship, enmity, and invasions suggests several continuities between past and present, despite today's claims that Sino-Russian Friendship is unprecedented. For one thing, Friendships then and now have shared the need to actively forget earlier iterations of the relationship. Any nostalgia for socialist brotherhood which might underlie contemporary Beijing-Moscow rapprochement demands that decades of outright hostility—which in turn negated earlier commitments to “eternal” amity—be overlooked. Even the Mao-Stalin Friendship involved discarding memories of the pre-socialist nineteenth century, when the Qing empire—under colonial duress from Britain, France, and Russia—ceded northern Asian territories to an expanding Tsarist realm.

Also consistent over the past century of Beijing-Moscow ties has been the looming presence of a third power. The 2022 communiqué stressed that today's Friendship has nothing to do with anyone else, being “neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment.” But the document's critique of “some actors” who behave unilaterally on the world stage and interfere in others' affairs had an obvious target. Shifting twentieth-century relations among the socialist giants were always

triangulated against the capitalist United States, and Chinese solidarity with Russian criticisms of NATO shows that this remains central to their relations. Indeed, Putin's own Chinese cult rests partly on his robust willingness to confront Western adversaries, much as his friend Xi increasingly does.

Yet if US-focused triangulation and the elision of past frictions are sources of continuity, one novel aspect of today's relationship is worth considering in this unsettling era of territorial conquest and cross-border intervention. Unlike either Friendship or enmity during the Cold War, China and Russia's twenty-first-century bond has facilitated extensive contact among ordinary people across the two countries' shared border. Since the 1990s, trade in consumer goods and, more recently, medical and leisure tourism have flourished between northeast China and eastern Russia.

Over the same period, however, these two regions have been rapidly depopulating. Between 2010 and 2020, northeast China lost over 10 percent of its population, whereas since 1991 the Russian Far East's population has shrunk by over 23 percent. With cross-border contact severed completely by the COVID-19 pandemic—devastating for borderland businesses—one might wonder if Friendship's new peaks are made possible precisely by estrangement on the ground.

At a time when each side's energies are focused elsewhere—be it Europe or the Pacific—it has suited Beijing and Moscow to maintain a regime of peaceful emptiness in the region that once witnessed Sino-Soviet conflict. Certainly the resulting marginality of the borderlands has made Moscow comfortable redeploying troops from its eastern military districts, where it once intimidated and fought China, to the Ukraine war. As global balances shift, abstract geopolitical rapprochement and triangulation against a third power are easier to manage than the messier human sphere of direct cross-border proximity.

Interstate Friendship may best be cultivated at arm's length, and so China's backing for Russia in Ukraine—like its commitment to territorial integrity—will likely remain within the limits of expediency. With the Friendship in its current form, Beijing would expect to receive similar arms-length support from Moscow for any comparable military exploit of its own—provided, of course, that the target is not part of sacred Tsarist or Soviet historical territory. ■

# China's Booming Fiction Industry

MICHEL HOCKX

In 2012, the Chinese writer Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was a memorable occasion for many reasons, but I remember it mostly for what it taught me about public perception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world. Western scholars of modern Chinese literature, myself included, generally rejoiced in Mo Yan's success, or at least were not surprised by it, given the author's long-standing presence in the canon that we teach. But journalists reporting on the event for mainstream US and UK newspapers rallied around a diametrically opposed opinion: Mo Yan did not deserve the Nobel Prize, because he lived and worked in an authoritarian state and showed no obvious signs of political dissidence. A journalist from *The Guardian*, who called me to ask for quotes, told me straightaway that he did not need me to educate him on the state of literature in China, because he knew it was "just like in the old Soviet Union, you know, the state tells them what to write and they write it." I tried to educate him anyway, but was at a loss for where to start, since he was obviously blissfully unaware of developments that had taken place in Chinese culture during the three decades or so prior to our conversation.

Yes, there is censorship in China—more of it now than there was in 2012, but still a whole lot less than there was before the economic reforms of the 1980s and especially the 1990s. Prior to the reforms, culture was produced by the state. Some of the best-known writers were employed by the state, but even for the majority that were not, it was nearly impossible to publish other than through state-owned publishing houses fulfilling quotas set in state-determined plans, or through state-funded literary magazines, edited by state-affiliated literary organizations.

## The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters

Megan Walsh  
(*Columbia Global Reports*, 2022)

This system was reformed in two steps. In the late 1970s, writers were told they no longer needed to produce work on command. They could explore their own literary styles and reconnect with both Chinese traditions and foreign influences, as long as they did not openly attack the state. After a few false starts and some knee-jerk relapses by the state (such as the short-lived "Campaign against Spiritual Pollution" of the early 1980s), this new openness resulted in an outburst of creativity within a system that otherwise was still state-operated. By the late 1980s, highly experimental and esoteric avant-garde fiction and obscure poetry, which in the West would typically be the domain of small, niche-based coteries, was being disseminated in tens of thousands of copies through yet-to-be-reformed state-owned publishing channels and sold at fixed, heavily subsidized prices.

When the reforms were restarted a year or two after the 1989 crackdown, that particular bubble burst. From the early 1990s onward, the state weaned the publishing sector off subsidies, making it responsible for generating its own profits. The introduction of this market principle led to the creation of a staggering diversity of cultural products, ranging from bestsellers and blockbusters to the tiniest of niche publications.

Instead of "managing culture" (*ban wenhua*), the state now sticks to "regulating culture" (*guan wenhua*). It stays at arm's length from the market, but it intervenes with regulation and censorship when it identifies unwelcome trends. Under Xi Jinping, after decades of relatively little intervention, such regulation has once again increased, although it is predominantly aimed at types of culture that reach broad audiences: soap operas, pop music, online fan culture. Literature generally attracts less regulatory attention and thus enjoys more freedom. Authors addressing political taboos have opportunities to publish their work in Hong Kong and Taiwan, although the former is now also under increasing restrictions.

---

MICHEL HOCKX is a professor of Chinese literature at the University of Notre Dame.

The crux of the matter is that literary authors anywhere in the world are generally not inclined to use their freedom to turn their creative writing into political manifestos. The expectation that all good Chinese writers must be political dissidents only serves to further restrict what freedoms they do have, and sets an ideological standard that is not imposed on their Western counterparts. As Megan Walsh writes in the concluding pages of *The Subplot*, it is the fate of writers everywhere to “resist the temptation to create art that serves a personal or political function.” Literature written to serve a nonliterary agenda is rarely any good. In contrast, literature written to serve a literary agenda *despite* pressure from political institutions can be very good, and often infinitely more complex and intriguing than work produced in “freedom.”

Walsh's book—135 pages in a handy pocket-sized format—is a very welcome contribution. As far as I know, it is the first book-length overview of contemporary Chinese literature written specifically for a broader readership. While she has all the necessary academic credentials (a master's degree in Chinese studies and obviously excellent Chinese-language proficiency), Walsh is first and foremost a literary critic, one who treats Chinese fiction the way it deserves to be treated:

---



---

*Literature written to serve  
a nonliterary agenda  
is rarely any good.*

---



---

as art created under unique circumstances. She is not in any way naïve about those circumstances, and her comments on the many restrictions under which Chinese writers have operated, especially since the rise of Xi Jinping, are as insightful as they are incisive, and up to date until 2021. Yet as she surveys the rich diversity of fiction published since the start of the reforms described above, with a focus on the past two decades, her writing counteracts simplistic judgments and generates nuanced appreciation, while introducing an impressive number of writers and works, ranging from the old and established to the very young.

## ADDICTIVE PRODUCTS

Walsh covers a wide array of reading material, mainly fiction, the occasional poem, and even some comic books. The material is loosely arranged by theme, covering the older generation (including relatively familiar names, such as Can Xue, Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, and Yu Hua), urban literature (the 1990s social rebel and political

satirist Han Han, as well as more recent writing by migrant workers), escapist online fiction, morally and politically transgressive writing (“Boys’ Love” fiction, but also writing by and about ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and elsewhere), crime fiction, and of course the massive recent popularity of Chinese science fiction (Liu Cixin and others). Walsh draws frequent attention to the massive outburst of literary creativity on the Internet, where literally millions of novels are being published without having to jump through many of the regulatory hoops that characterize print publication.

Lucrative for some and addictive to many, China's serialized Internet novels embody everything that the shift from state-driven to market-driven culture has brought about. Online fiction is a successful industry that churns out products that sell. It creates jobs and generates revenue—the title of the relevant chapter in Walsh's book is “The Factory.” The entertainment quality of some of its products is undoubtedly high and has started to find favor (in English translation) with some young

Western readers as well, through websites such as Wuxiaworld. This, in turn, raises patriotic expectations that Chinese web fiction, especially its martial arts variety, may become China's answer to Japanese *manga* and

Korean boy bands—a potential source of “soft power.”

Online fiction is also inevitably messy and unruly, like everything else on the Internet. The state intervenes with some regularity in order to ensure that the industry does not descend below its somewhat conservative decency norms. At the same time, the state sponsors online writing competitions designed to lead to the creation of works of what it considers to be higher moral and ideological quality.

What is most remarkable about *The Subplot* is that so many of the works discussed by Walsh throughout the book are in fact available in English translation. She has also added a short, helpful list of references at the end of the book that guides interested readers to more texts and more information. It is worth mentioning that despite the relatively minor position of Chinese literature in the context of world literature, and despite our mainstream media showing little interest in any Chinese writers other than those it can



paint as “dissident” or lacking as such, there are in fact substantial niches (especially, again, on the Internet) where dedicated critics and translators of contemporary Chinese literature have for years been working to introduce new Chinese writing with an emphasis on its artistic rather than its political qualities. Walsh rightfully reserves high praise for the collective behind the website Paper Republic, active since 2007. I would add a recommendation for the many resources provided by the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing.

When Megan Walsh claims in her subtitle that her book tells us “what China is reading,” she

obviously overstates her case. Although it is genuinely erudite and enviably well-informed, *The Subplot* still only covers a fraction of Chinese people’s literary activity. The second part of the subtitle—“and why it matters”—is, however, spot on. Walsh argues throughout that the tension between art and politics is increasingly pronounced in Western contexts as well. Understanding how Chinese writers cope with such tension and how their writing is shaped by it is therefore something that matters, something that helps us see beyond the ideological divide and into the small but precious spaces where art comes first. ■