

# 1. Insights for a post-pandemic world

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a different ambition: to move the future which is just beginning to *take shape* into view against the *still* predominant past.

Ulrich Beck

There may never be a ‘post-COVID world’, in the literal, posterior sense. However, if it is to serve as a novel scholarly appellation for the near future – the LSE’s trans-institutional ‘Shaping the Post-COVID World’ initiative being one indication this is so – then our initial questioning of it might begin with Ulrich Beck’s (1992, p.9) observations concerning the prefix ‘post-’, made nearly 30 years ago: as it gestures to a ‘beyond’ that cannot yet be known or named, the reality of that which is ‘post-’ can only be confronted through the familiar past and present that it purports to negate.

During the months in which this text was written, our world in many respects appeared to be in a moment of suspended transformation. Our intellectual lives, and the structures of daily life that sustain them, bore increasingly familiar features that mixed the improvisational with the decisive. The question of what will differentiate the arrangements that endure raises both a critical, scholarly imperative and an exigent impetus to act, or to shape the ‘post-pandemic world’ to the full extent that one can. Thus, the initial premise of this volume follows the widely read adjuration of Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) to see the pandemic as ‘a portal, [or] a gateway between one world and the next’. In her words, COVID-19 was an opportunity to rethink the world as it is and to ready ourselves to step into a new one, without, as she has put it, ‘dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us’. Roy’s stirring rhetoric comes entwined with her critical rigour and perspicacity, and it is our wish for this volume to likewise evince both aspects – the hopeful and the incisive – in its treatment of

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## How to cite this book chapter:

Mckenzie, Murray; Oh, Do Young; and Shin, Hyun Bang. 2022. ‘Insights for a post-pandemic world’. In: Shin, Hyun Bang; Mckenzie, Murray; and Oh, Do Young (eds) *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Insights for a post-pandemic world*. London: LSE Press, pp. 1–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.cov.a> License: CC BY 4.0.

the circumstances that COVID-19 brought differently or more clearly into view.

Nevertheless, so too do we yet harbour misgivings as to whether such questions of a ‘portal’ are the right ones to ask. Gautam Bhan, Teresa Caldeira, Kelly Gillespie, and AbdouMaliq Simone (2020) have opined that such monumental claims about COVID-19 – ‘totality, catastrophe, portal’ – evince an ‘overreach, ... romance, [and] rush to diagnose that inflames, encamps, and routes our imaginations’. They have argued that these tendencies reveal a northern paradigmatic imagination that slights the experiences of urban majorities in the global South, where emerging infectious diseases are but one risk among the many that constitute an enduring crisis to be contended with through the collaboratively improvisational practices of everyday life (see also Simone 2004). For many urban residents of the global South, there has been no lockdown, no social distancing, and no substantial change to provisions for sanitation or public health (Oldekop et al. 2020; Wasdani and Prasad 2020; Wilkinson 2020) – facts that often fall to critical social scientists to make known. Amid the circumstances of the pandemic, however, critical reflection and theorisation might compete with more urgent priorities to act, to contend with the exigencies of one’s embeddedness, or to attend to solidarities rather than critique (Barbosa 2020).

This volume, then, collects the insights of an ensemble of social scientists – area studies, development studies, and legal scholars; anthropologists, architects, economists, geographers, planners, sociologists, and urbanists; representing academic institutions, activist and charitable organisations, policy and research institutes, and areas of professional practice – who recognise the necessity of critical commentary and engaged scholarship while at the same time making no claims that the pandemic’s legacy or lessons can at this point be definitively known. Amid social sciences scholarship on COVID-19 at large, one readily finds evidence of disciplinary disjuncture and incoherence, as the deeper analysis and reflection through which concepts and theories will coalesce have remained in an incipient phase. What we do wish to convey, however, is our conviction that the sweeping consequences of COVID-19 will leave scarcely any focus of social research untouched, such that even social scientists who claim no expertise in infectious disease – most of us, of course – are likely to consider the relevance and possibilities of their research to have shifted in significant ways.

As we discuss in this introductory chapter, with reference to Beck’s *Risk Society*, as cited above, there have been two fundamental

perspectives that these social scientists' responses have been likely to take and with which we can argue for the value of these preliminary contributions. One is that which speaks from a situated position in relevant debates to challenge knowledge about the pandemic that has assigned selective and inequitable visibility to issues, people, or places, or which through its inferential or interpretive capacity has worked to set social expectations or assign validity to certain interventions with a bearing on the pandemic's course and the future it has foretold. The other perspective is that which has used the events and consequences of the pandemic to advance or renew understandings of social challenges, risks, or inequities that were already in place and which, without further or better action, are to be features of our 'post-pandemic world' as well.

By grounding this volume in Southeast Asia, we endeavour to help secure a place within these debates for a region that was among the first outside East Asia to be forced to contend with COVID-19 in a substantial way and which has evinced a marked and instructive diversity and dynamism in its fortunes. The relative success of Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand in dealing with the pandemic can be counterposed with the greater difficulties of Indonesia or the Philippines; the worsening of authoritarian leanings, the manipulation of information, the exploitation of migrant workers, stirrings of unrest, and outbreaks of political instability and conflict can be counterposed with demonstrations of technological innovation and heartening instances of grass-roots mobilisation. As we explain in this chapter, our editorial commitments in this regard owe much to our disciplinary grounding in urban geography, where postcolonial critiques of knowledge and difference have become transformational reference points in the intellectual and theoretical landscape (see, e.g., Robinson 2011; Robinson 2016; Roy 2009; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013). These critiques, alongside human geography's foundational neo-Marxian analysis of relational capitalist urbanisation (see, e.g., Doucette and Park 2019; Song and Hae 2019), have together compromised the viability of an archetypal 'Southeast Asian city' as an object of research (see Rimmer and Dick 2009) and a 'metrocentric' approach that foregrounds only select metropolitan regions (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010; Goh and Bunnell 2013). As we describe below, and acknowledging the methodological nationalism evidenced in other domains of Southeast Asian area studies, our preference is to think in terms of a multitude of situated outcomes and experiences that in their relational connectivity are in fact constitutive of

regional mappings bearing greater methodological utility than a priori framings can afford (Bunnell 2013; Ong 2011; Shin 2021).

## The unfolding pandemic in Southeast Asia

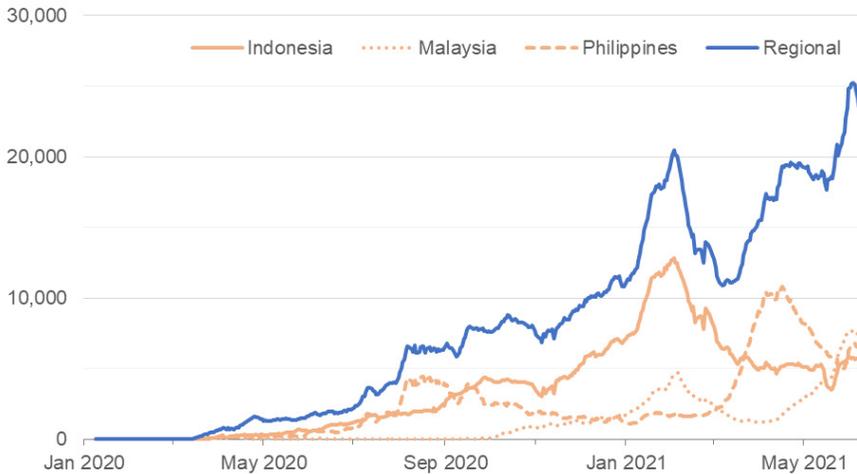
Southeast Asia was among the first regions outside East Asia to be significantly affected by COVID-19. While Thailand was the first country to report a case of COVID-19 outside China, on 13 January 2020, the Philippines reported the first death from the disease outside China on 2 February. Singapore, the region's global business hub, was also seen as an early transmitter of the virus to other parts of the world. It is well known that an international sales conference held in mid-January 2020 in Singapore was a key early node from which the virus circulated to other parts of the world, including the UK, France, South Korea, and Spain (Mandhana, Solomon, and Jeong 2020). By April, the country's initially measured approach and preservation of relative normality had given way to an advisory against non-essential travel abroad, the closure of the border to non-residents, the suspension of religious services, and a 'circuit-breaker' lockdown that was especially impactful on migrant worker dormitories (*The Economist* 2020a; *The Economist* 2021b).

Despite the early emergence of cases, many parts of Southeast Asia were known to have been less severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the number of COVID-19 cases and the resulting death rates. There are two principal caveats to this observation, however. First, the tremendous economic impact of COVID-19 in the region – more severe than that of the Asian financial crisis in 1997–1998 – was expected to have a lasting detrimental impact on inclusive growth, which fostered a widespread but mostly frustrated desire for political change that likely will have consequences for regional stability as well (*The Economist* 2020b). The GDP of the Philippines was expected to shrink 9.0% in 2020 (OECD 2021); the economies of Malaysia and Thailand have been severely affected too. The global economic downturn and travel restrictions had pervasive impacts on everyday life, as reported in scholarship on garment workers (Lawreniuk 2020), micro-finance borrowers (Brickell et al. 2020), and tourism operators (Do et al. 2021; Foo et al. 2020), for example. Second, as we conclude the writing of this chapter in June 2021, the identification of new clusters and the spread of more transmissible variants of the virus – partly attributable to recent festivals and the entry of infected foreigners – has been

straining healthcare resources and causing worry in scantily vaccinated areas of continental Southeast Asia that had hitherto been able to avoid being host to major outbreaks (*The Economist* 2021a) (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

According to the COVID Performance Index maintained by the Lowy Institute (2021), an Australian think tank that assessed the performance

**Figure 1.1.** New COVID-19 cases, seven-day moving average



Source: World Health Organization.

**Figure 1.2.** New COVID-19 deaths, seven-day moving average



Source: World Health Organization.

of 116 countries in managing the pandemic, several Southeast Asian countries ranked highly as of 13 March 2021, including Thailand (4th), Singapore (14th), Malaysia (17th), and Myanmar (24th). While some observers have doubted the reliability of such data, it is notable that even the worst-hit parts of Southeast Asia performed relatively better than many advanced Western countries. For example, as of 8 June 2021, the UK had recorded 1,915 COVID-19 deaths per million people. While similar rates were reported in other European countries – such as France, Italy, and Spain – Indonesia and the Philippines, as the two countries in Southeast Asia with the highest number of cases, had respectively recorded only 194 and 205 COVID-19 deaths per million (see Table 1.1). Reasons for this success might include ASEAN-led regional health governance (Caballero-Anthony 2021; see also Davies 2019), a widespread mask-wearing culture (Ratcliffe 2020), early domestic and international travel restrictions (Elegant 2020), or a mixture of all of these factors (Meagher 2020).

Furthermore, although the region's share of global COVID-19-related deaths was low, differences between Southeast Asian countries

**Table 1.1. Cumulative COVID-19 cases and deaths per million people across Southeast Asian countries, up to 8 June 2021**

Country	Population in millions (2019)	Cumulative cases per million	Cumulative deaths per million
Philippines	107.29	11,893	204.8
Indonesia	266.91	6,980	194.1
<b>SE Asia region</b>	<b>651.88</b>	<b>6,449</b>	<b>125.99</b>
Malaysia	32.58	19,093	106.2
Myanmar	54.34	2,658	59.4
Thailand	66.37	2,750	19.5
Cambodia	15.29	2,278	17.4
Timor-Leste	1.28	6,138	14.1
Singapore	4.03	15,451	8.2
Brunei Darussalam	0.46	531	6.5
Vietnam	96.21	94	0.6
Laos	7.12	276.	0.4

Sources: World Health Organization (cumulative cases and deaths); United Nations Statistical Division (populations).

cannot be overlooked, as they reflect diverse socio-economic and political conditions within the region. As mentioned above, several Southeast Asian countries like Singapore and Thailand were able to control their COVID-19 outbreaks with sound public health systems, massive test-and-trace regimes, swift government responses, and society-wide engagement. In hard-hit nations such as the Philippines and Indonesia, the situations were more concerning. We saw the rise of authoritarian governance including clamping down on free speech and declaring martial law (Russell 2020). Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte infamously threatened lockdown violators that he would ‘shoot them dead’ and ‘bury’ them, while informal residents already living in vulnerable conditions were pushed into more difficult economic situations (Gutierrez 2020; *Reuters* 2020). In Indonesia, President Joko Widodo introduced a Sukarno-like martial law that included repressive measures towards the media to tighten domestic control and surveillance (Kuddus 2020). At the same time, in the country, drinking traditional *jamu* was promoted by the president to build immunity against COVID-19 (Kuddus 2020). In fact, these poor pandemic responses could be said to have resulted from the states being too weak to effectively mobilise society to tackle the spread of the virus, and not because they downplayed the risk (Pepinsky 2021). In this regard, as Greer et al. (2020) have argued, politics and policies are highly related to the effectiveness of COVID-19 responses.

A pandemic may also operate as an ‘X-ray’ image that reveals long-lasting societal fractures (McCann 2020). For example, the COVID-19 outbreak among migrant workers in large dormitories in Singapore exposed the inherent problems of its selective migration regime (Lin and Yeoh 2020). While more than one million low-skilled migrant workers served as the ‘hidden’ backbone of the Singaporean economy by providing cheap labour to four million Singaporeans (Li 2020), their well-being was largely overlooked by the Singaporean government. In Thailand, more than one million undocumented migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar were excluded from state legal protection while struggling to return to their home countries due to mobility restrictions (*Radio Free Asia* 2020). Refugees in the region were also excluded from social protection provided by the state, having been mistreated or stigmatised (Human Rights Watch 2021a; Thiri Shwesin Aung, Fischer, and Wang 2021).

It is also important to note that COVID-19 will be remembered as a moment of not only public health crisis but also political crisis.

As mentioned earlier, Myanmar was considered a country that had successfully tackled the outbreak, but a coup in February 2021 raised major political as well as health concerns in the region. In Myanmar, health-care workers and civil servants led a civil disobedience campaign to fight against the return to military dictatorship. Frontline health workers' decision to risk their lives and boycott work reflected the political urgency amid a worsening pandemic situation (BMJ Opinion 2021). Thailand and Cambodia also experienced human rights crises in 2020: students, media, opposition parties, and human rights defenders were attacked and suppressed by states that aimed to silence critical voices (Human Rights Watch 2021a; Human Rights Watch 2021b). Global action to respond to emerging threats to democracy in the region remained largely insignificant. ASEAN's efforts to restore democracy in Myanmar were meagre despite convening several meetings (*Al Jazeera* 2021). Such circumstances raised concerns about the peaceful and equitable future of the region.

No one is safe until everyone is safe. This adage succinctly captures the challenges faced by Southeast Asia and the world. The extent of direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on the region has varied, but the ever-changing pandemic situation suggested that globally coordinated responses to COVID-19 were necessary to overcome its multi-faceted challenges. In June 2021, Malaysia struggled to stop a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases and again imposed a two-week lockdown to stop the virus. There were also new surges of COVID-19 cases in Vietnam and Singapore. Vaccination was considered a key solution to tackle the virus, but the progress of vaccination campaigns varied across the region. As of 14 June 2021, Singapore was leading (80.19 doses per 100 people), followed by Cambodia (33.12), while in Vietnam less than two doses (1.60) had been administered per 100 people (Our World in Data 2021). Along with supply issues, distrust in military governments is one of the key reasons for low vaccination rates in the region (Thompson 2021).

While the mainstream media and government announcements focused on official programmes to address the pandemic, it would be erroneous to disregard bottom-up initiatives that built upon the strengths of local communities and civil societies. Community-based responses to the pandemic produced the possibility for more progressive changes in the region. For example, both Padawangi (Chapter 18) and Perkasa (Chapter 20) in this volume highlight community efforts to slow down the spread of the virus. On the other hand, in Vietnam, it was expected

that the country's high public trust, building upon the transparency of COVID-19 information, could increase expectations and demands for further positive political changes (Truong 2020). In this regard, COVID-19 allowed us to imagine an alternative system driven by empowered people and communities. In the following section, we will look into what we can learn from the pandemic, laying out the key perspectives that guided our project.

### **Learning from the pandemic: our perspectives**

As indicated above, this volume commences from Arundhati Roy's (2020) proposition that COVID-19 opened a 'portal' through which circumstances are brought more clearly into view and through which we might collectively venture in the imagination of future possibilities. Like the pandemic itself, this approach is not without precedent. In geography and urban studies, for instance, Ali and Keil (2006) surveyed the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak and concluded that, while the greater, faster, and more spatially complex connectivity of the global city network should be recognised as posing new risks for the transmission of emerging infectious diseases and new challenges for their containment, an inverse perspective was also worthy of better recognition, namely that the study of infectious disease might serve as a fruitful 'new entry point for the already lively debate on connectedness in the global city universe' (Ali and Keil 2006, p.493). There are two general and equally valid interpretations of what this 'entry point' – or 'portal' for Roy (2020) – represents. The first is in accordance with the principles of political ecology as a mode of geographical critique. As Ali and Keil have extended to COVID-19 in collaboration with one of this volume's contributors (Connolly, Keil, and Ali 2020), it is the literal sense in which infectious disease wedges open a view onto the ecological pressures that are attendant on socio-spatial change and its entanglement with natural and social processes and systems. The second is a broader interpretation, which commences from the position that *all* modes and domains of critique have had some, and often many, of their points of reference changed, with implications as well as possibilities for intellectual work that are impossible to ignore. Taking inspiration from Chen's *Asia as Method* (2010), it could be proposed that the coronavirus pandemic, as an imagined anchoring point for scholars in a host of contexts, locations, and disciplines, like the ambiguous 'Asia' Chen has in mind, can be strategically mobilised to generate 'alternative horizons

and perspectives' (Chen 2010, p.212) that gain in political and integrative potential precisely by virtue of their emotional force.

Using this latter interpretation, which features implicitly in every contribution to this volume, we catalogued hundreds of English-language publications in the fields of development, human geography, planning, and urban studies for which to date (March 2021) COVID-19 had served as a 'portal', 'entry point', or 'method'. Nearly all of them had been written by scholars who claimed no expertise in infectious disease. Instead, many of them adopted the pandemic and its consequences, including the suspension of most primary research activities, as an appropriate juncture for the critical re-evaluation of each scholar's research area or sub-field. Such re-evaluation has been especially energetic in the geography of tourism, for example. In the three most highly cited papers, according to Google Scholar, of any of the publications we have catalogued thus far, Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2020), Hall, Scott, and Gössling (2020), and Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) have argued that COVID-19 exposed the critical flaws in global tourism's fundamental growth model, including its exposure to risk and its lack of resilience as well as its implication in the climate crisis. They have further highlighted associated problems such as deforestation, industrialised food production, and neo-liberal injustices such as labour exploitation and tax avoidance.

Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992, p.9), and his ambition to 'move the future which is just beginning to take shape into view against the still predominant past', affords a useful initial basis for summing up what it is that holds this outburst of scholarship together and what original critical undertaking it might collectively advance. Beck's compelling and well-known thesis, originally written in German in 1986, is that the late-capitalist logic of the production and distribution of *risks* has now become dominant over – and therefore in some sense a determinant of – the high-capitalist logic of the production and distribution of *wealth*. Those risks encompass the multitude of hazardous externalities that occur because of the expansion of techno-economic production, of which the accelerated transmission of emerging infectious diseases is a good example (Connolly, Keil, and Ali 2020), and that must consequently be identified and avoided, contained, or distributed.

Overall, the potential application of this lens to COVID-19 scholarship involves two essential perspectives. First, given their invisibility and uncertainty, risks acquire their social existence only through the knowledge that is available about them and thus are dependent on social

construction: northern political and economic concerns related to emerging infectious diseases are a ready example (see King 2002). This is one of the essential premises of geographers' recent critical interventions into global health and 'the differentiated manner in which particular problems, populations, and spaces are rendered visible and amenable to intervention' therein (Brown, Craddock, and Ingram 2012, p.1183). Scholarship in this vein served a vital purpose in the year before this volume's publication by challenging the rationalities and causal interpretations, as well as their implicit social expectations and value judgements, through which the pandemic was understood and addressed in various contexts. In the responses of some governments to COVID-19, for example, an immoderate dependence on sophisticated analytics variously caused the neglect of other forms of public health knowledge, such as field experience; the neglect of the societal implications of containment measures, including worsening domestic violence and mental health (Dodds et al. 2020); and the neglect of the nuances of spatially uneven and unjust outcomes that are not easily conveyed in summary statistics or graphical forms (Everts 2020). In other instances, scholars have focused their criticism on the intensification of a medicalised surveillance capitalism, in which the modelling and monitoring of COVID-19 have been guided principally by profit motives rather than practical feasibility or a regard for data privacy and security. The trade-off between public health and civil liberties that was constructed in debates about digital pandemic containment technologies was an especially contentious aspect of this issue (Kitchin 2020) that is echoed in several of the contributions to this volume (see Chapters 4 and 5 in particular).

Second, risks are unevenly distributed in ways that might amplify existing inequalities or complicate them, as evident at all scales from the interpersonal to the global. In often-predictable ways, many of the risks and consequences of industrial *over*-production are displaced, by a combination of design and circumstance, onto the same disadvantaged groups for whom material scarcity remains a real predicament, such as the residents of Jakarta's informal settlements, who are among the people in the region most vulnerable to the risks of environmental pollution, flooding, and land subsidence (Firman et al. 2011). These groups, furthermore, are more likely to lack the information and resources needed to recognise and avoid the risks to which they are exposed. As Harvey (2020) argued early in the pandemic, the familiar refrain that 'we are all in this together' was no more than a rhetorical

cloak over outcomes that were highly differentiated by class, gender, race, ethnicity, and other intersecting factors of oppression, largely originating in the dual burdens of exposure to the virus and to job losses that were disproportionately borne by the ‘new working class’ of the tertiary sector. This was as true of the millions of ‘impoverished, hungry, thirsty’ migrant workers that Roy (2020) observed trekking out of India’s megacities in late March 2020 as it was for the most vulnerable communities of Chicago and New York (Maroko, Nash, and Pavidonis 2020).

Thus, there is also a two-part answer to the question of the pandemic’s political meaning – the question of ‘a portal to what?’ There is, first, the part that seizes the opportunity to construct an objective community of global risk, potentially in the utopian terms of an imminent collectivity, facilitated by a ‘great awakening’ (Gills 2020) to new intersectional equivalences based on the degree and urgency of endangerment. Among the possibilities that social scientists have raised is that COVID-19 might serve as catalyst for a new global development paradigm (Oldekop et al. 2020), a sustainability transition (Cohen 2020; Goffman 2020; Wells et al. 2020), or more caring and inclusive approaches in urban planning and design (Forester 2020; Jon 2020; Pineda and Corburn 2020). The second part of the answer steps back from the commonality of positive social change – for, indeed, commonality might be precisely the grounds upon which responsibility is deferred – to ask whence risk’s most charged political subjects are to come. This part of the answer, referring again to Beck, is that it might be the anxious solidarities of *negative* social change that prove more animating in the current era: negative in the sense that their foremost concern is not with need or want but with the demand to be *spared* from exposure to the manifold potential dangers we have collectively produced. In other words, it may be enough to say – as the ambiguous phrase ‘post-pandemic’ implicitly does – that what we are searching for in the present is a portal simply to ‘something other than this’.

## Learning from Southeast Asia

The way we have situated this study in Southeast Asia reveals the influence of our disciplinary grounding in urban geography, where, among the scholarly fields represented in this volume, there has been an especially sustained and impactful application of postcolonial critiques of knowledge and difference to theoretical debates. Among the most

influential texts is Robinson's *Ordinary Cities* (2006), which makes a forceful argument against widely evinced practices in canonical urban studies through which only certain cities have become launching sites for novel theoretical propositions, and categorical divisions and hierarchies imposed on cities and world regions have amounted to incommensurability for the purposes of learning and understanding them. Robinson enjoined urban geographers to think in terms of 'a world of ordinary cities' (Robinson 2006, p.1) or a world in which conceptual innovations or insights can arise from any urban situation or process (see also Robinson 2016). Her intervention has helped to motivate geography and its adjacent disciplines to engage more systematically with the intellectual legacy of subaltern studies, with its methodological tools for resisting constrictive and hegemonic conceptions of political action, and especially with the injunction of Chakrabarty (2000) to 'provincialize' European thought by instating difference as an analytic through which academic knowledge is consciously produced. Accordingly, a recent bibliometric assessment of the cities that are now 'on and off the map' of urban globalisation research recommends cautious optimism about an evident but incomplete decentring of Euro-American cities, with select East Asian cities especially gaining representation, including Tokyo, Shanghai, and Beijing (Kanai, Grant, and Jianu 2018; see also Shin 2021 and Song and Hae 2019).

This volume, accordingly, is intended to make a modest effort to expand and enrich the representation of Southeast Asian experiences in English-language scholarship, a task we have set out to undertake by consciously mobilising regional contributors from the perspective of decolonisation and decentring knowledge production (see Chapter 26 in this volume). Our quick assessment of the first 834 English-language publications responding to COVID-19 in development, human geography, planning, and urban studies that we had collected as of March 2021 found that only 3.4% of them thoroughly described or analysed experiences of the pandemic in Southeast Asia – a figure that suggests the region has been afforded only two-fifths of the representation it is due based on its share of the world's population. What we cannot yet offer, however, is a rigorous analysis of the extent to which that 3.4% of publications resists the prevalent tendency to elide or assimilate southern social phenomena into dominant narratives originating in, or more attentive to, cities and regions of the global North. The urban theorist Ananya Roy (2009; 2011b) has been especially observant of the problem that it is insufficient to redouble efforts to compile empirical

research on the subaltern urbanisms of the global South or to refashion them as desirably ‘vibrant and entrepreneurial’ (Roy 2011b, p.226). Rather, theoretical propositions about cities in the global South must be ‘appropriated, borrowed, and remapped’ (Roy 2009, p.820), or made to travel in all manner of ways to stimulate new insights and provocations beyond their places of origin if theory generated in the global North is to yield up its exclusive authoritative force. Consequently, urban geographers have developed an influential and highly innovative body of work focused on epistemologies and methodologies of comparative research, often encompassing cities occupying markedly different positions in relation to global economic and social flows (see Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2016; McFarlane 2010; Robinson 2011).

Among Roy’s enduring contributions to this literature is her argument for the strategic grounding of knowledge production in world regions and a reformulated ‘area studies’, albeit attentive to ‘the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity, and relational connectivity’ through which cities and regions are made (Amin 2004, p.34; see also Roy 2009). In taking ‘Asia’ as her consciously ambiguous focus, Roy’s aim is not to adopt it as a territorial container for a multitude of urban meanings but rather to demonstrate how its circulating models, its inter-referenced plans and policies, and its aspirations to globality or futurity are in fact constitutive of the same geographical space for which they stand (see also Ong 2011); they affect a ‘making and unmaking of the referent’ that is ‘Asia’ (Roy 2011a, p.309). In so doing, these experiments and claims practise a form of self-recognition that is not a conferral of visibility onto a subaltern Other in and through which colonial difference is reinscribed, but instead achieve a centring, or ‘worlding’, of themselves that resists being subtended by implicitly Euro-American categories, concepts, or habits of thought (see Chakrabarty 2000). Chua (2011) and Pow (2014), for example, have interrogated Singapore’s self-scripting of its own success and the attendant partial borrowings of its lessons, or a Singapore ‘model’, in a wide range of urban contexts – an essential precursor, perhaps, for the influence of Singapore’s technology-focused pandemic response in places as distant as the Czech Republic (Kouřil and Ferenčuhová 2020). Park, Shin, and Kang (2020) have evinced a similar process of self-referencing in the case of South Korea’s promulgation of its developmental model.

As Bunnell (2013) has observed, the beneficial implications of this perspective for Southeast Asian area studies and for a lessened reliance on methodological nationalism therein have been acknowledged

far less among area studies scholars than have the corresponding implications for urban research. Rather, regional analyses of Southeast Asia depend predominantly on the a priori framings of either global economic macro-regions, in the view of which Southeast Asia typically occupies a supplementary position in relation to the Asia-Pacific, or of sub-regional economic areas, such as the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore growth triangle. While greater attention to Southeast Asia’s intraregional, transnational urbanisms is broadly warranted by this situation, in Bunnell’s view, the approach to intra-Asian urban aspirations developed in Roy and Ong’s 2011 edited volume *Worlding Cities*, as well as in Bunnell’s own editorial work (Bunnell et al. 2012), is distinctly capable of allowing mappings of regions-in-information to cohere through existing linkages and relations as they are observed, whether movements of financial capital or the everyday dreams of disadvantaged urban residents. The point is not that a relational urban geography should necessarily displace differently scaled geographical analyses but that the methodological innovations of postcolonial urban studies – including sensitivities to forms in emergence, to the mutability of geographical constructions, and to the possibility of alternative topological mappings – have much to offer beyond the study of cities for which they were devised. Concurrently, we are also mindful of the danger of postcolonial perspectives ‘falling into the epistemological pitfall of liberal pluralistic thinking’ and of how such approaches may ‘potentially neutralise or bypass historical violence and structural hierarchies’ (Hae and Song 2019, p.11; see also Shin 2021, pp.65–67). To this extent, we are reminded of Roy’s (2016, p.207) avowal that refers to how postcolonial approaches would help her ‘undertake a political economy attentive to historical difference as a fundamental and constitutive force in the making of global urbanization’. Thus, while each of the chapters in this volume takes a starting point that falls within Southeast Asia as conventionally understood, more important in our view is that each conveys a regional formation-in-the-making that claims a positioning within this world in its own way.

That does not mean that this volume attempts to reach any conclusions as to what the enduring rearrangements instigated by COVID-19 in Southeast Asia are likely to be. Certainly, over the course of the pandemic, the imaginative force of a perpetually emergent and technologically sophisticated ‘New Asia’ (Chang 2005), comprising a selection of East and Southeast Asian megacities, has held force in commentaries on the successful management of outbreaks in China, Singapore, and

South Korea. Exemplary is the economist Yasheng Huang's analysis in the *Harvard Business Review* of the synergistic blend of collectivist mindsets, advanced digital infrastructures, and compliant adoption of contact-tracing technologies to which he ascribes those countries' shared success (Huang, Sun, and Sui 2020). As Ong (2008; 2016) has documented, Singapore's well-nurtured bioscientific capabilities have been among the principal beneficiaries of its competitive ambitions, as well as of its post-SARS sensitivity to epidemiological risk, and these capabilities have in turn been an overlooked impetus to Asia's incessant remaking, now 'as a genomic, epidemiological, and environmental continuity' (2016, p.xiv). Ong also observes, however, how less well-resourced states such as Indonesia have cautiously negotiated to preserve a measure of 'bio-sovereignty' amid capitalistic and cross-regional initiatives for global health.

Taken as a whole, it is through a lens that takes Southeast Asia's cities as 'milieus of intervention', or as launching points for 'a plethora of situated experiments', as posited by Ong (2011, p.2), that this volume best stands to bring a post-pandemic world into view. The workings of this analytic depend, in ethos and orientation if not in an explicitly conceptual sense (see Anderson and McFarlane 2011), on the foregrounding of various situated articulations of knowledges and practices, or 'global assemblages' (Collier and Ong 2005), through which the broader shifts instigated or illuminated by the pandemic can be productively grasped. Consequently, Ong (2011) has argued, canonical theories of the political economy of globalisation or of subaltern postcoloniality are liable to be made untenable in their hegemonic forms, for what is demonstrated is that neither singular causalities nor privileged social categories alone suffice to explain the multitude of situated outcomes and experiences that are engendered by such overarching phenomena as COVID-19. Our contributors' conclusions must perforce be open-ended; the concepts and methods they use and the challenges and initiatives they describe neither hold consistent from one chapter to the next nor collectively exhaust the most salient themes for social research arising from COVID-19 in this part of the world. Each chapter, however, initiates an intellectual engagement with a world amid crisis, and, while theoretical intervention is constrained by each chapter's brevity as well as the risk of being premature, the circumstances under which this book was produced have the benefit of bringing many of its contributors' personal and political entanglements to the fore, while giving voice to authors from the region, many of

whom are early career researchers under-represented in mainstream English publications.

## **Learning from COVID-19 in the region**

COVID-19 presented huge challenges to governments, businesses, civil societies, and people from all levels of society, but its impact was highly variegated, affecting society in multiple negative ways, with uneven geographical and socio-economic patterns. The collaborative scholarly initiative in which this volume originated began with our recognition that, despite the profound implications COVID-19 posed for Southeast Asia, critical perspectives on and from the region were under-represented in many academic forums, apart from a small number of regionally specific initiatives. With this in mind, we solicited contributions from a diverse selection of social scientists that contemplate the lessons COVID-19 might hold for a ‘post-pandemic world’ in and beyond Southeast Asia. Within these contributions, we have identified three major themes, which serve as the titles for the three parts of this book: (1) Urbanisation, digital infrastructures, economies, and the environment; (2) Migrants, (im)mobilities, and borders; and (3) Collective action, communities, and mutual action.

### **Urbanisation, infrastructure, economies, and the environment**

Arundhati Roy’s (2020) notion of the pandemic as a ‘portal’ is among the most arresting of a considerable number of arguments for viewing COVID-19 as a catalytic crisis that has modified or accelerated processes of social change that were already considered urgent matters in the social sciences. For instance, Cohen (2020) has observed that the pandemic’s destabilisation of global financial markets, disruption of international supply chains and tourism, and prompt to reconsider patterns of work forced our thinking about prosperity and sustainability to advance abruptly in a direction broadly like the one in which governments, multilateral organisations, and research institutions had moving with respect to sustainable consumption for 30 years. Oldekop et al. (2020) have argued that the pandemic substantiates the case for a more global, rather than international, development paradigm that equally implicates countries of the global North and South in the shared challenges of the climate crisis and patterns of deprivation and inequality. Harvey (2020) has argued that the pandemic underscores the problems

of the existing global model of capital accumulation, which was already troubled by protest movements and other challenges to its legitimacy as well as mounting signs of poor economic health, such as the excessive creation of debt.

It is now the task of the social sciences to ground these and other interlinked arguments for the pandemic's significance in the empirical specificities of an array of contexts, not least because in many cases one finds that the strained political systems of severely affected countries may have constrained both the durability and progressiveness of adaptive responses. In Part I of this volume, contributors do this with respect to several salient dimensions of social change, namely urbanisation, digital infrastructures, economies, and the environment. First, from a regional perspective, Connolly (Chapter 2) discusses how our urban economies became prone to infectious disease, as the rise of globalisation not only made cities interconnected but also facilitated the emergence of peri-urban and regional connections that created greater challenges in terms of containing epidemic outbreaks. Rapid urbanisation seen in regions such as Southeast Asia has not been accompanied by an adequate provision of infrastructure such as clean water supplies and housing appropriate for tackling the proliferation of infectious disease. To address these problems, Connolly calls for the incorporation of socio-ecological justice for our urban economies to achieve more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable future development.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address digital technology and the economy. By taking Malaysia and Cambodia as their main case studies, the authors attend to the impacts of the pandemic on digital infrastructure. The use of digital technology for tackling the pandemic (e.g. app-based contact tracing) was a major area of innovation for pandemic-affected countries across the world. While the pandemic contributed to the deepening of digitalisation of social services including health and education, Gong, Shaharudin, and Tumin (Chapter 3) shed light on the ways in which such digitalisation may not create equitable opportunities for people, even though governments and businesses would encourage digital technologies to enhance the resilience of their labour force to the pandemic. For Yatid and Said (Chapter 4), the rapid adoption of digital technologies to control the spread of infectious disease raised concerns for data governance, especially with regard to ensuring data privacy and security. Young (Chapter 5) raises an important aspect of digital platforms as a double-edged sword based on his study of digital platforms and online communities in Cambodia. Digital platforms have

been a key arena for communities to connect with each other; however, it is also important to be aware that digital platforms can be an invisible means of state surveillance.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine the impact of the pandemic on select industries, namely real estate, business process outsourcing, and garment manufacturing. Here, we glimpse how the global pandemic affected the global production network and value production. Ng (Chapter 6) examines how cross-border investment practices in real estate markets responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on Malaysia's 'My Second Home Programme', which encouraged offshore property investment, the chapter exposes the fragile conditions of domestic property markets that depended heavily on the mobility of international investors when such mobility was constrained by movement restrictions. He thus calls for state action to curb the industrial practices of building housing for profit, which exacerbates affordability problems for local populations.

In Chapter 7, on the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in the Philippines, Thompson reveals the exploitative relationship between the global North and the global South, which drove BPO workers to face greater risks during the pandemic to support the lives of consumers in the global North. In Chapter 8, Brickell, Chhom, Lawreniuk, and So critically reflect upon the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on garment workers who were trapped in what the authors conceptualise as 'global precarity chains'. In line with the arguments made by Thompson, Brickell et al. also shed light on the ways in which garment workers in Cambodia faced harsher life conditions, which were initially generated by the precarious position of the country's garment industry in global value chains but were further exacerbated by the pandemic pushing workers into greater indebtedness.

Chapter 9 turns to labour relations, taking the example of labour activism and campaigning in Vietnam. Here, Buckley examines the structure of labour relations in Vietnam's socialist market economy and discusses how the national campaign by the state-led labour organisation co-existed with self-organised labour activism at the grassroots level. For Buckley, this dual structure was effective in advancing demands for safer workplaces as well as broader reformist changes to promote fair wages and welfare benefits amid pandemic-generated economic hardship. While exposing limitations, this dual structure was deemed effective in terms of preventing acute impacts of pandemic on many Vietnamese workers.

Finally, Chapter 10 steps back to reflect on the relationship between Southeast Asian economies and socio-environmental conditions and how this relationship was reshaped by the pandemic. Here, taking the example of haze in Indonesia and Malaysia, Smith and Varkkey draw attention to the possibility of how haze-generated air pollution and the spread of infectious disease might have reinforced each other during the pandemic.

### **Migrants, (im)mobilities, and borders**

The widespread imposition of restrictions on movement during COVID-19, including border closures, lockdowns, social distancing measures, and travel restrictions, signalled a profound resurgence of geographical closure, political disintegration, and territoriality that augured a very different post-pandemic world (Dodds et al. 2020; Radi, Pinos, and Ptak 2021; Ren 2020). Observers anxiously raised the prospect of various government responses and political debates reinforcing aspects of exclusionary nationalism and its linkages with authoritarianism, prejudice, and the politics of fear; however, it has also remained possible that the pandemic will prove to be an impetus for greater cooperation and cross-national solidarity (Bieber 2020). As a critical node in the control of transnational mobility, Singapore has already been centred within these debates and used to demonstrate that pandemic containment measures have tended to sustain existing regimes and the pathologisation of select mobilities, especially that of migrant workers (Lin and Yeoh 2020). These areas of inquiry are worked through and addressed from several places within Southeast Asia in the second part of this volume.

The salience of pre-existing structures of inequality impacting on migrant workers is well-demonstrated by Chapters 11 and 12, both of which take Singapore as their scene of analysis. In Chapter 11, Jamieson presents a critical and theoretically informed consideration of the preconditions for the uncontained outbreaks that afflicted migrant worker dormitories. His argument is that this exposure was enabled by the construction of the migrant worker as a pathological subject in the context of the 'logistical violence' of the global supply chains (Cowen 2014) within which the city-state had positioned itself as a global node. The model of 'logistical citizenship' that this entailed, for Singapore, in effect sequestered migrant labour from state or societal responsibility by way of formal and informal policy mechanisms, the

nested hierarchies of agents and contracts, and the spatial logic of the dormitory – with enduring and exploitative consequences that must not be allowed to slip behind the premise of quarantine as a temporary measure. In Chapter 12, Antona reports on the experiences of live-in domestic workers, whose mobility was acutely circumscribed, especially during Singapore’s ‘circuit-breaker’ containment measures. Describing domestic workers’ confinement in the homes of their employers, where they were subjected to increased surveillance and control and tasked with greater responsibilities, and their reluctance to travel outside the city-state when their right to return became much less certain, Antona’s most rousing finding is how few of her interlocutors regarded this as a meaningful change from ordinary circumstances, or as less of a ‘new normal’ and more of the ‘same old’.

A similar critique of pre-existing inequalities is evident in Chapters 13 and 14, both of which address the plight of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), ordinarily characterised as the Philippines’ ‘modern-day heroes’ for the hardships they endure, and for the substantial benefits remittances provide to OFWs’ households as well as the national economy. In Chapter 13, Fernandez, Muyot, Pangilinan, and Quijano focus on the experiences of the over 600,000 OFWs whom the pandemic had forced to repatriate as of April 2021. The difficulties they faced upon return – including, *inter alia*, lengthy and inconvenient journeys from Metro Manila to their home provinces, limited access to financial assistance or protection against exposure to COVID-19, and the necessity of compensatory adjustments to household expenses, including the withdrawal of children from education – illuminated their underlying disadvantages, precarity, and stigmatisation. So too did these difficulties illuminate shortcomings of governance, including underinvestment in community infrastructure and human capital, deferrals of responsibility to impoverished provincial and local governments, dilatory adaptation or policy responses, and insensitivity or misguidance in policy choices.

In Chapter 14, Humi presents a complementary analysis of the difficulties faced by OFWs who remained employed in frontline health-care roles in the UK, where they constituted the nationality dying from COVID-19 in the greatest numbers among National Health Service (NHS) staff. She observes that the ‘heroes’ narrative is echoed in the affinity that Britons hold for NHS workers, the insufficiency of which was demonstrated by gestures such as weekly performances of ‘clapping for carers’ while pay increases, adequate personal protective equipment, and secure immigration statuses were not forthcoming. Humi uses

these circumstances to forcefully situate the control and exploitation of Filipino and other migrant labour with respect to colonial legacies, the disruptive interventions of international organisations, and the deleterious fragmentation of such imagined communities as the ‘Filipino global nation’.

In Chapter 15, Tan and Romadan take a more policy-oriented approach to examining the societal consequences of the redoubled vulnerability of Malaysia’s migrant workers during the pandemic. While poor living standards amplified migrants’ viral exposure and rates of transmission, the inadequacy of governmental support for their employers worsened migrants’ precarity of employment and attendant residential status. Tan and Romadan’s point is that the argument for more effective government intervention in these circumstances is not only moral; there is also a compelling economic argument that encompasses (1) externalities such as the healthcare burden of the virus’s poorly mitigated circulation; (2) the qualities of migrant workers that make them difficult to replace (i.e. their willingness to take lower-skilled and unappealing jobs); and (3) the dangerous assumptions (a) that the costly modernisation of production technologies can be achieved simply by impeding industries from utilising low-cost, labour-intensive strategies, and (b) that it is lower-skilled roles, typically filled by migrants, that technology is most likely to displace.

In Chapter 16, Koh discusses the significance of borders and bordering practices as technologies of selective inclusion and exclusion, which were strengthened by the pandemic as well as augmented by such tactics as travel bubbles and ‘green’ or ‘fast’ lanes. Her argument is that what we witnessed is not only the illumination of the enduring logics of injustice that inform existing borders and bordering tactics but also their greater entwinement with health security in ways that will reshape the unequal privileges of mobility and which therefore bear considerable and potentially lasting ethical and political significance. Of critical importance here, as in many contributions to this volume, are the underlying inequalities that impact individuals’ health status and exposure to the virus, which are easily occluded by the legitimacy of public health considerations and the objectivity of testing for the virus or antibodies.

Koh’s observations are complemented by Chapter 17, in which Wardani and Maw Thoe Myar share an anthropological perspective on the Myanmar–China border area from Muse, a small town in Myanmar’s northern Shan State. Visiting the border crossing in July

2020, the authors detail the diverse mix of actors contending with unexpected macro-level changes in policy and trade and the uncertainty of the pandemic's course through various improvised means. Truck drivers camped within their stranded vehicles, found support in nearby communities, and haggled to offload perishable agricultural goods to local traders. Hawkers, smugglers, and peddlers worked flexibly between formal and informal economic arrangements.

### Collective action, communities, and mutual aid

Given the profound uncertainty brought by disrupted or accelerated processes of social change and the challenges of closure, disintegration, and enforced immobility, the third part of this volume sharpens our collective focus on the pandemic's diverse impacts on everyday life. There we find cause for hope. For, as Springer (2020, p.112) has suggested, one can find evidence of a 'resurgence of reciprocity' in every part of the world, as everyday acts of care and compassion hold communities together despite lockdowns and social distancing. In Part III, on collective action, communities, and mutual aid, eight chapters investigate various bottom-up initiatives in the region to support communities and slow the spread of COVID-19. It is of considerable importance that these analyses of everyday strategies of collective care and resistance adopt an intersectional sensitivity to how the uneven impacts of the outbreak, as well as unequal opportunities to access mutual support, have been conditioned by existing structures of oppression. These chapters allow us to imagine an alternative system driven by empowered communities. In this regard, Chapter 18 by Padawangi provides an overview of various potentials that collective actions can bring against the capitalist mode of production amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, this chapter sees COVID-19 as an opportunity to challenge 'normalcy' by looking into different collective movements in Indonesia from food-sharing in neighbourhoods to online protests and political participation.

Chapters 19 and 20 demonstrate challenges and possibilities for communities to respond to the multiple crises resulting from COVID-19. In Chapter 19, Sangsuradej investigates Myanmar's complex situation resulting from the pandemic and a series of political crises, including the 2021 coup. While the pandemic revealed the deep-rooted political, economic, and ethnic divides of the country, Sangsuradej finds that urban community groups played a key role in preventing the spread of the virus in disadvantaged areas. Similarly, in Chapter 20, Perkasa shows

how community groups mobilised themselves to manage and control the spread of the virus by introducing health protocols in response to government mismanagement in Surabaya, Indonesia. For Perkasa, the idea of community-based mutual help, known in Indonesia as *gotong royong*, was a key element to prevent further adverse effects from COVID-19.

In Chapter 21, Lim demonstrates how COVID-19 was utilised by the Singaporean state to legitimate the state's interventions regarding food security issues. He also points out that, despite the rhetoric of food security, the state insufficiently addressed lived food insecurity issues as more households faced difficulties in accessing sufficient, safe, and nutritious food. In such circumstances, community-led food-sharing initiatives were the pivotal point to support vulnerable groups in many parts of Southeast Asia. Chatinakrob, in Chapter 22, analyses the 'happiness-sharing pantries' campaign in Thailand, a platform allowing community members to donate food for whoever needed it. This is an example of how a local, bottom-up initiative can be a national-level campaign supporting vulnerable groups in society. In the Philippines, a similar initiative also played a key role in aiding vulnerable groups. In Chapter 23, Guazon provides a vivid account of community support for female informal residents despite a draconian lockdown imposed by the state. Guazon also reminds us that researchers need to learn from vulnerable people, who are often only seen as the subject of research.

The remaining chapters also show the role of communities in dealing with various social problems beyond the reach of the state resulting from COVID-19. Chapter 24 by Tengku Nur Qistina examines how civil society and NGOs responded to domestic violence issues in Malaysia that the government did not adequately address. In Chapter 25, Hanung argues that already-marginalised groups in Southeast Asia, namely LGBTIQ people, were more severely affected by COVID-19, but community-led initiatives were crucial to empower the groups and build resilience in terms of economy, well-being, and advocacy. The various community-led initiatives introduced in Part III to tackle COVID-19 pandemic indicate the possibility that community-led initiatives can bring more positive and enduring changes to the region.

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