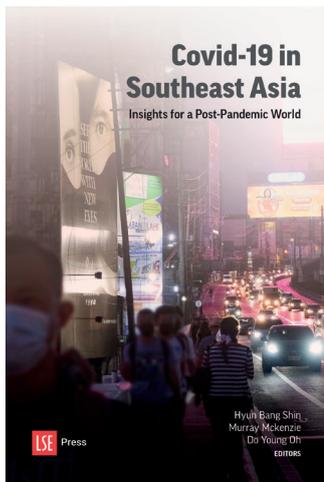


# Part 2

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Do Young Oh

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**PART II:  
MIGRANTS, (IM)MOBILITIES,  
AND BORDERS**



# 11. Logistical virulence, migrant exposure, and the underside of Singapore's model pandemic response

*William Jamieson*

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore was lauded for its early declaration of a public health emergency, its assiduous testing regime and track and trace system, and its quarantining of positive cases. However, the initial exemplarity of its pandemic response had been savagely undermined by April 2020 (Chew et al. 2020). Outbreaks in migrant worker dormitories had gone undetected and had to be contained by stringent lockdowns. As the infection spread, it quickly became apparent that it was nigh on impossible for migrant workers to effectively socially distance in their dorms, quartered 15–20 to a room, as well as sharing toilets, kitchens, and dining areas (Koh 2020). Migrant workers were decanted from their dormitories to disperse dense populations of healthy workers from infected dorms and quarantine infected workers. These temporary measures took equally utopian and dystopian turns; some workers were lodged in their own Housing Development Board flats, which are state-administered public housing usually out of reach for this segregated class of worker; some others were relocated to ocean liners, with separate ships for the healthy and for the infected, inverting the bygone practice of plague ships into a parody of the city-state's own attitude towards its workers: out of sight, out of mind. While these measures were eventually effective, Singapore's overall number of infections swelled to 56,000 by late August 2020; over 90% of those cases were from migrant worker dormitories (CNA 2020; Han 2020).

This chapter seeks to locate the unique exposure of migrant workers to disease during the pandemic within the city-state's peculiar political economy and the construction of the migrant worker as an already pathological subject requiring containment, both spatially and logistically. Migrant workers are not only a stigmatised source of cheap labour

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**Figure 11.1.** Tuas View Dormitory

Source: Robert John (2019).

within the city-state, their presence configured through recurrent moral panics by the state and the media, but also the subjects of a covert and problematic model of logistical citizenship that the Singaporean state requires for its reproduction. The initial exemplarity of Singapore's pandemic response was starkly unmasked to reveal what Yea (2020) has termed the 'institutionalised neglect' of its migrant workers; a study in 2017 found migrant workers at higher risk of infectious disease than the general population, owing to a combination of socio-economic status, countries of origin, and living conditions, as well as language and financial barriers to healthcare (Sadarangani, Lim, and Vasoo 2017). Singapore as a model global city has been undergirded by stark disparities in its subjects of governance: citizen, expat, and migrant worker (Yeoh 2006). While others have rightly responded to the exposure of the condition of migrant workers during the pandemic as an appalling disparity that needed to be ameliorated, this chapter will identify the mechanisms through which the vulnerability of migrant workers in Singapore stemmed from the haphazard construction of logistical citizenship, a biopolitical category the city-state relies upon to achieve its vaunted model of governance. This chapter aims to contribute towards critical geographies of logistics by centring the biopolitics of

citizenship. It begins with an outline of Singapore's logistical state, followed by a discussion of the evolving governance of migrant workers in Singapore. It then concludes with an analysis of Singapore's implicit model of logistical (non-)citizenship, a model of logistical violence that has in turn ripened into logistical virulence.

## Singapore as a logistical state

Recent scholarship has identified logistics as a critical practice that no longer only buffers the friction of global trade but has 'remade geographies of capitalist production and distribution on a global scale' (Cowen 2014, p.10), reconceptualising labour and citizenship within its spaces (Chua et al. 2018). Singapore's rise as a logistical state was intimately tied to the shifting cartographies of global production and circulation in the second half of the 20th century, leveraging its colonial legacy as an entrepot, already a prominent oil and rubber hub (Barr 2019). In labelling Singapore a logistical state, I build on Cowen's (2014) notion of the 'logistics city' – a new urban form central to the development of logistics in the 21st century – to refer to forms of governance that manage and mitigate the demands of logistical operations of paramount importance to self-styled global city 'nodes' such as Singapore, which this chapter will examine through the city-state's management of migrant labour. These forms of governance, as will be demonstrated, depended on a patchwork of formal and informal policy mechanisms, where state-created zones of private contracting and subcontracting engineer systems allow for greater exploitation of labour, while the most flagrant excesses of this system can be dismissed as design failures. These ad hoc systems were engineered not just to limit the liability of the state but to ensure that key logistical systems and infrastructures are maintained without incident. While not the only dimension of the logistical state, as many other theorists of logistics have noted, the disciplining and regulating of labour in logistical operations has been tied to the inherent vulnerability of these systems (Cowen 2014). Following Chua (2017), I demonstrate that this logistical violence has entailed a concomitant logistical vulnerability in the form of a logistical *virulence*. Canny social and economic policies positioned the nascent city-state as a key manufacturing and logistical node in the region, with its swift development through the 1970s and 1980s powered by nimble switches along manufacturing value chains, outsourcing lower-value manufacturing to nearby Malaysia and Indonesia. The introduction of the Central

Provident Fund (a mandatory savings and pensions programme), government-linked companies and banks, and sovereign wealth funds, as well as the vigorous pursuit of foreign direct investment and multi-national companies, formed the public face of Singapore's logistical-developmental trajectory, culminating in the paradoxical policy imaginary of a 'Singapore Model' (Chua 2011).

As Barr (2019) has noted, however, the role that low-paid migrant labour played in this transition has been almost comically underplayed: between 2004 and 2015 the number of foreign workers more than doubled, from 621,400 to 1,368,200, or 40% of the population. Foreign workers have served as a buffer, shielding the average Singaporean from the worst excesses of periodic unemployment (as employment passes can simply be revoked or reduced on an annual basis) and from the worst kinds of work and working conditions. The migrant worker, without any substantive political rights to reside or organise in Singapore, has been intimate with almost every facet of the production and reproduction of the logistical city-state:

Such foreign workers have built Singapore's factories, schools, skyscrapers, roads and railway lines [and] provided seemingly unlimited domestic service ... It is no exaggeration to say that Singapore's reliance upon cheap, vulnerable foreign labour has been at least as important to the country's economic development as more celebrated aspects of the political economy, such as its highly educated citizen workforce. (Barr 2019)

Low-wage migrant workers are unable to vote and are not allowed to collectively organise for better working conditions. They are excluded from the Employment Act, covered instead under the Employment of Foreign Manpower, and, owing to the lack of any fixed minimum wage in Singapore, are paid far lower than their Singaporean counterparts. Currently, Singapore has a foreign worker population of 1.2 million, with nearly half classified as either foreign domestic workers or construction workers on work permits, the lowest-paid category of employment visa (MOM 2020). The fluctuating population of 300,000-odd migrant construction workers come from across South and Southeast Asia to make more money than they would at home. They fill the gap for dangerous and poorly paid labour that very few Singaporeans have to contemplate in facilitating the perpetual construction of the critical infrastructure of the logistical state, as well as its skyline and countless condominiums.

Singapore's successful brand of global city has been underwritten by overwhelming disparities between the subjects of its governance.

In particular, the migrant worker has been *the* political subject of the logistical state. The distinction is important, as its citizens and expats (high-paid migrant labour) can vote and are accorded rights the migrant worker cannot access. While they are more intimately acquainted with the material production and reproduction of the city-state, they rarely encounter the state itself: migrant workers cannot apply directly for a work permit from the Ministry of Manpower but instead have to pay an agent to obtain one on their behalf for thousands of dollars. The agent then acts as a liaison between the Ministry of Manpower (more commonly referred to with the Freudian acronym MOM) and construction companies; the average Bangladeshi worker paid SG\$6,400 in agent fees in 2015 (TWC2 2018), not including an additional fee for the construction company to employ them. Workers seeking adequate compensation for workplace injuries and abuses are stymied by labyrinthine layers of bureaucracy that insulate contractors from subcontractors and can take years to rectify (TWC2 2016).

The data on workplace injuries in the construction industry offers a grim if oblique view of the working conditions of the workers at most risk of injury; while the average ratio for recorded injuries to fatalities across 28 EU member states in 2015 was 474:1 (varying from 373:1 in Sweden to 1428:1 in the Netherlands), for Singapore it was 82:1 (TWC2 2018). This strongly suggests that injuries are persistently unrecorded, with several cases reported by Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics demonstrating the extent to which doctors collaborate with construction companies to send injured labourers back to work. For the Ministry of Manpower, these events are aberrations that result from the informal nature of the migrant labour market, emerging as a natural consequence of competition and the desire for agents to obtain the best deals for the construction companies.

However, these aberrations and excesses have redirected attention from the inequalities structured into the migrant labour market itself and the political subjectivity cultivated by it. Bal (2017) has aptly noted how these cases have been seized upon by the Ministry of Manpower as opportunities to theatrically perform their impartiality and concern, whereas the motivation for the specific kinds of exploitation and abuse faced by migrant workers has stemmed from the legal apparatus controlling migrant labour, such as the foreign worker levy. A complex legal and social system has thus kept migrants at risk to lubricate the capital circuits of the logistical state. Air and seaports, as well as dedicated petrochemical infrastructure, that have fortified Singapore's ongoing

logistical relevance, were built and maintained by migrant workers that could not organise, conforming to Cowen's (2014) hypothesis regarding the logistical recasting of labour and citizenship.

### **Logistical citizenship**

Migrants' working and living conditions, seemingly the product of no grand design but rather an impromptu interlocking of design failures, redraw the lines of exploitation and precarity, prompting the question of whether these constitute the emergent conditions of a kind of 'logistical citizenship'. Cowen's (2014) above-mentioned claim that shifts in circulation and logistics entailed a subsequent redrawing of the relations of the state to security, labour, and citizenship merits revisiting. The fragility of just-in-time supply chains necessitated new forms of governance and control commensurate with these territories of circulation (Cowen 2014). The circulatory concerns of the logistical state point towards the desire to obscure not simply the labour that goes into its seamless functioning on the surface but to quarantine the very specific forms of political subjectivity it has constructed in the form of its class of migrant workers. By designing a class of workers insulated from the responsibility of the state through nested transnational chains of agents, middlemen, dormitory companies, contracting, and subcontracting, the state has inadvertently manufactured a political subject conditioned by the practice of logistics. This was made explicit following the security emergency of the 2013 Little India riot.

Singapore's 'bifurcated' regime of migrant labour, according to Yeoh (2006), is premised on a differential politics of inclusion and exclusion: for skilled, highly paid migrants, productivity and loyalty are rewarded with permanent residency and paths to citizenship; for the unskilled, no such route exists, and no matter how long they stay they will ultimately be 'transgressors' to be excluded (Yeoh 2006, p.36). This bifurcation was made a matter of formal government intervention in the aftermath of the Little India riot. In 2013, a migrant construction worker relaxing in Little India, a district comprising the most central migrant worker dormitories and residences that also acts as a leisure hub for many other South Asian migrant workers, was run over and killed by a coach driver. The death prompted an immediate backlash from other workers nearby, resulting in a riot the likes of which Singapore had not seen since the race riots of 1969 (Lee et al. 2015). The riot ruptured the veneer of state-manufactured multi-ethnic harmony, with the politically

invisible class of migrant workers becoming problematically present in the national consciousness.

The government was quick to dismiss the riot as an isolated, local event unrelated to the working and living conditions of the workers and focused instead on the predominantly South Asian workers' problematic consumption of alcohol and occupation of Little India on Sundays, as well as the perception of the neighbourhood as an 'area of "disamenity"' (Subramaniam 2017, p.58). Alcohol was temporarily banned in Little India, and in the months and years to come the state would pursue a 'decentralisation' strategy, which saw the construction of additional migrant worker dormitories – gated facilities designed to accommodate tens of thousands of workers (Tan and Toh 2014).

The construction and development of this new model of 'all-inclusive' migrant worker dormitory was developed as an explicit response to an unprecedented crisis of security for 21st-century Singapore. Their haphazard attempts to wean migrant workers off the downtown core and leave them content and entertained at the periphery perversely mimicked the spatial contours of quarantine, and the discourse around the problematic presence of migrant workers within the city framed their transgression as a matter of public hygiene. While the permanent yet provisional presence of these migrant workers in the city was always regarded as a nuisance at best and a public health emergency at worst, what the riot and the immunological response to it made explicit was the pathologising of this class of worker by the state.

## **Conclusion: logistical virulence**

The unbearable presence of Singapore's brand of logistical citizenship is a constitutive source of political and social unease because it points to the cracks within the Singapore model itself: beyond leveraging inequality, logistical citizenship is the political subject governed by the principles of logistics itself. Citizenship is informally rescaled by logistics to the raw input of labour-power, rendered 'efficient' by an opaque transnational market, and its presence is deemed pathological and in need of socio-spatial quarantine. While not an explicitly formulated class of citizen (beyond the regulations necessary for cultivating cheap and provisional sources of labour), what logistical citizenship holds for the political economy of the Singaporean state is not the jurisgenerative Roman spectre of Agamben's (1998) *homo sacer*, the bare life that can be exposed to death, but the exact kind of labour-power required by

the considerable political-economic machinery of the logistical state. What has been legislated through logistical citizenship is not the calibration of the state of exception upon the expendable figure of bare life but the disciplining and governance of a product – labour – in the lubrication of capital circuits specific to chokepoints in global markets like shipping, petrochemicals, and construction. The pathological sociality of logistical citizenship needs to be contained and subject to legal-economic displacement so that the state's formal citizens do not encounter the true political-economic terms of their enduring prosperity.

The implicit logic of the sequestration was again made explicit by repeated coronavirus outbreaks in migrant worker dormitories; while citizens and permanent residents were subject to an exemplary response in pandemic control, those in the logistical state were exposed to exponential viral reproduction, with their mobility rendered pathological (Lin and Yeoh 2021). Here we find the perverse limit of the Singaporean state's ongoing experiment with an 'elastic notion of the scale of the nation and its citizenship' (Ong 2006, p.178). It is no accident that the city-state's over-leveraging of low-paid migrant labour and desire to segregate it according to an implicit socio-immunological principle configured ideal circuits for viral reproduction. As Wallace et al. (2020) have noted, the COVID-19 pandemic was conditioned by the circuits of capital themselves and the shifting economic geography of land use, agriculture, and enclosure and then reproduced globally by ubiquitous transport infrastructure. By linking logistical violence with virulence, we can then locate the outbreak of coronavirus in Singapore's migrant worker dormitories within the precarious construction of logistical citizenship itself.

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## 12. The new normal, or the same old? The experiences of domestic workers in Singapore

Laura Antona

While extensive and far-reaching, the COVID-19 pandemic did not impact all nations – or all people – equally. Within Singapore, a country that was lauded, at least initially, for its exemplary approach to controlling the pandemic (Teo 2020), the ways in which the virus ultimately spread through the city-state exposed existing inequalities and injustices in its migrant worker populations, with construction workers' dormitories becoming the epicentre of the nation's outbreaks.

This chapter engages directly with these injustices to demonstrate how migrant domestic workers were impacted by the global pandemic, particularly by the 'circuit-breaker' measures enforced by the Singaporean state.<sup>1</sup> As such, it argues three core points. First, that many domestic workers were subjected to increased surveillance and bodily control during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the home space becoming the centre of this. Second, that many migrant workers experienced a removal of their rights and increased immobility. Finally, this chapter argues that, for many domestic workers, there was very little change to their circumstances, with the notion of the 'new normal' requiring further interrogation. Indeed, this chapter ultimately suggests that the experiences of populations who ordinarily experience prolonged confinement need further consideration if we are to achieve more just and equitable futures for all post-COVID-19.

Significantly, this chapter was written while I was living under restrictions in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the interviews and informal conversations on which it is based were conducted online with domestic workers, activists, and NGO workers/volunteers with whom I had existing relationships following prolonged ethnographic fieldwork between June 2016 and December 2017. Knowing

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about these individuals' lives and perspectives prior to the outbreak of the global pandemic, I build on this more recent dialogue and use this chapter to detail *how*, and in some cases *if*, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the domestic worker population of Singapore. All of the names included in this chapter are pseudonyms.

### **Increased bodily surveillance and tensions in the home**

Unlike labour that takes place in more public settings, both the intimacy and spatiality of domestic labour mark it as distinct, often leaving domestic workers under heightened scrutiny from their employers. This is particularly acute for live-in domestic workers, who not only have to work and rest in the home of their employer but are often overworked and experience increased vulnerability to abuse (Anderson 2000; Constable 1997; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Huang and Yeoh 2007; Parreñas 2001). In Singapore, as in many other national contexts, domestic workers are only able to migrate under an employer-sponsored scheme, rendering employers responsible for workers' salaries, accommodation, food, and well-being (MOM 2021). In addition to their bodily maintenance, employers are also made to be responsible for domestic workers' bodily control, with it being argued that the state legislates this in such a way as to leave them vulnerable to intense surveillance (Chok 2013; MOM 2021). While conducting ethnographic fieldwork prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I encountered many domestic workers who had either been monitored by CCTV or watched closely by family members to ensure that they did not rest and worked to the standard required by their employers (Antona 2019). This often became a point of tension and distress.

While many domestic workers are used to a high degree of surveillance, the pandemic further intensified this. Indeed, following the introduction of circuit-breaker measures, one of the key changes addressed by the domestic workers I interviewed was the sustained presence of their employer (and employer's family) in the home. One domestic worker, Benilda, said very simply in an exasperated tone: 'It just means I am being watched all the time.' She explained that, because she did not have a bedroom of her own, instead sleeping on the floor of her employer's child's room, she had no privacy or space to rest. While she would ordinarily have the house to herself on weekdays, meaning she could sit at the table to relax or could call her children at convenient times, she explained that she felt unable to do this in front

of her employer and so would not sit down all day. She also added that she would make smaller portions of food for herself, fearful that her employer would think she was taking too much.

These sentiments were shared by many others, who also expressed their frustrations with having less rest and an increased workload. Rose, another domestic worker I interviewed, said that the amount of cleaning and cooking increased dramatically, especially as the family was no longer eating any meals out. She explained: ‘They always eating, the children playing, making mess, I get so tired from all the work.’ Rose also said that she would be able to cope more easily if she was not constantly being watched and could take some time off: ‘It’s more pressure to be watched as well.’

In addition to the increased bodily surveillance and workload, and perhaps as a result of this, many domestic workers also described heightened tensions in the home. As mentioned, both the intensive bodily surveillance enacted by many employers and the intimacy of domestic labour often produce friction between employer and employee, with domestic workers remaining highly vulnerable to mistreatment, abuse, and being overworked. During the pandemic, activists, NGOs, politicians, advocates, and survivors across the world spoke out about the increase in domestic violence and abuse (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020; End Violence Against Children 2020; Women’s Aid 2020). Indeed, it has been widely shown that increased societal and household stress – whether it be produced socially, economically, politically, or otherwise – often results in higher rates of domestic violence (Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011; Bradley 2018; Tynes 2012). While none of the domestic workers that I spoke to said that they had experienced any physical violence during this period, many attested to increased working hours and more stressful living/working environments. In addition, HOME (the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics), an NGO that supports domestic workers in Singapore and operates a helpline, verified a 25% increase in calls after the government introduced circuit-breaker measures (*The Star* 2020). FAST (the Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training), another NGO that supports domestic workers in Singapore, also reported increased tensions within home spaces, suggesting that the number of domestic workers fleeing their employers’ homes had doubled in the months of March and April 2020 (Yang 2020).

It is evident, then, that in many circumstances an employer’s continued presence in the home caused increased tensions during the

pandemic. With more domestic workers seeking support from NGOs and their embassies and in some circumstances fleeing their employer's homes, it is clear that the circuit-breaker measures detrimentally impacted the working and living conditions in the home space for many of these labourers. While Rose's and Benilda's increased discomfort and hardship were, thankfully, short-lived – as their employers returned to work (and their employers' children to school) following the relaxation of the circuit-breaker measures in June 2020 – many other homes were permanently impacted, causing domestic workers to flee these spaces and return to their 'home' nations.

### **Removal of rights and decreased mobility**

While often defined by their mobile status, many migrant labourers, including domestic workers, were rendered immobile by the COVID-19 pandemic in many respects. Indeed, the pandemic enforced stillness at multiple scales: within national borders, within urban regions, and within the micro scale of the home. In Singapore, particularly when the circuit-breaker measures were in place, many domestic workers were unable to travel to and from their home countries. One domestic worker, Maya, had been hoping to travel to Indonesia to visit her children during the summer of 2020, having not seen them for four years, prior to renewing her employment contract. She explained how upset she was at deciding not to travel back, instead renewing her contract and delaying a visit for another two years. Maya explained that she felt she had no choice in her decision, as she could not risk getting stuck in Indonesia; her wages were vital for providing her children with education.

Beyond being confined within the national borders of Singapore, many domestic workers also discussed the tightened societal controls and their enforced confinement to their employer's home. Indeed, domestic workers were encouraged not to leave their employers' homes on their weekly day off, requiring them to rest in their place of work.<sup>2</sup> Margielyn was just one domestic worker who expressed her upset with this, explaining: 'Even if I can't meet with friends, staying in all day always means more work.' Like others, Margielyn said she understood the need for the circuit-breaker measures but felt unable to get any rest without a room of her own. Being bound to the home in the presence of her employer meant that she would be asked to do small 'favours' or jobs regularly, ultimately requiring her to work every day. While being restricted to the home space was a shared experience of Singaporean

citizens and migrants alike, the lack of freedom to move around the city also resulted in a removal of many domestic workers' rights to rest and time off from work. Even after the circuit-breaker measures were lifted, Margielyn explained that her employer would not allow her outside on her day off. She stated: 'Ma'am thinks I will meet with friends and bring back the virus, so she don't allow me out.' The lack of trust within this relationship, paired with her employer's unequal positioning of power and the bodily controls that they were able to exert, meant that Margielyn, like many other domestic workers who would ordinarily be given a weekly rest day, continued to be subjected to confinement long after Singaporean citizens were allowed more freedom and mobility.

Alongside these experiences of heightened immobility, some domestic workers were, conversely, forced to move out of Singapore. During the circuit-breaker period, the Singaporean state affirmed that it would carry out inspections of key sites to ensure that migrant labourers did not break any social distancing measures (Zhuo 2020). If caught doing so, the state did not, however, impose the same punishment as it did to citizens. Instead of being fined, migrant workers were liable to have their work passes revoked and be blacklisted, meaning they would be unable to work in Singapore again (Zhuo 2020). A volunteer from HOME suggested that the population's unease, or perhaps disdain, towards migrants might have impacted the state's decision to further stratify the rights and positioning of citizens vis-à-vis non-citizens. Interestingly, this rule was applied not only to domestic workers and other foreign workers in Singapore but also to White 'expats', or 'professionals', who did not adhere to circuit-breaker regulations (Low 2020).

It can, therefore, be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted, even if temporarily, in a reconfiguring of both mobility and migration within Singapore and Southeast Asia more broadly. Rather than leaving Singapore for a holiday or ending a period of employment and feeling certain that returning for new work would be simple, domestic workers had to make decisions on whether to remain in the city-state for a prolonged period or to return to their 'home' countries with no certainty that they could return when desired. This decision, for Maya and others, proved particularly distressing. Indeed, while domestic workers' ability to move to and from Singapore was always mediated by the state and their ability to freely move around the city was always controlled by their employers, the additional circuit-breaker measures further decreased their mobility and freedoms, leading to an increased workload and a restriction of their rights.

## The new normal or the same old?

Alongside the aforementioned concerns, several domestic workers, interestingly, reported that they had experienced no significant changes to their lives in Singapore since the global pandemic had begun. In interviews, comments such as ‘no sister, nothing change’ and ‘things are quite OK, the same really’ led me to question how this could be the case when so much attention had been on how quickly and greatly the world had transformed. While none of these domestic workers were entirely happy in their employment, their working environments had not deteriorated or worsened during this period. In interviews, it transpired that none of these women had been given a day off prior to the circuit-breaker measures, when their employers would have regularly been at home. As such, their already heavily restricted mobility, the dynamic/relationships within the home and the surveillance they were under were not impacted.

While discourse during the pandemic largely focused on the ways in which labour practices and people’s relationships with space changed both profoundly and quickly, it was striking that these domestic workers’ experiences had remained unaffected. Upon reflection, however, it became clear that it was an individual’s prior experience of freedoms that made their enforced confinement so starkly felt. For many domestic workers, being forced to live and work in the same space, confined to the same few rooms for months or even years, is the norm and an employment decision that they make because the financial opportunities and gains are so much more significant than any other options they have.

## Conclusion

When considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives of domestic workers in Singapore, and particularly when reflecting on comments and sentiments about a lack of change to some individuals’ lives, it is clear that their situation was unique. While it became evident through interviews that the imposed circuit-breaker measures had heightened certain tensions in the home spaces in which domestic workers lived and worked, the issues described were not entirely new. Indeed, domestic workers that I interviewed through the course of my extended ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD thesis commented widely on their level of surveillance and a relentless workload, as well as a lack of free time, rest, and basic rights. Rather than being a ‘new normal’,

then, it became evident that, for most domestic workers, the issues that arose during the pandemic were, in fact, more of the ‘same old’.

While it is important for policymakers, activists, NGOs and others to recognise the increased surveillance and household tensions that domestic workers were subjected to, as well as their more limited rights and mobility, it is also important to re-examine the structures and systems in place within Singapore that have maintained this form of labour migration. With increased concern about both the immediate and longer-term physical and mental health consequences of enforced confinement (as there has been globally with lockdowns and circuit-breaker measures), it is important to reflect on those individuals whose daily lives are ordinarily heavily confined. Live-in domestic workers, particularly those with minimal or no days of rest, regularly experience isolation and confinement for extended periods, sometimes years. When taking into account a domestic worker’s inability to choose when and what they eat, the physically and emotionally arduous labour that they perform without rest, the social isolation they are forced to endure (particularly for those people who are not allowed to use their mobile phones and can only speak to their family and friends at limited times), and their precarious status, which renders them dependent upon their employer, it is clear that their mental and physical well-being should be a much more significant societal priority. Rather than remaining concerned only by the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns/circuit-breakers brought to Southeast Asia and the world at large, it is also important to reflect on those whose daily lives were not altered during this period. Only then might we be able to work towards a more equitable future for all.

## Notes

1. Similar to ‘lockdown’ measures in many other countries around the globe, circuit-breaker measures were introduced in Singapore on 7 April 2020, by the state, in order to control the spread of COVID-19. This period saw the closure of schools, workplaces and non-essential shops, as well as mandated social distancing/isolation, in order to minimise the spread of the virus.

2. While the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (MOM 2021) states that domestic workers in Singapore are entitled to one weekly day off and ‘adequate’ daily rest, this ruling was ultimately not enshrined in law and can be circumvented if there is written agreement by the employee and employer.

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## 13. Questioning the ‘hero’s welcome’ for repatriated overseas Filipino workers

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As the world entered its second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global inequalities around access to healthcare, vaccines, and therapeutics, as well as border closures and lockdowns, heightened existing inequalities between the global South and the reopening North. An emerging area of engagement has been the immobilising effect of the pandemic on migrant labour, specifically on citizens who were repatriated back to their home countries, and the communities that received them. The experience of the Philippines, which had the slowest recovery in Southeast Asia as of 2021, and its repatriated migrant workers provided early evidence of this phenomenon.

Domestically known as overseas Filipino workers (OFWs),<sup>1</sup> temporary migrant workers have been hailed as *bagong bayani* (modern-day heroes) for contributions to their respective households and the Philippine economy. In exchange for higher incomes and foreign currency, OFWs made the difficult decision to part from their families for prolonged periods of time in foreign lands or aboard sea vessels. As of April 2021, the Department of Labor and Employment reported 627,576 OFWs affected by pandemic closures who had been forced to repatriate (PNA 2021). Official records tallied at least 2.2 million OFWs scattered worldwide out of 108.1 million Filipinos as of 2019 (PSA 2020), although migrant workers have been historically estimated at around 10% of the population (San Juan 2009).

The Philippines was the world’s fourth largest destination of remittances in 2019 (World Bank 2020), reaching US\$30 billion (1.56 trillion Philippine pesos), or about 8% of the Philippines’ US\$377

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billion (PHP 19.52 trillion) economy (BSP 2020). The effects of remittances have been felt not only by OFW families; they have shaped the Philippine built environment as well. A settlement called 'Little Italy' south of Manila features a village of largely empty Italian-style villas constructed by its OFW population, thanks to decades of remittances from domestic and service workers, nurses, and au pairs (Onishi 2010). Shopping malls were once the pre-pandemic leisure area of choice for 'balikbayans' ('home-comers') on holiday, consistent with the country's consumption-driven economy. OFWs also comprised a sizeable portion of the condominium market, although banks have expressed concern regarding furloughed workers defaulting on mortgage payments (Dass 2020).

The global role of OFWs was highlighted early in the pandemic, as heavily affected countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom employed more than 165,000 Filipino registered nurses on the frontlines.<sup>2</sup> However, other OFWs were not as 'lucky'. Of the 327,000 OFWs repatriated in 2020, around 70% were land-based workers from badly hit industries such as logistics, construction, and the oil sector, while the rest were sea-based (DFA 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Thus, OFWs from affected sectors were forced to return and found themselves unemployed under one of the longest and most stringent COVID-19 lockdowns in the world. Despite such draconian efforts, the Philippines recorded more than one million confirmed cases as of April 2021, the second highest in the ASEAN region (CSIS 2021). Intermittent lockdown cycles halted approximately 75% of economic activities and rendered nearly half of the country's adult labour force jobless, leaving repatriated OFWs scrambling to retrain during the worst recession since the tail end of the Marcos dictatorship (Social Weather Stations 2020).

All evidence points to how the pandemic magnified persistent inequality and lack of opportunities in the Philippines – the same factors that had driven Filipino labour migration reaching back to the early 1900s, when Filipinos were first hired as temporary plantation workers across the United States; in the 1970s, when male construction and oil refinery workers left en masse for the Middle East; and again in the 1980s as more women pursued opportunities abroad as domestic, administrative, and healthcare workers (Orbeta and Abrigo 2009). How do we begin to understand these multiple layers of displacement, (im) mobility, and uncertainty?

## Layers of vulnerability: double displacement and migrant work

As of 2019, the preferred destinations of OFWs were Saudi Arabia (22.4%), the United Arab Emirates (13.2%), Hong Kong (7.5%), Taiwan (6.7%), and Kuwait (6.2%), with the largest proportion of workers coming from the regions in and around the capital, namely Calabarzon at 20.7%, Central Luzon at 13.3%, and Metro Manila at 9.7% (PSA 2020). Observers have argued that the Philippines' labour export policy was originally intended only as a stopgap measure, and so the lack of in-country opportunities has been a form of displacement where citizens are forced to move elsewhere by 'push' factors such as persistent unemployment and underemployment, political instability, cyclical environmental disasters, or armed conflict (Asis 2017). However, unlike the decision to leave the Philippines for work, being displaced yet again from their jobs abroad and returning during the COVID-19 pandemic was not a voluntary choice.

The desire to provide more for the household has often been mentioned as a reason for choosing to work abroad, the higher wages contributing to the once-burgeoning middle class (Ducanes and Abella 2008). A study on 2007 and 2008 patterns of income and expenditure compared Filipino households with and without OFWs. Households with OFWs, compared to those without, sourced about PHP 28,000 (US\$630) more of their income from remittances, while sourcing PHP8,700 (US\$195) to PHP15,000 (US\$335) less from domestic wages and salaries (Ducanes 2015). The study demonstrated that remittances from a household member working abroad more than made up for the effects of an OFW leaving a domestic job or another household member leaving a job to take over household responsibilities. The same study reported that households with OFWs had higher expenditures in education and in health. Lastly, the study estimated that households able to send a member overseas had odds of climbing out of poverty two to three times greater than similar households who could not.

Precurity has remained an issue. Using 2015 data, Albert, Santos, and Vizmanos (2018) found that 19% of OFWs belonged to the lower-income cluster (i.e. between the poverty line and twice the poverty line) while 37% belonged to the lower-middle-income cluster (i.e. between two and four times the poverty line). Even OFWs categorised as middle class or lower-middle class have been economically vulnerable as many of these families are single-income households who might slide

back to poverty if the breadwinner dies or becomes unemployed (Bird 2009). Even prior to the pandemic, remittances had usually been spent on basic needs, education, and healthcare. Several surveys run by the Central Bank of the Philippines showed that 97% of OFW families depended on remittances for food and basic household needs; only 38% were able to put away savings, while a paltry 6% were able to funnel earnings into investments (BSP 2019).

With future employment uncertain, more than half of households with OFWs faced the risk of sliding into poverty. Deployment figures in 2020 decreased to around 1.4 million from around two million in 2019. The sudden shift from hypermobility to pandemic immobility had a disproportionate impact on specific sectors. Managers and technical professionals (who might have been able to redeploy easier as companies pivoted to digital work platforms) comprised a smaller share of the migrant worker population. At least 39.6% of the total number of OFWs in 2019 held elementary occupations requiring manual labour, of whom 88.3% were women. The next largest cohort of OFWs, those employed in the global service and sales industries (18%), were equally affected by layoffs (PSA 2020).

In the absence of a systematic review of pandemic impacts on migrant workers, anecdotal and partial reports indicated that permanent and temporary job losses affected OFW household allocations for food and education. Data from the Department of Education showed that only 27% of private school students who enrolled in 2019 returned for the 2020–2021 school year (Ramos 2020) – indicating that families were forced to cut a costly investment in economic mobility despite the mixed quality of the Philippine public school system.

The economic slump offered limited options to returning OFWs that sought alternative sources of income in the Philippines. In the domestic labour market, the number of employed persons decreased to around 40 million in 2020 from around 42 million in 2019 (PSA 2020). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by those forced home paled in comparison to the difficulties of those who had lost their jobs but had not been able to repatriate. By the second half of 2020, labour secretary Silvestre Bello III announced that an estimated 80,000 OFWs were stranded abroad (Terrazola 2020). Reports that circulated on social media showed images of displaced workers forced to sell blood to secure money for food (Casilao 2020), photos of organ donation scars, and even suicides among stranded cruise ship workers, whose former places of work were moored, immobile, in harbours around the world.

By the end of 2020, at least six cruise ship suicides had been Filipino (Carr 2020).

### **Repatriated OFWs and lacklustre public sector response**

Although the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Labor and Employment had existing capacity to facilitate repatriation and assistance in host countries, the COVID-19 experience exposed the limits of existing government mechanisms. Previous economic shocks that resulted in job loss and mass repatriation of OFWs – such as the Gulf War in the 1990s or recent events in Libya, Syria, and Lebanon – were contained and had minimal impact on domestic affairs. With COVID-19, however, repatriation requirements no longer ended once OFWs were brought back to the country. It extended until OFWs were able to get back to their home provinces amid lockdowns and multiple quarantine arrangements. Asis (2020) has noted that, unlike previous repatriations, COVID-19 needed not only a 'whole-of-government approach, but a whole-of-nation approach, which hinges on joint efforts between government and nongovernment entities'. Without this interlocking and collaborative approach, haphazard policies affecting migrant workers that were not fit for purpose unnecessarily extended the discomfort of an unemployed cohort in cycles of transit and forced immobility, facing risks greater than other citizens who had the option to stay indoors.

The suffering was marked by stretches of movement and immobility: at sea or in their previous host countries, upon arrival in Manila, and yet another two-week quarantine upon arrival in their communities of origin. The final leg from Manila to their home provinces was facilitated through the now-suspended Balik Probinsya and Hatid Probinsya programmes (return and bringing back to the provinces), which rendered close to 593,000 individuals, including OFWs, stranded on Metro Manila's streets, under its overpasses, and in its sports arenas for weeks or even months while waiting to be brought home (CNN Philippines 2020a; NDRRMC 2021). The lack of coordination between the national government and the receiving communities meant that impoverished provinces and municipalities were forced to set up rudimentary systems for testing, quarantine, and basic financial assistance for those displaced. One consequence included stranded individuals from the provinces of Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi in the southernmost region

of the Philippines being dropped off by a government vessel at the wrong port, Cagayan De Oro, nearly 500 km away from the intended destination (Maulana 2020).

Upon reaching their hometowns, repatriates had to contend with the dual stigma of losing their jobs and disinformation regarding COVID-19 transmission. Reports told the tale of returning OFWs experiencing discrimination or animosity from neighbours due to misconceptions that they were potential vectors of the disease (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2020). This prompted a flurry of local orders and a congressional bill criminalising discrimination against frontline workers, confirmed or suspected cases, and returning OFWs (Cepeda 2020). A widely shared photo showed a tarpaulin congratulating a repatriate for testing negative for COVID-19 – a family's public announcement for all the neighbours to see (Laureta-Chu 2020).

Initial COVID-19 repatriation programmes offered by the Overseas Workers' Welfare Agency were limited to its regular menu of capacity-building activities, job placements, livelihood packages, and individual loans, for which about US\$14 million (PHP 700 million) had been allocated before the pandemic (DBM 2020; OWWA 2020). When demand for emergency repatriation soared, the government disbursed USD\$103.6 million (PHP 5 billion) to almost 500,000 OFWs to cover quarantine and transportation expenses as well as some cash aid. In March 2021, OWWA sought an additional US\$202 million (PHP 9 billion) since they claimed that their agency budget was about to run out that year (*Business Mirror* 2021). The Philippine government also promised to support unemployed OFWs by matching them with 60,000 jobs in special economic zones (Philippine Economic Zone Authority 2020) and in the construction sector through the infrastructure-led growth strategy of the Duterte administration called 'Build, Build, Build' (CNN Philippines 2020b). However, no detailed plans related to these initiatives had been released by the first half of 2021.

Other policy choices met criticism from repatriates and the public alike. A knee-jerk decision to institute a deployment ban for health-care workers in April 2020 was lifted eight months later. In May 2020, President Duterte announced the suspension of a policy that required OFWs to pay higher state health insurance premiums. This announcement came on the heels of protests from OFWs who had lost their jobs and could no longer act as 'cash cows', as well as a corruption controversy involving the embattled state health insurer, PhilHealth (Lopez

2020). By early 2021, reports surfaced regarding a thriving black market for vaccines, first for presidential guards, then for elites, and potentially for workers desperate for ‘vaccine passports’ so they could return to work abroad (Cabato 2021)

In the face of continued restrictions and incoherent, oft-changing policies, the onus to support returning workers fell on provincial and city governments, together with the private sector, to kickstart economic activity in their respective localities. However, the magnitude of the local and international repatriation and reintegration problem coupled with staggering unemployment required resources for social services and livelihood support that not all local governments possessed. In the last quarter of 2020, the Philippines was ravaged by eight different typhoons barely weeks apart, depleting strained local disaster funds used for both pandemic and typhoon response (Torres 2020). Some affluent provinces and cities were able to offer jobs by purchasing agricultural produce and personal protective equipment (PPE) from local businesses, entering into service contracts with transportation providers, and enabling e-commerce platforms to thrive in their areas.

In the absence of publicly funded safety nets, the burden of survival was carried by neighbours, relatives, and fellow Filipinos through various mutual aid arrangements. The Catholic Church and various faith-based groups launched their own OFW-focused programmes, acknowledging the dual economic and social costs to affected families. Local microfinance institutions reported that OFWs resorted to loans to pay for basic necessities and secure start-up capital. Along with other displaced workers, repatriates were forced to start small online businesses, usually food-based, and find forms of alternative livelihood such as motorcycle delivery. The ventures that emerged were small but quickly absorbed OFWs and other affected local workers.

## **Conclusions: quo vadis?**

Ultimately, the pandemic exposed the Philippines’ vulnerability as an unequal society kept afloat by remittances while underinvesting in human capital and community infrastructure. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 states that the government ‘does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development’. However, exporting labour will remain the reality until long-standing recommendations to shift the structure of the Philippine economy away from remittances are implemented

– an unlikely scenario with current calls from the Duterte administration to create a Department of OFWs.

Global evidence has pointed to how post-COVID economic recovery hinges on how well governments are able to address the health crisis. Based on the challenges faced by repatriated OFWs, the existing public sector response can be described as fragmented at best. At worst, it has displayed a vacuum in leadership that has resulted in poor prioritisation and haphazard execution of support programmes (Quijano, Fernandez, and Pangilinan 2020). Inconsistent messaging, coupled with harsh lockdown–release cycles and different punishments for elite rulebreakers and regular citizens, translated into dismal public health communication despite the Philippine government's sizeable investment in state broadcasting and online platforms – including so-called 'troll armies', which have instead been used to stifle dissent (Billing 2020).

Nevertheless, the pandemic forced local governments and private actors to try to creatively piece together long-overdue reforms to create and sustain local jobs as well as support families battling multiple rounds of economic displacement. Early evidence has pointed to the promise of digital and neighbourhood-level economic and food security initiatives as a survival measure, although many have been simply bidding their time until borders open again. But, even as target countries in the global North reopened, redeployment proved more difficult thanks to suspended flights and stricter, costlier requirements because domestic efforts to battle the pandemic were unsuccessful. Thus, the romanticised rhetoric of OFWs as long-suffering heroes is no longer tenable – this time, it is the old saviours that need saving.

## Notes

1. Alternative terms include overseas contract workers (OCWs) and overseas Filipinos (OFs), although the latter also captures Filipinos who have migrated and have since taken foreign citizenship.
2. A Filipina nurse was the first to administer the coronavirus vaccine jab in the UK (Baker 2020; Batalova 2020), and nearly a third of nurses who died of COVID-19 in the US during the first year of the pandemic were Filipino despite comprising only 4% of the country's nursing population (Shoichet 2020).
3. The Philippines is presently the world's largest source of seafarers. Prior to the pandemic, a third of all global cruise ships were staffed by Filipinos (Maritime Industry Authority 2020).

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## 14. Exposing the transnational precarity of Filipino workers, healthcare regimes, and nation states

*Francesca Humi*

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, academics and researchers across social science fields highlighted the ramifications of the pandemic for the movement of people across borders, ranging from the implications of the pandemic on global remittance flows to the geographies on grief, intimacy, and loss (Abel and Gietel-Basten 2020; Maddrell 2020). These pieces of preliminary research highlighted the inherent international and globalised state of the world in the 21st century. The experience of one group, however, emerged as an ideal subject of study and poignant symbol of the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable, those at the frontlines, and those whose existence has been inherently diasporic and fragmented – in short, those whose lives intersected with all things most impacted by the COVID-19 health, social, and economic crises. That is, the globalised Filipino healthcare community.

This chapter examines the precarity of Filipino healthcare workers caught in between nation states' duties of care by focusing on those in the Philippines and the UK and by drawing on studies of Filipino labour migration and COVID-era commentary on Filipino healthcare workers in the two countries. This study posits that the Filipino experience is indicative of how migrant labour is controlled and exploited under globalised capitalism and by modern nation states in both the pre- and post-COVID worlds,<sup>1</sup> and calls for voices from the community to be given due consideration and audience.

### The global Filipino nation

In 2013, over 10 million Filipinos lived abroad, about 10% of the country's total population (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2013)

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without accounting for second-, third-, or fourth-generation Filipinos around the globe. Migration flows from the Philippines have been shaped by experiences of colonialism and economic intervention from international organisations (Parreñas 2001, p.10). But the migration pattern of medical professionals has been particularly steeped in colonial legacies. American colonial rule in the Philippines from 1898 to 1946 established nursing as a medical profession through training programmes and teaching hospitals (Choy 2003, p.19). This was part of the US's mission of 'benevolent assimilation', which positioned health and education as a means to achieve self-rule (Choy 2003, pp.20–21). It was also specifically designed to bring Filipino nurses to the US away from the Philippines (Choy 2003, p.5). In 2020, about 20,000 Filipinos worked for the UK's National Health Service (NHS), the largest group after British and Indian workers (Baker 2020). Although this presence originated in the US colonial period, the 1990s saw the first major wave of Filipino nurses and other high-skilled workers migrating abroad, including to the UK, facilitated by Philippine government bodies and programmes (Choy 2003, p.1).

The Filipino experience can be taken as representative of a fragile, globalised system relying on the mobile and docile labour of migrants for their work both in their destination country and 'back home', where they provide remittances as well as stability for the Philippines' 'export-based economy' (Parreñas 2001, p.11). Though the Filipino nation has become disconnected due to physical boundaries and political borders – and, more recently, a global pandemic – it is connected through an imagined global community, to borrow Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation, and through shared occupations and similar socio-economic status (Parreñas, 2001, p.12). This is an archipelagic experience – by virtue of its geography and diaspora – shifting the focus from the national to a more dispersed and fragmented one, still connected through an imagined bond (David 2018, p.335).

The impact of COVID-19 on this global Filipino nation has been documented by journalists, commentators, and academics alike. Galam (2020) has emphasised the role of community care among Filipino migrants in the UK, which stepped in where governments took a step back. Many have lauded the heroism demonstrated by Filipino health-care workers and mourned the devastating toll the pandemic had on the community because of this and of broader structural issues from defunding of public health services to immigration regimes and legacies of racism and colonialism (Chikoko 2020; Day 2021).<sup>2</sup> For many in

the community, it felt like Filipino healthcare workers were receiving long-awaited recognition (Isidro 2020), but the complex and at times tragic realities for Filipino healthcare workers have warranted further exploration.

## The failure of two ‘hero’ narratives

While the global economy’s exploitation of and dependency on Filipino labour have earned Filipino migrants the titles of ‘servants of globalisation’ (Parreñas 2001) and ‘manufactur[ed] heroes’ (Guevarra 2009) forming an ‘empire of care’ (Choy 2003), the crises caused by COVID-19 have cast new light on this phenomenon. Shortly after the pandemic outbreak, the Philippine government halted the deployment of healthcare workers abroad even if they had signed contracts to return to work abroad, while asking them to ‘volunteer’ at home for 500 Philippine pesos (about US\$10) a day (Magsambol 2020). The ban was partially lifted in April 2020 (Calonzo 2020), but in 2021 the Philippine government offered healthcare workers to Germany and the UK in exchange for vaccines (Morales 2021). The government’s decisions to call on ‘healthcare warriors’ (Magsambol 2020) to save the country from public health disaster and then offer them as a bartering tool for vaccines demonstrated the pressure exerted by the global economy and its reliance on workers’ willingness to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of society.

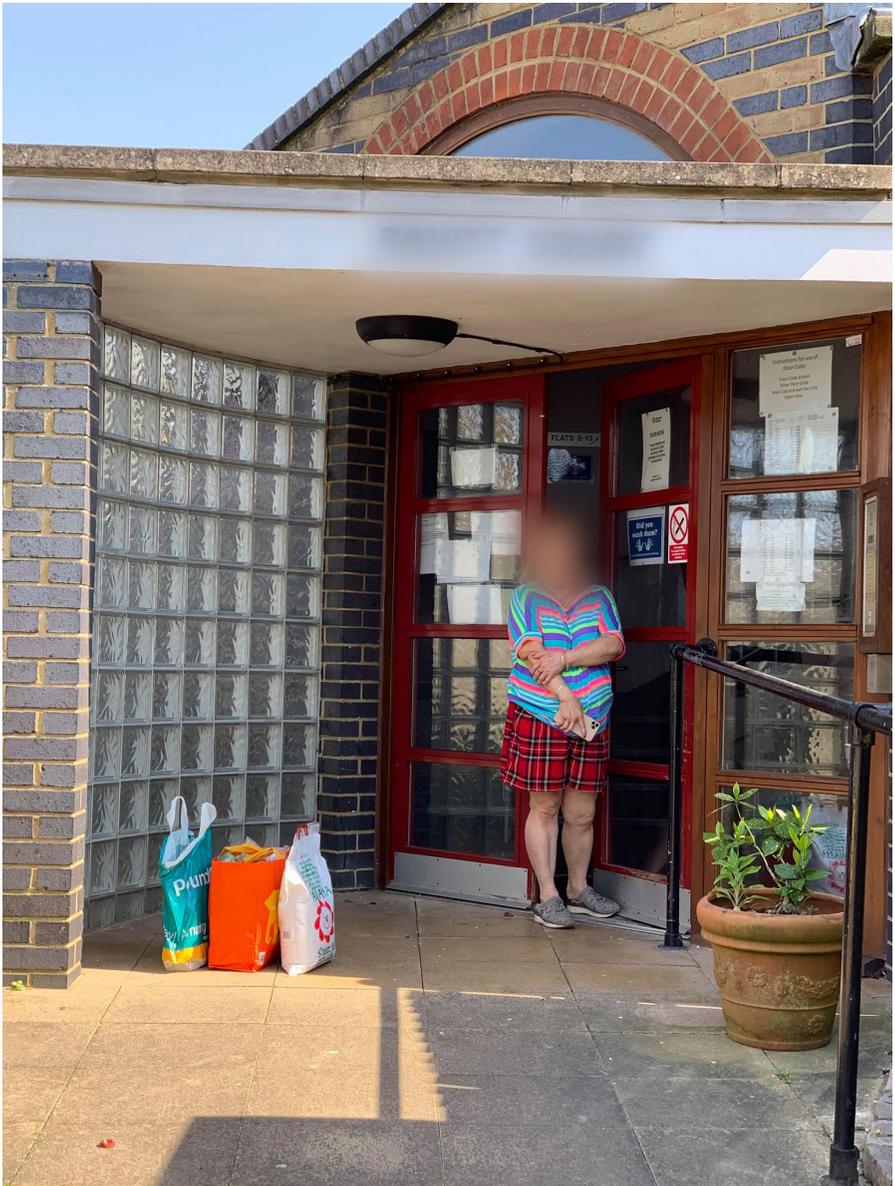
In the UK, as early as May 2020, Filipinos were the single largest nationality to die from coronavirus among NHS staff. They accounted for 22% of COVID-19 deaths among nurses, despite Filipino nurses comprising only 3.8% of the nursing workforce (Kearney et al. 2020). By April 2021, at least 71 Filipino health and social care workers had died after contracting COVID-19, according to the data collected by the Kanlungan Filipino Consortium (hereafter Kanlungan) – a charity working to support the Filipino migrant community in the UK (Day 2021).

Filipino healthcare workers were placed at the intersection of two separate, but overlapping, hero narratives. Healthcare workers in the UK and around the globe were hailed as heroes and applauded as model citizens during the pandemic (Mohammed et al. 2021, p.4). In the Philippines, the push to work abroad was bolstered by popular narratives of the overseas Filipino worker (OFW) as a ‘modern-day hero’ who endures tremendous hardship to form the backbone of the Philippines’ economy (Almendral 2018; Rocamora 2018). Their remittances, which contributed about 10% of the country’s gross domestic product in 2019 (World Bank 2019), represented education and material stability

for people at home. As a Facebook tribute to Dondee, a Filipino NHS nurse who died from COVID-19 in April 2020, pointed out, '[h]e was the breadwinner of his family back home and helping 3 of his nieces/nephews to college' (Fernandez 2020).

Workers like Dondee may have been attributed the status of hero but

**Figure 14.1.** A Filipino woman with groceries delivered by Kanlungan volunteers in London, April 2020



Source: Courtesy of Kanlungan.

it did not provide him or his family with a changed material reality. Such attribution was, in fact, a tactic to deflect responsibility from politicians (Mohammed et al. 2021, p.8). Being an NHS hero receiving doorstep

**Figure 14.2.** Posters appealing for donations and volunteers for Kanlungan's COVID-19 community outreach project in a Filipino grocery store window in London, April 2020



Source: Courtesy of Kanlungan.

claps<sup>3</sup> from the British public and the prime minister did not translate into adequate pay rises, sufficient personal protective equipment, or secure immigration status for staff (Campbell 2021; UK Government and Parliament Petitions 2020; UK Government and Parliament Petitions 2021), nor did it translate into better protection from the Philippine government, as its offer to exchange workers for vaccines revealed (Morales 2021). Community groups and charities, such as Kanlungan, responded to the health and economic impact of the crisis on communities who were either not able to access or not eligible for COVID-19 government support owing to their immigration status<sup>4</sup> by filling in these gaps in welfare provision with emergency grocery delivery, mental health support, and the dissemination of COVID-19 guidelines in community languages (Galam 2020, pp.452–453; Kanlungan Filipino Consortium 2021).

The situation faced by Filipino health and social care workers exposed the failure and emptiness of these two narratives. Celebrating Filipino healthcare workers for their sacrifices and contributions, such as – ironically – administering the first COVID-19 vaccine in the UK (Chikoko 2020), may have made them heroes, but this public discourse did not translate into material and economic security. For Filipinos ‘at home’, the crisis demonstrated the need to fundamentally question the hero narrative surrounding OFWs. The hardship faced by OFWs must be recognised and appreciated, but a new narrative must be forged, one of empowered immigration through informed decision-making for migrants about their work and immigration, systematic access to adequate support services and knowledge about labour rights, and sustained agency. As Cielito Caneja (2020, p.2), a Filipino nurse in London, stated: ‘Please do not call me a hero. ... I am a nurse delivering my oath and this is what we do, day in and day out. Long before the pandemic.’

### **Calls for change amid uncertain post-COVID futures**

The tragedy of the Filipino is transnational. Whether they were abroad – dying from caring for the sick – or in the Philippines – experiencing loss of income, being killed in the streets for breaking lockdown rules, or being ‘red-tagged’ as communists (Talabong 2020; *UN News* 2021) – for many Filipinos, the present has become dire and the future deeply uncertain.

The pandemic required studies of the Filipino global nation and other diasporas to be re-evaluated. Much like the climate emergency, the long-term disruptive impact of the pandemic will lead to a reassessment

of global migration, healthcare and welfare regimes, and the further fragmentation of imagined global communities. The crises generated by the pandemic proved again the precarious position of both nation states and migrant workers caused by global capitalism. Nation states faced a near collapse of healthcare provision without the constant supply of migrant workers, while migrant workers were caught in between nation states, with neither able to properly care for them (Galam 2020, p.442; Ghosh 2020, p.92). On a micro scale, politicians, academics, and civil society at large must ask themselves, as Cielito, the Filipino nurse in London, asked, ‘who cares for the carers?’ (Caneja 2020, p.3).

Finally, the pandemic brought attention to issues that migrants’ rights activists and community members had been campaigning on for years (Galam 2020, p.442). It has been bittersweet to consider that public and academic interest in these issues expanded only after such tragedy had occurred. Much of the COVID-19 era’s activism was trauma-responsive: the international Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements, conversations in the UK about violence against women in the wake of Sarah Everard’s murder, and reckonings with systemic racism and inequalities in public health as non-White people continued to bear the brunt of the pandemic. There is an urgent need to listen to community members and resource their leadership in academic research and political decision-making, as opposed to making them the subject to/of research and relying on trauma to mobilise and beg for political capital. COVID-19 revealed injustices in the immigration, healthcare, education, and many other public systems. Let us not wait until the next global crisis to take these experiences seriously.

## Notes

1. A literal ‘post-COVID’ world may never occur. Much like the ‘post’ in post-colonialism is used to emphasise the impact of colonialism and empire on the contemporary moment, my use of ‘post’ in this chapter is an acknowledgement that any future occurring after the outbreak in late 2019–early 2020 will be shaped by the pandemic and the global response to it.

2. A more general repertory of news coverage relating to healthcare workers as heroes during the pandemic can be found in Mohammed et al. (2021).

3. During the first lockdown, people across the UK, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other senior politicians, took part in weekly claps on their doorsteps to show appreciation and support for health and social care workers.

4. In the UK, under what is known as the ‘hostile environment’ policy, migrants have no recourse to public funds, unless they have been granted indefinite leave to remain.

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## 15. The economic case against the marginalisation of migrant workers in Malaysia

*Theng Theng Tan and Jarud Romadan Khalidi*

The plight of migrant workers in many countries has been in the spotlight since the beginning of the global COVID-19 outbreak. Owing to their low-income, precarious jobs and poor living standards, migrant workers became one of the most vulnerable populations amid the pandemic.

Migrant workers in Malaysia were no exception. In 2020, there were at least two million migrant workers, mostly from Indonesia and Bangladesh, making up 14% of Malaysia's total employed persons (DOSM 2021; MOHA 2020). Many were known to live in overcrowded accommodation in unsanitary conditions, either provided by unscrupulous employers or sourced by workers themselves, making it impossible to maintain good hygiene and practise physical distancing during the pandemic. Moreover, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress also reported violations of migrant workers' rights by their employers during the pandemic. This included unfair terminations, unpaid wages, workers being required to continue working in non-essential jobs, and workers' uncertainty about their employment status due to limited contact with employers (ILO 2020). Those who lost their jobs would have also lost their work passes, making them undocumented and at risk of being arrested.

Unfortunately, the Malaysian government did little to address the vulnerabilities faced by these workers. Although the government gazetted the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Bills, which require all employers to provide standard accommodation to their migrant workers, this took place only in August 2020, and most employers were unable to comply with the regulation immediately, especially in a difficult economic climate (*Straits Times* 2020c). Overall, fewer than 10% of documented migrant workers lived in regulation-compliant housing by December 2020 (Bernama 2020).

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Furthermore, when major immigration raids took place in May 2020 to detain undocumented workers, concerns were raised that more migrant workers would have been scared into hiding, making testing and treatment, as well as tracing the spread of coronavirus, even more challenging (*Straits Times* 2020b). Given migrant workers' precarious living conditions, the government's actions did little to contain migrant workers' exposure to coronavirus. It is no surprise that, by the end of 2020, migrants accounted for more than 40% of all confirmed COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, despite constituting only 10% of the country's population (MOH 2020; authors' calculation).

On the job front, government assistance was lacking as well. One of the most prominent initiatives was a 25% cut for the migrant worker levy due between April and December 2020 to alleviate the financial burden on hard-hit small- and medium-sized enterprises. Unfortunately, this was likely not helpful as the levy cut amounted to discounts of only 103–463 Malaysian ringgit, roughly US\$25–115, per worker (Tan, Nazihah, and Jarud 2020). Even after restrictions on movement were gradually lifted, the government repeatedly urged employers to prioritise locals in their hiring practices as part of measures to alleviate soaring unemployment among Malaysians. This policy was also justified as an effort to wean Malaysia off its reliance on low-wage migrant workers and encourage automation in the long run (Minderjeet 2020).

In a global public health and economic crisis, it is only humane to treat everyone with care and dignity, regardless of nationality or social class. Migrant workers deserve protection by the simple virtue that they are human, and basic protection should be part of their human rights. Unfortunately, human rights arguments often fall on deaf ears, with many still calling for governments to prioritise their citizens over migrants.

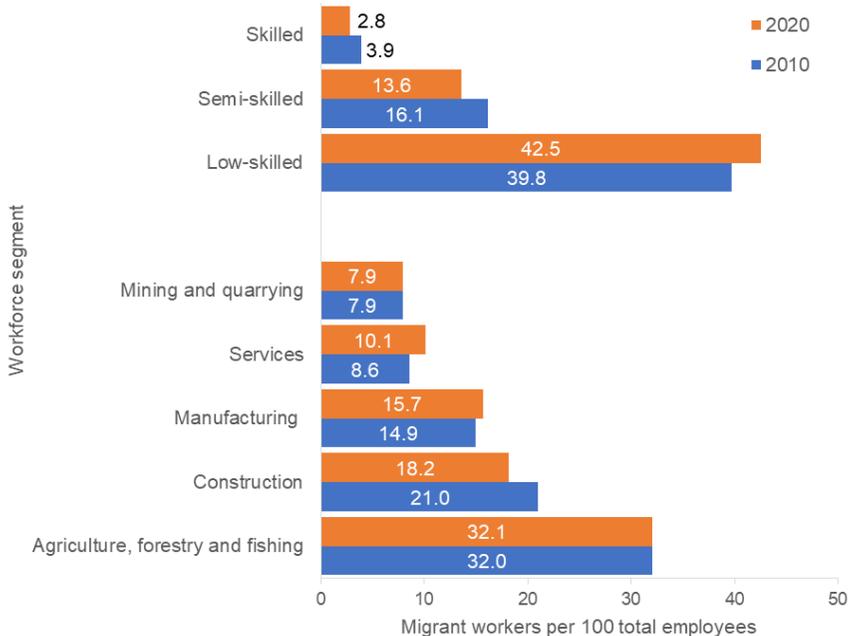
However, even from a pure economic perspective, an ideology that puts the welfare of citizens first must give way to inclusive protection measures. Although some may argue that, given limited resources, governments have an obligation to prioritise their citizens over migrants, there are several strong economic arguments against the marginalisation of migrant workers.

## **Neglecting migrant workers hurts locals too**

The pandemic laid bare the pervasiveness of economic externalities beyond what was previously thought. In the case of migrant workers in Malaysia, the economic consequences of neglecting their welfare manifested in at least two ways.

First, the failure to manage migrant workers' exposure to coronavirus strained the public healthcare system and led to the extension of movement restrictions. In November 2020, a cluster linked to the migrant workers at Top Glove Corp's congested dormitories became the largest COVID-19 cluster in Malaysia as of April 2021 (Malaysiakini 2021; *Straits Times* 2020a). After more than 3,000 workers tested positive within a month, coronavirus spread beyond the workers' circle to the community, forced the company to shut its factories, and caused the area to be placed under an extended period of lockdown (Hazlin 2020; Teh and Dhesegaan 2020). On a national scale, by early January 2021, the number of confirmed locally transmitted cases among non-citizens had risen drastically by more than 30,000. This contributed to the pressure that eventually brought the country's healthcare system to 'breaking point', forcing the government to lengthen movement restrictions within the country (Ahmad 2021). Clearly, any outbreak – whether involving poor migrant workers or rich Malaysians – would indiscriminately affect the larger population by straining the public healthcare

**Figure 15.1. Migrant workers are important to Malaysia's economy**



Source: DOSM (2011), DOSM (2015), DOSM (2021) and authors' calculation.

Note: Migrant workers made up a large proportion of workers in different sectors and among the low-skilled workers.

system and throwing more businesses into deeper waters as lockdown became inevitable.

Second, in terms of migrant workers' job security, inadequate support to protect workers' jobs also had a spillover effect on the survival of industries and businesses. Malaysia's economy had long been heavily reliant on the migrant workforce. In 2020, migrant workers made up more than 30% of the workforce in the agriculture sector, and just below 20% in both the construction and manufacturing sectors (Figure 15.1). Almost half of the low-skilled workers in Malaysia were of foreign origin. For semi-skilled jobs, where the majority of jobs were, more than one in 10 were migrant workers. Overall, an estimated 22% of establishments in Malaysia hired migrant workers in 2018 (MOHR 2019).

As such, without adequate support to protect migrant workers' jobs, Malaysia effectively unplugged its economy's access to a large swathe of the labour force. This served an extra blow to businesses that were already grappling with the economic consequences of the pandemic. As firms struggled to stay afloat, this in turn complicated the effort to reduce unemployment.

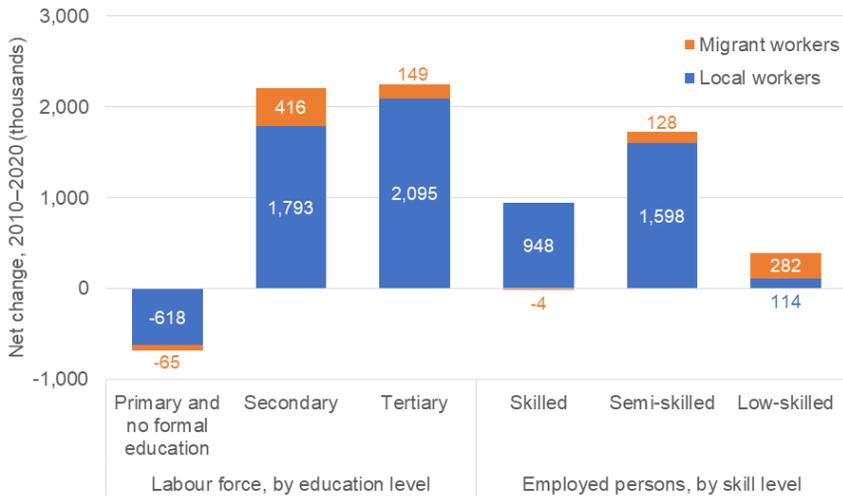
## **The difference between migrant and local workers**

When migrant workers became absent from the labour market – whether due to sickness or job loss – hiring local workers to replace them was not easy simply because migrant and local workers are not perfect substitutes.

Between 2010 and 2020, most of the migrant workers who entered the labour market had at most a secondary education (Figure 15.2). By contrast, the Malaysian labour force was becoming more educated: there were fewer people with only a primary education or less and over two million more who were tertiary educated. This partly explains why, within the same decade, most migrant workers tended to go into lower-skilled jobs, whereas Malaysians were mostly hired in skilled and semi-skilled occupations.

In other words, given their distinct education profiles, migrant and local workers generally do not do the same jobs. Lower-educated migrant workers often take on lower-skilled jobs that are deemed dirty, dangerous, and difficult (3D), which are also jobs that Malaysians usually shun. Indeed, in a survey conducted by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), around 78% of 101 member companies reported that the main reason for recruiting migrant workers was a 'shortage of local workers to fill vacancies' (MEF 2014). Although this survey was

**Figure 15.2. Migrant and local workers occupied different occupational spaces**



Sources: DOSM (2011), DOSM (2015), DOSM (2021) and authors' calculation. Note: Between 2010 and 2020, migrant workers mostly went into low-skilled occupations due to their lower education backgrounds.

not nationally representative, it gives a broad sense of the struggle that firms faced in hiring local workers.

Therefore, by neglecting migrant workers' health and requiring employers to hire only local workers after lockdown, the government was putting employers in a challenging position. For example, following the government's directive to stop hiring migrant workers, market traders at wholesale and wet markets in Selangor found it hard to hire (Soo 2020). The jobs that migrant workers did were often too demanding for locals, such that it took two locals to handle one migrant worker's workload. As such, the market functioned at less than 20% of its full capacity due to the staffing disruption.

Encouragingly, after a petition by some employers, the government announced in August 2020 that employers could hire migrant workers who had previously been laid off. This was indeed a move in the right direction. After all, migrant and local workers had been occupying different occupational spaces. Expecting this to change overnight – even amid a global economic crisis – was unrealistic.

## The march towards automation

Last but not least, the pathway to a successful structural transformation of the economy that will benefit all Malaysians does not depend

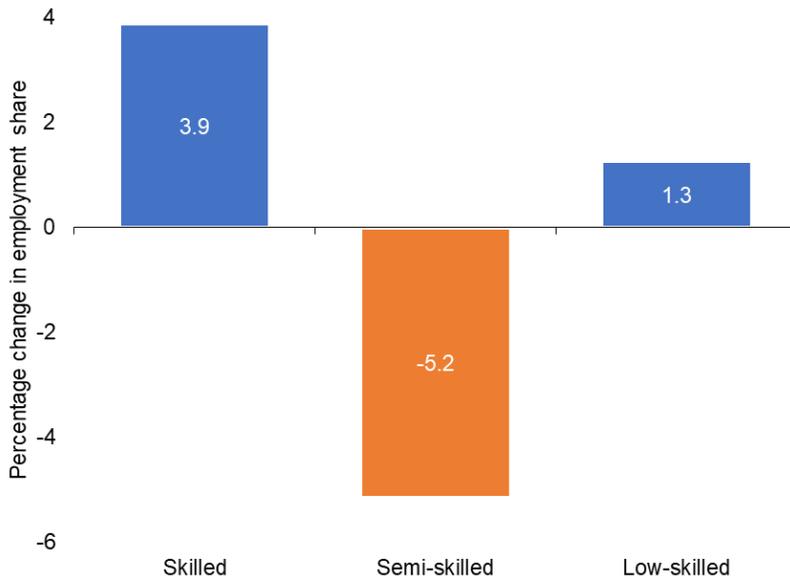
solely on reducing Malaysia's reliance on migrant workers. Although there has been a wealth of economic research on the short-term impact of immigration on the employment and wages of locals, immigration's long-term effects on Malaysia's choice of production technology and the growth potential of its economy have remained under-investigated. One view holds that current low-cost, labour-intensive production strategies – made possible by the relative abundance of migrant workers – may actually have been slowing down Malaysia's adoption of the latest forms of technology (KRI 2018; Ng, Tan, and Tan 2018). If true, this has significant implications for Malaysia's ability to sustain its economic development and eventually transition to an advanced economy.<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt, this is a highly consequential research question. Yet it does not imply that removing migrant workers from the labour market would automatically promise a structural transformation of Malaysia's economy that guarantees prosperity and employment security for all. First and foremost, it is naïve to assume that firms would simply upgrade their technology once low-skilled migrant workers are absent from the labour market. For one thing, labour-saving technologies are costly. The adoption of automation or the relocation of production to overseas locations with low-cost labour are luxuries that are often exclusive to large firms only, while other firms might go out of business instead (Sumption and Somerville 2009). This is pertinent in light of the fact that, in 2016, 90% of Malaysian manufacturing firms had fewer than 75 employees each (DOSM 2017). It forces the question of how Malaysia can ensure these firms remain competitive in the face of global technological advancement so that the manufacturing sector can continue to be a reliable source of job creation.

From the workers' perspectives, automation and new technology are bound to replace jobs, and it is Malaysians, not migrant workers, who are at the highest risk of job displacement. Based on findings by KRI (2017a), in the next two decades, 54% of all jobs in Malaysia could be displaced by technology. Four in five of these high-risk jobs are semi-skilled jobs. Malaysians will be most affected because 86% of all semi-skilled jobs are held by Malaysians. In fact, the hollowing-out of semi-skilled jobs by technology has been evident since 2001 (Figure 15.3). The void is only expected to deepen further with rapid progress in technology, more so if the government fully commits itself to the transformation of the country's economic model.

Clearly, the road to economic transformation comes with its own set of labour and industrial challenges that will inevitably put Malaysians'

**Figure 15.3.** The disappearing middle – percentage point changes in employment share between 2001 and 2020



Sources: DOSM (n.d.), DOSM (2021) and authors' calculation.

Note: Unlike jobs on both ends of the skills spectrum, semi-skilled jobs experienced a dip between 2001 and 2020.

jobs at risk. Reducing Malaysia's reliance on migrant workers could be an important policy lever to drive transformation, but it is a foundation of sound labour, industrial, and education policies that will ensure the sustainable creation of quality jobs and prepare all Malaysians for the rapidly evolving employment landscape. This may involve, among other things, strengthening public–private interactions to better inform industrial policies to create an enabling environment for innovation, developing active labour market policies to continually retrain the workforce, and reforming the education system to equip all Malaysians with relevant skills for the future (KRI 2017a; Rodrik and Sabel 2020). As far as employment security is concerned, the question is: has Malaysia invested enough in building the foundation?

## Conclusion – becoming better, together

If there is anything that the pandemic has taught us, it is that we are all in this together, and only by caring for one another can we emerge from the crisis safe and strong. From this chapter, it should be clear that neglecting migrant workers incurs significant economic externalities

that inevitably hurt the greater population. Furthermore, amplifying the urgency to reduce the reliance on migrant workers in a time like this has only distracted the country from what needs to be fundamentally improved in order to transform Malaysia's economy in the medium to long term.

Nonetheless, economic arguments should not be the only consideration when it comes to the ways in which we treat others. Certainly, the population of migrant workers – whether documented or otherwise – who have contributed significantly to Malaysia's economy are owed a duty of care. Besides stepping up job protection for all migrant workers during the pandemic, Malaysia must commit to protecting migrant workers' rights at all times. This includes overhauling existing regulations to safeguard workers' undisputed access to healthcare services and decent living conditions and holding employers and all authorities along the migrant workers' employment line accountable for any form of mistreatment of workers. These should apply in any other countries that host migrant workers, because how we treat migrant workers will determine not only the fate of our societies but also how our countries are remembered in the annals of history.

## Note

1. This section draws from the research findings of KRI (2017a) and KRI (2017b), two of the few studies in Malaysia that thoroughly investigate the impact of automation on the Malaysian employment landscape.

## Acknowledgements

This chapter draws from the discussion in Tan, Nazihah, and Jarud (2020), a discussion paper that explains at length the practicality of protecting migrant workers in Malaysia. The authors are grateful for the valuable comments by Allen Ng, Nazihah Mohamad Noor, and Ryan Chua. All errors remain those of the authors.

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# 16. Emergent bordering tactics, logics of injustice, and the new hierarchies of mobility deservingness

*Sin Yee Koh*

Borders and bordering practices have long been used by nation states to selectively include and exclude migrants and foreigners, whether in-territory or ex-territory. This was no different in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, travel lockdowns hardened existing external borders, preventing inward and outward mobilities. Under the guise of health security, additional layers of internal and external borders emerged. This accentuated and complicated existing structures that stratified the already selective inclusion and exclusion of ‘others’. On the other hand, in juggling pandemic control and economic recovery, some countries introduced new bordering tactics such as travel bubbles, green lanes, and fast lanes to spur the mobilities of those who were considered eligible (Abdullah 2020).

These new and emergent borders and bordering tactics were used by state authorities in an attempt to manage and control the spread of the virus and its implications. Underlying these tactics, however, were certain logics and assumptions about who should be protected, who should be kept away, and who should be allowed in or out, when and where (Ferhani and Rushton 2020; Laocharoenwong 2020). In this reflective chapter, I put forth a twofold argument: first, the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the enduring logics of injustice that inform existing and emergent borders and bordering tactics; second, as health security becomes intertwined with the governance of mobilities, we will be seeing the emergence of new hierarchies of mobility deservingness that have important political and ethical implications.

To develop this argument, I first outline the metaphorical understanding of borders. I then discuss how Ayelet Shachar’s (2020b) conceptualisation of the shifting border can help us understand borders

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and the bordering tactics that nation states used during the COVID-19 era. In doing so, I highlight the enduring injustices that underlie and inform such bordering tactics. Finally, I put forth the argument for the emergence of the new hierarchies of mobility deservingness. I conclude by calling for greater attention to the urgent task of considering the political and ethical issues surrounding border(ing)s in the COVID-19 era.

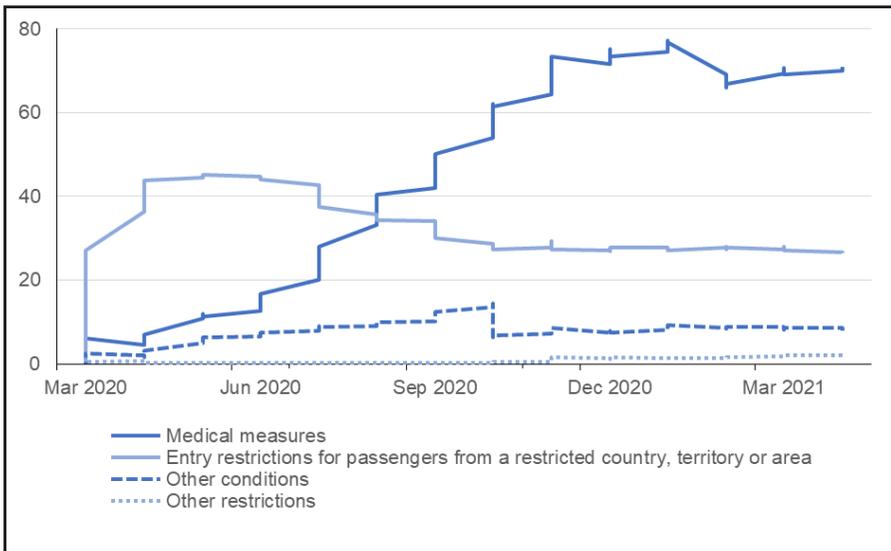
### **Borders: from lines to time-specific spaces**

When thinking of borders, it might be easy to jump straight into using linear metaphors – lines that demarcate, walls that segregate, boundaries that include/exclude, partitions that divide, or gates that open/close. Regardless of which metaphors we use (see Parmar 2020, pp.177–179), the important thing about borders is that they perform these functions *selectively*. The criteria – for inclusion/exclusion, entry/non-entry, permission/restriction – are typically based on selective sets of requirements. Furthermore, these sets of selective criteria may vary across contexts and in time. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw rapid shifts in the development of new international travel restrictions and authorised entry on the basis of medical requirements and other conditions for selective groups of people (Figure 16.1).

Of course, none of this was new: borders and bordering tactics had been in use for a long time for different purposes – whether to selectively include/exclude certain groups or to produce certain (economic/political) subjects (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Newman 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, gave us more concrete examples of borders as *spaces*, in contrast to lines. For example, we saw the emergence of ‘travel bubbles’ (Wong 2020), also known as ‘travel corridors’ and ‘corona corridors’, as a kind of protected zone of travel – almost like a tunnel. These corridors were theoretically sealed from the point of origin to the destination as well as throughout the journey – including quarantine facilities at the destination. We also saw the emergence of ‘green lanes’ (Chong 2020), ‘fast lanes’ (Toh 2020), and ‘fast-track entry’ (Chang 2020) for less restricted travel depending on multilateral agreements.

What is interesting here is that *the border became a space tied to a specific temporality*. These bubbles and corridors existed only in a specific spatio-temporality (i.e. between an origin country and a destination country during a specified timeframe) created through the mutual agreement of the authorities involved. As people travelled in and through these border(ed) spaces, their mobilities were circumscribed

**Figure 16.1.** COVID-19-related international travel restrictions (thousands), 8 March 2020 to 12 April 2021



Source: IOM (2021), reproduced with permission by the IOM.

Note: As changes in restrictions were monitored at biweekly and weekly intervals and the dynamic of the measures was at times changing on a more frequent basis, the graph cannot be indicative of the exact date of change in travel restriction policies.

and characterised by different velocities and viscosities. On the one hand, some were able to move from point A to point B with higher speeds, fewer hassles, and fewer additional costs – whether these were financial or opportunity costs. On the other hand, some mobilities were significantly slowed down, subject to multiple starts and stops along the way, suspended, or even entirely prohibited. As Susan Martin and Jonas Bergmann (2021, p.9) have noted, COVID-19-related travel bans and restrictions ‘clearly affect[ed] the capabilities of people, regardless of their aspirations, to move from one location to another’. As borders morphed into time-specific spaces that are in constant flux, travel, migration, and mobility also significantly changed.

### Shifting borders and enduring injustices

To understand borders and bordering tactics during the COVID-19 era, I turn to Ayelet Shachar’s (2020b) *The Shifting Border*. Shachar (2020b, p.4) has argued that the border ‘has become a moving barrier, an unmoored legal construct’ that is not fixed in place. Indeed, as

the border becomes disentangled from a fixed locality, it attains *spatial agility*. Nevertheless – and perhaps because of this unfixed nature – the shifting border can be flexibly used to suit different purposes at different times. In this sense, the border becomes a method (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and a means to creatively and flexibly operationalise inclusion and/or exclusion as necessary. Importantly, this carefully calibrated instrument that is the shifting border has been rapidly expanding its reach beyond territorial confines.

In the context of pandemic control, the shifting border offered nation states the ability to contain or keep out those deemed risky in order to protect those deemed worthy of protection. Ann Stoler (2016, p.121), however, has highlighted that ‘what and who must be kept out and what and who must stay in are neither fixed nor easy to assess. Internal enemies are potential and everywhere.’ During the pandemic, there was similarly no clear and universal answer to the question of ‘*who gets in, ... [who] gets out, and who gets rescued*’ (Ferhani and Rushton 2020, pp.461–462, original emphasis). We saw this fear of the potential enemy manifested in increased health and mobility surveillance, lockdowns resulting in selective im/mobilities, and deportations. In this regard, the shifting border was ‘revived as a *dispositif* to protect the state from a virus that [had been] increasingly portrayed as a foreign invader’ (Radil, Pinos, and Ptak 2020, p.3), in- and ex-territory.

It is here that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed enduring injustices based on structures of inequality such as race and class that were unequally shouldered by different groups. Those who had been marginalised and scapegoated in pre-COVID-19 times (e.g. migrant workers or asylum seekers) were easily and uncritically turned into ‘enemies’. They were contained, detained, fixed in place, kept waiting, stopped in their tracks, and deported (e.g. Sukumaran and Jaipagras 2020; *Straits Times* 2020). Such bordering tactics imposed on the so-called ‘enemies’, however, disregarded the precarious conditions that made them more at risk to the virus in the first place (Yea 2020). Bordering tactics also disregarded the medium- and long-term vulnerabilities that these groups faced, such as the risk of contracting COVID-19, lack of access to appropriate and affordable care, livelihood insecurity, stigmatisation, and discrimination (see Guadagno 2020). Regardless of prior and potential contributions to and membership of local and national communities, the migrant was made ‘disposable, subject to (even more) heightened security, and racialised as the source of pathogenic risk’ (Collins 2021, p.80) during the pandemic.

By contrast, those *not* seen as enemies were allowed to move and to cross internal and external borders because they were not considered (health) security threats. As part of state strategies to revive national economies weakened by prolonged lockdowns, we saw nation states taking on a certain degree of calculated risk to partially reopen borders to certain groups. These included business travellers and investors (Ahmad Naqib Idris 2020), medical tourists (Valentina 2020), international students (Adam 2020), and border commuters (*Malay Mail* 2021) – groups who arguably had more capacities and resources to take on the additional (financial and time) costs of pandemic travel and whose mobilities had not been seriously curtailed, compared to the groups who were seen as ‘enemies’.

As Meghann Ormond (2021) has highlighted, both routine and exceptional treatments of different groups during the pandemic can reveal ‘how embodied “risk” is imagined, evolves, and gets differentially attributed and practiced by national governments’. The bifurcated bordering tactics imposed upon ‘enemies’ and ‘non-enemies’ revealed ‘the underlying script states follow when they embrace or filter *The Other*’ (Kenwick and Simmons 2020, p. E37, original emphasis). The pandemic brought the problematic logic that informs existing and emergent bordering tactics into greater clarity, showing how control regimes that delineate ‘(im)mobilities of the “past”’ (Lin and Yeoh 2021, p.96) continued to shape mobility regimes in the COVID-19 era.

## **New hierarchies of mobility deservingness**

Putting aside legitimate public health considerations that might have justified the pandemic’s bordering tactics, it is important to recognise that the shifting border translated into material violence that positioned people in ‘new relations of power in political spaces of im/mobility’ (Shachar 2020b, p.6; see also Shachar 2020a). Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged that border control and migration governance have been inherently political, both during and before pandemic times (Kenwick and Simmons 2020). As health security becomes intertwined with the (political) governance of mobilities in the COVID-19 era, I argue that we will be seeing the emergence of *new hierarchies of mobility deservingness*.

In their article on Malaysia’s healthcare regime, Meghann Ormond and Alice Nah wrote about ‘hierarchies of healthcare deservingness’ (Ormond and Nah 2020) whereby migrants have been positioned along

a hierarchy of differential access to healthcare largely on the basis of moral judgements. There are some parallels that can be drawn here: in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who were deemed fit for travel – that is, deserving of (risk-free) mobilities that did not compromise public health – were allowed to move. On the one hand, this is arguably a relatively objective judgement (i.e. health status on the basis of scientific measurements) in comparison to subjective moral judgements. On the other hand, the seeming neutrality of its ‘objectiveness’ obscures pre-existing structures of inequality and inequity that might have contributed to an individual’s compromised health status in the very first place (e.g. differential access to housing, healthcare, nutrition, economic opportunities, networks, and information). Moreover, frames of deservingness are neither static nor apolitical (Landolt and Goldring 2016).

If the emergent hierarchy of mobility deservingness develops into an accepted norm, those positioned higher in the hierarchy will be able to enjoy greater access to mobility and opportunities to accumulate mobility capital (i.e. resources from previous experiences of mobility *and* the potential to undertake future mobilities; see Moret 2020). Accumulated mobility capital can then be converted into other forms of capital in the future, locally as well as in another transnational locations. As Moret (2020, p.238) has explained, mobility capital ‘opens up and solidifies options in more than one place’. The unequal access to mobility capital, in turn, contributes to the exacerbation of inequalities as this new structure of inequity – mobility deservingness – overlaps and interacts with existing ones (e.g. race, class, and citizenship).

## Concluding thoughts

In moments of crisis, great uncertainties, or a pivotal moment in history – like the COVID-19 pandemic – we can observe that states display a tendency to add more layers to the ‘highly variegated terrain of social protection and vulnerability’ (Sheller 2018, p.xi). Protection becomes selective, while non-protection or outright abandonment expands to more groups and individuals. This clearly signals and reminds us that the rights and privileges accorded by nation states are highly discretionary (Koh 2020). One’s status and access to rights and privileges are subject to changing circumstances and shifting state priorities (Shachar 2020a). They are not – and cannot – be taken for granted. This applies equally to those of us who belong to groups of relative privilege (e.g.

citizens, permanent residents, privileged migrants) as well as those of us who belong to groups of relative underprivilege (e.g. undocumented migrants). This is because, as borders shift, morph and mutate, we become positioned within these categories, sometimes without even realising it.<sup>1</sup>

The development of new hierarchies of mobility deservingness is important because we know that migration and mobility are ways for people to achieve their aspirations, have a chance at attaining social mobility, or escape vulnerabilities. Furthermore, mobility has implications for residential status and citizenship acquisition later on or for the next generation. This is therefore not just a question of equity and justice for the current generation; it is also about that for future generations. The new hierarchy of mobility deservingness raises political and ethical questions that should be carefully thought through, critiqued, and debated.

## Note

1. See Lin and Yeoh (2021) for examples of how different groups in Singapore were recategorised according to their (state-perceived) risks of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

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## 17. The impacts of crisis on the conflict-prone Myanmar–China borderland

*Abellia Anggi Wardani and Maw Thoe Myar*

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the Chinese government decided to close the border in Muse, a small town in Myanmar's northern Shan State. Inbound and outbound movements from both countries came to a halt. A chain of truck trailers lining up on the transnational route between China and Myanmar left only one side of the road for vehicles to pass by. The trucks were stuck there for months in a lose–lose situation – leaving meant losing the possibility of trading their goods, whereas staying put meant remaining stranded in a place of uncertainty. During our short visit to Muse in July 2020, it was agonising to see a dozen miles of hope and hard work falling apart. What the experience of the truck drivers, traders, farmers, and consumers in Muse offered was a glimpse of how COVID-19 impacted cross-border economic activities and movement of people in Myanmar's border areas.

Myanmar, undergoing economic development and a tumultuous democratic transition, was prone to socio-economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic due to the uneven and underdeveloped provision of health services, a lack of accurate reporting, and low test-and-trace capabilities. The situation became worse in places where institutional and administrative regulations heavily relied on the security situation, such as border areas. The health crisis exacerbated already-uncertain terrain.

This short analysis investigates the impact of COVID-19 on cross-border trade areas in Muse, emphasising how different actors engaged in or governed cross-border trade activities and the pandemic's implications for cross-border trade movement. The chapter aims to highlight specific organisational tinkering with cross-border trade in a conflict-prone area during the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds upon participatory observation during a short trip to Muse in July 2020,

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which was part of a research project on people's livelihoods in conflict-affected areas, and data collected from secondary sources.

Observable impacts on cross-border trade in the conflict-affected Muse area during the COVID-19 pandemic manifested at two levels of analysis: macro and micro. The study gives an overall understanding of border areas using multiple lenses to capture the dynamics of different actors in their political, economic, and social settings. In this analysis, those settings are juxtaposed with the three pillars that support society: the state, markets, and community. The state represents the structures of political governance and, in this case, what can be found in Muse in Myanmar and Ruili in China. Markets include all private economic structures in production and exchange processes, including both large- and small-scale trades. As the third pillar, community consists of people who share a specific locality, government, and cultural and historical heritage. In this chapter, the community comprises people who live in the areas separated by the Shweli River. When any of the three pillars is disturbed, society must find a new balance to reach equilibrium (Hann and Hart 2009; Rajan 2019). Given this complexity, an analysis of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at macro and micro levels in Muse can make a valuable addition to the analysis of conflict-prone borderlands.

The micro-level analysis focuses on small-scale trade as a coping mechanism of grass-roots actors during the border closure. Meanwhile, the macro level covers the values behind COVID-19 regulations and policies that impacted cross-border trade routines. The underlying argument is that small-scale trade, such as peddling, hawking, and smuggling, is among the economic activities most sensitive to changes in border settings and is usually among the first to feel the impact of macro-level policy changes. Simultaneously, small-scale trade is a prerequisite for and inseparable from the development and maintenance of large-scale world trade (Evers and Schiel 1987; Goodhand 2020).

### **Cross-border trade in an unpredictable environment**

Studies on the relationship between borderlands and trade in various regions, especially conflict-prone areas, have increasingly attracted the attention of scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (for the borderland in Vietnam, see Bonnin 2010; for Thailand and Laos, see Phadungkiati 2014; for Myanmar and China, see Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020; for Afghanistan, see Goodhand 2008; for Indonesia, see

Wardani 2020). The border is understood as a contested space with an uncertain temporality. In conflict-prone areas, the border is a vital part of the battle for control and surveillance. Such an understanding invites the assumption that the border as a space embeds domination and power (Foucault 1977). In the case of Muse, where governance has come from entities at many different scales – supra-national, national, regional, and local – the border closure unravelled previously intangible hierarchies of power that had existed only in the abstract for grass-roots economic actors.

Literature on the border has often been the province of political scientists and has been disconnected from more in-depth anthropological debate, which suggests that geographical place defines boundaries and then demarcates the identities of the communities around it. In the case of Muse, the border area had been continuously shaped and reshaped by economic exchanges performed by diverse actors. Historically, the two communities on both sides of the border shared the same cultural characteristics and social-psychological environment despite their split nationalities (Dong and He 2018; Ganesan 2017). Therefore, looking at cross-border trade with only a macro-level analysis is insufficient owing to the transnational sociocultural embeddedness that factors into the two countries' cultures and plays a significant role in trade (Hann and Hart 2009). Over the years, such embeddedness has been transformed into social networks of cross-border trade. It has comprised complicated relations and influences between state and non-state actors from both countries, especially given that the area was formerly under the *de facto* control of ethnic armed groups instead of the Myanmar government (Ganesan 2017). Su (2020) has argued that border control in Muse has served to balance economic development and national security, as informal economies were pushed to formalise in an attempt to safeguard national sovereignty at the border.

Muse, also known as the Muse 105-mile trade zone, is one of the most significant economic corridors between Myanmar and China. Since 1988, the town has seen dramatic increases in connectivity and economic cooperation between the two countries. Considered 'a successful model for border trade gates and routes in Myanmar', Muse has served as a vital point in Myanmar and China's contemporary development strategies (Kudo 2010, p.266). It was also an important spot for a planned infrastructure route worth billions of dollars that promised to connect the Indian Ocean oil trade with China's Yunnan province. Labelled the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), the project

was designed to allow China to diversify its energy shipping routes and ease its reliance on the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. The bilateral cooperation on border trade zones thus fostered export and import activities in Muse. Between October 2019 and October 2020, Muse's trade volume – almost US\$4.8 billion – accounted for nearly half of Myanmar's total border trade volume (Ministry of Commerce 2020). Indeed, China's political influence in mainland Southeast Asia has intertwined with regional countries' interests, including Myanmar's, to advance their economic and trade positions (Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020). Without this cross-border connection, exchanges of capital, labour, and natural resources between China and its neighbouring countries in mainland Southeast Asia would come to a stop.

The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 turned the situation in Muse on its head. After the first confirmed cases, in March 2020, the Myanmar government implemented a series of prevention and mitigation measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. It also issued a nationwide order to close public areas and cancel events, including Thingyan (the Burmese New Year festival). Moreover, people were ordered to stay at home, practise social distancing, and temporarily close their businesses. The government took legal action against those who did not obey the laws and prevention measures. Nevertheless, even when COVID-19 cases were soaring in Myanmar, China sought to move forward with the CMEC project and claimed that the pandemic would not deter its initial plans (Nan Lwin 2020).

### **Coping with COVID-19 in conjunction with trade**

At the micro level, two types of trade activities were common in Muse. In addition to legal trade with government-authorized documents or licences, conducted mostly by large-scale traders, informal economic exchanges also significantly increased due to a somewhat loose licensing process, which allowed actors to evade taxes and trade restricted products. Motorcycles and cars were among the best-selling items in this shady border marketplace. A man riding a motorcycle while carrying another motorcycle on top was a common sight along the border route. Sometimes people also used cars to carry several motorcycles. Despite efforts by Myanmar and neighbouring governments to regulate the import and export of automotive products, such illegal practices continued to flourish.

Moreover, the thin line that constituted the border between Myanmar and China became a grey zone in which two currencies, the kyat and

yuan, were used interchangeably in economic transactions. Informal currency exchange kiosks were easy to find in the corners of Muse, and at shops buyers were allowed to pay with whichever currency they had.

In Muse, COVID-19 and the governments' measures to contain it also led to the stalling of trade activities. Truck drivers found themselves deadlocked, as they could not pass through the closed checkpoint but still had hope that the border would reopen soon. They mostly relied on local people in nearby villages for food and hygiene necessities to cope with the situation. Some tried to cut their losses by selling the agricultural goods to local traders. Others, failing to do so, decided to throw away what had rotted. Most of the drivers spent the night in their vehicles to guard their products against theft or other damage given that the area had long been a battlefield for ethnic armed groups.

Amid the Myanmar government's certainty that the country was free from coronavirus in the early months of the global outbreak, large numbers of migrants, both legal and undocumented, managed to cross the border with China. This raised questions as to whether these border-crossers had somehow contracted the virus yet remained undetected owing to limited testing in the border area of Muse.

In Muse, some traders operated without proper documents, highlighting rampant corruption practices in the local bureaucracies. Informal trade networks provided ample employment opportunities, attracting locals and migrants who were mostly low-skilled workers (Set Aung 2011). The rise of illegal migration, however, created inevitable tension in the area. In August 2020, 20 illegal migrants from China were arrested by the Myanmar authorities (Pyae Sone 2020). In total, from January to August 2020, 297 Chinese people were arrested.

Moreover, research suggested that Myanmar and China's alleged violent land expropriation process in ethnic minority areas with ceasefire agreements that also happened to be resource-rich, such as Kachin State and northern Shan State, had worsened the situation on the ground (Woods 2011). Policies on smuggling also seemed to fail in preventing illicit trade in the border areas during the pandemic. Despite continuous attempts to secure the border areas, clandestine commerce between people from Myanmar and China continued to exist thanks to the established trade networks among traders who shared long-existing ethnic and kinship relationships (Su 2020). With economic activities restricted by border policies, local traders found themselves stuck between the state's regulations and individual–collective moral convictions, such as cooperation between truck drivers and local villagers, in order to survive during the pandemic.

## Regulatory constraints and transnational trade

At the macro level, China imposed cross-border cargo policies to forbid all Myanmar's vehicles and small-scale traders from April 2020 to contain the coronavirus's spread. This move was seen as a one-sided policy instituted without any consultation with the Myanmar government, implying a lack of trust in its ability to control the virus's spread. It also created imbalanced business opportunities for Chinese traders and had protectionist undertones (Bharat 2020). Traders and consumers who had previously engaged in cross-border trading activities in Muse were caught in an unfortunate situation, as the primary operations of import and export halted and border checkpoints closed. As a result, trade volume in the Muse 105-mile trade zone decreased significantly. Traders from both sides were unable to cross, with around 500 trucks stranded along the way to the border. The restrictions put traders and cargo owners at risk of bankruptcy (Bharat 2020). The Chinese government also decided to increase tax rates, making the traders' lives even more difficult.

The border closure impacted not only Myanmar's agriculture and livestock sectors. Most of the raw industrial materials used to power Myanmar's factories were imported from neighbouring countries, especially China. Given its strategic and vital position, the border closure in Muse contributed to the shortage of raw materials and forced factories and industries to close. In Yangon, at least 47 closed or reduced operations due to the lack of raw materials, significantly increasing the unemployment rate (Myo Pa Pa San 2020).

Myanmar's government tried to negotiate with China to resume the flow of goods. Chinese authorities suggested that loaded trucks should not park along the route, to avoid congestion. Moreover, Chinese authorities allowed Chinese drivers with a COVID-19-free health certificate to enter Myanmar to drive the trucks that were already en route to deliver China's exports to prevent Myanmar drivers from entering China. The Chinese drivers would then return the trucks to the Myanmar drivers waiting at the border. The Chinese authority put the driver substitution policy in place in April 2020; then, in October 2020, the Chinese administration decided to triple the associated fees. Concerns remained, however, as only a few trucks out of the hundreds could operate due to the limited number of Chinese drivers. As a result, most trucks were still stuck for more than two months in a lose-lose situation due to China's lessened demand. Despite the Myanmar government's efforts to ease the border area trade restrictions, conditions did not change much.

Moreover, while the influx of migrant workers was not as apparent in Muse as in the border areas with Thailand, the government continuously attempted to tackle trafficking by strengthening law enforcement, albeit with unsatisfactory results. The pressing issues behind these illegal practices were closely linked to inadequate opportunities, insufficient border trade facilities, high-cost licences and documents, and the exploitation of vulnerable people (Set Aung 2011).

The illegal drug trade, human smuggling or trafficking, and illicit labour migrants were also found in Muse. It was arguably common knowledge among the locals that people could buy drugs ‘openly’ in small shops along the trade routes. It is also worth noting that Muse and the trade routes linked to it fell within areas of prolonged conflict involving seven ethnic armed groups. Muse, as a borderland connecting China and Myanmar with relatively easy access to lucrative foreign markets, often became a favourable option for ethnic armed groups to extort money. Along with neighbouring towns, Muse had been administratively controlled by an ethnic armed group called the United Wa State Army (UWSA) (Ganesan 2017).

The frequent fighting between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups impacted the everyday socio-economic situations of the local population and the actors who engaged in trading activities in Muse. Given Myanmar’s strategic location in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, China and Chinese economic interests influenced geopolitical relations and security in Myanmar’s border areas, where ceasefires between conflicting parties were arguably heavily influenced by attempts to enable cross-border economic exchange (Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020). In recent years, China had shown keen interest in brokering peace in the area for at least two reasons: first, to ensure security along the Chinese border and, second, to maintain dominance over the informal political economy of the Northern Alliance, comprising the Wa and Kokang peoples – the latter of which is ethnically Chinese (Ganesan 2017).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dire impact on the movement of people and goods around the world. In the small yet strategic town of Muse in the Myanmar–China borderlands, cross-border trade was forced to stop, causing significant damage to the local and national economies. Building from social theory, borderlands provide a sphere where the ongoing pandemic directly impacted the three pillars of society: the

state, markets, and community, all of which are in constant dialectical relations with one another. Such dialogues are constructed and negotiated through everyday life at the micro level just as much as through policymaking processes at the macro level. The border closure in Muse and the lining up of trucks along the transnational road made power relations visible within communities that shared the same sociocultural background despite being separated by a border. It rendered abstract concepts such as ‘the state’ and ‘politics’ far more observable than in ordinary, pre-COVID-19 times for the communities in the borderlands.

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