

The Newsletter



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of Jazz in Korea



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In this edition of The Focus

Republican Archives

Crossed Perspectives on the Khmer Republic and the Republic of South Vietnam

Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier

It’s been 50 years since Phnom Penh and Saigon fell to the communist forces (17 and 30 April 1975, respectively). In both cases, the fall of the capital city marked the end of a political entity: the Khmer Republic and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam). At the time, the two states were often dismissed as incompetent, corrupt, and bickering American “puppets” devoid of any genuine political project. Do we still hold the same views today? How is it possible to revisit and challenge these stereotypes? How has the field of study evolved in recent decades? This edition of The Focus assembles a diverse group of researchers and artists who reflect on these questions and on the role that archives play in reassessing the two regimes and their contentious legacies. The collection is meant to generate dialogue between the emergent “republican moment” in Khmer studies and the more advanced scholarship on the RVN. In line with critical archival practices, the researchers and artists in this Focus section explain how they have worked with existing records and addressed the lacks, gaps, and silences of republican archives. All use a broad range of sources – textual, visual, sonic, material, and architectural – and all mobilize a wide array of disciplines and methodologies. The diversity of their approaches points to the possible, promising directions crossed or even joint research on the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam may take in the future.



Street scene, Phnom Penh, 1973
(Photo [Mjed71](#) on Wikimedia, CC license)

On The Network pages

On page 49, the River Cities Network (RCN) offers a brief write-up of their recent In-Situ Engagement Project *Regenerating the Ngong River: A Journey of Riparian Planning, Renewal and Transformation*, which gathered diverse partners and stakeholders in Nairobi, Kenya on September 7-14, 2025. That page also announces the upcoming seminar *New Perspectives on the Presentation of Japanese Art II*, organized jointly by IIAS and the Heinz Kaempfer Fund (HKF). In the following spread (pages 51-52), the editor and journalist Filip Noubel reflects on the groundbreaking conference-festival *Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge 3*, which took place from June 11-14 in Dakar, Senegal. On page 52, Alisa Santikarn discusses the process of researching and writing her new book *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand*, published by IIAS’ “Asian Heritages” series at Amsterdam University Press. Following this, Laura Erber discusses the new structure of our Asia in the World Fellowship Programme and introduces the new cohort of 2025-2026 fellows (page 53). Finally, pages 54-55 offer the usual snapshot of ongoing research projects and academic networks at IIAS.

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is a global Humanities and Social Sciences institute and a knowledge exchange platform, based in Leiden, the Netherlands, with programmes that engage Asian and other international partners. IIAS takes a thematic and multisectoral approach to the study of Asia and actively involves scholars and experts from different disciplines and regions in its activities. Our current thematic research clusters are Asian Heritages, Asian Cities, and Global Asia.

Information about the programmes and activities of IIAS can be found in The Network pages of each issue of The Newsletter.

The Newsletter is a free periodical published by IIAS. As well as being a window into the Institute, The Newsletter also links IIAS with the community of Asia scholars and the worldwide public interested in Asia and Asian studies. The Newsletter bridges the gap between specialist knowledge and public discourse, and continues to serve as a forum for scholars to share research, commentary and opinion with colleagues in academia and beyond.

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A New Model for a Global Knowledge Community

Philippe Peycam

Four months have passed since the question of the existence of the institute has been settled. With a renewed sense of purpose, IIAS will continue its journey. The past year was challenging, but it offered an opportunity to rediscover the core priorities, and strengths, of the institute, and to reconceptualize our mission as a facilitator of connections between diverse regions, institutions, stakeholders, and sectors of knowledge.

The difficult patch found another conclusion with the unprecedented success of the third edition of the Africa-Asia Conference-Festival, or ConFest, held in Dakar, Senegal (pp. 50-51). The build-up to the event proved extremely trying on account of numerous logistical difficulties against a background of uncertainty over the fate of our own organization. In the end, however, the achievement was highly significant and widely recognized. With the Dakar ConFest, occurring at a highly geopolitically charged time, IIAS gained international visibility and legitimacy beyond traditional academic circles. The consecration was revealed through a unique collection of events and performances, and also through the expressed support of major institutions and organizations: the EU Parliament and the EU's

representative in Dakar; the Dutch Embassy and its counterparts from Japan, Indonesia, India, South Korea and elsewhere in Asia, Africa, and Europe; the Japan Foundation, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, amongst other prestigious institutions; and numerous African and international media outlets. After Dakar, IIAS was invited to Brussels to report on the event.

In the last year or so, since the other major success of the ICAS ConFest in Surabaya, Indonesia, what has emerged is a general recognition that the institute's multifaceted engagement with 'Asia in the World', in particular through its 'South-South-North' orientation, is bound to play an increasingly meaningful role to help shape a more conscious intra- and inter-regional, multi-stakeholder, multilateral knowledge community. This is being achieved through a more coherent, synchronized combination of initiatives. This includes a revamped Fellowship Programme designed to be more collaborative and itinerant (p. 53), large-scale 'ConFests' as event-platforms that bring together multiple networks and social sectors, the signature in-situ workshop format like the most recent event held earlier this month in Nairobi under the River Cities Network (p. 49), and a more interactive suite of communication and dissemination interfaces.

Through existing and emergent networks, IIAS continues to facilitate the development of new institutions or geographic knowledge hubs around the world. In so doing, we aim to constitute a multilateral knowledge community that represents an antidote to the increasingly fragmented and even hostile geopolitical configuration. This is what attracts the interest of a growing number of institutions, including knowledge policy agencies.

IIAS is thus emerging from a turbulent period to embrace a new phase of accelerated transformation. This will include galvanizing our current initiatives and deepening our role as an influential incubator of knowledge, all of which yields closer inter-cultural and regional understandings and collaborations, with Asia-in-the-world as its entry point.

We look forward to continuing to serve these objectives with you, thanks to your support.

Philippe Peycam is Director at IIAS.
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Fig. 1: "Drawing Connections" workshop at the IFAN Museum of African Arts during the Africa-Asia Conference-Festival in Dakar, Senegal. (Photo courtesy of Pierre Deperouges, 2025)





Fig. 1 (left): Shah Jahan on a Globe with His Four Sons, Balchand, paper, pigment and gold, 392 x 284mm, c. 1628-1630, folio from the Minto Album, Chester Beatty Memorial Library, Dublin, In 07A.10. Image courtesy of the Chester Beatty Memorial Library (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>).

Fig. 2 (above): Artisanal diamond miners in Cempaka, an historic diamond mining region in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. (Photo by the author, 2023)

Fig. 3 (right): Sambas Kris, steel (blade), suasa (gold and copper) inlaid with diamonds (hilt), 6.5 x 2.5cm, c. 18th-19th century, British Museum, London, As.Bk.88.a. Image Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_As-Bk-88-a). Shared under a CC licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>).



Trading Gems and Knowing the Earth in Early Modern Eurasia

Claire C. Sabel

Gems before geology

Before the discovery of diamonds in Brazil in the mid-18th century, the only known diamond deposits in the world were found in parts of what are now India and Indonesia. South Asia's most significant diamond mines were controlled by sultanates in the Deccan, principally Golconda and Bijapur, throughout most of the 16th and 17th centuries. Islamic sultanates also controlled several smaller diamond localities in western and southern parts of Borneo, which in contrast to those of the Deccan, are still mined today. (Fig 2) Maritime traders dealing in gems traversed the Bay of Bengal to buy both diamonds and colored stones, which were mined in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. The latter regions were home to many of the rubies, sapphires, topaz, tourmalines, and zircons in regional circulation at the time, which also traveled overland to China.¹ Pearls, too, came from sources spanning the Indian Ocean, from the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Mannar, and the Mergui Archipelago. The complex geography of the premodern gem trade sustained a rich gemological literature in Arabic and Persian, often commissioned by rulers whose courts purchased most of the stones. Jewelers and traders triangulated the diverse origins of gems in books recording stones' physical qualities, where they were found, how they were mined, and how lapidaries cut, polished, enhanced, and tested them.

The "spice trade" is an essential trope of maritime Asia's role in world history, but it is less well-known that precious stones often traveled similar routes to pepper, cloves, and nutmeg. Like spices, gems were important and expensive status symbols across the pre-modern world, as objects of spiritual and political power and as medicines that could be worn or ingested. They were also associated with distinctive geographical locations in Asia (Fig. 1). Indeed, some of the most important gem localities of the pre-modern world were found in the same regions as spices in South and Southeast Asia. The unique geography of gemstones not only attracted merchants' attention from across the Indian Ocean – it was also of considerable interest to scholars of the early modern world concerned with the composition of the globe.

While the Indian Ocean gem trade had supplied Europe with gems since antiquity, European scholars and consumers had little information about the places where gems were found. Europe was comparatively poor in gem deposits, except for garnet, opal, and amethyst localities in Central Europe. And throughout the Middle Ages, most gemstones reached Europe by land routes via the Middle East, arriving overland through Turkey and the Balkans or on ships across the Mediterranean. As soon as European participants entered Indian Ocean trade around 1500 via direct maritime routes, they sought knowledge of elusive and precious stones directly from their sources. From the periphery of gemological expertise, European merchants as well as natural philosophers sought to learn more about how to buy, sell, and use these precious

minerals, and to answer the question: how was it that such minerals could only be found in very specific places on the earth?

Unlike exotic plants or animals, minerals could not be transplanted to be studied or cultivated in situ. This required seeking out observations of gemstones by visiting markets and mines directly, which an increasing number of European goldsmiths, jewelers, and merchants attempted over the 16th and 17th centuries. Setting out on military, missionary, and commercial voyages, they followed existing networks of the Indian Ocean gem trade from the coastal port cities where Europeans settled, tracing stones further afield. During his residence in Melaka from 1512 to 1515, the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires (c. 1468–c. 1524/1540) learned of sources of precious stones around the Bay of Bengal,

including Ceylon, Arakan, and Pegu (parts of modern Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, respectively).² His contemporary, Italian adventurer Ludovico Varthema (1470–1517), corroborated Portuguese reports on the dynamism of the region's gem trade. Varthema declared of Bengal: "here are the richest merchants I ever met with," whose wares included abundant cotton, sugar, ginger, and silk. "There are also here very great merchants in jewels," he noted, but their wares "come from other countries."³

After Flemish soldier Jacques de Coutre had disembarked a Portuguese ship at Goa in 1592, he ventured onward to Melaka, seeking a fortune in Asian trade. Initially buying and selling diamonds at Pahang and Johor (which would have been imported from their client states in Borneo), he later traveled to India in 1611 to buy diamonds directly at the Deccan mines, spending several years working with Gujarati, Portuguese, and Ottoman Jewish merchants. De Coutre offered to handsomely compensate Tamil and Telugu "mine diggers to get me some stones with diamonds in them" as evidence of the kinds of rocks in which diamonds originated. Such samples would have been procured at considerable risk to the supplying miners, who were severely punished for smuggling and private dealings. De Coutre reportedly collected 160 samples of diamond-bearing rocks that he sent to his brother "to show to our friends in Europe."⁴ He described the color and texture of earth at different diamond localities, as had been pointed out to him by miners, as evidence for the geological conditions conducive to gem formation. Ultimately, the new insights relayed by people like de Coutre back to Europe – specifically, about how diamonds formed in the ground – relied on the existing expertise of the merchants he did business with and on the skilled techniques of the South Asian laborers he observed.

Gems and geopolitics on the ground

Because of its strategic location for intra-Asian shipping, the port-city of Melaka continued to be the target of European forays into Southeast Asia. When the Dutch East India Company admiral Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge (c.1569–1632) arrived in Melaka, it was with the intention to wrest the city from the control of the Portuguese, who had seized it in 1511. The Dutch set their eyes on the Malay peninsula as a base from which to wrangle a share of Indian Ocean commerce for the newly founded Dutch Republic. In the early 17th century, Melaka was a small European-controlled enclave abutting the Johor sultanate on the southern Malay peninsula. At that time Johor was ruled by Alauddin Riayat Shah III (r. 1597-1615) and his step-brother, Raja Bongsu (1571-1623).⁵ Amidst the growing political threat from neighboring Aceh, in north Sumatra, and the incursion of new European political elements, Bongsu negotiated a series of treaties with Matelieff and sent a diplomatic delegation to Holland.⁶

Raja Bongsu was also responsible for the sultanate's *negeri* (client polity) of Sambas, a region in western Borneo rich in diamonds, which were sent to Johor as tribute (Fig. 3). Matelieff must have discussed the sources of these diamonds with Raja Bongsu, because he shared extensive information about them and their political sensitivity with his superiors after returning to the Netherlands. Like the earliest Portuguese voyages, the VOC's first fleets brought several diamond experts (*diamantkenners*) to help navigate the region's famed gem trade. Around 1610, two of them were dispatched to southern Borneo to aid in mineral prospecting in areas that would be less politically sensitive than Sambas.⁷

After Matelieff's departure, Raja Bongsu appears to have commissioned a revised copy of the *Sejarah Melayu*, the Malay dynastic chronicles. This updated the history of the sultanate from its mid-16th-century genealogy in order to celebrate the legitimacy and longevity of Bongsu's dynasty. The text glitters with jewels presented to these rulers and is an early source of evidence for the association of Johor with gemstones.⁸ While Bongsu celebrated Johor's illustrious past, Matelieff composed a series of memoranda

for the VOC focusing on the present and immediate future of the region, taking note of its role in the Southeast Asian gem trade. He advised that interfering with the Sambas diamond deposits in Borneo might yield conflict with Johor. Matelieff proposed instead to cultivate trade with Sukadana, a small polity to the south of Sambas, as the diamond trade would be a “very important business with a lot of money involved” for the Company. However, he warned, “the entire trade consists in subtlety and knowledge” which the Dutch would need in order to realize profits from precious stones.⁹ How exactly to obtain and protect such knowledge was an enduring concern for European colonial commerce and science throughout the early modern period, leading to various attempts to understand the geography of gem deposits.¹⁰ (Fig 4) Ultimately, regional conflict between many of the coastal polities of Borneo displaced Europeans from a permanent commercial presence there throughout much of the 17th century, preventing sustained engagement with the island’s diamond mines. However, when Banjar became a Dutch protectorate in 1787, diamonds were at the forefront of the agenda, both for the East India Company and the newly established Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences (*Bataviaasch Genootschap voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen*). The Society’s journal highlighted the island’s diamond mines in its report on Borneo in 1780, describing how local prospectors (*malim*) could discern the shining diamonds in the ground and advise on which places to dig.¹¹

Meanwhile, the English East India Company’s gradual growth in Indian coastal trade over the course of the 17th century led to increasing English investment in gemstones. By the late 17th century, London superseded Amsterdam as the European center for diamond imports. Informal exchange of information among jewelers, goldsmiths, merchants, and scholars in London was aided by the establishment of The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge in 1660, one of Europe’s most influential and long-lasting scientific associations. At the Society’s meetings, learned naturalists, nobility, traders, and artisans often discussed the nature of distant places. The very first inquiry for the East Indies published by the Royal Society’s journal, *The Philosophical Transactions*, asked whether diamonds replenished themselves.¹² This set of queries was intended for merchants and travelers, to help them gather intelligence for scholars in London about curious features of the globe. And indeed, the most detailed early modern European account of how diamonds were mined in India was published in the *Philosophical Transactions* just a few years later in 1677. It described how in the Deccan, “the expertest Labourers are employed in searching” for diamonds, requiring considerable skill since “diamonds are so scattered and dispersed in the Earth.”¹³

While regional conflict in Borneo kept Europeans largely out of the island’s mines, diamonds from Borneo nevertheless reached Europe. In 1682, an embassy from the polity of Banten in Western Java arrived in England with a cargo of rough diamonds, pepper, and a bejeweled sculpture of a peacock. The diamonds would have been sourced from Banten’s tributary polity of Landak in western Borneo and perhaps supplemented by other gems from regional trade. The mission ultimately was for naught, due to an internal power struggle between Banten’s two rulers, Sultan Haji (Abdul Kahhar) and his father Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (Abul Fath Abdul Fattah), which led the young ruler into an alliance with the Dutch. Sultan Haji granted the Dutch monopoly over trade in Banten, who rerouted his father’s returning ambassadors to Batavia, where they were detained. This new Bantenese–Dutch alliance further disrupted the archipelago’s diamond supply by bringing Dutch military backing to Landak’s frequent conflicts with its neighbor Sukadana. Eyewitness accounts to the sacking of Sukadana in the late 1690s were written by European gem traders who got caught in the crossfire.¹⁴

Even after diamonds were discovered in Brazil in the 18th century, precious stones continued to play an important role in the history of European imperial incursion into the Indian Ocean world. This was especially true in the renewal of the British Empire’s designs on Southeast Asia in the early 19th century. During the 1811 British invasion of Java during the Napoleonic Wars, the British East India Company placed Stamford Raffles in charge of the Netherlands East Indies. Raffles had great expectations of the archipelago. “The acquisition of a range of countries, apparently possessing the most valuable gold and diamond mines in the world,” he wrote to the Governor General of India, had the potential to restore the empire’s diminished coffers.¹⁵ When deliberating on the return of these islands to Dutch control several years later, Raffles compared the mineral resources of Borneo to those of the Americas, claiming gold and diamonds made the island “as rich perhaps ... as Mexico or Peru.”¹⁶

Raffles dreamed that the British might replicate the extractive exploits of the early modern Iberian empires in the New World. While rivalry with the Portuguese in Asia had fueled the ambitions of the Dutch and English East India Companies at the dawn of the 17th century, it was not until the mid-18th century that their efforts finally shifted from forced entry into marketplaces to campaigns of territorial annexation. From the second half of the 18th century, Dutch and English campaigns of military conquest laid the foundations of the more comprehensive colonial struggles of the 19th century. In establishing political control over the interiors of India and Indonesia, scientific surveys were an essential tool. The dual imperatives

of mapping hinterlands and prospecting for mineral resources led to the first geological surveys of the Dutch and British East Indies, produced under the auspices of colonial rule. These efforts highlighted gem deposits among the most alluring and lucrative minerals. And in planning and executing these surveys, colonial geologists operationalized insights that had been accumulated throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, when English and Dutch merchants had begun to muscle their way into the world of the Indian Ocean gem trade.

Gems and political geology

When Matelieff had arrived in Southeast Asia at the start of the 17th century, the ability of both European and Asian powers to acquire mineral resources depended on the strategic insights of artisanal, commercial, and diplomatic interlocutors, as gem deposits remained under regional control for the next two centuries. And ultimately, throughout this period, prospecting for and extracting gems continued to rely on the embodied expertise of local miners. Over some two hundred years of European expansion into the Indian Ocean world, imperial powers not only appropriated vast quantities of Asian gems, but also integrated Asian geographical, geological, and practical expertise in gems into the emerging earth sciences. By the time Raffles arrived in the early 19th century, he was able to rely on new scientific disciplines, that had been built on this global gathering of data, to understand the territories around him. Raffles’ wife Sophia described his daily routine during his years in Southeast Asia, which included writing, reading, and studying “natural history, chemistry, and geology.”¹⁷ (Sophia also took “full share in these pursuits.”¹⁸) In addition to his own studies, Raffles hired professional naturalists to survey Java, Sumatra, and Borneo, and they amassed voluminous natural history collections on his behalf, including a study of the *Mineralogy of Java*. The old allure of gems was difficult to shake. Even into the late 19th century, Hungarian geologist Theodor Posewitz wrote in the first comprehensive survey of Borneo’s geology and mineral resources that “diamonds form the chief, and most valuable product of this island.”¹⁹ Even though by that time gold mining was a much larger enterprise, and prices for Borneo diamonds had been significantly deflated by the arrival of South African stones on the world market.

By retracing these connections between European scientific and commercial interests in Asian gems over the early modern period, we can better appreciate the deep roots and long shadow of the colonial earth sciences.²⁰ Just as Raffles did not “discover” Singapore, whose presence as a thriving commercial city is testified in the reports of de Coutre some two centuries earlier, his contemporaries did not “invent” geology. Colonial geologists built on older practices of knowing and understanding the earth, by modifying and adapting techniques for accessing, extracting, and ordering the diversity of the world’s mineral productions, all of which relied on the labor of those working closest to the ground. If the emergence of geology as a field was facilitated by the changing “tectonics of empire,” as one leading historian of science has argued, then the ways of knowing the earth through its precious minerals during the previous centuries were no less political.²¹ In the early modern period, precious stones were at the center of imperial, economic, and intellectual ambitions to know and control the globe. Knowledge of the earth and its polities was forged in the pursuit of the mineral commodities of distant places, whether between Java and Borneo or England and Golconda. Imperial ambitions led scientific curiosity into the very ground itself and into intimate conversation with those who worked it. In doing so, it enabled these precious pieces of earth to become instruments of trade, diplomacy, and knowledge.

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Notes

- 1 Sun Laichen, “From Baoshi to Feicui: Qing-Burmese gem trade, c. 1644–1800,” in *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) pp. 203–220. Caravan trades also carried gems from Central Asian sources, such as the Badakhshan region straddling Afghanistan and Tajikistan.
- 2 Armando Cortesão ed. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan*, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515. *The Book of Francisco Rodrigues, Rutter of a Voyage in the Red Sea, Nautical Rules, Almanack and Maps*, Written and Drawn in the East before 1515, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944). See 85–6 (Ceylon), pp. 98–101 (Pegu), and p. 111 (Arakan).
- 3 Lodovico de Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico Di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, A.D. 1503 to 1508*, ed. George Percy Badger, trans. John Winter Jones (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863): p. 212.
- 4 Teotonio R. de Souza, “A New Account of the Diamond Mines of the Deccan,” in *Medieval Deccan History: Commemoration Volume in Honour of P.M. Joshi*, ed. A.R. Kulkarni et al. (Popular Prakashan, 1996), p. 129.
- 5 Known as Abdullah Ma’ayat Shah when he succeeded as sultan in 1615.
- 6 Peter Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (Singapore and Leiden: NUS Press and KITLV Press, 2010), p. 122.
- 7 Peter Borschberg, “Batu Sawar Johor: A Regional Centre of Trade in the Early Seventeenth Century,” in *Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1350–1800*, ed. Ooi Keat Gin and Hoang Anh Tuan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 136–53.
- 8 Cheah Boon Kheng et al., “Raja Bongsu and the Sejarah Melayu: The Tragic Fate of an Ill-Starred Prince of Johor (b. 1571–d. 1623),” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 96, no. 2 (2023): pp. 1–28. G. P. Rouffaer and R. O. Winstedt, “The Early History of Singapore, Johore & Malacca,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 86 (1922): 259.
- 9 Borschberg’s translations, in “Batu Sawar,” 148–9. For a critical edition of Matelieff’s full reports see Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge, *Journal, Memorials and Letters of Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge: Security, Diplomacy and Commerce in 17th-Century Southeast Asia*, ed. Peter Borschberg (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).
- 10 Claire Sabel, “The Impact of European Trade with Southeast Asia on the Mineralogical Studies of Robert Boyle,” in *Gems in the Early Modern World*, ed. Michael Bycroft and Sven Dupré (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): pp. 87–116.
- 11 J.C.M Radermacher, “Beschryving van het eiland Borneo,” *Verhandeligen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap der Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, v. 2, (1780): pp. 144–148.
- 12 “Inquiries for Suratte, and Other Parts of the East-Indies,” *Philosophical Transactions* 2 (1666): pp. 415–22.
- 13 Henry Howard, “A Description of the Diamond-Mines, as It Was Presented by the Right Honourable, the Earl Marshal of England, to the R. Society,” *Philosophical Transactions* 12 (1677): pp. 907–17.
- 14 F. Andrew Smith, “Misfortunes in English Trade with Sukadana at the End of the Seventeenth Century, with an Appendix on Thomas Gullock, a Particularly Unlucky Trader,” *Borneo Research Bulletin* 46 (2015): pp. 75–93.
- 15 Stamford Raffles to Lord Minto, Malacca, 10 June 1811, c.f. Sophia Raffles, *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles: Particularly in the Government of Java, 1811–1816, and of Bencoolen and Its Dependencies, 1817–1824; with Details of the Commerce and Resources of the Eastern Archipelago, and Selections from His Correspondence* (London: John Murray, 1830), pp. 84–5.
- 16 Stamford Raffles to Lord Buckingham, Buitenzorg, 5 August 1815, in Sophia Raffles, *Memoir*, p. 255.
- 17 Sophia Raffles, *Memoir*, p. 452.
- 18 Raffles to R.H. Inglis, Bencoolen, 7 October 1819, in Sophia Raffles, *Memoir*, p. 412.
- 19 Theodor Posewitz, *Borneo: Its Geology and Mineral Resources*, trans. Frederick H. Hatch (London: Edward Stanford, 1892).
- 20 Adam Bobbette and Amy Donovan, eds., *Political Geology: Active Stratigraphies and the Making of Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- 21 James Secord, “Global geology and the tectonics of empire,” in Helen Curry, Nicholas Jardine, James Secord, and Emma Spary ed., *Worlds of Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): pp. 401–417.



Fig. 4 (left): Detail from 1671 map showing the journey of Dutch East India Company merchant Pieter Smith from Paliacatte to Golkonda, including a stop at diamond mines on the Krishna River. [Dutch National Archives, NL-HaNA_4_VEL_1078](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/4_VEL/invnr/1078/file/NL-HaNA_4_VEL_1078) (https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/4_VEL/invnr/1078/file/NL-HaNA_4_VEL_1078). Shared under a [CC license](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed) (<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed>).

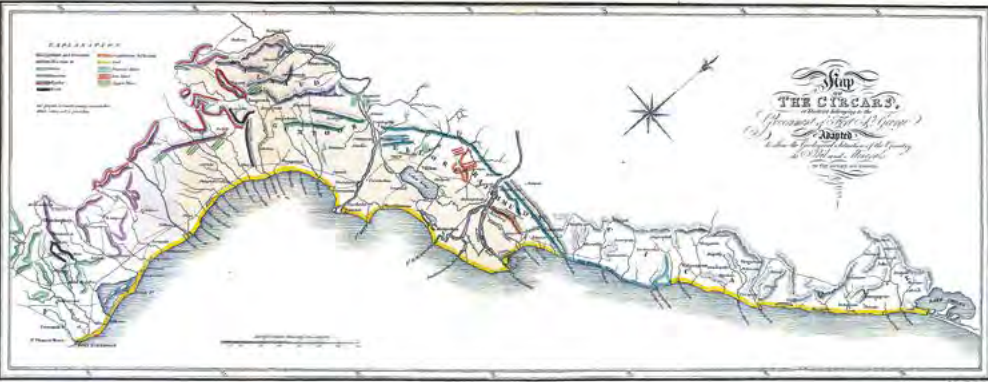


Fig. 5 (above): Geological map of the Circars by Benjamin Heyne, 275 x 230mm. Published in *Tracts, Historical and Statistical, on India*. London: C. Baltwin, 1814. ⁴ This is the earliest known geological map of India, based on reports compiled by Heyne after surveying Indian diamond, iron, and copper mines for the East India Company in the 1790s.



Fig. 1: Henk Nangtung (1921-91) and Edhi Sunarso (1932-2016), *Welcome Monument*, 1962, bronze, 6 m h, Jalan Thamrin, Jakarta. (Photo: IVAA Collection, Yogyakarta)

Fig. 2: Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1996), *Poster for State Publishing House, Leningrad*, 1925, screenprint, 48.26 x 68.58 cm. (Image courtesy of Fleet Library, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI)

Fig. 3: Cover of *Soviet Socialist Realism and Art in the Asia-Pacific* (Routledge, 2025). Cover image is the Japanese magazine *FRONT*, No. 1-2, 1942, Navy Issue, lithograph, 41.5 x 19 cm.



‘Changing the World’? Socialist Realism and Art in the Asia-Pacific

Alison Carroll

The art

The art made under this rubric in both the USSR and the Asia-Pacific was as varied as the cultures and contexts involved. Vera Mukhina's (1889-1953) sculpture shown in Paris in 1937 of the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* – which Picasso memorably admired, saying “how beautiful the Soviet giants are against the lilac Parisian sky”³ – was emulated by Javanese artists commissioned by Sukarno to stand as symbols of future promise at key sites in his new splendid capital. The works were grand, heroic, and sleek, with athletic young people simply dressed looking outwards with great confidence [Fig. 1].

The dramatic graphic forms of Aleksandr Rodchenko [Fig. 2] and El Lissitzky (1890-1941) particularly were admired and followed by Japanese designers creating masterful designs to support their new East Asia Prosperity Zone in the 1940s. They had studied from the Soviet models and created large-scale duotones of collaged imagery, bled edges, simple flat colours, and sharp, angled lines, with a variety of sophisticated type for texts spread across images still memorable today [Fig. 3].

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when poster-making took on such importance, groups from the army, amongst many, used the stylised, simplified Soviet graphic example to make some of the iconic images of the period [Fig. 4].

The grand history tableaux painted by the Soviets, using the whole apparatus of European academic technique, were taken up by young Chinese artists to similarly acclaim their own new revolutionary history. Many of the Chinese paintings were specifically made for the new (Soviet-inspired) Museum

In 1934 Maxim Gorky explained that the role of art was to “change the world.”¹ According to him and Joseph Stalin, the art movement to do this was “socialist in content and realist in style,” an easy mantra that immediately needs further qualification. The Russians themselves, including the proverbially hardline Andrei Zhdanov, insisted on it being a style of emotion and feeling. However, neither the Soviets nor those in power in Asia who wrote about art, particularly Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung, were specific about what they wanted artists to create – as long as it had political purpose. Their rare comment on specific style was to express their dislike of the European ‘isms’ of the early 20th century, particularly cubism and futurism, which they saw as “the decay of painting.”² Based on my new book, this article explores the impact of Socialist Realism throughout the Asia Pacific over the last 100 years.

of Chinese History (now National Museum), where they are still in pride of place and are often of greater visual import than their predecessors in the USSR. Shen Jiawei's *Standing Guard for our Great Motherland* of 1974 is one example made at the height of the Cultural Revolution to extol the courage and strength of the young border guards [Fig. 5]. Yet it also reflects the composition and intention of the much more prosaic 1938 painting of Stalin and Voroshilov at the Kremlin by Russian Academician Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881-1963).⁴ Another example is Lin Gang's (b. 1924) large brush and ink painting of a young girl praised by Mao Zedong, emulating the Vasili Efanov (1900-78) image of a similar event with Stalin. Both works, composed of dignitaries arrayed on a shallow picture plane, are exceptional for their celebration of young women in such paternalistic cultures.

This is the imagery produced, but behind it is an equally important story about the role of art in society. The Soviets had introduced and implemented, top down, the idea that art should be accessible to everyone. We can all be artists – it is our right. The idea had great impact in the Asia-Pacific, with cultural ministries created and art education made open for everyone, including for ‘soldiers, workers and farmers.’ Museums were built to show art, assemblies were held, and multiple publications were circulated.

Australia prides itself on its egalitarian spirit, with its ‘working man’ ethos epitomised by the strong Trade Union movement. In the early 1970s the Whitlam government and its official body, the Australia Council for the Arts, created a new Community Arts Board, which they called “a world leader in having dedicated and unbroken funding to support community



arts.” It was defined by “the creative processes and relationships developed with community” rather than the ‘artistic excellence’ of the outcome.⁵ Ann Newmarch's work *Women Hold up Half the Sky* made at this time recognises the new thinking reflected in the Maoist phrase with a typically disrespectful humour. It is a photo of her aunt Peg lifting her husband on holiday [Fig. 6].

As is often the way, many of the artists in Asia who successfully adopted and adapted this new style did it in accord with local traditions. In China, millions of posters reflected both folk and literati traditions in the use of fluid lines on paper and in the easy combination of image and text. In Vietnam, quiet watercolours in support of the new regime paid homage to their influential French experience. The publications designed in Tokyo to support the WWII-era militarist regime reflected centuries of restrained linear and planar mastery of the *ukiyo-e* masters. The dramatic, complex, highly competent historical imagery created in Manila in support of the church and the *ilustrado* (ruling) class was applied by artists like Pablo Baens Santos [Fig. 7] and collectives like Sanggawa (est.1994) to extoll the new political order. In Indonesia, the strength of artistic collectives making political comment reflected local understandings of *gotong royong*, or working together,⁶ and in Australia the ubiquity of community arts officers employed by local government to encourage ‘art for the people’ was welcomed by a culture which decried class distinctions – at least officially.

Vilification

If this work has been significant, why is it treated so poorly? Is it purely because of the context of political repression (and worse) in many of the places discussed here? There are long answers about equivalences of evil, but perhaps the best is to say that art extends beyond the context of its creation, although understanding that context is important. In the end, the work stands for itself.



Fig. 4: The 3 July and 24 July proclamations are Chairman Mao's great strategic plans! Unite to strike surely, accurately and relentlessly at the handful of class enemies, 1968, lithograph, 105.5 x 75.5 cm. Tianjin Fine Arts Publishing House. Landsberger Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
Fig. 5: Shen Jiawei (b. 1948), *Standing Guard for our Great Motherland*, 1974, oil on canvas, 189 x 158 cm. Coll: Long Museum, Shanghai. (Image courtesy of the artist)
Fig. 6: Ann Newmarch (1945-2022), *Women Hold Up Half the Sky!*, 1978, screenprint, 80 x 56 cm. Coll: National Gallery of Australia. (Image courtesy artist's estate)
Fig. 7: Pablo Baens Santos (b. 1943). *Manifesto*, 1985-87, oil on canvas, 157.6 x 254.3 cm. Coll: National Gallery Singapore. (Image courtesy National Heritage Board, Singapore)
Fig. 8: Taring Padi (collective est. 1998), *The Workers Unite*, 2003, woodcut print on canvas, 242 x 122cm. Coll: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.



Nevertheless, this is a movement that almost everyone who knows global art history disparages with simple judgements. Socialist Realism is still frequently dismissed as soulless, unimaginative, repressed, and kitsch.

The Cold War provided the context for Western art historiography to discredit Socialist Realism in the 'First World' and to ultimately spread that disdain to the Asia-Pacific adaptations. An essay by American critic Clement Greenberg in 1939 was very influential.⁷ First, Greenberg raises the idea of Western connoisseurship in evaluating good and bad taste, positioning Socialist Realism as 'bad taste' or kitsch. Second, the Enlightenment centrality of the single elite genius is contrasted with Socialist Realism's apparent disregard for individualistic creative processes. Third, the essay discredits the related idea of popular (mass) visual art and Socialist Realism's focus on mass popularity. Fourth, any role of the state in art's creation is critiqued, specifically the paramount role of the state in Socialist Realism and its apparently deleterious effect on the quality of the work produced. This is obviously all either untrue, or else so loaded that the arguments don't

fly. Michelangelo worked for the State; Van Gogh is popular; and the last Documenta exhibiton in Kassel celebrated the work of collectives today. Finally, the idea of inherent elite good taste is a throw-back to, we hope, long-gone class distinctions – that you need to be wealthy or of a higher class to appreciate art.

A corollary of this is the often disparaging use of the tag 'propaganda' in association with Socialist Realism. The term took on a negative meaning in the West after World War I and implies that the art had no value beyond being a tool of Communist politics. In saying this it is salient to remember Mao's words in his Yanan talk in 1942: that artists must put "political criteria first and artistic criteria second" but "works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically."⁸

If Socialist Realism had no strength as art, nobody would care, but the style's spread and impact through the Asia-Pacific highlights that this is not so. Contrary to Western thinking, it was the visual power of this work describing an idealised new world that has stirred countless millions through the last century in the Asia-Pacific. One

indication of their visual force is that, in China in the 1980s and 1990s, artists used the style satirically in works that gained worldwide notice and admiration.

Today

Is this movement over? The thinking that everyone can and should have access to the arts – whether as practitioner or audience – remains unchallenged in most countries of the region.

In Indonesia, despite persistent sensitivity towards 'communist' thinking, collectives like Taring Padi continue to actively address political issues in imagery that has spread to Timor Leste and East Malaysian artist groups. Examples are the series of woodcuts like *The Workers Unite* now in Queensland Art Gallery collection, with the subheading translating to "build solidarity between the rich and the oppressed people" [Fig. 8].

Communist Asia continues to make posters in the heroic style, as sometimes occurs in leftist states such as Kerala in India. In China, artists like Wang Guangji (b. 1957) have continued to make large paintings in the stylistic grand manner of the Cultural Revolution, like his *Art and Politics* now at Hong Kong's M+ museum. Shen Jiawei, who painted the *Border Guards* 50 years ago, has recently completed an enormous, complex painting depicting the history of Communism.⁹ The artist is critical of much of Communism's past but pays tribute to its importance and impact, especially on the arts.¹⁰

Particularly intriguing, the 100th anniversary celebrations of the CCP in Beijing in 2021 included a performative recreation of the same historical, heroic scene on the National Monument in Tiananmen Square sculpted in the 1950s. The early work was made in the flush of belief in the new Republic. The recent tableau was created in the footsteps of the pictorial mockery and satire of the 1990s but here there is no irony in sight.¹¹

Socialist Realism in the Asia-Pacific needs greater recognition for the lasting visual imagery of keenly felt idealism and challenge created under its umbrella.

That so many memorable and moving works of art throughout the region owe so much to the ideology and practice is testament to its significance.

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Notes

- 1 Maxim Gorky. "Soviet Literature," in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the first Soviet Writers' Congress*, (ed.) H.G. Scott (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1935), 67.
- 2 Andrei Zhdanov. On *Literature, Music and Philosophy*, see https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/zhdanov/lit-music-philosophy.htm, accessed 30 April 2024.
- 3 See <https://muzaart.ru/great-sculptures-vera-mukhina>, accessed 30 April 2024.
- 4 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalin_and_Voroshilov_in_the_Kremlin, accessed 19 March 2025.
- 5 <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/artforms/community-arts-and-cultural-development> [Accessed 5 May 2015]
- 6 Elly Kent. *Artists and the People; Ideologies of Art in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2022), 201.
- 7 Clement Greenberg. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," reprinted in *Art and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson (1961) 1973), 3-21.
- 8 Mao Zedong. *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 30-31.
- 9 Documented in film: <https://www.welcometobabel.com/about>.
- 10 Shen Jiawei. "Welcome to Babel," *TAASA Review* (Sydney, 2025, Vol. 34, No. 2), 26.
- 11 See Alison Carroll, *Soviet Socialist Realism and Art in the Asia Pacific* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), Fig. 4.1.





Fig. 1 (left): At the height of lunchtime rush in Huaqiang North, Shenzhen, delivery riders entrust the “last mile” of their deliveries to elderly assistants for the fee of 2 Yuan. (Photo by the author, 2024)

28/09/2024 Shenzhen

The urban matrix requires knowing eyes. All kinds of mundane street furniture line the sidewalk: locker shelves for mailed packages, food delivery parcels, and moped batteries, alongside charging stations for vehicles and courier stations. Once you recognize them, an entire layer of hidden infrastructure emerges like invisible ink, revealing the flowing river of China’s logistics network that powers its rapidly expanding e-commerce.

30/09/2024 Beijing West
A middle-class neighborhood where I stay

I see couriers delivering groceries every day. Each elevator features an LCD screen playing ads from Jingdong, one of China’s largest e-commerce platforms.

Supermarkets are rare. I spent an evening on Amap searching for laundry detergent offline, but found only produce markets and convenience stores. The only supermarket I managed to uncover—after traversing multiple highways, bridges, and many skyscrapers—was a dim basement shop in a rundown building. It felt like stepping into a Blade Runner-esque world, scavenging for relics of the past.

A Dispatch from China

Platform Economy, Labor Precarity, and Literary Voices

Chun Chun Ting (Isha)

A 2023 national survey reveals that 21 percent of the total workforce, or 84 million people, work in “new forms of employment,” mostly platform-based gig work: ride-hailing drivers, couriers, and food delivery riders.² Migrant workers with rural household registrations (*hukou* 户口) dominated these sectors. In local parlance, these three roles are dubbed the “triathlon” of contemporary jobs due to intensity and risk. Yet food delivery is considered the most hazardous, as riders are often seen rushing through red lights or driving against traffic, and featured in news stories about traffic accidents or sudden deaths from exhaustion. Investigations show how food couriers are trapped by tightening algorithms and unsustainable delivery paces.³ Amid China’s optimistic e-commerce narrative, workers’ struggle exposes deep contradictions of our time: triumph and failure, comfort and misery, speed and alienation.

In fall 2024, I returned to the Migrant Workers Home in Picun, Beijing, to continue my research on migrant workers’ literature. I made additional trips to observe the labor conditions shaped by the platform economy. Here are my initial reflections, with field notes and literature reviews.

Platform economy and gig workers in the food delivery service

A significant appeal of gig work lies in its alleged freedom and flexibility, especially when compared to the rigid discipline of factory work. However, as research shows, platforms employ various tools to

The exponential growth of platform economy is profoundly reshaping China’s urban landscape and its fabric of everyday life. To outside visitors, China can feel like an alien planet: Google, YouTube, Instagram, and other familiar tech tools are inaccessible; cash and credit cards are rarely accepted; and until recently, the prerequisites for plugging into the national network, a local SIM and bank account, were difficult to obtain. But once connected, everything flows seamlessly and instantaneously. Nearly all needs – from hailing taxis, ordering food, booking hotels, paying fees, to banking and shopping – can be, and in most cases are, conducted entirely through a single platform like WeChat or Alipay. The rapid monopolization of the daily lifeworld by the platform giants has been met with both exhilaration at the convenience they bring (and the perceived advancement of China compared to the West) and growing apprehension about the shifting labor conditions.¹

manufacture consent and impose meticulous control over the labor process. Algorithmic dispatch, ratings, and dynamic pricing are used to generate “just-in-time/place” labor.⁵ Meituan uses dispatching policies to favor full-time riders and squeeze out part-timers.⁶ Orders are preferentially directed to riders

who work over ten hours, avoid absences, reject few orders, deliver on time, and earn good reviews. Dynamic pricing further rewards diligence with higher fees per delivery. Customer tracking tools and labor subcontracting worsen job indignity and further erode protection.

These platform mechanisms keep riders in a state of dependency, precarity, over-exhaustion, and high injury risk. Half of riders report traffic accidents. Food delivery is hazardous: delivery windows have shrunk from 50 to 30 minutes between 2019 and 2023.⁷ In that window, riders must negotiate entry into shopping malls, office buildings, or gated communities (often barred to them), maintain ties with restaurants to expedite orders, determine the optimal sequence and route for chained deliveries, and stay in constant contact with restaurants, customers, and platforms. All this must be done while maneuvering through busy traffic across highways, pedestrian overpasses, and walkways – and managing battery swaps.

At the same time, late deliveries cost 50% of the fee, 70% if over 10 minutes. They also disrupt chained orders, lower on-time delivery rates, reduce rankings, and diminish fees for future orders.⁸ Ironically, while riders strain to deliver on time, the data from their GPS and labor processes are continuously fed into the algorithm to fix bugs, improve maps, optimize labor management, and ultimately achieve higher efficiency, i.e. cut delivery times further. As labor researcher Sun Ping argues, riders are “human batteries,” feeding data to perfect a system that exploits them.

26/09/2024, Shenzhen

I met my filmmaker friend Baik, who is working on a documentary about China’s platform economy. Together we visited Huaqiang North, home to tech giants like Tencent and Huawei, to observe the bustling scene of food delivery.

For riders employed in this area, lunch deliveries between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. to nearby offices are peak earning hours. In the shopping malls, they either waited outside restaurants or rushed between mall staircases, picking up multiple orders from eateries that primarily cater to delivery business. Navigating traffic on electric mopeds, riders were easily identifiable

by their Meituan’s yellow or Ele.me’s blue gears (the two dominant platforms) – though many skip it, as platforms do not provide them for free.

Outside office buildings, older adults collected deliveries for the final stretch. Wearing a QR code to accept payments, they called out building names, gathered orders from riders, and earned 2 Yuan per delivery. Instead of climbing stairs or waiting for elevators, which can be very time-consuming, riders outsource this task, keeping only 4 Yuan. I initially assumed the seniors were retirees, but the first one I spoke to turned out to be a hospital cleaner, skipping lunch to earn extra income.⁴



Fig. 2 (left): A migrant Didi driver who has spent over twenty years working in Beijing. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Migrant workers and labor precarity

Despite harsh conditions, workers continue to flock to the ranks of food delivery riders, Didi (China’s Uber) drivers, and couriers. China’s economic restructuring has sought to shift from the old export-oriented model to a growth regime driven by capital investment, technological innovation, and domestic consumption.⁹ Since the early 2010s, the manufacturing upgrade led to widespread unemployment among industrial workers. The rapid expansion of e-commerce and logistics displaced small entrepreneurs such as street vendors, shop owners, and distributors.¹⁰ Many of these displaced workers thus turned to the emerging gig economy.

The gig economy has become a catch-all sector for workers from diverse backgrounds. It attracts laid-off white-collar workers and fresh graduate (who often see it as temporary), yet migrant workers (with rural hukou) remain 75% of the force. Studies show that they tend to have a higher tolerance for precarity, remaining “sticky” on platforms despite excessive workloads and brutal exploitation.¹¹ In other words, while technological advancement and infrastructure upgrades are widely celebrated, what is overlooked is that migrant workers – whose precarity ensures the low cost and rapid speed of delivery – provide the essential labor without which the flourishing of the platform economy would be inconceivable.

27/09/2024, Shenzhen, 11pm

The Didi driver taking us home is from Sichuan province. In his 40s, he has worked in Shenzhen for over 20 years, starting on factory assembly lines before becoming a construction contractor. The real estate downturn pushed him into gig work four years ago. To earn more, he works both evening and morning rush hours, totaling 14 hours: from 4:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. and from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Between 2:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m., he naps and charges his car at the city’s outskirts for cheaper electricity rates. After car rental and living cost, he sends home around 3,000 Yuan monthly.

Although the category of “migrant worker” remains powerful due to the specific link between migration and precarity, developments over the past 40 years have rendered it less stable. For example, the permanent exhibition at Migrant Workers Museum in Bao’an, Shenzhen – an official institution – includes engineers and entrepreneurs (who began not as factory workers but with education and capital) among its list of exemplary migrant workers.¹² Many migrant gig workers I interviewed were former entrepreneurs, such as shop owners or contractors, or held white-collar jobs. Some have even brought apartments on the outskirts of megacities, or in second- and third-tier cities, in order to acquire urban hukou and secure education for their children.

These discrepancies arise from both economic opportunities and policy reforms. In the 2000s, hukou reforms allowed for easier

rural-to-urban hukou transfers in smaller cities and limited access to education and healthcare services in megacities – provided that migrants contributed to local welfare system.¹³ While these changes fall short of universal welfare, they suggest the hukou system is gradually being replaced by class-based exclusion. As attested by Guangzhou native Hu Anyan, whose bestseller *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* 我在北京送快递 has positioned him as a spokesperson for gig workers today, precarious work is no longer exclusive to rural migrants but increasingly affects the urban working class.¹⁴ With the rise of the platform economy, precarity is increasingly shaped by economic power and social class, rather than place of origin.

Writing about gig work

As labor activism faces severe suppression in China, cultural expression has emerged as a vital avenue for precarious workers to represent themselves and reclaim dignity. In recent years, two worker-authors, nonfiction writer Hu Anyan and poet Wang Jibing, have garnered significant public attention. Both authors gained recognition through social media, which eventually led to book publications. Wang’s poetry collection, *Those Racing Against Time* 赶时间的人 (2023), delves into his experiences as a food delivery rider and his family life in both urban and rural settings.¹⁵ Hu’s *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* (2023) recounts his 19 jobs over two decades, with a focus on his time as a warehouse worker and parcel courier. A key factor in their popularity is the public’s curiosity about couriers – ubiquitous yet largely unheard figures. Compared to more established migrant worker-poets like Xu Lizhi, Zheng Xiaoqiong, or Chen Nianxi, these two works are more restrained in tone. Strikingly absent in both books are anger, criticism, or sarcasm, despite the frustrations inherent in a courier’s life. Instead, there is a palpable caution in their writing, as they navigate the need to avoid offending readers (who are also potential customers), platforms, or censors.

Yet sometimes the truth itself is critique enough. For instance, when Hu Anyan writes about his experience of time as a parcel courier, he provides an extraordinarily detailed account of his internal calculation of time versus money. To earn 7000 Yuan monthly, necessary to sustain a life in Beijing, he must work 26 days a month, 11 hours a day (including two unpaid hours of preparation). This breaks down to 270 Yuan per day, 30 Yuan per hour, or 0.5 Yuan per minute. At a rate of 2 Yuan per parcel, he can only afford to spend 4 minutes on each delivery. In this framework, even basic human needs become luxuries: a two-minute bathroom break costs 1 Yuan, and a 20-minute lunch costs 10 Yuan. To avoid such “expenses,” the only option is to skip meals and limit liquid intake.

Written in a matter-of-fact, emotionless tone, the meticulous recounting of numbers – which must be the mental calculation of every rider and courier – creates scale, speed, urgency, and stress, evoking both awe and a sense of absurdity at the tireless, robotic frenzy of this labor. In his calculations, Hu reduces his time to its monetary value: 0.5 Yuan per minute. Once this rate is established, the logic turns inward against oneself, measuring the cost of maintaining biological life. Acts of self-care, like eating or using the bathroom, no longer reflect a living being’s relationship with his own

physical body but are now mediated by currency. Social reproduction costs time, which is money, which is the time it takes to earn that money, which is, ultimately, a piece of one’s life. In other words, we consume our own lives to sustain life itself. This grim reality is underscored by Hu’s self-deprivation: to survive in Beijing, he must skip meals and limit water intake. Survival demands self-harm. Hu Anyan’s conversion of currency, time, bodily needs, and life exposes alienation at a material and corporal level: the domination of time and money over all social relations, including one’s relationship with oneself.

Time is the most dominating factor in gig labor. As Sun Ping observes, making people wait is an expression of power that differentiates service receivers from providers. Gig workers often perceive their time as “subaltern time” or “informal time”, excluded from structured work hours like the “9-to-5” model or paid overtime.¹⁶ This conception of time reflects gig workers’ submission to class hierarchy and explains their “stickiness” to remain on platform despite increasing unpaid waiting time.

However, Hu’s fastidious calculation reveals a stark truth: any form of customer service – whether spending time on the phone, making extra trips for redelivery, or accommodating special requests – consumes the courier’s life. They are obliged to work at a loss, no longer earning but paying with minutes of their life to keep the job. Recounting an exchange with a customer who asked him to “take a walk after dinner” to collect a returned parcel, Hu writes: “Making a trip to her neighborhood is not as idyllic as she suggested. It would take me a whole hour, enduring traffic noise and exhaust fumes... Why would I work an hour overtime to earn a 3.5 Yuan fee?... I want to suggest that she take a walk after dinner too and, while she’s at it, find a courier station to return the parcel herself.”¹⁷ Though Hu never made the suggestion, he also refused to make the trip. He treats his time as equal to the customer’s, rejecting the notion that his time is “informal” or “subaltern” and therefore expendable for unpaid labor.

At the end of this article, I want to consider a poem by Wang Jibing. “Please Forgive” 请原谅 is from the first section of *Those Racing Against Time*, which focuses on his delivery work. As previously noted, indignity is the hardest part of a rider’s laboring experience. Whether it is accusations of reckless driving, complaints about late deliveries or impolite behavior, being denied entry by security guards, or reprimands from platform managers for inefficiency or absence – riders often have no choice but to apologize. In the poem, Wang Jibing uses “please forgive” as a refrain to evoke the countless instances of forced apologies. But at its core, what riders apologize for is their resilience; their tireless labor and constant hustle to seize every gap and every second; their undignified existence, likened to ants or scars, inconvenient yet illuminating like a bolt of lightning; their unbroken inner strength, unvanquished yet tender, as they silently bear insults and utter endless apologies. The poem concludes on a somewhat clichéd optimistic note: “Please forgive the night / when all is cloaked in darkness, stars still shine / For the burden of existence never outweighs the value of life.”¹⁸ Yet if resilience demands forgiveness, it remains ambiguous whether we are meant to forgive the night’s darkness or the stars that persist within it. What is undeniable, however, is that the riders’ resilience offers incontrovertible evidence: life’s inherent worth forever eclipses the weight of existence.



Fig. 3: A delivery rider pauses to exchange his moped battery at a dedicated locker shelf designed for battery swaps. (Photo by the author, 2024)

As Sun Ping suggests, the subjectivity of gig workers is not so much revealed in moments of solidarity or organization (which are exceedingly rare) but in instances of being beaten, punished, or dismissed for failing to comply.¹⁹ This inverted manifestation of subjectivity, emerging in moments of defeat rather than uprising, is also at work here. The poem carries an implicit critique, yet it can only be articulated in the voice of one begging for forgiveness. Critique cannot afford to offend, not the censors, the platforms who control digital traffic and content visibility, nor the readers who, as consumers, equally benefit from the reckless exploitation of labor. This is our reality today.

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Notes

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A Tailor Street in Singapore's Chinatown

Seng Guo-Quan

Before the advent of ready-made clothing, most Chinese who lived in Singapore's town area knew where to go to get their clothing tailor made: Kwong Hup Yeun Gai (Cantonese: 廣合源街), or Pagoda Street as it is officially known. This essay accounts for the rise and fall of a tailor street in Singapore's Chinatown at the intersection of global clothing trends, the dynamics of business enclave formation, and the everyday history of shops and shopkeeping between 1945 and the 1980s. Asia has a long tradition of tailoring, but the urban tailor shop in Eastern Asia manifestly indigenized a Western and gendered (masculine) form of handicraft-based business and mode of consumption. The name *yangfu dian* (洋服店), literally Western Clothing Shop, originated during the Meiji era in Japan. From around the 1880s, beginning in Japan and spreading to the colonial and semi-colonial port cities across East and Southeast Asia, putting on the Western suit became a mark of the Asian man's modernity and his assumption of Western "civilized" norms.

As early as 1880, the Master Tailors' Association 新加坡軒轅洋服商会 (Xinjiapo Xuanyuan Yangfu Shanghui) was founded in Singapore. It was also in this decade that the English-educated Asian elite began to appear in suits. But these early (Chinese and Indian) tailor shops – congregating on High Street and Coleman Street – mostly served the European residents of the port city.

The mass adoption of the tailor-made shirt and trousers for everyday wear, and the suit for more formal occasions, most likely began in the 1920s. The rubber boom of the 1920s, mass schooling for the Chinese, the advent of the three "Worlds" Amusement Parks, and the circulation of Hollywood and Hollywood-mimicking Shanghai-made films, meant that it became an urbane expectation for the average male resident to be seen in shirt and trousers on the streets, if not yet at their workplaces. In 1932, *The Singapore Directory*, written with the visitor from China in mind, contained this sartorial commentary: "[Chinese] men mostly dress

themselves in western clothing. In business settings, they often wear short sleeved shirts and broad trousers (阔裤 *kuoku*), with no distinction between daily and ceremonial wear. There isn't the practice here of putting on the (Chinese) long gown and jacket (长衫马褂 *changsha magua*).¹

Two early advertisements from the inter-war period show how the imagined consumer still had to be educated and cajoled into tailoring shirts and trousers for everyday wear. In 1926, to advertise for its opening at 117 North Bridge Road, a tailor noted, "Clothing is what brings orderliness to one's body, and if one sincerely wished to appear orderly through one's clothing, then measurements have to be precise, and the cut has to fit your body." It was further shared that the shop had all kinds of fabrics, and "could make Chinese and Western clothes for commercial and educational occasions."² By 1934, the norms had somewhat shifted. Another tailor at No. 127 Amoy Street could now proposition their product as a familial norm to be passed down the generations, as depicted in this

image of a suit-clad father telling his son, "The New Year is arriving, let's go to Hock Seng Chun to make a new set of clothing" [Fig. 1].³

The same 1932 directory listed 87 Chinese tailoring shops in the Singapore town area. The majority clustered along North Bridge Road (29), Selegie Road (20), and Coleman Street (9). Those on Coleman Street, along with their peers on High Street (1) and Tanglin Road (5), served mainly the European, Eurasian, and wealthy Asian clientele. The rest of the tailors catered to what was gradually becoming a daily necessity for the male half of the emerging Asian middle class. In the 1930s, there was little indication – beyond the three tailors which had set up shop there (Seng Chang 成昌, Nam Chang 南昌, and Hwa Hing 华兴) – that Pagoda Street would later on develop into Singapore's premier tailoring street.

Kwong Hup Yeun Gai (广合源街): From Vice to Tailoring Street

In fact, for most of its history, Pagoda Street had a seamy reputation for housing the town's public brothels, coolie and opium dens, and setting the scene for Chinatown's vice-related crimes. The street apparently acquired its colloquial Chinese name, "Kwong Hup Yeun," from a 19th-century coolie-importing firm, whose history remains shrouded in myth. By the early 20th century, an area called Ngau Chey Sui (牛车水 *Niu Che Shui*) in Cantonese had appeared, with the opera houses, brothels, opium dens, and teahouses of Smith Street (戏院街 *Xiyuan Jie*) at its centre. The area spilled from there into neighbouring streets (such as Pagoda Street and Keong Saik Road), but it was contained within the boundaries set by Neil Road, South Bridge Road, Tanjong Pagar, and Upper Cross Street. Ngau Chey Sui was an unapologetically Cantonese entertainment town. Before the Shanghainese turned up with their amusement parks and cinemas in the 1920s, the dandies of Singapore had to learn to swagger in Cantonese.



Fig. 1: Advertisement for a tailor shop in Nanyang Siang Pau on 30 November 1934. (Image courtesy of the Singapore Press Holdings)

The first tailor shops on Kwong Hup Yeun Gai had to contend with this lively entertainment scene unfolding nightly on their shopfronts. They must have been attracted to the foot-traffic that accompanied the bustle of Chinatown. At the same time, the declining entertainment businesses, now increasingly seen as fuel for "vices" by reformists, created relatively cheaper rental opportunities. A quick search of Chinese news articles that mention the street from the 1920s reveal a spate of crimes ranging from petty theft to crimes of passion and murder.

The rapid expansion of the tailoring industry after the Second World War was a Singapore-wide phenomenon. From 87 shops in 1932, the number of Chinese-operated tailoring establishments grew to 394 by 1958, according to a commercial directory published in that year. North Bridge Road (40) and Selegie (20) continued to have the greatest concentrations of tailoring shops – close to one in every ten and one in every 20 were located there, respectively. More significant perhaps was the spread of tailoring services to suburban residential areas outside the town area: Geylang (27), Jalan Besar (16), Joo Chiat (15), and Serangoon Road (9).

While tailoring remained Cantonese-dominant in the town area, in Singapore's suburbs, Hakkas – and later on Hainanese – began to make serious inroads. At its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, according to an estimate based on guild membership numbers, there might have been upwards of 1000 tailoring establishments across the island. By the late 1990s, there were perhaps no more than 200 tailoring shops still in operation.⁴

The sudden expansion of tailoring after the war and its rapid decline after the mid-1970s can be traced to global structural causes. The story of Singapore's rapid economic development since the 1950s – and the attendant growth of general demand for clothing – need not be repeated here. Likewise, the replacement of tailor-made clothing by mass-produced garments, marketed by global brands and made available in Singapore department stores from the 1970s and 1980s, is another well told tale.

Kwong Hup Yeun Gai in Chinatown deserves a closer scrutiny as a tailoring street and community, which both rode on the crest of 1950s expansionism and somehow managed to buck the trend of rapid decline, at least up to the 1980s. In 1958, the street counted 13 tailoring concerns. This appears to be a smaller number compared to the other roads named above, but it was also the shortest street (perhaps one-fifth the length of North Bridge Road), thus making it probably the most densely packed area with tailors at that time. At its peak, perhaps in the 1970s, 23 out of 59 shops on the street were tailoring joints [Fig. 2]. A survey by a conservation advocacy group in 1985 showed that there were still 16 tailor shops operating on the street [Fig. 3].



Figure 2: Row of tailor shops on Pagoda Street in Chinatown. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore, 1975)

Even on the eve of their collective closure, although the industry had declined, it was reportedly still the go-to place for tailor-made suits⁵ Chinese in Singapore.⁶

“(Even) customers from outside Niu Che Shui spoke Cantonese”

In accounting for the concentration of Cantonese tailors on Pagoda Street, the veteran tailor Wong Chew Chung (b. 1931) noted that even customers from outside Chinatown spoke Cantonese to the tailors.⁷ To the immigrant tailors, Pagoda Street offered the freedom of socializing freely in the language and culture of their home county. Language mattered. According to Wong, everywhere else, Cantonese and Hakka tailors learned to speak the language of their clientele: English in Katong and Tanglin, Malay in Geylang. Only on Kwong Hup Yeu Gai did Chinese customers of all dialect backgrounds conform to the lingua franca of Ngau Chey Sui.

It is easy to forget today that Ngau Chey Sui was still a “Chinatown” in the 1950s, in the sense that the majority of its residents were first-generation newcomers. In 1948, when Wong Chew Chung arrived in Singapore as a 17-year-old migrant, he already had one foot in the door of the tailoring industry. His father had been in Singapore, most likely from before WWII, and was working as a tailor in a shop on North Bridge Road. Chew Chung and his father were cramped into a second-floor room on 55 Sago Street with four other Cantonese migrant workers: three tailors and two other workers. It was his fathers’ friends who helped placed him as an apprentice in the tailor shop Chan Kwong Kongsi (真光公司 Zhengguang Gongsi) at 63 Pagoda Street.

At Chan Kwong, Chew Chung learned his craft from the bottom up, lived on the premises of the shop, and went unpaid

for two years (1950-2). Upon completion of the apprenticeship, he was offered a job as a tailor in the shop for the salary of \$120 (Malayan dollars) a month. Determined to be his own boss, he quit after two months to start his own business in Kim Chuan Road (Paya Lebar). He then moved to Geylang before finally settling in Katong (Shopping Centre) in the 1990s.

Although his familial network landed him a job, there was no way for a newcomer like Chew Chung to set up shop in a premier retailing location like Kwong Hup Yeu Gai. Due to rent control legislation, rent was low (\$80 a month in the 1950s), so that the market value of the retail space came to be expressed in the form of an unofficial “entry fee” called “kopi-money.” Chew Chung’s boss, the towkay of Chan Kwong Kongsi, could only afford the \$6000 “kopi-money” to lease the shop in 1948 thanks to help from a brother-in-law, who was running a textile-related business on Arab Street. The entry fee was the equivalent of 50 months of the confirmed tailor’s salary.⁸

As business on the street boomed during the 1950s, it was the already established insiders who muscled in on whatever limited shopfront retail space came on the market. Chan Pak Heong (陈伯雄 Chen Boxiong), a second-generation owner of Seng Cheong Tailoring Shop (成昌洋服 Chengchang Yangfu), the oldest on the block (since 1918) at no. 46 and 48, co-owned two shops with his brother, and subsequently invested in at least a few others on the street through his relatives. At least four shops on the streets were co-owned by two other pairs of fraternal brothers. In other words, a random customer on Pagoda Street had a one-in-four chance of walking into a Chan family-owned shop. By the 1960s, the unofficial entry fee for leasing a shop on Pagoda Street had risen to between \$10,000 and \$20,000. (Malayan dollars).

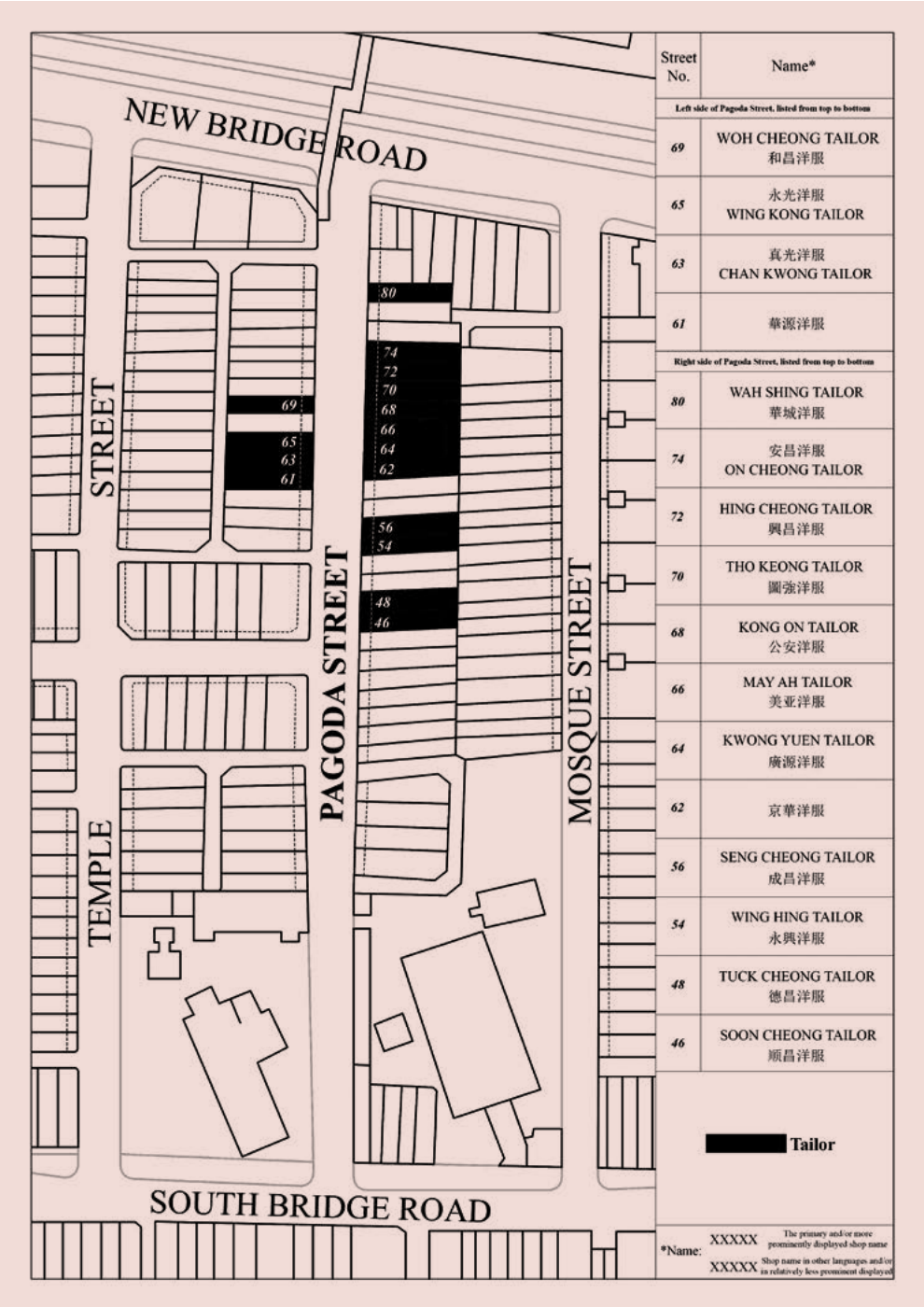


Fig. 3: Map indicating tailor shops on Pagoda Street in 1985.



Fig. 4: Interior of Tuck Cheong Tailor preserved and on display in the Chinatown Heritage Centre. (Photo by the author, 2025)

The tailoring shop was a craft-based family business. The towkay was hence at once the master craftsman, the business owner, and the family patriarch. The shops on Pagoda Street were considered “big” by contemporary industry standards. Each firm had on average 20 members, including the towkay, his wife, 15 or so tailors, and two or three apprentices. A “medium”-sized shop would be run by the towkay and his wife, along with family members and two to four hired assistants.⁹ The tailoring shop was equipped such that every worker would have his own sewing machine – 20 for the big tailor shops, and five to ten for the medium-sized tailor shops. The shop came together as a “family” through the meals that were provided for all employees. Everyone sat together and ate the same two meals provided by the towkay: an early lunch at 9:30 A.M. before the shop opened and a dinner before the busiest retailing hours of the day (i.e., the final two hours before the shop closed at 9:00 P.M.). Everyone worked seven days a week, with only four days off during the Lunar New Year celebrations.

Physically the shop was broken up into three parts on the ground floor. The retailing space on the shopfront was about ten metres deep. In addition to the huge tailoring tables, a big shop would display upwards of 50 types of fabrics in their glass cabinets, which customers could touch and feel on request. The towkay-cum-master-tailor helmed the shopfront, and he played the role of making the sales pitch, measuring, fitting, and most important of all, cutting (裁剪 *caijian*) the fabric. The back end, filled with 20 sewing machines, served as the workshop, where workers spent the long workday producing as many as five shirts per person per day. Separating the two spaces, interestingly, was the kitchen, which was helmed either by the towkay’s wife or a hired cook.

Tailor shops on Pagoda Street predominantly served the local Chinese market. Plain short-sleeved shirts and trousers would have been the most in demand by men in business for everyday wear. Another staple was shorts worn by working-class men. The very first item an apprentice was made to learn to sew was a set of shorts that would subsequently become his attire in the shop. The most challenging to assemble item was the suit. For businessmen of some standing, who had to regularly attend social functions in the guilds or *huiguans*, it had become an expectation since the 1920s to put on the suit. Although not as much in demand, tailors could also make the formal suit for black-tie events. As Wong Chew Chung put it, the suit is “easy to make, but whether it’s beautiful and fitting, that’s another question.”¹⁰

Heritage Businesses in Singapore

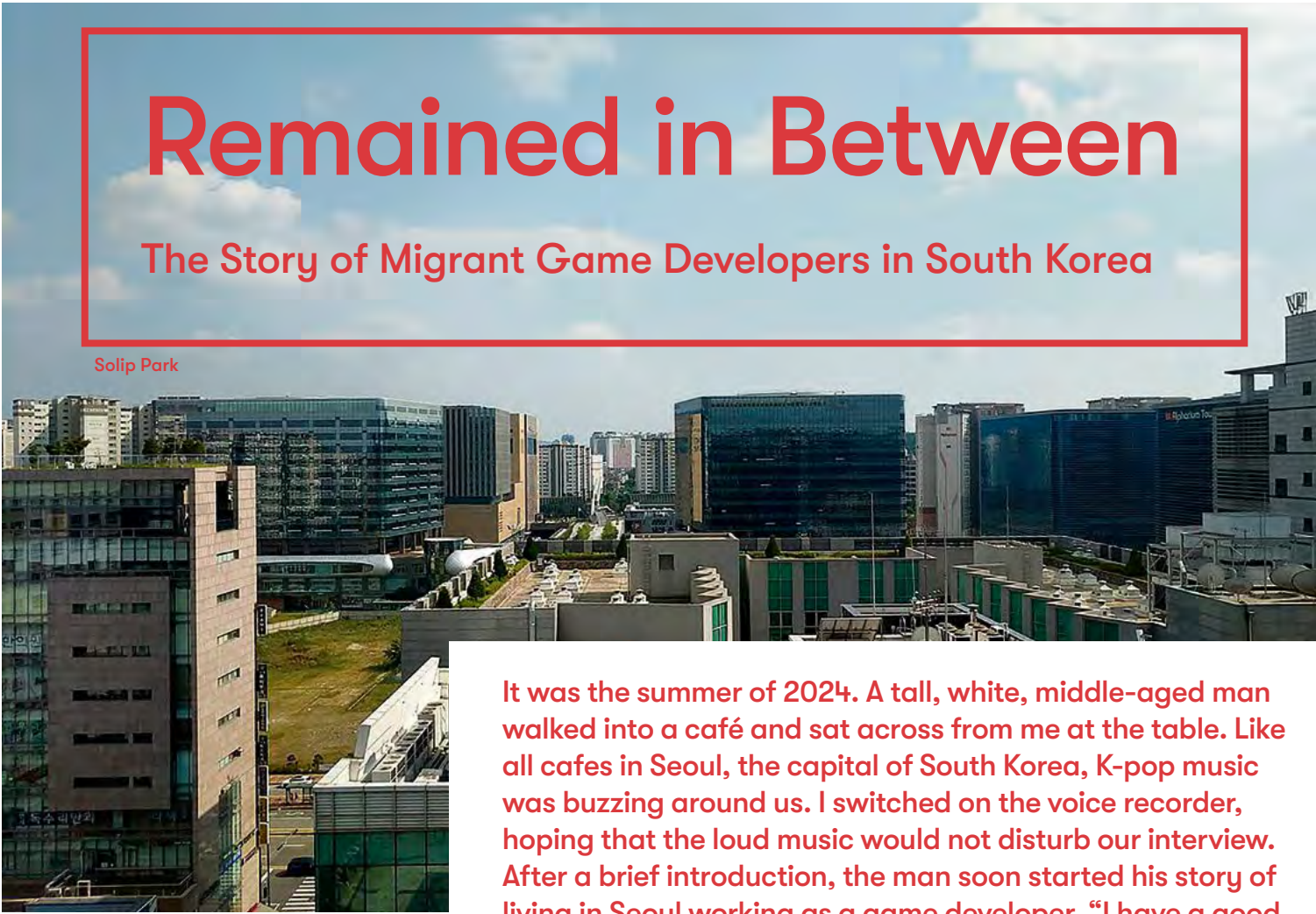
The decline of tailoring in Singapore, and on Pagoda Street in particular, in the face of the industrial manufacturing of ready-made clothing since the 1970s and 1980s was perhaps inevitable. To many of the towkays, the business was a means of supporting their families. The uncertainty of the business meant that from the 1980s onwards, it became harder for families to pass them to children, who tended to be better educated and had more attractive career options. Many of the towkays simply chose to end their businesses in 1993, when their shops were acquired by the government for urban renewal.

In recent years, the National Heritage Board in Singapore has begun to champion the cause of heritage businesses – small businesses that have been passed down for three or more generations. On Pagoda Street, however, all of the tailor shops of yesteryear are gone. One of them, Tuck Cheong Tailor, however, has its furniture and interior décor preserved and displayed by the Singapore Tourism Board in the Chinatown Heritage Centre [Fig. 4]. While that is to be lauded, it is a pity that all the tailoring shops were closed en masse during the 1990s. Had one or two shops been allowed to carry on, it is plausible, especially from today’s perspective, that an institution like the fashion department of an arts college might “adopt” the space as a both a practicing heritage site, and a design studio for older tailors and young designers to meet and interact.¹¹

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- 8 Wong Chew Chung, Oral History Interview, Reel 10.
- 9 Yan Yee Foo, NAS, Oral History Interview, Reel 1.
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It was the summer of 2024. A tall, white, middle-aged man walked into a café and sat across from me at the table. Like all cafes in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, K-pop music was buzzing around us. I switched on the voice recorder, hoping that the loud music would not disturb our interview. After a brief introduction, the man soon started his story of living in Seoul working as a game developer. “I have a good foothold here,” he said. “I’m a foreigner who speaks Korean and has experience in Korea. That alone is my resume.”

The man, who I will address as John in this article, had spent over 10 years living in South Korea while working in the game industry. John was a passionate gamer since childhood, now living with his wife and half-Korean kids while working full-time in a game company. He said he is proud to be involved in South Korean games and proud of the career that he has built so far. But at the same time, he expressed his frustration with the slow pace of change in the South Korean game industry when it comes to globalisation and diversity – and him being constantly put into the role of a middle person or cultural mediator.

South Korea has a strong game industry, ranked 4th in the world by revenues.¹ The South Korean game industry employs about 85,000 people and is significantly concentrated on mobile and PC games, with Free-to-Play (F2P) being a dominant business model.² Thanks to the decent size of the domestic market – many of South Korea’s 50 million inhabitants are also active gamers – and an abundance of game education institutions that provide a consistent pool of labour for the new workforce, the South Korean game industry has flourished with its domestic-centric market. As a result, a vast portion of the game revenue is collected domestically or from its closest neighbours like China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

So, it was unsurprising to hear John describe how English-speaking people like him are rare in the South Korean game industry. He also said that internationals are often treated as interpreters. Sometimes this is as simple as translating Korean to English, but more often, it also entails explaining to their Korean colleagues what games are like outside of Korea. As John put it, “There are many things Korean game companies only know how to do in the Korean way. When

they are trying either to become a global company or studio or publisher, or if it’s a Korean publisher just trying to sponsor a global game, there are a lot of things that they...either don’t know they need to do, or they know that they need to do but can’t, or know what they should do but don’t want to.”

Video games have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in recent decades. Making of games, so-called “game development” or “game production”, is a creative process that inherently involves various forms of local practices.³ For instance, what makes the game “fun”? How do you make a game “fun” when the concept of fun is highly contingent on cultural, contextual, and individual factors? And from there, how can one make the game that they have created appealing to players across the earth with different cultural backgrounds and in social contexts? This is why the game industry may seem highly technical, but in reality, it is more about working around various cultural customs, social norms, and regional regulations.⁴ It is, therefore, highly specialised and requires various types of communication skills.

However, in the case of South Korea, the highly homogeneous work environment of the locals is putting its game industry at risk of market isolation. Despite being one of the major global entertainment industries through its production of K-drama and K-pop, only a handful of games produced in Korea struggle to reach outside Asia. Many Korean games, especially those from small- to medium-sized studios, either lack language support, do not meet the needs of international audiences, or are simply ‘not fun’ for those who play games outside of a Korean context. John pointed out that it is perhaps due to Korean game industry

stakeholders’ domestic-centric perspective and limited understanding of gamers outside: “One of the bosses said, what I think sums up the Korean gaming industry the best. He said, ‘You know, there are four game markets: Korea, Japan, China, and the West.’”

Meanwhile, the game industry is becoming more connected and diversified than ever before. People can now play games on their everyday digital devices like smartphones, which can be downloaded instantly by pressing the “download now” button. As the global game industry becomes increasingly connected, the number of international workers in the industry is also increasing. For example, a recent study showed that roughly 30 percent of game developers in Finland,⁵ 34.4 percent in the Czech Republic,⁶ and more than 15 percent of the respondents of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), mostly in North America, identified themselves as immigrants.⁷ This indicates a growing migrant worker presence in the global game industry, connecting games across borders.

But not yet in South Korea. The South Korean game industry remains largely homogeneous and thus slow to adapt to global changes. John and other migrants in the Korean game industry that I spoke with all generally agreed that there are very few internationals working at Pangyo, a municipality near Seoul that is home to many South Korean game companies. This is not surprising considering that South Korea is one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world, with only about 5 percent of the population recognised as ‘foreign residents.’⁸

Of course, the Korean game industry stakeholders appear to acknowledge their limitations in the global market and are attempting to make adjustments. That is because the recent economic downturn is also affecting the game industry, with a shocking number that nearly 50 percent of Korean game studios recorded zero profits in 2024.⁹ They are therefore actively seeking alternative revenue sources, such as game markets in the Global South and Europe. However, the homogeneous workspace in the Korean game industry continues to slow down the pace of change and poses challenges to innovation. The process of making games in Korea is optimized so well with a homogeneous pipeline, unable to or unwilling to embrace different points of view and create diverse types of games. As John

put it, “You get a lot of gotcha, semi-strategy, semi-RPG, fantasy RPG games. No matter what games we make, the marketing copy would be something about ‘new,’ ‘fantasy RPG,’ ‘unlimited strategy,’ etc. It doesn’t matter what game it is.”

John and other internationals were often expected to assimilate fully into a certain ‘Korean way’ of communicating and socialising at work, which is often hierarchical and masculine. Furthermore, Korean developers and their leadership often refuse to take insights from abroad as they are deemed not aligned with the ‘Korean way’ of making games, and most do not have experience working with people outside their comfort zone.

John’s story was echoed by Emily, another migrant working in the South Korean game industry. Emily said during her interview that she is satisfied working in her current job at one of the largest game developer and publisher companies in the country. Similar to John, Emily is fluent in the Korean language and was working hard to blend into the Korean way of making games. However, she was often excluded from fully immersing herself in the Korean social group: “Are there advantages to being a foreigner in a Korean company? Yes, obviously. I’m not expected to adhere strictly to the hierarchy. But, you know... maybe it is not an advantage.”

On one side, these migrants were expected to work seamlessly in the ‘Korean way’ of making games, helping create games that are deemed as the norm in Korean game studios. On the other side, however, they are expected to remain as others who bring outsiders’ views to help game studios make changes. These contradictory expectations are an alarming sign of marginalisation, when migrants cannot fully engage with either the native culture from home or the dominant host culture in the new country; instead, they remain isolated as a middle person somewhere in between.

With the abundance of a highly educated specialised workforce and decent domestic market scale, the South Korean game industry perhaps never needed to import game development talents, unlike game industries in Finland and Czechia that rely on foreign exports. However, with the growing interconnectedness of the game industry, Korea is now facing a turning point, where it must break out of its comfort zone and create games that can also excite audiences outside of Korea and Asia. For that, Korean game studios must look outward and be prepared to embrace changes. But can they do that? Are they fully ready to embrace the disruptions to their comfort zone? Only time will tell.

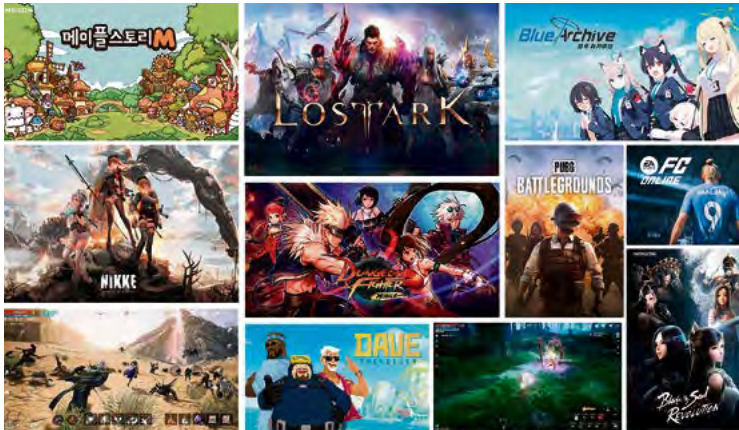
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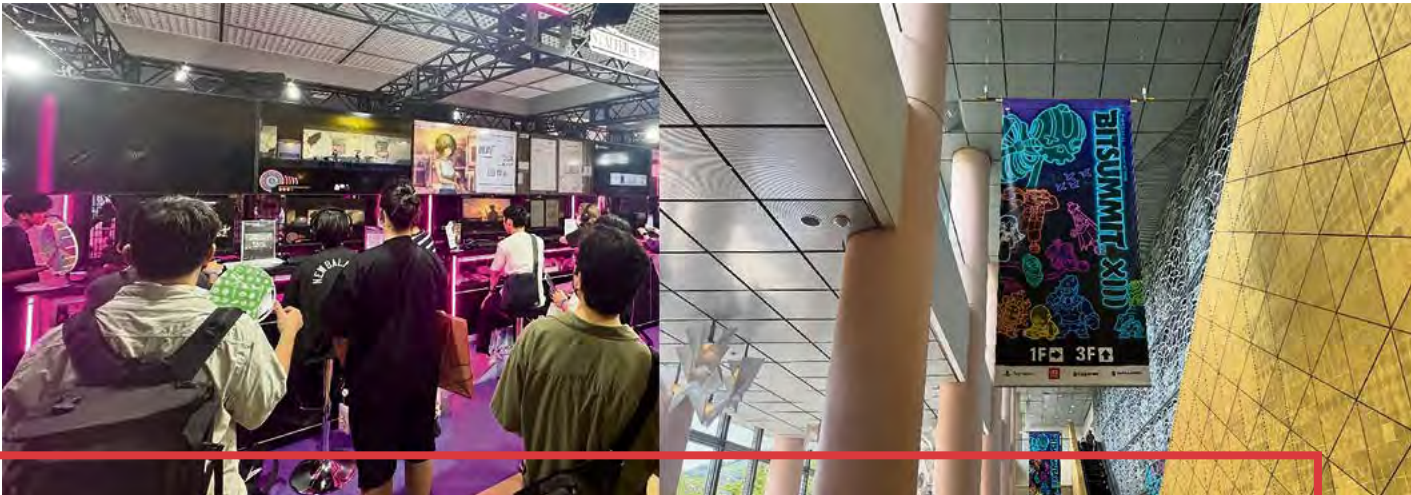
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Fig. 1 (above): Pangyo Techno Valley located in greater capital region in South Korea (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user lmtotallykorean and reprinted under Creative Commons license).

Fig. 2 (right): A selection of well-known South Korean video games. (Collage created by the author, 2025)





Doing It as Trailblazers!

Indie Game Developers in Japan and South Korea

Jh Shin

In the past decade, several noteworthy games have been released in South Korea and Japan. These include *THE PIA* (The PIA, 2024), which portrays a bomb accident within the South Korean military; *Commentator* (Tebasaki Games, will be released in 2025), which explores the power of media and social issues through the lens of a fictional broadcast station; *30 Days* (The Bricks Games, 2021), which addresses social isolation and the phenomenon of *kodokushi* (solitary death) among youth; and the *Unfolded* series (the first title, *Old Wounds*, was released in 2018 by COSDOTS), which addresses the Jeju 4.3 Uprising in South Korea. Although these titles share the same historical background in addressing the Jeju 4.3 Uprising – a tragic series of events, often described as a genocide, that took place on Jeju Island, South Korea, between 1948 and 1954 – each game’s narrative features a different event in the period.

The emergence of such titles from Japan and South Korea represents several significant shifts in game design, production, and market. Alongside technological transformations such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and the metaverse, new forms of indie games have appeared. These games go beyond narrow pedagogical functions to simulate historical events and lived experiences, particularly from the perspectives of those directly affected. Moreover, these games have fostered connections – among individuals and between individuals and society – serving as platforms for collective reflection and critical dialogue. But why does this matter?

In both Japan and South Korea, many millennial and Gen Z developers have embraced game design as a means of launching their own ventures amid uncertain economic conditions. A growing

number of these young creators identify as independent developers. An indie game refers to a game developed by individuals or small teams without the direct financial backing of large game publishers. Importantly, even when engaging with similar events, indie games vary across cultural contexts in their aims, interpretive frameworks, and representational strategies. These differences are shaped not only by developers’ individual intentions but also by broader sociocultural and political environments. While developers embed their own perspectives into their games, these are deeply informed by the societies in which they live, as well as by transnational currents and globalized patterns of thought. However, the idea of independence presents a fundamental dilemma. As Juul argues, indie games are considered those in which developers must maintain financial, aesthetic (artistic), and

cultural independence.¹ On the other hand, freedom from the artistic limitations imposed by the mainstream gaming industry allows developers to embed their own perspectives on both local and transnational events into their games. These thoughts are inherently informed by the societies in which they live. To analyze the games, it’s essential to first understand the developers. As some of them gain recognition, they begin to receive support from major game companies, publishers, and, in some cases, even government institutions. However, many first entered the field through university assignments or group projects. Rather than striving for professionalism from the beginning, these early projects served as opportunities to experiment with novel concepts and develop foundational skills. As their capabilities evolved, developers continued to produce new titles. Yet some of these works are still considered amateur

productions rather than commercially polished releases. At the same time, many developers grapple with the tension between their identities as indie creators and their aspirations to produce original, innovative content. Indie developers often view games as platforms for learning and artistic exploration – spaces that engage not only players but also academics and individuals with an interest in the medium. These games foster environments where ideas can be exchanged, critical dialogue initiated, and diverse perspectives expressed. Research on indie games has highlighted their emphasis on inclusivity and diversity, offering spaces that welcome a wide range of voices. They also cultivate communities centered on shared interests and experiences, fostering belonging and mutual understanding. Through cooperative gameplay, experimental narratives, and community-driven design, developers emphasize collaboration and empathy.

Games such as *Team Project Simulator*, developed by studio 806, exemplify how cooperative mechanics and community engagement can be harnessed to explore historical or social themes. The game addresses concerns of Gen Z such as the challenges of campus life, and it has sparked extensive debates on student forums about both game play and similar real-life scenarios. Similarly, when it comes to historical themes, indie game developers utilize narrative innovation to make contributions that go beyond entertainment. By basing games on real historical events, they construct sites of discourse, preserve marginalized histories, and challenge prevailing assumptions about what games can achieve. For example, *Unfolded: Camellia Tales*,² which deals with the Jeju 4.3 Uprising, illustrates how games can depict historical events from alternative perspectives. In this game, the player takes on the role of a young boy who loves poetry and literature and experiences the tragic history of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising through his eyes. Although the outcome of the historical event cannot be altered, since it belongs to the past, the game offers a powerful experiential perspective, allowing players to engage with history in a deeply personal way.

As games become more deeply integrated into daily life, increased scholarly and public attention to the indie genre is warranted. While indie developers have already produced groundbreaking work, emerging technologies promise even more dynamic and provocative contributions. As this indie phenomenon continues to evolve, so too will our understanding of the roles indie games play within gaming communities and broader society. Indie games are often associated with creative autonomy and resistance to corporate structures, but they can also be seen as tools of democratization in digital game culture. Unlike mainstream titles shaped by profit-driven models, indie games are frequently produced by small teams or solo developers who challenge the narrative and design monopolies of large AAA studios. From this perspective, the rise of socially engaged indie games represents not only artistic independence, but also a broader redistribution of cultural and expressive power. Having gone beyond entertainment, indie games in both Japan and South Korea are evolving rapidly and have become an increasingly important factor in both the game industry and academic research. It is exciting to see what new kinds of indie games will appear in the next decade.

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Fig. 1 (above): Scenes from an indie game event: BitSummit in Kyoto. It is a well-known global indie game event. (Photo by the author, July 2025)

Fig. 2 (right): Screenshot from *Unfolded: Camellia Tales* (top) and *Commentator* (bottom), notable indie games. (Screenshot by the author, June 2024)



Notes

- Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. MIT Press.
- Unfolded: Camellia Tales* is the final game in the *Unfolded* series.



Fig. 1: A street vendor in Dakar serves instant coffee from a makeshift Nescafé cart—an intimate exchange embedded in everyday urban life. (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

On Tiny Cups

Tracing the Invisible Routes of Coffee Culture

Dr. Ohsoon Yun

1. Street Cups in Dakar

In Dakar, coffee arrives in motion—not in cafés or on household trays, but on sidewalks, wheeled carts, and makeshift metal stalls. The carts share a recognizable design: two linked oil drums with a gas tank below and a kettle or pot above. A large plastic cup is used for mixing; a tiny paper cup delivers the final pour. With swift, practiced movements, the vendor arcs the liquid high between vessels, echoing the Moroccan tea ritual where repeated lifts and drops blend flavor and build foam. But this is not mint tea. It is Nescafé, stirred into hot water, mixed with powdered milk, and sweetened heavily—syrupy, not optional. Unless you ask from the start, your cup arrives half sugar, half coffee.

The cups themselves are striking—slightly larger than a thimble, wax-lined, designed for two or three sips. Though disposable, they define the experience. Transparent sleeves holding stacks of these cups hang from the cart like soft armor—functional, yet oddly aesthetic. The barista may sit on a plastic stool or drift from block to block, but the cart’s silhouette is constant—legible even to those who don’t share the language.

Elsewhere on the same streets, another

Coffee’s journey is usually traced through beans. But the humble cup tells another story—quiet, overlooked, yet just as powerful. From the aromatic brews of Saudi Arabia to the bustling streets of Dakar, from Tokyo’s curated cafés to the traditional homes of Ethiopia, these small vessels carry cultural memory. This essay follows the hidden geography of coffee cups—how they travel across continents, adapt to local rhythms, and subtly shape ritual and daily life, knitting together moments from east to west, and west to east.

coffee circulates. Less formal in setup but just as recognizable, Café Touba vendors carry everything they need: a thermos of pre-brewed spiced coffee, a large mixing cup, and a stack of tiny serving cups. The choreography is similar—the high pour, the steady hand, the brief exchange. The dark, herbal brew—often infused with grains of Selim (*Xylopiya aethiopica*) and cloves—comes not from a tin but from memory and muscle. And again, the same small paper cups: the vessel as the final point of contact.

That moment—standing on a dusty street, holding a fragile paper cup of overly sweet instant coffee or spiced brew—was disorienting. The drink itself was forgettable; the vessel was not. Culture does not always announce itself. Sometimes it slips quietly into the hand. The cup became a trace, a signal, a compression of ritual into gesture.

Why pause there, with that small cup? Perhaps because it resembled so many others I had seen—in Ethiopian homes, in tea shops in China, in Turkish street stalls. Familiar, yet unmoored. This cup, stripped of context, seemed to float between meanings: between Africa and Asia, tradition and improvisation, performance and necessity. That tension—between recognition and displacement—is where this story begins.

2. What Is a Cup?

In Dakar, a cup of Café Touba costs fifty CFA francs; sweetened Nescafé costs one hundred. The difference is not only price. Café Touba moves through the city like an informal offering—tools in hand, liquid pre-brewed, the setup improvised, almost marginal. Nescafé arrives from a fixed

cart—a rough, welded kiosk that, with its speed and familiar taste, reads like a tiny café, enough to justify more. But what I’m tracing here is not Touba or Nescafé. It is the cup: a vessel so ordinary, so ever-present, that it rarely draws attention even as it reaches our lips every day.

We often praise coffee as the art of water and fire, as if those two elements alone conjure the drink. I would argue something is missing. Coffee, as we experience it, cannot exist without the cup. It receives the brew, contains the heat, and carries it toward us. The cup mediates between substance and sensation, ritual and routine. It is the silent infrastructure of every coffee moment, and yet we rarely ask: what is a cup? Children answer easily: a cup holds liquid. But when does it become more than a container—when does it become a signal, a symbol, a story? In a world where coffee organizes our rhythms—waking, working, resting—the cup remains strangely invisible even as it structures how we drink, how much we drink, and how we feel about what we’re drinking.

There are cups with catalog numbers and cups with names; cups behind glass as curated objects. Some are porcelain; others glass-blown, bamboo-molded, silicone-cast. Some are made to endure; others to vanish in moments. Shapes vary: some taper upward like the wax-lined cups of Dakar; others curve outward like the small ceramics of Ethiopia’s coffee ceremony. Bowls, often conflated with cups, invite two-handed holding—warmth, reflection. Cups, by contrast, imply movement: lift, sip, return.

The line between cup and bowl is neither universal nor trivial; it is cultural, material, symbolic. In some contexts, a bowl is called a cup; in others, a cup takes on the intimacy of a bowl. These design choices encode values—speed or stillness, sharing or solitude, formality or spontaneity. Shape, weight, and texture carry social cues as surely as utility.

In Ethiopia, I often encountered two distinct cups for different coffee styles. The *sini* (ሲኒ, “Chinese”) is a small, handleless ceramic cup. The *buruchuko* (ቡርህካቆ, “little glass”) is a thick glass used for macchiatos, often with a metal spoon resting inside. Both contain coffee, but they signal different experiences—slowness, ritual, and hospitality in one; efficiency, modernity, and mobility in the other. The cup is not passive; it actively shapes the coffee moment.

When does a cup become noticeable? Perhaps when unearthed from a royal tomb, displayed in a museum, or spotlighted in an art installation. But sometimes meaning arrives more quietly. A paper cup on a Dakar sidewalk, costing less than a dollar, can hold more than liquid: memory, association, recognition. In 2025, I stood with such a cup—neither precious nor permanent, yet familiar. It evoked other cups I had known: a *sini* in Ethiopia, a sake cup in Kyoto, a tea cup in Guangzhou. How could something so disposable carry so much resonance?

As a cultural geographer who has spent years studying coffee and its rituals, I began to see the cup itself as a kind of narrator. It held not just coffee, but traces of aesthetic sensibilities, economic choices, and geographic echoes. It whispered of trade routes, colonial pasts, and design philosophies passed through generations. In a world that celebrates coffee as a liquid that connects people, it is the cup that makes that connection visible, tangible, intimate. The cup enables the journey. Beans can be harvested, roasted, and brewed—but only the cup allows the drink to be shared, held, remembered. The cup gives coffee its social legibility, its emotional touchpoint. Perhaps it is time we pay attention to the cup—not merely as a tool, but as a vessel of meaning.

3. Why Small? Ritual, Routes, and the Missing Map

In Dakar, coffee is served in the smallest of cups—smaller than a demitasse, smaller even than the *finjān* (فنجان, “small cup”) common in West Asian traditions. The flimsy paper shot-glass is passed from vendor to customer with a high-arc pour that suggests a distant aesthetic lineage. It stands in quiet contrast to grande and venti, to double-walled tumblers and refillable flasks of the global coffee economy. And yet, in this small cup, something lingers. The act of pouring is not merely utilitarian; it is expressive—a moment of attention, performance, memory. It summons older rhythms when vessel size communicated presence more than productivity. These cups do not simply hold coffee; they hold attention. And attention becomes a threshold where the everyday meets the ancestral, and the vessel begins to speak.

There is ritual in smallness. A sip from a tiny cup is not meant to quench but to

pause. One drinks not to consume, but to mark the moment. A social clock ticks between sips, and the emptied cup is not an end but an invitation—a silent prompt for refill and continuation. This rhythm echoes across traditions. In Ethiopia, the *sini* is refilled without request. In West Asia, rounds of *qahwa* (قهوة) follow a cadence of silence and return. In East Asia, delicate ceramic cups for tea or sake invite pause and attentiveness.

Different in form and context, these cups still share a code of tempo and restraint. They slow the drink, stretching it across minutes and meanings. The small cup refuses the logic of volume; it insists on attention.

Why small—why Dakar? The answer lies not only in aesthetics or economy, but in routes we seldom map. If we chart coffee by beans and markets—Ethiopia to Arabia, Arabia to Europe, Europe to colonies—the cup’s itinerary diverges. The tiny paper cups in Dakar do not descend from Ethiopia’s highlands, where the clay *jebena* (ጃቤና) is the ceremonial brewing pot. Their form belongs to a different lineage, resonating with the handleless, low, delicate silhouettes of East Asian tea cups and with terms that traveled through the Middle East and North Africa before reaching West Africa. In Ethiopia, the ceremonial cup is called *sini* (ሲኒ)—a borrowing via Arabic *ṣini* (“Chinese; porcelain”)—which in Amharic names the small, handleless cup used in the ceremony.¹ The lineage points to porcelain trade and the adoption of aesthetic values carried along Indian Ocean and Silk Road routes. From tea tables in China to mint rituals in Morocco, from spice-laden coffee in Saudi Arabia to Senegalese street corners, the small cup has journeyed far—geographically and symbolically.

This is the missing map—not of coffee beans, but of coffee vessels. A cartography of cups. If today’s global coffee scene is dominated by large ceramic mugs and branded paper to-go, it is not because those forms are universal, but because they are cultural—speaking of speed, abundance, and scale. Elsewhere, another tradition endures. The small cup fosters return. It encourages exchange. It extends the moment. Its limitation invites repetition. Within repetition, a deeper hospitality emerges—rooted not in how much is offered, but in how often.

As I traced these routes, my role shifted. I had long studied the geography of coffee—its movements, meanings, markets. Now I was drawn to what had been present all along: the cup. To follow the cup is to see the invisible infrastructures of coffee culture—the unspoken codes, the rhythms of gathering, the shapes of pause. The cup is not merely a vehicle; it is a map, a marker, a memory. It reveals how coffee is carried, shared, and domesticated in everyday life.

And so, I find myself becoming not only a geographer of coffee, but a geographer of cups.



Fig. 2: An Ethiopian coffee ceremony setting with *jebena*, small cups, incense, popcorn, and sugar—a slow ritual of gathering, storytelling, and shared time. (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

4. Global Journeys of the Cup

Once passed hand to hand, the cup now moves through global logistics with astonishing speed—in shipping containers, warehouse pallets, algorithmic delivery routes. Increasingly it carries not only liquid, but brand, identity, and aspiration. A scribbled name—“latte,” “your name here”—can summon an entire world of consumption. But whose world? Whose time, whose ritual, whose value does that cup represent?

Unlike beans, whose routes from farm to market are comparatively traceable, the cup’s journey is diffuse and fragmented. A single city block might host IKEA mugs (affordable Scandinavian homeware), Muji tumblers (minimalist Japanese design), Daiso character cups (cheerful, low-cost goods), and high-end European porcelain gleaming in department stores. Each encodes a worldview—minimalist or playful, ostentatious or nostalgic. The cup has become a market object, not just a vessel but a curated symbol of lifestyle, taste, and speed. No brand globalized the cup like Starbucks. What began in Seattle became planetary not through taste alone, but through experience—and central to that experience is the cup. The Italian espresso demitasse was scaled up, thickened, and reimagined as a portable lifestyle accessory. Size equaled value. Holding a Starbucks cup signals participation in a global urban rhythm. The cup became a companion—personal, portable, branded—measured not in milliliters but in minutes and movement.

Yet not all cups follow this route. The Ethiopian *sini*, the Middle Eastern *finjān*, Morocco’s delicate tea glasses, East Asia’s white porcelain bowls resist the logic of disposability and scale. They hold not only coffee or tea, but cultural memory, embodied gestures, and slow time. Their design privileges repetition and restraint: pour again, offer again, remain present again. These cups are not optimized; they are situated. And because they resist acceleration, they open space for relation.

I remember the paper cup I held in Dakar. Small, hot, gone in three sips, it nevertheless asked me to slow down. No logo, no slogan—just warmth and the dusty rhythm of the street. To many, disposable. To me, resonant. It belonged to a lineage with no barcode and no catalog number, but with memory—whispering of other hands, other places, other times. The cup’s global journey is not a single narrative. It expands, contracts, vanishes, reemerges. Some cups are used once and discarded. Others are washed, stored, passed on. Between these extremes lies a question: how do we want to hold time? With the oversized, branded cup of convenience? Or with the small ritual cup that calls us back—not for more volume, but for more meaning? To trace the cup is to follow the material infrastructures of care, taste, and belonging. It is to ask how vessels—not only the drinks—shape our sense of presence. While modern coffee culture prizes mobility and convenience, the small cup remains a counterpoint. It refuses to vanish. It lingers. From that quiet persistence, the final story begins.

5. The Cup Remains

Long after the coffee is gone, the cup remains. Even when aroma fades, warmth cools, and conversation dissolves into memory, the cup stays—quietly, unobtrusively—on the table, in the hand, on the shelf. It holds more than liquid. It holds a trace. It holds time. A witness to the moment just passed, it absorbs presence without demanding attention. We rarely think of it, yet we never drink without it.

Across cultures, the cup is overlooked yet constant. In Ethiopia, the handleless *sini* used in coffee ceremonies mirrors the aesthetics of East Asian tea bowls, its shape whispering of routes that crossed deserts, empires, and seas. In Dakar, the thin paper cup of sweet, spicy *Café Touba* bears no outward sign of inheritance, yet compresses centuries of ritual into a



Fig. 3: A tiny paper cup of *Café Touba*—sweet and slightly spiced, reminiscent of Korea’s *Ssanghwa-cha* (쌍화차). (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

street-side transaction. In Tokyo and Seoul, cafés experiment—minimalist mugs, poetic ceramics, aromatics-forward glass—echoing the past while speaking in the present. Regardless of style, the cup endures. It is the element that binds these settings together. Coffee has long anchored rituals of pause, productivity, and pleasure. Without the cup, those rituals do not unfold. The cup determines portion, temperature, tempo. It mediates the encounter between drink and drinker, setting the tone not only for how we consume, but how we remember. A cup holds warmth, invites sharing, and receives our silences without question. It is not merely a container; it is an interface between people, between past and present, between culture and body.

Through centuries, the cup has crossed regions and regimes. It has been carved from horn, thrown in clay, spun from bamboo, glazed in porcelain, pressed in paper, forged in steel. It has worn imperial insignias and global logos alike. Yet beneath the changes, its role persists: to carry, to connect, to hold meaning—mundane and sacred, individual and communal, local and planetary.

After years of studying coffee not only as a crop or a commodity but also as a geography of human experience, I have come to see the cup as more than a supporting actor. It is a storyteller. It remembers the roads coffee has traveled, the hands it passed through, the gestures repeated around it. I have lost cups I cherished and found meaning in the most ordinary ones. Cups are shaped by culture, and they shape it in return.

A question that began simply—why are the cups in Dakar so small?—ends with this recognition: to understand coffee’s movement across the world, we must also understand the vessels that carry it. Beans can be traded; brewing methods can change. But the way we hold and experience coffee is embedded in our histories, habits, and sense of belonging. The cup is not just part of that experience—it is the structure that makes it possible. Long after the last sip, the cup remains: in the faint ring it leaves on a table, in warmth lingering on the palm, in the quiet second before it is set down. In the end, it is not only coffee that moves through the world, but the cup that teaches us how to carry it.

Notes
1 Ohsoon Yun, *Coffee Tourism in Ethiopia: Opportunities, Challenges and Initiatives* (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2014), ch. 8. (Etymology: Amh. *sini* < Ar. *ṣini* “Chinese; porcelain”; cf. Ar. *finjān* “small cup”).



Fig. 1 (far left): Street scene, Phnom Penh, 1973 (Photo [Mjcd71](#) on Wikimedia, CC license)

Fig. 2 (left): Sample of the author's own "republican archive," June 2025. (Photo courtesy of Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier, 2025)

Republican Archives

Crossed Perspectives on the Khmer Republic and the Republic of South Vietnam

Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier

"Republican moment(s)"

The 1954 Geneva Accords ended French colonial rule in Indochina and divided the region into Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Vietnam was split in two zones along the 17th parallel, the North under communist rule and the South anti-communist. The two zones were to be reunited after the general elections scheduled in 1956. However, these elections never materialized. In the South, after a rigged referendum, Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm ousted head of state Bảo Đại (Vietnam's former emperor) and proclaimed himself president of the newly founded Republic of Vietnam (1955). War broke out between North and South. With the help of China and the Soviet Union, Hanoi supported the struggle of the communist dissidents (the 'Việt Cộng') in the South. Concerned over the possible Soviet advance in the region, the US increased the level of its military and political assistance to the RVN. The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident (the alleged attack of US destroyers by North Vietnamese boats) gave the American government a pretext for direct intervention. The war escalated and spilled over the borders. Domestically, Diệm's policies – for example his persecution of Buddhist followers – made him unpopular and led to his assassination in a CIA-backed coup (1963). General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's election as president in 1967 brought to South Vietnam some stability after several years of short-lived military governments. He remained in power until the fall of Saigon.

Unlike Bảo Đại, Cambodia's king Norodom Sihanouk refused to be sidelined. Fortified by the success of his campaign for the country's independence (1953), he abdicated in 1955 and founded his own political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. After the death of the king (his own father), he became Cambodia's head of state (1960). In the following decade, Sihanouk tried to keep Cambodia neutral. However, he allowed Vietnamese communist sanctuaries on Cambodian soil, prompting a series of covert carpet-bombing operations by the US Air Force to disrupt their lines. The bombardments drew the Vietnamese further inside Cambodia, where they joined forces with the indigenous communist insurgency

(the 'Khmer Rouge', as Sihanouk called them). Discontent grew over Sihanouk's policies, especially as his iron rule left little space for political opposition. Despite his later rapprochement with the Americans and his repression of the communist guerrillas, he was overthrown in a right-wing coup led by his cousin Sirik Matak and General Lon Nol (1970). The Khmer Republic was proclaimed a few months later. Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak found shelter in Beijing. On the advice of China and North Vietnam, he formed an alliance with the Khmer Rouge, the National United Front for Kampuchea (NUFK). He urged the population to take up arms against the new authorities in Phnom Penh. The civil war in Cambodia soon became further entangled with the conflict in Vietnam, as the Khmer Republic declared war on the Vietnamese communist 'aggressors', with the backing of the United States.

Despite the Paris Peace Agreements (1973), fighting continued in both countries until April 1975, when the two republican regimes collapsed within days of each other. It is not surprising thus that war keeps dominating views of the Khmer Republic and the RVN since it impacted their trajectories to such an extent. For a long time, there has been little scholarly and public consideration given to nation-building in republican Cambodia and South Vietnam, or to their vision of national identity, programs of economic modernization and political reform, and importantly the interactions between society and state. Yet, since Philip Catton's book *Diem's Final Failure* (2002), there has been an outpouring of new scholarship on the RVN. Shifting away from Americentric views and foregrounding local agency, this literature

It's been 50 years since Phnom Penh and Saigon fell to the communist forces (17 and 30 April 1975, respectively). In both cases, the fall of the capital city marked the end of a political entity: the Khmer Republic and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam). At the time, the two states were often dismissed as incompetent, corrupt, and bickering American "puppets" devoid of any genuine political project. Do we still hold the same views today? How is it possible to revisit and challenge these stereotypes? How has the field of study evolved in recent decades? This Focus section assembles a diverse group of researchers and artists who reflect on these questions and on the role that archives play in reassessing the two regimes and their contentious legacies.¹

covers a large range of topics like civil society, ideology, urban life, domestic media, feminism, photography, and the experiences of refugees. It is impossible to do justice to all authors, yet it is worth mentioning the works of Tuong Vu, Andrew Wiest, Nu-Anh Tran, Van Nguyen-Marshall, Pierre Asselin, Olga Dror, Trinh Luu, Sean Fear, Duy Lap Nguyen, Yén Lê Esperitu, Lan Duong, and Tam Ngo. In contrast, the Khmer Republic or Lon Nol regime [Fig. 1] has been little examined to this day. The first studies were published in the 1980s and early 1990s (David Chandler, Ros Chantrabot, and Justin Corfield), with later additions on US-Cambodian relations (Kenton Clymer and the as-yet-unpublished work of the late Ray Leos) and the Khmer Republic's wartime economy (Margaret Slocumb) in the 2000s. Even more recently, William Chickering has published a book on FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races),² and Steve Heder maintains ongoing research on the Cambodian civil war.

Lately, though, there has been a renewed interest in the Khmer Republic from a cohort of younger scholars (some of who discuss their research here).³ It is tempting to see this body of work as the harbinger of a "republican moment" in Cambodia's modern history studies, finally echoing what has happened in Vietnamese studies in past years. According to historian Peter Zinoman, the "republican moment" refers to a shift in scholarly focus onto South Vietnam and, more broadly, onto Vietnamese republican political traditions across the colonial and postcolonial periods.⁴ The Focus section seeks to bring into dialogue this subfield emerging in Khmer studies and the more advanced scholarship on the RVN. This dialogue is first of all historical, a discussion

of the wartime connections between the two regimes. It is also historiographical. The "republican moment" provides the opportunity to take stock of the state of the field today, its evolution, and its debates. Finally, this dialogue is a methodological one. Research on the Khmer Republic is, at this stage, both thrilling and discouraging (depending on the day). There's so much to be done. The motivation behind this Focus section is to compare research notes and see how the tools and concepts used by colleagues who work on South Vietnam may help chart this gigantic territory.

Scholarly contact zones

In recent years, there has been a tendency to approach the "Vietnam War" from a global viewpoint. However, the relationship between the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam has been little studied so far. The fact that the Cambodian civil war has long been seen as just a "sideshow" to the conflict in Vietnam⁵ might explain in part why this academic conversation has not really taken place yet. This 50th "anniversary" seems the right moment to kick it off. Many contact zones between the two republican states could be researched productively, for example their economic and military cooperation, cultural exchanges, anticommunist nationalism, and the cross-border movements of goods and people (e.g., refugees, soldiers, and defectors).

Moreover, although they were fighting a "common" enemy, tensions ran high between the Lon Nol regime and the RVN. In the weeks after the coup that ousted Sihanouk, anti-Vietnamese feelings in Cambodia reached a fever pitch. Violence erupted against the ethnic Vietnamese communities living in the country, some of whom had lived there for decades or longer. Within a year, over 200,000 people were "repatriated" to South Vietnam via aerial and fluvial operations. A commission involving representatives from the two governments was established, but the extent to which its members collaborated is not known. How were the refugees received and integrated in the RVN? What was the impact for the Khmer Republic, which had deprived itself of many skilled workers? In retaliation, some South Vietnamese units based in Cambodia carried out abuses against civilians and their properties. There were reports and talks of compensation. These episodes of violence laid the ground for a difficult entente. And yet, despite their impact on the relations between the supposed allies, they have hardly been discussed until now.

The idea of "resonance" could also be fruitful. The 1963 coup and killing of Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu certainly fueled Sihanouk's suspicions vis-à-vis American intentions in Cambodia, as his 1973 memoirs on his "war with the CIA" made clear. A few years later, how did these events influence Lon Nol's grasp on power and his ever-increasing seclusion? How did the 1968 Tet Offensive inform the strategies of the generals from the Khmer National Armed Forces (FANK) for the protection of Phnom Penh and other big cities in 1970-1975? These and many other questions give an idea of the numerous topics to be explored and the potential of crossed perspectives on the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam to yield new insights into the Second Indochina War.

And the archive in all this?

The idea of a "republican archive" provides the framework for this multilevel dialogue. The term encompasses the records produced by, in, and about the Khmer Republic and the RVN. It is beyond this introduction's scope to give an exhaustive idea of existing sources. It can only give an overview that points out the commonalities and differences between the two corpuses. As any researcher knows, it is not always easy to say if it is the object of inquiry or the available sources that determines one's research. Dead ends

for lack of materials, alongside serendipity, equally shape archival research. This applies, perhaps, even more strongly to the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam.

There is at the core of the “republican archive” a structural and narrative imbalance. For decades, the republican regimes have been seen primarily through the eyes of foreigners (i.e., diplomats, policymakers, military officers, humanitarian organizations, intelligence agencies, journalists, and activists) and through the communist lens, especially in the case of the RVN. Easily consultable, these reports, stories, and pictures are in large part at the root of enduring negative views of the two republics. Indeed, today’s reader cannot but be struck by their oversimplifications and patronizing tone. Obviously, these documents form an essential source of information. But they require a reading “against the grain” and – as anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler famously suggested – a reading “along the grain” too, which reveals their affective states.⁶

This imbalance has been reinforced by the assumption that “failed states” like the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam do not leave as many traces as other states. It is partly true since there is no official authority that remains to take care of their records. Yet this idea must be nuanced. There are well-kept South Vietnamese records, but consulting them in Vietnam today might sometimes be complicated due to restricted access. Similarly, while the extent of destruction and loss caused by the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) did – and still does – hamper research on the Khmer Republic, the work of collection done by archives and research institutions in Cambodia since the early 2000s has improved the situation.⁷ I do not say that there are meters and meters of consultable archives. Still, it is not a situation of archival indigence. There are decrees, reports from ministries and commissions, newsreels, books and memoirs, illustrated magazines and newspapers, and bulletins from institutions like the National Bank and the Chamber of Commerce [Fig. 2].

For researchers interested in history from below, however, the official or semi-official nature of these records quickly becomes a methodological problem. Such documents do not give much access to “ordinary” people’s views and daily realities. Of course, advertisements for the “high class” rice wine Mekong in the pictorial *The Khmer Republic* or recipes for a roasted orange pork rack in the daily *Le Républicain* (16 September 1972) say something about life in wartime Phnom Penh, but it’s about the life of elites and expats, not the life of the poor, the refugees, or the villagers [Figs. 3 and 4]. Now and then, researchers come across written traces of everyday life. Historian Heather Stur, for example, studied over 100 request letters sent by families and soldiers to the RVN’s Ministry of Armed Forces and Ministry of Justice.⁸ In

general, however, scholars have to rely on an “expanded” corpus of images, sounds, bodies, textiles, architectures, and landscapes.

Of course, interviews and oral history yield some much-needed information. Witnesses, though, are now getting elderly, and collecting their testimonies has become more than ever a pressing task. Regrettably, not much – or rather not enough – is being done, despite numerous institutional, community, and artistic initiatives. Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh was founded in 2006 by film directors Rithy Panh and Ieu Pannakar. This prominent institution does not only collect and preserve Cambodia’s cinematographic heritage. It supports the creation of documentary movies about Cambodian history. Bophana Center’s director Chea Sopheap once mentioned the urgency of recording wartime life stories of people from the countryside – the effect of the bombardments, the disruption of village life, the forms of (gender-based) violence they experienced, and the way they saw Phnom Penh politics. But it is an enormous and costly undertaking.⁹

It is important to underline here the impact of digital technologies and social media on research. With the transition from “hard” to “hybrid” archives, more and more people outside institutions have been able to retrieve existing corpuses and, crucially, to make new ones.¹⁰ In her book *Warring Visions* (2022), art historian Thy Phu writes about “orphaned images,” the photos left behind by South Vietnamese refugees and now sold in vintage shops in Vietnam.¹¹ Obviously, looking at family pictures online has nothing to do with this kind of affective encounter. Still, YouTube, Facebook/Meta, Instagram, and Spotify are gamechangers in terms of research. They give access to previously “lost” pictures, movies, radio programs, and songs from the Khmer Republic and the RVN. Being an entryway into refugees’ counter-narratives and “emotional connections to the lost country,”¹² they generate new questions and types of ethnographic inquiry. Research on the Lon Nol regime and South Vietnam is not only about things past, but also about intergenerational transmission and the survivance of these vanished states in today’s diasporic practices and imaginaries.

As well, the recent upsurge of research projects combining environmental sources (soils, rivers, plants, animals) with geospatial visualization technologies to study the lasting and multiscale effects of wars points to a further expansion of the idea of archives. Gender studies scholar Lina Chhun, for instance, explores the role of trees and vegetation in her study of the traces left by the American (mistake) bombardment of Neak Luong, Cambodia, in August 1973.¹³ The discussion of “ecological warfare” in the Vietnam War context is an old one.¹⁴ But the rethink of human-nonhuman interaction and current debates on the

linkages between genocide and “ecocide” (a concept historically tied to the region) lend it a renewed significance and a different analytical toolkit.¹⁵

In line with critical archival practices, the researchers and artists in this Focus section explain how they have worked with existing records and addressed the lacks, gaps, and silences of republican archives. All use a broad range of sources, including textual, visual, sonic, material, and architectural ones. All mobilize a wide array of disciplines such as history, anthropology, visual studies, material culture, and forensics. They discuss their methodologies and share personal memories and fieldwork stories. The diversity of their approaches illustrates the interdisciplinarity of the field. Furthermore, it points to the possible directions crossed or even joint research on the Khmer Republic and South Vietnam may take in the future.

Conclusion: towards comparative studies of postcolonial “Indochina”?

On 30 April 2025 in Vietnam, the fall of Saigon was officially commemorated as Reunification Day with a grand parade of thousands of marching troops in Ho Chi Minh City. In Phnom Penh, however, 17 April 2025 was nothing special aside from Chinese president Xi Jinping’s visit as part of his larger Southeast Asia tour. Interestingly, though, Cambodia’s former Prime Minister Hun Sen attended the commemorations in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁶ It is not the place here to discuss the geopolitical background of this show of friendship and solidarity. Yet Hun Sen’s presence in Vietnam indirectly prompts the question of how 17 April is seen in Cambodia nowadays. For many Cambodians, it marks the beginning of four years of horror. At the same time, does it have any other or additional meanings, for instance, for the members of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)? During the 1970-1975 civil war, some, including Hun Sen, had fought on the side of the NUFK, the alliance between the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk. But they defected in 1977-1978 and returned to Cambodia in late 1978 to fight the Pol Pot regime with the support of the Vietnamese army. To them, the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975 meant also the fall of their enemy, the Khmer Republic, and, vicariously, the defeat of American imperialism. To what extent does this narrative survive today and how is it woven with official views of the past?

Researching the history of republican ideas in Cambodia and Vietnam is not only about contributing to the analysis of the Second Indochina War. It is not only about revisiting a contested past. It is central to our understanding of present-day political cultures and state historical narratives in the two countries. Comparative perspectives on nation-building and entanglements in postcolonial “Indochina” are not new (see the work of Christopher Goscha and Philippe Peycam, for instance). By providing a shared framework for widely diverse approaches, the “republican moment” is the occasion to address in an interdisciplinary fashion fundamental questions like continuities in elites, relations between revolution and reformism, long-term social changes, and local and Western roots of political ideas. It does not only reinforce the rethink of decolonization processes in Indochina (i.e., periodization, spaces, actors). It also opens the way to a more granular understanding of national projects and their afterlives in today’s imaginaries.

Yet, it is an educational challenge. As historian Nu-Anh Tran and political scientist Tuong Vu argue, while republicanism’s moment has finally arrived, “much remains to be done to change [the] popular understanding” of it.¹⁷ The enthusiastic reception in Cambodia of John Pirozzi’s documentary movie *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten* (2016) with its interviews of film and music stars from the late 1960s and early 1970s shows that there is a lot of curiosity, especially among the youth, about that overlooked period. The same can be said of Greg Cahill’s and Kat Baumann’s graphic novel *The Golden Voice* (April 2022) about

singer Ros Sereysothea (1948-1977). It is thus essential to devise new and creative ways to make this scholarship accessible to a variety of audiences. This edition of “The Focus” hopes to take a further step in that direction.

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Notes

- 1 I thank the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) for their support of my research on the Khmer Republic. I also thank Anne-Laure Porée for her careful reading of the draft and for her precious suggestions.
- 2 *A War of Their Own: FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955-75* (Casemate Publishers, 2025).
- 3 For example, see the work of Linda Saphan, Shintani Haruno, Thun Theara, and Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier.
- 4 Peter Zinoman propounds this idea of a “republican moment” in Vietnamese studies in his talk at the workshop “Studying Republican Vietnam” organized by Tuong Vu at the University of Oregon (14-15 October 2019). The video and transcript of his talk are available at: <https://usvietnam.uoregon.edu/en/a-republican-moment-in-the-study-of-modern-vietnam>. In her PhD dissertation *Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam* (University of California, 2013), Nu-Anh Tran refers to “waves” of research. It is the fifth wave that takes South Vietnam as its primary focus, p. 5.
- 5 William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).
- 6 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 7 Some examples include The National Archives (with the help of Cornell University) as well as the more recently founded Center for Khmer Studies (CKS), Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), and Bophana Audiovisual Center.
- 8 “Blurred Lines: the Home Front, the Battle Front, and the Wartime Relationship between Citizens and Government in the Republic of Vietnam,” *War & Society* 38:1 (2019), 57-79.
- 9 Conversation with the author in Phnom Penh in August 2023.
- 10 Sune Haugbolle, “Archival Activists and the Hybrid Archives of the Arab Left,” in *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, ed. by Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, and Sune Haugbolle (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020).
- 11 *Warring Visions: Vietnam and Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), pp. 151-152.
- 12 Scarlett Nhi Do, “YouTube as the Pirate Archive: South Vietnamese Cinema and Memories of the Second Indochina War,” *Senses of Cinema* 105 (2023), available at: <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2023/cinema-and-piracy/youtube-as-the-pirate-archive-south-vietnamese-cinema-and-memories-of-the-second-indochina-war>
- 13 “Sometime American... Can Make Mistake Too...: Contested Memory, Documentary Registers, and Cambodian/American Histories of Violence,” *Amerasia Journal* 42:2 (2016), 160-188.
- 14 Yves Lacoste, “An Illustration of Geographical Warfare: Bombing of the Dikes on the Red River, North Vietnam,” *Antipode* 5 (1973), 1-13.
- 15 See for example David Bigg’s *Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018) and Erin Lin’s *When The Bombs Stopped: The Legacy of War in Rural Cambodia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).
- 16 Tep Sony, “Hun Sen leads Cambodian delegation to Vietnam for Reunification Anniversary,” *Khmer Times*, 29 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501676565/video-hun-sen-leads-cambodian-delegation-to-vietnam-for-reunification-anniversary>
- 17 *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam (1920-1963)* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2023), p. 19.



Fig. 3 (above): In front of the Central Market, Phnom Penh, 1973 (Photo Mjcd71 on Wikimedia, CC license)



Fig. 4 (right): Water Festival, Phnom Penh, 1973 (Photo Mjcd71 on Wikimedia, CC license)



Recovering the History of the Losing Side

Historical Research and the Republic of Vietnam

Van Nguyen-Marshall

How does one gain access to the history of a vanquished state, a defeated country that can no longer safeguard its own archives or shape its historical narrative? Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier writes in the introduction of this forum that “‘failed states’ like the Khmer Republic and the Republic of Vietnam do not leave as many traces as other states.” I would suggest that for the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam), it is not the dearth of historical material that is the issue, but rather the victor state’s control of access to historical evidence as well as Western historians’ lack of interest (until the last two decades) to examine seriously the history of South Vietnam.

Within days after the Vietnam War ended on 30 April 1975, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or North Vietnam) – the victor in the war – began the process of not only dismantling the state apparatus of South Vietnam but also eradicating aspects of its culture and history [Fig. 1]. The new communist authority immediately changed the names of major city streets to commemorate famous communist and revolutionary heroes. The most symbolic name change was that of the Southern capital Saigon, which took on the name of the most revered of Vietnamese Communist leaders, Ho Chi Minh. In addition, South Vietnam’s public monuments and symbols, and even its military cemeteries, were vandalized and destroyed [Figs. 2–3].¹

The authority also ordered cadres to “eradicate every cultural and educational work in the South.”² Bookstores, publishing houses, and newspaper offices were raided, or coerced into “voluntarily” handing over their collection. In some instances, over-zealous cadres even raided people’s homes looking for “counterrevolutionary” books, music, and art. Some of the confiscated contraband were destroyed, burned, or sold to recycling plants.³

Despite these acts of destruction in the early days, textual traces of South Vietnam – state records, periodicals, newspapers, and books – have on the whole remained intact. Many southerners had anticipated the new regime’s campaign, since they were aware of similar drives to seize allegedly bourgeois and feudal material in North Vietnam. As a

result, book dealers, publishers, and store owners were able to hide some portions of their collections in advance of the raids.⁴

Furthermore, Vietnamese communist leaders were not like the Khmer Rouge leaders who were bent on destroying all vestiges of the ancient regime. They saw value in preserving the archival documents of the vanquished government along with material in South Vietnam’s national library. For the most part, the new communist government left these collections unharmed but imposed measures to limit access to these sources (as well as other primary sources pertaining to the Vietnam War generally). The strict control is maintained to this day. Newspapers and periodicals from the Republic of Vietnam, for example, are kept in a restricted section, accessible only

Fig. 1: The General Science Library, which was the national library of South Vietnam before 1975. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Bùi Thụy Đào Nguyên, CC BY-SA 3.0)

with permission. For foreign researchers, this means needing to obtain a letter of introduction from one’s state-approved sponsoring institution.

Even when one is permitted to work in the collection, either in the libraries or national archive, how much and what type of information researchers can access cannot be taken for granted. For example, a researcher’s request to view a particular document would have to be adjudicated by archival authorities, whose policies are shaped by the current political imperatives and the Party line. It can therefore be difficult to predict when something might be considered off-limits or too sensitive. While the unpredictability of the correct political line can make archival work challenging, researchers can try to mitigate problems by framing projects in ways that do not appear to threaten the party-state’s ideology or challenge its narrative of the Vietnam War.

The latter point is especially relevant for research on South Vietnam, since the Vietnamese government still does not recognize the legitimacy of the Republic of Vietnam. It continues to portray South Vietnam as a puppet (ngụy) of the United States and continues to refer to the Vietnam War as the War to Resist the United States and Save the Nation (*Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước*), or the “American War” for short. The name implies that the conflict was a war of resistance against US imperialism, rather than a civil war between Vietnamese who had opposing ideologies and visions for the future of their country. South Vietnamese are denied agency and are seen not only as puppets but traitors to the Vietnamese nation. The Communist Party’s claim to rule is deeply rooted in this narrative.

For decades during and after the war, many Western academics – particularly those who were critics of US intervention in Vietnam – also adopted the Vietnamese communist view that the war was a liberation struggle against the United States, and that South Vietnam was a mere American puppet. This perspective – referred to as “orthodox” – has dominated the historiography on the war and led many academics to focus on only the US and Communist sides of the war.⁵ In this perspective, studying South Vietnam appeared less important since this state supposedly did not have a critical role. In fact, when discussed at all, historians often dismissed South Vietnamese political and military leaders as corrupt and incompetent. Their judgments about South Vietnam, however, often come from their readings of US official documents and American journalistic writings.⁶ Until the 2000s, few saw the need to conduct serious research into South Vietnam’s political, military, or social history.⁷

Although the historiography has been evolving and more publications now exist that examine South Vietnam using Vietnamese sources, some historians are still reluctant to shed these long-held orthodox assumptions. Some top scholars of American foreign policy have in fact doubled down on their position. Historians Daniel Bessner and Fredrick Logevall, for example, called for the “recentering” of the United States in the Vietnam War historiography and criticized as inaccurate Vietnam War scholarship that “gives equal or near-equal causal weight for the war’s military, political, economic, and social course to non-American or transnational actors.”⁸ Christian Appy similarly finds it problematic to view the Vietnam War as a civil war; to him it was “an American war that exacerbated Vietnamese divisions and internationalized the conflict.”⁹ The view that the war was mainly an American War is only tenable if one discounts South Vietnam as its own entity with agency, which Appy does. According to him, without “American intervention, it is hard to image that South Vietnam would have come into being or, if it did, that it would have endured for long.”¹⁰

Peter Zinoman recently noted that orthodox ideas about South Vietnam and the War (such as those expressed by Appy, Bessner, and Logevall) continue to be perpetuated with vigour in popular works such as Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s Vietnam War documentary and Nguyen Thanh Viet’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Sympathizer*.¹¹ These works, like Appy’s op-ed article in the *New York Times*, have the ability to reach a wide audience. And so, whereas scholarship on the war has taken a “South Vietnamese” turn, providing more nuanced interpretations of the Vietnam War, the old stereotypes are still thriving in the popular imagination.

My latest book, *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam*, contributes to the endeavour to refocus scholarly attention on Vietnamese people, particularly those in the Republic of Vietnam.¹² It challenges the perception that South Vietnam had no agency or society. I chose the topic of civil society because it gave me a unique entrée into society without privileging political or military leaders. There was moreover a practical reason for focusing on civil society, a term in which I include charities, civic groups, and rights organizations. Voluntary organizations left textual evidence. By South Vietnamese law, groups had to apply for government permission to operate, and these applications, along with associations’ constitutions and bylaws, have been preserved in the National Archive in Ho Chi Minh City (Archive No. 2). While the archival records provide basic information about a wide range of voluntary groups operating in South Vietnam, information about the groups’ activities can be gleaned from other sources including association bulletins and newsletters, newspaper coverage of club events, or reports of activist groups’ street protests.

To supplement the archival and published sources, I also relied on oral interviews with about two dozen past participants. Almost all interviews with people living in Vietnam were done in person, while interviews with those living in the United States and Canada were conducted mainly by telephone and email correspondences. In Vietnam, my research assistant and sponsoring institution helped facilitate introductions to former civil society participants such as student union leaders and activist priests. We used the snowball technique to find more interlocutors. Participants living outside Vietnam were also found through the snowball method, using familial and social connections. These interviews provided insight into participants’ personal experiences and motivations for taking part in public activities.

The internet was also useful. Blogs written by past participants of civic groups and websites of former groups helped to fill gaps or corroborate my findings. For example, blog posts of Doan Thanh Liem recount his personal experience with various civic projects, including his participation in a long-running community development project of several underserved districts on the outskirts of Saigon in 1965–1971. His writings and other past participants’ posts reveal that many participants took pride in voluntary work and many remember their activities with fondness and nostalgia. Tellingly, many of the participants have continued to be active in civil society and some remained in contact with peers from their associational work during the war.

While there was some administrative red tape, I did not encounter too many



Fig. 3: Central Saigon in May 1962. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Chief Richard Mowery, public domain)

barriers when researching in Vietnam. It took time to obtain permission, such as getting support from a research institution, applying for a research visa, and then requesting permission to use various research facilities. On the surface, my research on associational life does not appear controversial or politically sensitive. When conducting research in Vietnam and especially during the interviews, I avoided the term “civil society,” which connotes political activism or dissent. Instead, I used more innocuous descriptors such as voluntary associations and charity groups. Nevertheless, I was not given access to all the material I requested. During my time at the archives in 2017–2018, all my requests pertaining to religion were denied. Even documents on the Scouts movement were deemed religious and off limits. Fortunately, some US libraries (e.g., Cornell University Libraries) have a wealth of Vietnamese material. Furthermore, almost all past participants I was introduced to for interviews in Vietnam were former members or supporters of the National Liberation Front and not supporters of the Republic of Vietnam. For this reason, the interviews with interlocutors living abroad were important to generate a balanced perspective.

Although researching a defunct state poses some challenges, it is not insurmountable in the case of South Vietnam. Researchers interested in the history of South Vietnam need to devise strategies to navigate the archives and to search for additional sources outside of the state-guarded repositories. While scholarly attitudes regarding the importance of

studying South Vietnam are changing and rigorous scholarship is being produced, there is still a lot more to uncover and, just as importantly, there is a need to make sure new insights reach the public.

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Notes

- 1 Nguyễn Công Luận, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 462.
- 2 Ibid., p. 463.
- 3 Ibid.; Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc, I. Giải Phóng* [The Winning Side, vol. 1, Liberation] (Saigon: Osinbook, 2012), pp. 210–211.
- 4 Nguyễn Công Luận, 463; Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, p. 213.
- 5 The rivalling revisionist school of thought also takes a US-centric approach to the study of the war, ignoring Vietnamese agency. For a discussion on the Vietnam War historiography, see Pierre Asselin, “The Vietnam War at 50: the (tragic) state of the field,” a contribution to the Roundtable for the 50th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, part I: America’s Vietnam War, ed. Lori Macguire. *Cold War History* 25, issue 2 (2025): 138–148.
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- 7 For a concise discussion of the historiography on South Vietnam, see Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu, “Rethinking Vietnamese Republicanism,” in *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963*, eds. Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2023), pp. 4–8.
- 8 Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” in *Rethinking US World Power: Domestic Histories of US Foreign Relations*, ed. By Daniel Bessner and Michael Brenes (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), p. 37.
- 9 Christian Appy, “What Was the Vietnam War About?” *New York Times*, Mar 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/opinion/what-was-the-vietnam-war-about.html>
- 10 The New York Times
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Peter Zinoman, “A Republican Moment in the Study of Modern Vietnam,” in *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam*, pp. 26–42.
- 13 War and the State: *Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 2023).

Fig. 2: The Mourning (“Thương Tiếc”) stone plaque at the entrance of the Biên Hòa National Cemetery was destroyed after 1975. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Codoba1, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Surprising Testimonies

Retracing the Trajectories of Highland Minority Refugee-Soldiers under the Khmer Republic

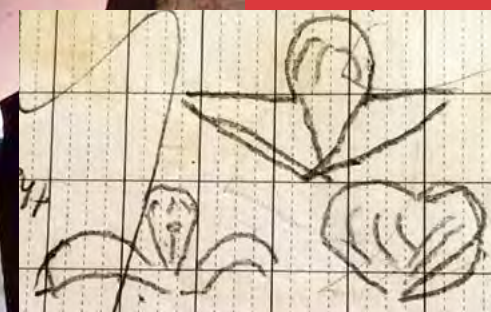
Catherine Scheer

The difficulty of finding official written records on the Khmer Republic appeared to me unexpectedly, during ethnographic fieldwork in the hilly province of Mondul Kiri. I had set out to study how indigenous Bunong highland dwellers made sense of Christianity. I learned that many had converted in the early 1970s, after having crossed the nearby border to South Vietnam, fleeing American bombings and Khmer Rouge rebels. However, I also heard that some of these refugees were repatriated to Cambodia to become soldiers. Hence, I found myself in search of written proof of this recruitment and of the underlying military relations between Cambodia and South Vietnam.



Fig. 1 (left): Pö Mon sketches the three insignia. (Photo courtesy of Kim Sochea, 2020)

Fig. 2 (below): Sketch of the three insignia. (Drawing by Pö Mon, 2020; Photo courtesy of Catherine Scheer)



In May 2009 I first met Mé Nok and Pö Nok at their home with my Bunong colleague Neth Prak.¹ We had gone to see the elderly couple because wife and husband were first-generation Protestants. I had heard many stories of escape, but what Mé Nok and Pö Nok told us surprised me to the point that I initially thought that I must have misunderstood something. After their escape to a refugee camp in South Vietnam, they said, they converted to Christianity in Phnom Penh. Neither Neth nor I had heard of Bunong people living in the capital at that time.

We learned that Pö Nok had been recruited in the Bu Bong refugee camp by a highly placed Bunong military official who told him that he would be taken back to Cambodia to help defend his homelands. He and Mé Nok said that they boarded a helicopter along with hundreds of fellow Bunong refugees. After a training near Saigon, the recruits were brought to Phnom Penh and settled in a camp on Chroy Changvar, a peninsula that separates the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers, directly across from the royal palace. Rather than

being sent to fight in their native Mondul Kiri, many of the Bunong soldiers were asked to guard bridges that linked the city to the surrounding province.

On 17 April 1975, those Bunong who had survived to that point were killed by the Khmer Rouge, seemingly with few exceptions. Mé Nok and Pö Nok told us about one other survivor, Pö Mon, who had similarly been recruited in the South Vietnamese refugee camp and joined the Cambodian Special Forces. I found no sign of other survivors, only Bunong people who told me about family members who had left the camp for Phnom Penh and never came back.

Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to explore this historic episode further during my PhD research, but I got back to it as soon as I could. With only three elderly witnesses, it was urgent. Their accounts enabled me to retrace the Bunong refugees' trajectories and learn about their life in Phnom Penh, but they did not provide much information about the political backdrop.

Two secondary sources provided clues. One is Po Dharma's 2006 history of the *Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (FULRO), an ethno-nationalist movement

that connected South Vietnamese highland minorities to Cambodia-based Cham and Khmer Krom who also resented the Vietnamese power. Po Dharma mentioned the creation of a special brigade within the Khmer Republic's army that was to put FULRO militants under the command of Colonel Les Kosem, the movement's Cham leader. The names of two of the original highland commanders matched those given by Mé Nok as the leaders of the camp in Chroy Changvar. Thus, a link to the FULRO was established.

This link was corroborated in 2017 by William Chickering, a former "Green Beret" in the United States Army, who was stationed in South Vietnam in the 1960s, worked as a journalist in Phnom Penh in the early 1970s, and has written a history of the FULRO.² Chickering knew the highland leaders of the movement and confirmed to me that they oversaw the Bunong soldiers in Phnom Penh.

The other useful secondary source is Gerald Hickey's 1982 ethno-history of the war years in the central highlands of Vietnam, which mentions in passing that in 1970, FULRO leaders, who came from the highlands of Vietnam and were based

in Phnom Penh, "made frequent visits to Vietnam to recruit highlanders to go to Cambodia."³ His 1970 note on the "The War in Cambodia" for the Rand Corporation details Les Kosem's plan to create a highland armed force intended to operate as a guerrilla group in the mountainous border regions between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.⁴

The first written report that I came across confirming that Bunong refugees, in particular, had enlisted in the Khmer Republic's army was a brief 1971 *Le Monde* article by Jean-Claude Pomonti.⁵

The only official documents recording these highlanders' transfer from South Vietnam to Cambodia that I have found are among the over 2000 eclectic documents in the Les Kosem archives, which have been available for consultation at the Documentation Center of Cambodia since 2022. There, I discovered three edifying letters, all from June and July 1971.

In one, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam [RVN] agrees to a May 1971 request by Khmer Republic Premier Lon Nol to allow "the recruitment of 1600 men among the active elements of the Khmer refugees



Fig. 3 (left): Interview with Bunong sisters showing the picture of their lost siblings and brother-in-law. (Photo courtesy of Kim Sochea, 2020)

Fig. 4 (below): The original photos of the lost family members taken in the early 1970s and their recent photo-edited reunion. (Photo courtesy of the Breen sisters [Yeut, Reut, and Weut], 2020)

Fig. 5 (below): The 1970s originals showing the Bunong men in their Khmer National Armed Forces uniform. (Photo courtesy of the Breen sisters [Yeut, Reut, and Weut], 2020)

Fig. 6 (bottom): Mé and Pö Nok retrieved the photo after their return to the highlands in the 1990s. They had survived the Khmer Rouge regime and made it back all the way up to Mondulkiri. There, they reunited with Mé Nok's sister, who had been repatriated from Vietnam in 1986 and kept the photo safe all those years. (Photo courtesy of Mé and Pö Nok, 2022)



from Mondulkiri in Quang Duc.”⁶ In another, the RVN Ministry of Defense writes to the representative of the Khmer Republic’s army about recruitment and training support that the RVN was providing.⁷ Finally, there was a correspondence between the Khmer Republic’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and its Ambassador to the RVN that inventories the “Khmer Loeu” (“Upland Khmer”)⁸ in the Bu Bong camp, many of whom wanted to be “repatriated” to Cambodia.

To check whether the Vietnamese archives held more evidence of this collaboration, I asked the help of Huy Bảo Nguyễn Phúc, a Vietnamese history student. Despite an extensive search through files held in Ho Chi Minh City, he did not find anything about the “Khmer Loeu” refugees’ transfer to Phnom Penh.

In addition to cross-checking how my three witnesses came to Phnom Penh, specific aspects of their journey necessitated further inquiry. Some led me to delve into military history. Kenneth Conboy, an American policy analyst interested in Southeast Asian armed forces, published several books containing illustrations of insignia. In 2019, during one

of my last long conversations with Pö Mon, I asked him whether he remembered the insignia on his Cambodian Special Forces uniform. Without much hesitation, he drew three parachute insignias in my notebook: a Khmer, a Thai, and a U.S. one, closely resembling those depicted in Conboy’s work [Figs. 1 and 2].

Photos also unexpectedly appeared in the field. In Mondulkiri in 2020 we were interviewing three sisters, who had stayed behind in the refugee camp in Vietnam while two of their siblings left for Cambodia [Fig. 3]. A large, plasticized color photo featured their long-lost sister, next to her husband and her younger brother, both in uniform [Fig. 4]. They also showed me the two timeworn black-and-white photos taken in Phnom Penh on which the colorized version was based [Fig. 5].

The sisters explained that the Bunong recruiter who travelled back and forth between Phnom Penh and the South Vietnamese camps carried news and photos between separated family members.

Another of these rare visual testimonies turned up in 2022, when Mé Nok and Pö Nok’s daughter showed me a colorized photo

of her parents with a baby [Fig. 6]. Tucked into the back of the frame was the faded and creased black-and-white photo. It had been taken in Phnom Penh and carried back to Mé Nok’s parents and younger sister, who had stayed behind in Vietnam.

The testimonies of Pö Mon, Mé and Pö Nok, and others have shone some light into a dark corner of history. Further research in the Vietnamese archives might provide a better understanding of the decisions that shaped the highland minorities’ trajectories. But now it is urgent to talk to elderly Bunong and other highland holders of oral history. Their testimonies fill in some of the numerous gaps in a dominant history that has largely shut them out.

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Notes

- 1 In the Bunong language, people are referred to as Mother (Mé) or Father (Pö) of their first child’s name, in this case “Nok.” I use pseudonyms here at the request of my interlocutors.
- 2 William H. Chickering, *A War of Their Own. FULRO: The Other National Liberation Front, Vietnam 1955-75* (Havertown: Casemate, 2025).
- 3 Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 220.
- 4 The Rand Corporation was advising the U.S. Army.
- 5 Jean-Claude Pomonti, “Des officiers cambodgiens recrutent des soldats dans les minorités ethniques,” *Le Monde*, April 1971. With thanks to Jean-Pierre Chazal who made me aware of this article.
- 6 Translated from French by the author.
- 7 With thanks to Antoine Lê for translating this document from Vietnamese to French.
- 8 “Khmer Loeu” is a generic term for Cambodia’s indigenous minorities that Prince Sihanouk coined in his post-independence nation-building effort.



Fig. 1 (far left): Household Registration Book administered by the Civil Registration Office of District One, Saigon, 1965. The Book was among the documents that determined my family's rightful property ownership from before 1975. (Photo by Le Thu, 2025)

Fig. 2 (left): Grandpa kept family documents in the altar cabinet before entrusting them to me. Grandpa would carefully squeeze himself in the small space of the cabinet door on the side of the altar as he reached for the documents inside (Photo by Le Thu, 2023).

Intergenerational Memory and Family Archives

Thu Le

After 1975, South Vietnam lost its legitimate political and archival status in the official historiography both in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and abroad. This loss gives rise to multiple forms of alternative archiving practices beyond the purview of official archival institutions. These alternative archiving practices are grounded in personal and familial domains where South Vietnamese individuals and families re-narrate and transform histories of the “failed state.” Attention to these practices presents opportunities for conceptual and methodological approaches to studying lived histories of individuals and families that at once entangle with and challenge dominant memory narratives about “failed states.” This article tells a story of my family’s intergenerational archiving practices. Through this story, I grapple with the role of family private documents in preserving and transmitting “lost” histories across generations within and beyond the orbit of official historiography.

It was around 2010, I was too young to comprehend what Grandpa and Mum were doing, nor to realise the significance of this encounter for years to come. I was simply there ... to remember. I remember Grandpa and Mum looking worried as their hands hastily yet gently sorted through a spread of papers across the floor of our living room. Those papers were so weathered they all had that sepia colour and those deckled edges. Many of them had been folded in half for so long that the two halves barely hung on to the time-tattered fold lines. Grandpa and Mum handled the papers with such delicacy and care that it made me nervous and surprisingly well-behaved. But those antique-looking papers enchanted me so much that I could not keep my distance from them. Every time my fingers moved in

their direction, Mum shooed me away and stretched out her legs between the papers and me. “What is it, Mum?” I asked with frustrating curiosity. Mum did not respond until a while later, “Just some old family paperwork, go play somewhere.” I stayed beside Mum the entire time, sometimes rolling around to Grandpa’s side but never onto the papers. I remember gradually losing interest, feeling sleepy, and dozing off on the floor. Just when my eyes almost shut, I heard Grandpa’s voice, “Found it!” Mum leaned towards Grandpa, inspecting a piece of paper with him, their eyes squinting and moving through the lines of faint writing. They started smiling; the worried looks disappeared. I, too, felt relieved for reasons I could not understand at the time and still cannot now.

It was not until years later that I came to understand what had happened that day. Grandpa and Mum had tried to find family documents from before 1975 for a property dispute they had dealt with at the time. They had been afraid that they could not find the documents needed, as so many of our family’s pre-1975 documents had been irretrievably lost. Family members would frequently recount the dispute in family conversations throughout the years while my younger self would eavesdrop heedfully without understanding much. I gradually came to understand what had happened in the dispute as time went by. Years after the dispute had settled in favour of our family, Grandpa would often say, “See, not all is lost in the War. [Fig. 1] I’m good at keeping the papers,” with a firm look of pride. Then

Grandpa and Mum would exchange looks of approval and compliment, but not for too long before Grandpa would shift to an ambivalent, somewhat sorrowful, tone: “Had the South not been lost, we could have just gone to the authority and asked for certified copies of those documents. The new regime keeps nothing of the South.” At those moments, I would get this strange feeling of sorrow and loss for the former southern regime of which I have no direct memory. But before I would wander too far off in my nostalgic imagination of pre-1975 life, family conversations would be filled with stories of the War and South Vietnam – many of the stories would be related to those document papers I grew up seeing. Stories about early 1975 would take me to scenes of chaos and urgency where documents related to the

former regime were thrown away, burnt, concealed in locked drawers, taped onto clothes or bodies, counterfeited for various reasons, or handed to the authorities, old and new. At various points in the stories, words from Grandpa and family members would slither away across my ears like swirls of smoke, almost a muffled noise, because all I could see, hear, and feel would be those scenes – all in my imagination. In those fleeting moments of imagination, I belong to a past I have never lived.

The institutionalised erasure of South Vietnam in the SRV and abroad resulted in a specific kind of historical amnesia that does not eliminate memories of the former state, but rather tucks them away in intimate realms such as the home environment, family altars, family documentations, personal feelings, and imaginations. Asian American Studies scholar Quan Tue Tran calls this the “mnemonic splinterings”¹ of South Vietnamese histories. There is a substantial body of works on remembrance in Vietnamese diasporic communities (Yến Lê Espiritu, Long Bui, Linda Ho Peché, Alex Thai-Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, to name a few²), which points to the reconstruction of South Vietnamese memories across multiple sites and a wide range of uses and interpretations of the “republican archive.” For example, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi argues that digital archives mobilize South Vietnamese memories and preserve the cultural identity of the former state outside of SRV censorship and US-led cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of the War and the South Vietnamese army.³

Indeed, the multiple virtual, informal, and user-run archives across domestic and transnational spaces emerge as counter-hegemonic sites that render present memories made absent by official archives and dominant memory narratives. Cinema and media scholar Lan Duong puts forth the idea of “archives of memory” with respect to the South Vietnamese experience.⁴ This concept points to the reconstruction of South Vietnamese memories across multiple sites beyond the remit of the SRV’s erasure and the institutionalised amnesia abroad. Duong highlights the different archives of South Vietnamese memories that denote both the absence and the presence of the former state. That is, on one hand, the SRV’s National Film Institute – as the official state archive – makes absent South Vietnamese memories⁵ through omission and appropriation. On the other hand, diasporic films can effectively make present South Vietnamese memories. Similarly, cinema and media scholar Scarlettte Nhi Do posits that YouTube functions as a subaltern archive of South Vietnamese memories that preserve the former state’s cinematic materials.⁶

Many South Vietnamese alternative archives emerge within non-digital spaces of material family archives. The pluralising forms of digital and non-digital archiving practices highlight the ways in which different archives allow former members of “failed states” to negotiate and reconstruct memory narratives within and beyond intimate scopes of private remembrance. Through archiving practices, South Vietnamese individuals and families navigate their hopes for the continuation of what has been rendered lost in the official historiography by both the SRV and abroad. As lê thị diễm thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*⁷ poignantly captures, the afterlife of South Vietnam centres around the idea of *mất* (“loss”), which shapes a nostalgic hope that the lost state might one day re-emerge in any registers of its afterlife. For generations of my own family, those time-tattered papers are remnants of the former state that re-materialise imaginaries of the “lost” past. They give Grandpa and Mum a sense of hope and belonging to their pre-1975 lives. They also give me a vicarious inheritance of South Vietnamese histories of which I have no direct memory. We sense the fragments and absence of South Vietnamese memories as we touch, see, smell, and feel those tattered papers. Through those papers, we sense the pre-1975 past but cannot touch, see, or smell it. We feel but cannot feel it. But we know it lives on and transforms – at least within ourselves and our archives.

As family generations remember, forget, and pass on intergenerational memories,



Fig. 3 (top): Meal offerings to Grandpa on his annual death anniversary in front of the family altar. As I light three incense sticks and whisper my wishes to Grandpa, I wonder if he had kept the documents in the altar cabinet for the protection and blessing of ancestors (Photo by Le Thu, 2023).

Fig. 4 (below): The spread of family documents I am sitting with while writing this article. (Photo by Le Thu, 2025).

they preserve but also transform the family archives. Family archivists – family members of different generations – negotiate complex temporalities as part of what literary scholar Hai-Dang Phan calls an intergenerational responsibility to “transmit a linguistic and cultural heritage.”⁸ I am now allowed access to those document papers – I have inherited my family archives. I would handle them so scrupulously that stiffening nervousness would shroud the living room until I place the papers back into the drawer intact. Grandpa would always smile at my meticulous care: “That’s right, you kids need to be good with these papers, the last source of family histories, you know.” Then he would recount disconnected episodes from wartime while watching my every move as I put the papers back into the drawer and lock it with the tiny

key [Fig. 2]. I would then listen to Grandpa’s stories, with only partial attention because a part of me would daydream about a past I have never lived [Fig. 3].

Another part of my daydream contemplates the multiple identities I embody when researching with family archives – as a family member, an insider, but also as a researcher, an outsider. As I am writing these words about the role of family archives in preserving and transmitting family histories, I see Grandpa’s smile, pleasant yet nervous. I channel the emotionality of his smile into these lines. I am pleased that Grandpa bequeathed the family archives to me and entrusted them to my research capabilities, which he believed could do some justice to the lost histories of his beloved country, South Vietnam. What justice could I, as a

family member and a researcher, do for those time-tattered papers? How could I carry the histories, family heritage, and trust that those papers embody? And with which identities could I carry this baggage? I do not have an answer, and I am nervous. I am nervous that those papers will degenerate into pieces – they will one day. I worry that my understanding of South Vietnamese histories – situated at the intersection of family memories and broader narratives, each entailing distinct political perspectives – would make Grandpa frown because it does not align entirely with the family narratives. I fear that the words I am writing here and elsewhere – nervous and ambiguous – would cast doubt on Grandpa’s trust in me as inheritor of family heritage and South Vietnamese histories. Artist and scholar Grace Pundyk asks, “How could an act of writing serve to responsibly engage with the dead (and largely unknown) when so many gaps exist between the written words I’d inherited?”⁹ I am sitting with these time-tattered papers right now, right here, but my attention, partial as it always is, is not in the now nor the here [Fig. 4]. I am nervously reminiscing about Grandpa’s smile, pleasantly daydreaming about the vicarious past, and aimlessly grappling with what to do with remnants of this family history.

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Notes

- 1 Quan Tue Tran, “Mnemonic splinterings and disciplinary convergences: Memory studies, Vietnamese studies, and diasporic Vietnamese studies,” *Memory Studies* 17, no.1 (2024): 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980231215008>.
- 2 Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (University of California Press, 2014), 107-8; Linda Ho Peché, Alex Thai-Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Temple University Press, 2023); Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York University Press, 2018).
- 3 Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, “‘Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?’: Theorizing the Relationships between History and Cultural Memory,” (Pomana College, 2013): 1-122.
- 4 Lan Duong, “Việt Nam and the Diaspora: Absence, Presence, and the Archive,” in *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim (Rutgers University Press, 2016): 64-78.
- 5 Scarlettte Nhi Do, “YouTube as the Pirate Archive: South Vietnamese Cinema and Memories of the Second Indochina War,” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 105 (2023).
- 6 Scarlettte Nhi Do, “YouTube as the Pirate Archive: South Vietnamese Cinema and Memories of the Second Indochina War,” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 105 (2023).
- 7 lê thị diễm thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (Picador, 2003).
- 8 Hai-Dang Phan, “The Unreconciled: Phan Hạo Nhiên’s Poetry and Diasporic Testimony,” in *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory*, ed. Linda Ho Peché, Alex Thai-Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu (Temple University Press, 2023): 208.
- 9 Grace Pundyk, “Beyond the written: Embodying the sensorial as an act of remembering,” in *Translating worlds: migration, memory and culture*, ed. Rita Wilson and Susannah Radstone (Routledge, 2021): 56-71.



Fig. 1 (far left): Picture of the Thương Tiếc (Mourning) Statue. The statue is no longer there. (Photo by Colonel William E. LeGro, public domain, available on [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Fig. 2 (left): Screenshot of the Việt Museum website, showing the replica of the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery. (Screenshot by Dat Nguyen, June 2025)

Fig. 3 (below): Central structure of the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery. (Photo by Dat Nguyen, June 2021)



Fig. 4 (far left): Picture of the American Cemetery in Manila. (Photo courtesy of Flickr user Storm Crypt, reprinted under a Creative Commons license: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Fig. 5 (left): The three-gated structure leading to the Temple of the Fallen. (Photo by Dat Nguyen, 2021)

A Living Material Archive of the Republic of Vietnam

The Case of the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery

Dat Nguyen

“This is in the only place left. We need to preserve it!” This statement was uttered by a veteran of the military of the Republic of Vietnam during one of my field research visits to what was formerly known as the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery, now renamed Bình An People’s Cemetery.¹ The cemetery, whose construction began in the mid-1960s, is one of the most important commemorative sites of the Republic of Vietnam (or “South Vietnam”) that still stands in contemporary Vietnam. My field research in the cemetery (multiple short trips between 2021 and 2023) was part of the research for the project *Bones of Contention: Technologies of Identification and Politics of Reconciliation in Vietnam*, led by Dr. Tam Ngo at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies.² Funded by the National Dutch Research Organisation (NWO), the project investigates the processes of war dead identification, commemoration, and postwar reconciliation in Vietnam.

When the Second Indochina War – popularly known as the Vietnam War in many Western contexts – ended in 1975, the cemetery was the resting place of more than 16,000 South Vietnam soldiers and military officers. In the immediate postwar period, the cemetery came under the control of Military Zone Seven, Vietnam Ministry of Defence. Access

to the cemetery was heavily curtailed. Families of the fallen were asked to move the remains of their loved ones (and many did), while local people discreetly placed incense for the dead around the premises of the cemetery.³ The cemetery and its many graves became dilapidated. At the end of 2006, however, the Vietnamese government decided to transfer the cemetery’s

management to the local provincial government. This decision emerged from many discussions within the Vietnamese government, as well as between various individuals in the Vietnamese government and those in the diasporas.⁴ Until now, the site still figures prominently in national and transnational discussions and negotiations over postwar reconciliation.⁵

The sentiment expressed by the veteran in the beginning of this article has prompted me to think of the site as an archive of the continuing legacies of South Vietnam inside Vietnam. As I have written more extensively elsewhere,⁶ with the transfer of the cemetery management, more families, local volunteers, and diasporic organisations have been active in caring for the graves



Fig. 6: Natural elements in the cemetery. (Photo by Dat Nguyen, 2023)

of the fallen. Apart from its significance in US-Vietnam bilateral relations, the material culture of and socio-cultural practices in the cemetery offer a living archive into the study of South Vietnam history and its legacies in the country. In this article, I want to lay out two considerations that might be helpful for the study of the Republic of Vietnam, particularly through the lens of material and commemorative culture.

First, there is the history of design. The Biên Hoà Military Cemetery has been referred to as the Arlington Cemetery of South Vietnam by the overseas Việt Museum in California and by Americans interested in the history of the war.⁷ However, according to an online interview with the well-known South Vietnam sculptor Nguyễn Thanh Thu⁸ – the creator of the famed *Thương tiếc* (Mourning) statue [Fig. 1] that once greeted visitors to the cemetery – it appears that the direct inspiration for the cemetery design was not the original Arlington Cemetery, but rather, the American Cemetery in Manila, the Philippines. In examining the structure of the two cemeteries [Figs. 2 and 4], one can notice some similarities.⁹

For example, at both cemeteries, graves are arranged in hemicycles, and at the centre is a circular structure from where one can have an overview of the different grave sections. In the case of the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery, at the centre of the central circular structure, there stands a tall sword-like structure. This sword-like structure is called *Nghĩa Dũng Đài* (The Tower of Bravery), while the circular structure wrapping around the tower is likened to the funeral band (*Vành Khăn Tang*) that one wears around one's head during funerals in Vietnam. In tracing the design history of the Biên Hoà cemetery, one can see that there was a circulation of aesthetic ideas and design, at least when it comes to war commemorative culture, across countries and territories that experienced US military intervention. Simultaneously, it highlights how these aesthetic flows were also localised. Beyond the addition of the Tower of Bravery and the symbolism of the funeral band, the Biên Hoà cemetery also has a Temple of the Fallen (*Đền Tử Sĩ*) close to its entrance. To enter the temple, one has to pass the three-gated entrance

(*Cổng Tam Quan*), a traditional structure signifying one's crossing over into a sacred space [Fig. 5]. In examining these similarities and differences in architectural design, one can trace the various transnational influences, but also their localisation, that informed the formation of the material and commemorative culture of the Republic of Vietnam.

The second consideration that I want to propose here is to think of the cemetery not only in terms of what it was previously, but also in terms of what it is now, namely a potential living archive of the legacies of the Republic of Vietnam in contemporary Vietnam itself. My field research trips to the cemetery have attuned me to the layered material culture of the place. The cemetery has undergone many changes since the end of the war. Many blog posts, newspaper articles, and other reporting written by members of the diasporic Vietnamese community have lamented the decrepit state of the cemetery compared to what it used to be, with overgrown trees, weeds, and the deterioration of many graves [Fig. 6]. At the same time, families, volunteer groups, and diasporic Vietnam veteran organisations have undertaken efforts to restore the cemetery and commemorate the fallen. If one approaches the cemetery as a living archive, one can see how its material culture and the natural environment contain narratives and physical traces of violence, but also of restoration and regeneration.

Take, for example, the graves themselves. Since the mid-2000s, diasporic Vietnamese organisations like Association d'Aide aux victimes de guerre du Vietnam (or "Wooden Crutch Association", *Hội Nạng Gỗ*) in France and the Vietnamese American Foundation (VAF) in the United States have helped restore many of the graves, including replacing old grave mounds with cement structures.¹⁰ During my fieldwork, local volunteers at the cemetery were able to point out to me which grave structures were new and which were from the previous eras. These new cement graves, over the years, have also suffered from deterioration from climatic and natural conditions. Most recently, an informal local volunteer network has also added a layer of white ceramic on these graves to ensure that they are less exposed to the elements [Fig. 7].

Not to mention, many graves were also built anew by families, with their distinctive styles. As such, the layered materials, as well as the building and rebuilding of graves, all say something about the history of the site. Paying attention to these layers of material culture allows us to trace what one can tentatively call "the archaeology of the Republic of Vietnam" and its continuing living legacies.

Taking these considerations into account, I want to propose seeing the Biên Hoà Military Cemetery – including its design, its material culture, and its environment – as a living archive of the Republic of Vietnam and its legacies. While it remains a place of contention and of pain for many, it is in many ways also a site where new initiatives of restoration and regeneration can be found. It is also a place where transnational historical war connections can be considered anew.

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Notes

- 1 The cemetery is located in an area previously belonged to Bình Dương province. Since July 1, 2025, Bình Dương province was officially merged as a part of Ho Chi Minh City. How this merger will affect the management of the cemetery remains to be seen.
- 2 More information about the project can be found at: <https://www.niod.nl/en/projects/bones-contention>
- 3 Christina Schwenkel, "The Ambivalence of Reconciliation in Contemporary Vietnamese Memoryscapes," in *Four Decades On: Vietnam, United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*, ed. S. Laderman and E. A. Martini (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 117.
- 4 Grossheim Martin, "Reunification without Reconciliation?: Social Conflicts and Integration in Vietnam after 1975," *Journal of Humanities*, Seoul National University 78, no. 2 (2021): 459–88.
- 5 Ted Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible: America's Reconciliation with Vietnam* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022); Alex-Thái Dinh Võ, "Accounting for the Stateless: In Search of the Republic of Vietnam War Dead," *Human Remains and Violence* 9, no. 2 (3 January 2024): 76–95.
- 6 Đạt Nguyễn, "Rendering the 'Orphaned' Dead Palpable: Spiritual Care and Memory Activism at the Former Republic of Vietnam Military Cemetery," *Human Remains and Violence* 10, no. 1 (10 May 2024): 18–34; Tâm T. T. Ngô and Đạt Nguyễn, "War Dead, Trauma, and Care: The Differential Reintegration of Vietnamese Former Combatants," *War & Society* 43, no. 4 (October 2024): 382–397.
- 7 See the museum's website: <https://www.vietmuseumsanjose.com/exhibitions/memorials>. For the American perspective, see: <https://www.usmilitaryforum.com/forums/index.php?/topic/162003-arvn-cemetery-saigon>.
- 8 Interview sculptor Nguyễn Thanh Thu by Le Xuan Truong, YouTube, 29 April 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IJBgQGqBsCA&rdm=17jwyp50u&client=mv-google>
- 9 Pictures of the American Cemetery in Manila can be found here: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/storm-crypt/2320405163/in/photostream/>; Picture of the replica of the Biên Hoà Cemetery can be found here: <https://www.vietmuseumsanjose.com/exhibitions/memorials>.
- 10 For restoration work of the Wooden Crutch Association, see: <https://nanggo.wixsite.com/nanggo/video>. For the pictures of the restoration work of VAF, see: <https://89g.552.mfypupload.com/xay-mo-before-after>.



Fig. 7: Graves with new ceramic cover. (Photo by Dat Nguyen, 2023)



Fig. 1: Matthew Jagel at the rooftop Oscars party. (Photo courtesy of Shelby Elizabeth Doyle, 2012)

Researching the Mystery of Son Ngoc Thanh

Matthew Jagel

As I was wrapping up my Masters research on Filipino involvement in the war in Vietnam, I began to look toward research projects for a potential PhD. I knew that I wanted to continue examinations of under-studied aspects of the war in Vietnam, and at that time Northern Illinois University was a premier institution for all-things Cambodia. My dissertation advisor, Kenton Clymer, had previously written a two-volume series on the history of US relations with Cambodia, which certainly was an influence. In reading his work and the work of others like David Chandler or Ben Kiernan, a name that routinely popped up in semi-mysterious fashion was Son Ngoc Thanh.

Though many different factions of resistance to France sprouted up throughout the country, the unquestioned leader of Khmer resistance to France at the dawn of the Second World War was Son Ngoc Thanh. From the perspective of the United States, he was a communist sympathizer and a troublemaker. From the perspective of some Cambodians, he was their first independent ruler. The period of 1945-1975 saw dramatic changes both inside of Cambodia and in United States responses to political developments. These transformations can be directly connected to Son Ngoc Thanh's various political incarnations, where he morphed from agitator to leader to dissident. Son Ngoc Thanh went from being Cambodia's first prime minister to political outcast. The young king, Norodom Sihanouk, transformed himself from a royal figurehead to a political authoritarian. The United States gradually moved from an advisory and support role for France, as the last remnants of its colonial empire disintegrated, to the main geopolitical player in Southeast Asia in an effort to thwart the spread of communism. Son Ngoc Thanh turned from American adversary to ally. Further study seemed a worthwhile project to undertake, and it became the most intellectually challenging, frustrating, yet fulfilling endeavor of my academic career.

Although my research was not primarily on the Khmer Republic, it certainly factored in significantly, as its formation was in some ways the culmination of Son Ngoc Thanh's 30-plus-year political odyssey, which I document in my book, *Khmer Nationalist: Son Ngoc Thanh, the CIA, and the Transformation of Cambodia*.¹ The historians mentioned above, and others, had already done yeoman's work contextualizing the Khmer Republic in

modern Cambodian history, and studies such as Justin Corfield's *Khmers Stand Up! A History of the Cambodian Government 1970-1975* provided a focused analysis of the short-lived government.

Domestic research in the United States was supported with grants from the Northern Illinois University History Department. Scouring various presidential libraries yielded some fascinating finds, as did an extended stay at National Archives II in College Park, Maryland. Because many Khmer Republic sources no longer exist, seeking other avenues was essential. That could mean combing the archives of a journalist who was in Cambodia during the era, like those of T.D. Allman located at Harvard. It could mean revisiting the papers of an academic and research professional such as George McT. Kahin

at Cornell. Kahin conducted several interviews with key players in the Khmer Republic government, including Son Ngoc Thanh. David Chandler personally shared many resources from The David Chandler Collection at Monash University – he graciously provided commentary on draft chapters of my dissertation as well – which proved invaluable for understanding not only the Khmer Republic era, but also for tracing the historical arc of Son Ngoc Thanh's life and career.

Obviously, an extended trip to Cambodia was essential to complete the project. A Fulbright Fellowship and a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the Center for Khmer Studies made such an undertaking possible, and great thanks to them. I knew going in that material on the Khmer Republic was going to be hard to come by, and that

the majority of my time would be spent in the National Archives of Cambodia. Hot and humid among dusty relics of the past, this was a home away from home (away from home) for a great deal of my time in Phnom Penh. The familiar site during rainy season of librarians scrambling to close the shutters to prevent complete saturation of the slowly decaying archival papers was always a site to behold. As expected, I did not find a great deal of material relating to the Khmer Republic here, although I did examine plenty of sources from the French colonial period and Sihanouk era which were of use in my overall research.

I had better luck at the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) in Siem Reap, finding some useful materials, including Khmer Republic-era newspapers and photographs, along with an extensive library. The Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh yielded a few interesting finds as well, although the vast majority of materials there relate to the Khmer Rouge. One of the most difficult aspects of researching Son Ngoc Thanh was the lack of "human touch," if you will, in the extensive tranche of materials I consulted. It was not until – after some digging – I made contact with some of his family members that I was able to provide more personal insight into the project. His grandson was gracious with his time and acted as an intermediary of sorts with other family members to get all my questions answered. While much remains murky about Son Ngoc Thanh, the family's contributions did help me put more of a human face on the man I had been reading about for over a decade.

One always faces unexpected obstacles in the research process, especially one of such a long duration as I spent in Cambodia. Unexpectedly realizing that my wife, who had joined me, was pregnant resulted in her returning to the United States. I took a break in my research to return for the birth of my son, making it back with about 36 hours to spare. I returned to Phnom Penh alone but with a fuller heart. My son would be ten months old when I finally returned for good.

Countless odd memories are stored, from wandering around Ta Mok's house with ex-Khmer Rouge in Anlong Veng to a surprise invite to a rooftop Oscars party [Fig. 1], complete with red carpet and camera-flashing paparazzi (and no, I do not remember how or why I was invited). There was the random party at the head of embassy security's house, complete with local Khmer fuzz-rock band, or seeing Dengue Fever at the Foreign Correspondent's Club (or FCC, which is sadly no more) and so many other fantastic experiences that augmented my time in Cambodia [Fig. 2].

Overall, it was a long, strange trip. From the outset, I was pretty sure there was a story to tell about Son Ngoc Thanh, I just did not know what that story would be. I had to follow the source material where it took me, and while my project is complete, his story certainly is not. Uncovering more specifics about his work with US intelligence sources, for example, certainly deserves further examination, and his many years in exile are full of gaps in the historical record. The Khmer Republic-era is similarly spotty, but as historians we do our best to synthesize source material and historically contextualize it, and oftentimes the sources lead us to unexpected places. My research experience in Cambodia was similar, as I had goals, but found myself in the unexpected throughout.

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Notes

- 1 Matthew Jagel, *Khmer Nationalist: Son Ngoc Thanh, the CIA, and the Transformation of Cambodia* (Cornell University Press – NIU Southeast Asian Series, 2023).

Fig. 2: Matthew Jagel (left) with cousin Tyler Jagel (right), seated on a bamboo train, Battambang. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2012)





Fig. 1: Image from
The Golden Voice.
(Image courtesy
Gregory Cahill, 2021).

The Golden Voice

Graphic Novels and the Khmer Republic

Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier

Until 1975, the music and film industry in Cambodia was flourishing. Yet, to date, not much scholarly study has been done on cultural life in the Khmer Republic.¹ It is music, perhaps, which evokes the memories of that period most strongly. The haunting voices of the dead have survived to this day through records carefully kept, recovered, and remastered, or through lesser-quality versions shared on YouTube and Spotify.

Gregory Cahill's and Kat Baumann's graphic novel *The Golden Voice* – about famous female singer Ros Serey Sothea – was published in both English (2023) and Khmer (2022).² It is the result of many years of work.³ Director and screenwriter Gregory Cahill's fascination with Cambodia's music from the 1960s and early 1970s began in 2005 with the soundtrack of Matt Dillon's movie *City of Ghosts* (2002), the first big foreign feature film to be shot in Cambodia. Yet, as Cahill recalls his first encounter with this music, he remembers another story. In the summer of 1984 or 1985 – he was very young then – his parents hosted a big party in their backyard, with over 100 people in attendance. Most of the children did not speak English. It was only later that Cahill understood that it had been a welcome party for Cambodian refugees recently arrived to Massachusetts from refugee camps in Thailand.

In 2006, when Cahill was a young graduate from film school, he decided to make a movie about Ros, and his father put him in touch with some of the former refugees. They gave Cahill further contacts of friends and relatives in Long Beach. Many came from Battambang, Ros's home city. The enthusiastic reception of his short film *The Golden Voice* at the Cambodian Students Society (Long Beach) convinced him to develop the project into a full-length feature movie. In 2007, he made his first trip to Cambodia for research. His guide and mentor there was musician and human rights activist Arn Chorn Pond, a good friend of Ros Serey Sothea's sister Ros Saboeun. Through them, Cahill met other primary sources, mostly musicians and actors. He thinks they also managed to find the village where Ros died in Kompong Speu province. There, they met an older woman, who said she had lived in the village during the Khmer

Rouge period. They did a bit of digging, and she clearly knew things she could not have known otherwise, such as the names of Ros's brothers and sisters.

The project went into development with different companies. Cahill had in mind an epic period picture, but it was too expensive. After ten years, he decided to turn the project into a graphic novel and adapted the script to a storyboard. He hired artist and comic illustrator Kat Baumann in 2019.⁴ To help her recreate Ros's environment, Cahill provided Baumann with a massive photographic archive, including family pictures as well as more general images of architecture, clothes, hairstyles, cars, and military equipment [Fig. 1]. As Baumann got further into the process, she also did additional online research for specific visuals, for instance the plants native to the different regions in Cambodia.⁵ There were then only two silent films with Ros in existence. The first was a clip of her as a paratrooper interviewed by a French magazine [Fig. 2], and the second showed her in army uniform with another female singer at Wat Phnom for a concert celebrating the Republic's second anniversary in October 1972. Cahill shared the second clip on social media, and within ten minutes, a Cambodian friend commented that the woman next to Ros was his aunt, still living in Long Beach. Seng Botum was an actress in the 1970s, and she was also best friends with Ros. Seng had many stories to tell, and some made their way into *The Golden Voice*. When interviewing witnesses, Cahill had to rely on memories from 60 years ago. There were contradictions. His policy in general was to stick with the Ros family's version. The end of the graphic novel lists the differences between real and fictionalized events.

Cahill was keen to have the music in sync with the graphic novel. In collaboration with the Cambodia Vintage Music Archive (CVMA),⁶ he introduced a QR Code that made it possible for readers to stream a soundtrack of 47 songs he had curated (Ros had recorded some 500 songs in her career). Socheata Huot from Avatar Publishing expressed her interest in a Khmer translation of *The Golden Voice*. The launch of the Khmer version was organized at Bophana Center in Phnom Penh, with hundreds of people cramming to in the gallery (November 2022). In 2023, *Les Humanoïdes Associés* (Humanoids) acquired the worldwide rights for publication. The launch party in the United States took place in Long Beach. Members from Dengue Fever – the Cambodian-American band that had been instrumental in reviving Cambodia's psychedelic rock from the 1970s – and CVMA played and DJ-ed. The story of *The Golden Voice* is far from over yet. In March 2024, the Cambodian theater company Khmer Art Action announced that it would turn the graphic novel into a musical, which is currently under development.

Many artists died during the Khmer Rouge regime. Many works disappeared. There have been initiatives to find and preserve these materials and bring this cultural legacy to the public. *The Golden Voice* is one of them, and the ways it has been received by the public show the importance of collecting, researching, and sharing these works and life stories in Cambodia and the diaspora.

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Fig. 2: Ros Serey Sothea completing her training as a paratrooper, monthly illustrated magazine *Khmer Republic*, vol. 1, no. 1, September 1971 (photographer unknown).



Notes

- 1 Aside from LinDa Saphan's *Faded Reels: The Art of Four Cambodian Filmmakers 1960-1975* (Phnom Penh: Department of Media and Communication, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2022) and her co-authored chapter with Nate Hun "Popular and Political Songwriting in Cambodia: From Sihanouk's Prewar Golden Age to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge" in *The Golden Age of Cambodian Popular Music* (Seoul: Hyunsilbookm 2021). Saphan was researcher for John Pirozzi's movie *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014).
- 2 See <https://www.thegoldenvoicemovie.com>.
- 3 I thank Gregory Cahill for kindly sharing the story of *The Golden Voice* with me (interview 10 March 2025).
- 4 See <https://katbaumann.com>.
- 5 Baumann's email to author, 27 February 2025.
- 6 See <https://www.thecvma.org>.

Photography and the Documentation of Memory

Colin Grafton and Keiko Kitamura

This iconic man in Fig. 1 has been wrongly identified at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) as Hem Keth Dara, the leader of the Monatio (Mouvement Nationale), a ragtag group of some 200 students and youths hastily assembled – possibly by President

Lon Nol's brother Lon Non – as a “welcome committee” for the Khmer Rouge. They wore nicely tailored black uniforms and were initially mistaken for the real Khmer Rouge. The man in the picture is certainly not Dara. I knew him personally, so it particularly annoys me that he has been reduced to this image of mindless violence. Dara was executed together with his family and followers, probably on the same day that this picture was taken [Fig. 2].

I started taking photos in Laos in 1970, then in Cambodia. I was not a photographer, although I was consumed by enthusiasm for taking photos. I was a teacher at an English language school (ETAPP) in the Khmer Republic. A colleague shared an apartment with a Japanese photojournalist, Naoki Mabuchi, who fueled my interest and provided me with film when I couldn't get any. It was bulk-loaded, mostly black-and-white Kodak Tri-X. My camera (I only had one – the mark of an amateur) was a Pentax Spotmatic. In those days, most professional war photographers used Nikons, tougher and easier to change lenses. I had a regular 50mm 1.4 lens, a short 105mm telephoto, and a 35mm wide angle. There were no darkroom facilities available. I had all my films processed in a local photo shop. They did a decent job but it depended on the freshness of the chemicals. Sometimes the negatives were under- or overdeveloped.

It was fortunate that we scanned and digitalized them in 2015 because a few years later some of them bubbled up and died when I took them out of their sleeves.

The scarcity of film made me focus, as if I was using ammunition in short supply. In two years, I ended up with only a few hundred pictures. I had no agenda. I was not planning to “do” anything with them. There was no idea of reporting or documenting history. Until the last month or so of the war, when movement became more limited, professional photographers were going out to the front line every day, risking their lives to capture battle scenes. They spent little time in town. Occasionally they captured powerful images on the battlefield, but if you look at their contact strips, you see endless series of puffs of smoke in rice paddies. I was taking “safe” pictures in the streets, and later in the countryside, of ordinary people and everyday life [Figs. 3–4]. When

I left Phnom Penh in April 1975, ten days before the city's fall, I had all the negatives. Naoki Mabuchi drove me to the airport. He was staying to cover the entry of the Khmer Rouge.¹ I intended to return if possible. Then an ominous curtain fell over Cambodia for nearly four years. Looking at the photos, I often wondered what had become of the people.

In 2007, a dancer appeared in Tokyo, where I was then living. Somehow, she had one of the photos I had taken of her in the dressing room of the National Theatre 33 years before [Fig. 5]. It was a delightful surprise and a wake-up call. She had survived. Her name was Om Yuvanna. I had to go back and find out more about the other dancers.² In 2011, I met my old friend Naoki. He was in bad health. We talked about the fact that neither of us had shown our photos in Cambodia and decided to put together a joint show. But six months



Fig. 1: 'Khmer Rouge' (actually a Monatio) soldier, April 1975. (Screenshot from the website KI Media)



Fig. 2: This is the real Hem Keth Dara, leader of the Monatio, much more elegant and fashionable than Figure 1. (Photo by Naoki Mabuchi, 1975, courtesy of Watana Kiuchi)



Fig. 3: Mr. Bigsmile. 'This was the man who drove me to Banteay Chhmar on his motorbike, actually the first Cambodian I met.' (Photo by Colin Grafton, 1972)



Fig. 4: Girl on a bicycle. 'I took one more photo of this girl, but in the second photo she lowered her eyes. Only the first one captured that look.' (Photo by Colin Grafton, 1973)

Fig. 5: Om Yuvanna.
'I walked into the
dressing room and took
this photo.' (Photo by
Colin Grafton, 1974)



later, Naoki died. His wife gave me a box of his slides.³ I moved to Phnom Penh in 2014 and deposited scanned photos at Bophana Center, an audiovisual resource archive. In 2016, my wife Keiko Kitamura and I produced an exhibition of 20 Dancers images, based on one single film that I had shot at the last performance of Khmer classical dance at the Suramarit National Theatre in 1974. Then we did *Phnom Penh Before The Fall* in 2017. Bophana envisioned an “art” exhibit of similar scale to the first, but I wanted this to be a documentary project, so we ended up with over 100 prints. Next was an exhibition of Naoki Mabuchi’s work from 1974 to 1983.

While talking about the scarcity of visual material from the Lon Nol era, Bophana Center director Chea Sopheap showed us some photos donated by two French peace corps volunteers, Serge Guérin and Daniel Yvetot. He asked us if we could curate an exhibition using these and other material from Bophana’s archives. The resulting *Glimpses of the Khmer Republic* consisted of work from six different photographic sources. We called the exhibition “glimpses” because there were so many gaps. Guérin and Yvetot had provided information about themselves, but nothing about the photos they had deposited. We could not even be sure they had taken them. There were prints, but no negatives. However, their pictures covered the first two years of the Khmer Republic (1970-1972), so they were important. Some show enthusiastic support for the Republic in Phnom Penh at the outset and the strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment that fueled it. Mabuchi and I covered the later period (1973-1975). Then there were well-documented photos from Ros Reasey of the aftermath of the Vietcong attack on the Japan Bridge in 1972, and aerial photography of refugees from the countryside coming to Kampong Thom in 1974. Finally, ETAPP co-director Sam Jackson III’s intimate photos of the American evacuation on 12 April 1975 completed the cycle.” We had no budget for big prints. For the first two exhibitions we got a good deal on panels, but for Naoki’s photos, we just mounted prints on sheets or on frames – not under the glass, but on top of it. I don’t like reflections. We did the same for the Khmer Republic exhibit. This hands-on approach seemed to work well. Audiences could see details and were not intimidated by sheets of glass.

The presentation might be basic, but Keiko’s preparation of the photo data is meticulous. Fifty-year-old negatives that have not been developed nor preserved in the best conditions require tweaking. Dust marks and scratches have to be removed manually. Auto settings do not work well. It takes time and patience. It can also be quite exciting. Examining enlarged negative images may reveal hitherto unnoticed details in the background that provide new information or a different perspective. For example, some street signs tell us that (now) Sihanouk Boulevard was Avenue 18 Mars 1970 (date of the Lon Nol-Sirik Matak coup d’état) in 1973, and the open space in front of the royal palace was Place de la République. These things I had forgotten, and you won’t find them on any current map. Another photo shows a devastated, post-bombardment landscape near Takhmau with only one lone figure walking down a road. It is an impressive image. But closer inspection reveals quite a few other people dug in and camouflaged [Fig. 6]. In another photo there is a pile of captured weapons with a soldier standing behind them, and a poster of a dancer. It says “Wel Come” (sic). The feeling of this picture is enhanced if you know that it’s a deserted country club and that



Fig. 6: Devastated landscape after the American B52 carpet bombing. (Photo by Colin Grafton, 1973)

Fig. 7: Heart-shaped dancefloor, a repository for captured weapons. (Photo by Colin Grafton, 1974)



American, Russian, and Chinese weapons are stacked on a heart-shaped dance floor; and even more so if you notice the skull-like shadow on the face of the soldier, a detail which, because of the backlighting, can only be brought out in the printing [Fig. 7].

I regret that I failed to take notes at the time I took the photographs. I realize now the importance of accurate documentation and the fallibility of memory. An extreme case was my initial dating of the “dancers” photos to 1973, when they subsequently turned out to have been taken a year later, thus making them the last glimpse of the Royal Ballet before the fall of Phnom Penh. How could I have been a year off? It was a stressful time, and there were several reasons, but none of them acceptable. My main reason for dating them to 1973 was that on the same negative strip there were scenes from a trip to Neak Luong, which had been the scene of the infamous “minor bombing error” by US Air Forces in August 1973. I thought I had gone there with some friends a few months later. As the “dancers” photos came after this on the strip, I guessed they were from October or November 1973. Then one of the friends visited Phnom Penh and told me it must have been a year later because he had not arrived in Cambodia until June 1974. But there he was, in the photos! This placed the dancers’ photos and the dance performance much closer to the fall of Phnom Penh than I had imagined.

Our task in curating others’ photos would have been much easier if we’d had some documentation to help us. Although I must admit the “guessing game” was fun, we just didn’t want to make too many wrong guesses. Keiko and I may have developed an obsession with documentation, accuracy, and truth, and it has been exacerbated by the fact that many people don’t seem to care. Sometimes we think of a photo as art, but in history a photographic image must have documentation to ensure it does not perpetuate a lie.

Colin Grafton took the original photographs and wrote the documentation, and Keiko did the hard work of data preparation and display planning. This article expresses their shared views and observations. Colin’s photos, many of which were used in their exhibitions, can be found with extra and updated information at: <https://colingrafton.wixsite.com/photography> and <https://colingrafton.wixsite.com/phnompenh1973>

Colin Grafton travelled overland to Asia in 1969 and took photographs in Laos and Cambodia (1970–1975). He returned to Thailand as a volunteer in the Cambodian refugee camps in 1980. He and his wife Keiko Kitamura settled in Cambodia in 2014. Email: colingrafton@yahoo.com

Keiko Kitamura, who has extensive experience as a stage and light designer, has worked with Colin on exhibitions and projects at Bophana Center, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Meta House and the Institut Français in Phnom Penh. From 2021–2022, she designed and produced the book “Dancers” based on photographs taken in 1974. Email: keikokit2@yahoo.co.jp

Notes

- 1 Naoki came out of Cambodia on 8 May 1975 with photos, movie film, and a Cambodian wife. They had spent two weeks in the French Embassy and then been trucked out to Thailand.
- 2 The result was the book *Dancers* published in 2022. The story of Yuvanna with extra and updated information can be found at: <https://colingrafton.wixsite.com/photography/dancer-in-the-dressing-room-om-yuvanna>
- 3 This provided the bulk of the material for the Naoki Mabuchi exhibition held at Bophana Center in 2021. See: <https://colingrafton.wixsite.com/phnompenh1973/naoki-mabuchi-magazine-articles>
- 4 He left on the last American helicopter out of Phnom Penh on 12 April 1975. See: <https://colingrafton.wixsite.com/phnompenh1973/samuel-jacksons-last-day-in-py>

The Nature and Impact of Language Policies and Conventions in Korea

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia.

In this edition on ‘The Nature and Impact of Language Policies and Conventions in Korea’, our authors focus on the variety and complexity of intersections between language, ideology, and identity in North and South Korea. Daniel Pieper discusses the linguistic divide between North and South Korea, due to the diverging language policies of post-World War II regimes in both countries. Adam Zulawnik analyses the ideological differences in the various references to the very notions of ‘Korea’ and ‘Korean’. Lucien Brown addresses the

linguistic, social, and cultural challenges experienced by foreign learners of Korean during their study programs in South Korea.

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Do You Speak North Korean or South Korean? The Korean Peninsula’s North-South Split Has Created a Distinct Linguistic Divide

Daniel Pieper

In the closing days of WWII, the Korean Peninsula, home to one of the most ethnically homogenous populations in the world with political boundaries among the oldest on earth, was arbitrarily divided by the great powers. Competing regimes have since applied contrasting approaches of policy and planning to the Korean language, which have far-reaching implications for possible reunification and for North Korean refugees living in the South.

What’s happened to language since the Peninsula was divided

In South Korea post-1945 there was an impetus to remove *hancha*¹ (Chinese characters) in favour of hangul only, and to expel Japanese loan words from the language. But more recently, the country’s overall laissez-faire approach to its language has meant that language change has been largely driven by the linguistic market and the whims of the public. This has meant the increasing influence of English on the Korean language. In the North, *hancha* was also removed in favour of hangul-only writing, as the North placed a premium on mass literacy for the effective spread of propaganda and the advancement of socialist revolution. According to Soviet sources,² beginning with a 1945 illiteracy rate of more than three quarters (and even higher for mixed script),³ North Korea virtually eliminated illiteracy even before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

However, it is North Korea’s language policies from the 1960s that laid the foundations for more drastic divergence between the language varieties and has posed the greatest challenges for *saet’ömin* (North Korean refugees). In that decade, the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung conducted and published his so-called ‘Conversations with Linguists’ (1964 and 1966), in which he portrayed the southern variety of Korean as “inundated with foreign borrowings,” a “gibberish mixture of Chinese, Japanese and English” that had lost its ethno-national characteristics, necessitating the state’s intercession to defend the language.⁴ In addition to the explicit proscription of foreign borrowings (especially from English and Japanese), Kim called for creating pure (North) Korean words to replace not only Japanese and English loan words, but also the extremely numerous Sino-Korean vocables as well. A successful campaign to do away with (obvious) Japanese loans also unfolded in South Korea, and so the first area was not as consequential. But in the case of English loans and Sino-Korean vocabulary, these proclamations by Kim and the subsequent policies they engendered have resulted in a profound divergence of the Korean varieties. Research has shown that the greatest divergence between the languages has been in the various areas of lexicon. These include synonyms like *kungmin* (국민 citizen; NK: 인민 *inmin*), words with the same spelling and pronunciation but different connotations

such as *tongji* (동지 friend or colleague; NK: comrade), remaining Sino-Korean words such as *minganin* (민간인 civilian; NK: *samin* 사민 private citizen), and even the pronunciation and spelling of limited loan words such as *k’öp* (컵, NK: *koppu* 컵 cup), the latter revealing Russian influence.⁵ The most highly publicised (and for some snicker-inducing) changes, however, are the North Korean attempts at actively creating pure Korean words in place of Sino-Korean words. Examples include terms such as *Hanbok* (한복 traditional Korean clothing; NK: *Chosön ot* 조선옷 [North] Korean clothing), *hongsu* (홍수 flood; NK: *k’ün mul* 큰 물, “big water”), *siröp* (시럽 syrup; NK: *tanmul* 단물, “sweet water”), *rek’odü* (레코드 [music] record; NK: *sorip’an* 소리판, “sound disk”), and *p’ama* (파마 perm; NK: *pokküm möri* 볏음 머리, “fried hair”).

An uphill battle for North Korean refugees adapting to South Korean linguistic life

The significant number of successful adaptations along with the effective limitation of foreign borrowings has contributed to the creation of a very distinct language variety. This directly affects the linguistic assimilation of North Korean *saet’ömin* when they settle in the south. It is estimated there are 34,000 North Korean refugees living in South Korea.⁶ According to one study, while South Koreans tend to underestimate the



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The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne’s key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.



Fig. 1: North Korean reading an inscription at Juche Tower, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user Nicor and reprinted under Creative Commons license)

differences between the language varieties and the challenges they pose to new settlers, *saet’ömin* ranked linguistic challenges as the most significant impediment, with over 70 percent of respondents reporting ‘much difficulty’ or ‘considerable difficulty’ due to language.⁷ Importantly, all of the 34 *saet’ömin* interviewed as part of this study indicated language difference as a contributing factor to difficulty in work life. Significant percentages of respondents reported experiencing difficulties due to differences in pronunciation and intonation, the extensive use of English expressions in South Korea, differences in honorifics, ignorance of *hancha*, not knowing the name for an object or everyday vocabulary word, and a feeling of self-consciousness when interacting with southerners.⁸ Research has also reported extensive discrimination experienced by *saet’ömin* due to language difficulties.⁹ Instead of revealing their true identities, many respondents are either mistakenly ascribed or assume the identity of ethnic Korean Chinese (*Chosönjok*), various Korean dialect speakers, or overseas Koreans. This suggests that many *saet’ömin* view their background and identity as an impediment or mark of shame rather than a potential asset that might be fostered. As the population of *saet’ömin* inevitably increases in the south, the difference between the North and South Korean language varieties will continue to be

a salient issue. Reflecting the perceived widening gap between the languages, work began in 2005 on the *Kyöremal k’ün sajön* (Unabridged Dictionary of Our Language),¹⁰ an ongoing joint project involving experts from North and South Korea that seeks to index the entire Korean language and ‘re-converge’ the varieties. Moreover, in the event of political unification, the issue would have even more intense and far-reaching ramifications for the entire population of the Korean Peninsula, as it grapples with social inequality, discrimination, and power imbalances.

Not only is it paramount that we identify the different areas and specific reasons for linguistic difference, but also that we determine how this history of linguistic change continues to affect the two Koreas today. Moreover, extra care must be taken not to demonise either variety, blame either side for the linguistic divergence, or identify either language as flawed or an impediment that needs to be eliminated or overcome. Rather, it is crucial to embrace linguistic diversity and acknowledge pluricentric Korean as an unexpected, though at this point established, byproduct of political division.

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Notes

1 This paper utilizes the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization.
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How Korean Language Students Studying in Seoul Navigate Linguistic and Cultural Homogeneity

Lucien Brown

The linguistic and cultural immersion offered by studying abroad is often positioned as the perfect context to build second language skills and to acquire cultural knowledge. The study abroad context is idealised as ‘an imagined monolingual utopia’¹ where language learners can be completely immersed in the target language. The reality, of course, is more complicated. Research on the acquisition of a swathe of languages shows that students on study abroad spend varied amounts of time interacting in their target language,² often face struggles to adapt to the local culture,³ and return from study abroad having made variegated linguistic gains.⁴ In some cases, teachers might even perceive students’ language skills to have regressed.⁵

The expectation that study abroad provides a perfect setting for linguistic and cultural immersion may be particularly problematic for students who visit South Korea, a country grappling with the early stages of multiculturalism⁶ and where powerful ideologies of cultural homogeneity still hold strong.⁷ The Korean language remains a powerful emblem of ethnic homogeneity via ideologies that equate ‘speaking Korean’ with ‘being Korean.’⁸ These racialised ideologies translate into folk beliefs shared to varying extents within South Korean society⁹ that all people of Korean ethnicity should be able to speak ‘good’ Korean and, on the flipside, that learning Korean is difficult, unnecessary, or incongruous for those of non-Korean ethnicity.

In the course of my research, I traced the experiences of Grace (a pseudonym), a proficient and highly motivated Caucasian American female learner of Korean.¹⁰ Although Grace went to Korea with the explicit goal to speak only Korean in order to immerse herself as much as possible in the language, my analysis showed that many of her daily interactions featured English and she was engaged in an ongoing struggle to establish an identity as a potential speaker of Korean. Her attempts to speak Korean were often met with responses in English, which sometimes seemed to disrupt rather than assist her interactions. In some cases, Grace’s use of Korean was so unexpected that her interlocutors mistakenly assumed that she was in fact using English.

Experiences of study abroad are of course different for students who have Korean ethnicity or who are ‘Korean-passing’ (i.e., whose appearance leads people to assume they are Korean). In a blog post written by Hong Konger-American Rachel Wong, who spent a semester in Seoul,¹¹ the author reports never being addressed in English, and she notes that there were high expectations that she would be a proficient Korean speaker (in fact, she only had novice Korean). It led her to question her own identity as an Asian American and made her feel guilty that she was unable to live up to the expectations that came with her Korean-passing appearance.

For some students who do have Korean heritage, studying abroad can be a transformative experience. In a study of a mixed-heritage learner of Korean named Gina (a pseudonym), who had a white father and Korean mother, her Korean heritage allowed her to make meaningful connections with local communities and afforded her greater opportunities to learn Korean in comparison to her non-heritage peers, strengthening her sense of ‘Koreanness’.¹² However, Gina also

experienced heightened levels of anxiety in the immersion classes that she took, due to tacit expectations that as a ‘half’ she should be able to outperform her non-heritage classmates. She also shunned chances to practice Korean with proficient non-heritage students in her dorm, since their high levels of proficiency would exacerbate her own insecurities about her Korean ability. In addition, perhaps due to exposure to the same ideologies that equate ethnicity with linguistic ability, she seemed to conceptualise using Korean with non-native speakers as inauthentic and unhelpful.

Although we have ample evidence of the experiences of study abroad students in South Korea who are white English speakers and those who are of Korean ethnicity or Korean-passing, as yet we lack the same level of research that looks at the experience of exchange students from other ethnic backgrounds. We may expect that South Asians and Southeast Asians as well as Black students, for instance, would face particular hurdles, since non-Koreans who are of darker skin tone tend to face high levels of discrimination.¹³ Black students would likely face the same struggles to establish Korean-speaking identities as their white peers, but coupled with the explicit racial discrimination documented elsewhere.¹⁴

Previous studies have also shown that the racialised experiences of study abroad learners in South Korea interact closely with gender and sexuality. White female students in Korea frequently complain of receiving unwanted attention or even sexual harassment from Korean men in public places, including Grace in my own study¹⁵ Meanwhile, in my study of a white lesbian Korean learner named Julie¹⁶ she struggled to negotiate her identity in a context where markers of her sexuality such as her short hair and androgenous clothes were not necessarily understood in the same ways as they would be in her native United States. These struggles with sexual harassment and gender identity can negatively impact study abroad learners’ sojourns in Korea, including curtailing their opportunities to practice the language.

In the case of Grace, the path towards the resolution of her identity struggles and attempts to speak more Korean ultimately lay in developing an appreciation for study abroad as a multilingual and multicultural space. She found that interactions with fellow Korean-speaking international students from third countries including China and Iran who shared her desire to improve their Korean skills were valid and productive contexts for developing her linguistic proficiency, as well as for building her intercultural competence. Through this process, she moved away from seeing native Korean-speakers as the model that she needed to follow, and instead aspired to adopt the identity of a translingual international student who could skillfully switch between English, Korean, and other languages. With this shift, she gained confidence to use Korean in her interactions, while she also managed to shed the guilt that she had previously felt about using English, and she became interested in learning further languages and building her knowledge of additional cultures.

The various studies suggest that students who are set to study abroad in South Korea might benefit from pre-departure training that explicitly sensitises them to these complex issues that involve the interaction of race, gender, sexuality, and linguistic ideologies. Such sessions should also look to break down the stereotype of study abroad as a monolingual setting where all that counts is speaking Korean with ‘real’ Koreans. They should pinpoint the importance of interactions with global Korean speakers

(rather than just local Korea-born speakers) as the goal of study abroad and should further discuss how to balance and integrate the use of Korean, English, and other languages during sojourns in Korea.

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Fig. 1: Open source map of North and South Korea. Courtesy of Wikimedia.

Hanguk or Joseon? Republic of Korea, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and the Complex Nature of Reference to ‘Korea’

Adam Zulawnik

Escapes from North Korea face numerous challenges upon arriving in South Korea, with cultural and language barriers being one of the most significant. As of 2023, approximately 34,000 North Korean defectors reside in South Korea,¹ contributing to the complex social fabric of the nation. The 2024 appointment of Thae Yong-ho,² a former senior North Korean diplomat, to a vice-ministerial position in the South Korean government, symbolises the growing political and social integration of defectors. However, despite such seemingly positive advancements, the societal stigmas faced by North Korean defectors remain significant.

Although the Korean language contains examples of ethnocentric nation-building³ and unification in the form of terms such as Ournation (*urinara*) and Ourlanguage (*urimal*), it is arguable as to whether these envelop the whole of the Korean diaspora or, indeed, in a more tribalistic sense, simply those born and raised in South Korea. The discrepancy may be seen in the rhetoric of the South Korean public, with expressions such as ‘North Korean vocabulary lookup in Ourlanguage’ visible in the titles of certain publications.⁴ Such usage may be seen as rather ironic (and arguably reflective of actual, contemporary South Korean identity as opposed to that prescribed by institutions such as the National Institute of the Korean

Language), as the official definition of Ourlanguage (*urimal*) is ‘the language of the people of Ournation (*urinara*)’.⁵ In this essay, I focus on the ideological discrepancies in the naming of ‘Korea’ and everything that is ‘Korean’ – something that is often overlooked in English translations of both South and North Korean written matter. Although the arguably ‘subtle’ differences in the naming of a country (i.e., the equivalent of ‘North’ and ‘South’ Korea in many Indo-European languages) may seem trivial for audiences from some linguistic backgrounds where the difference is not as linguistically marked as in languages with Sinoxenic (Chinese character) vocabulary, inadvertent misuse and misnomer may have repercussions for both source (victim) and target (perpetrator) culture individuals.

‘Han’ and ‘Joseon’: Two Koreas

Although the Korean language is fundamentally the same in both North and South Korea, it has diverged significantly due to the 70-year separation and differing sociopolitical conditions.⁶ Korean in South Korea has been heavily influenced by foreign languages, especially English, due to globalisation, while North Korea has taken a purist approach with some Soviet Russian influence.

Korea was unified under the Joseon Dynasty for over 500 years until the Korean Empire was established in 1897. Following Japanese colonisation (1910–1945), the Korean Peninsula was divided after World War II, with the Soviet-backed North becoming the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the US-supported South forming the Republic of Korea (ROK). The division also created differences in how each side refers to ‘Korea’. North Korea uses ‘Joseon’ (from the Joseon Dynasty), while South Korea uses ‘Daehan’ (from the imperial period). This distinction is not mirrored in English, where both are often referred to as ‘Korea’.

In everyday language, North Koreans refer to their country as ‘Joseon’ and South Koreans as ‘Hanguk’, extending the terms to other national symbols such as the Korean alphabet, which is called ‘Hangeul’ in the South and ‘Joseon-geul’ in the North. The Korean Peninsula is similarly referred to as ‘Han bando’ (*bando* meaning peninsula) in the South and ‘Joseon bando’ in the North. These distinctions indicate political or ideological alignment, especially when terms like ‘Joseon Peninsula’ are used in the South or ‘Hangeul’ in the North, raising eyebrows due to their symbolic significance. In languages other than Korean, the situation is even more complicated. For example, in Japanese, South Korea is called ‘Kankoku’ (*Hanguk*) while North Korea is ‘Kita Chōsen’ (*Buk Joseon*, ‘Kita’ the Japanese *kun-yomi* reading for ‘North’), therefore somewhat reflecting the use in the respective countries.

In North Korea, using ‘Han’ for Korea has been illegal and highly policed. For instance, during a visit by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung in 2000, North Korean media reported he arrived on ‘H Air’ instead of ‘Daehan Hang’gong’ (Korean Air). More recently North Korean officials have referred to South Korea as ‘Daehan Minguk’ (the official term used in South Korea), to reflect a view of the South as a separate nation and enemy.⁷

In South Korea, there are no bans on the usage of ‘Joseon’ (in fact, one of South Korea’s major newspapers, the *Chosun Daily*, is literally the *Joseon Daily*). Nevertheless, there is some stigma in relation to the term Joseon being used in reference to the Korean people, as it is associated with North Korea and the Japanese colonial period and sometimes used as a racial slur in Japan towards South Koreans.⁸ According to some historical sources, patrons of the American-backed interim government in the South held a vote in 1948 to decide on the naming of the new government,⁹ with 17 votes going towards Republic of Korea (Daehan), seven towards Republic of Koryo (Koryo originating from the ancient Koryo Kingdom), and two towards the Republic of Joseon (the same term for Korea now used in the North).

Koryo is used sporadically in both the North and South as well as in reference to the Korean diaspora in Central Asia (known as ‘Koryo saram’). The term ‘Koryo’ also made a brief comeback in 1980,¹⁰ when Kim Il-Sung, the founding leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, proposed a ‘Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo’. Historical sources note that proponents of Daehan (the term used now in the South) – such as politician and Korean independence activist Jo So-ang – argued that the Japanese colonisers tried to eradicate the term in favour of ‘Joseon’, which is “symbolic of *sadaeju’ui*”,¹¹ a largely pejorative term often used in reference to historical Korean reliance on China (within a Sinocentric world order), particularly during the Joseon Dynasty.¹²

It is, therefore, the combination of such narratives and historical flows (including naming decisions made by a select few on both sides) that have resulted in a relatively complex socio-political situation, often overlooked by languages outside of Asia. And yet, the name that we go by, or choose as self-reference, have been a hot issue historically, including in the Anglophone world.¹³

The heightened sensitivity of South and North Koreans to misnomer may be seen as linked to the very plurality of ‘Korea’ in the

Korean language, and ideologies imparted through decades of education. This can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and a lack of objectivity, such as when interacting with states such as Japan, China, and Vietnam, who choose a more diplomatic approach to nomenclature. Regardless, considering the importance of naming in ascertaining collective identity and positionality, all nations should have the right to be referred to using their own naming convention of choice (within contextual reason).

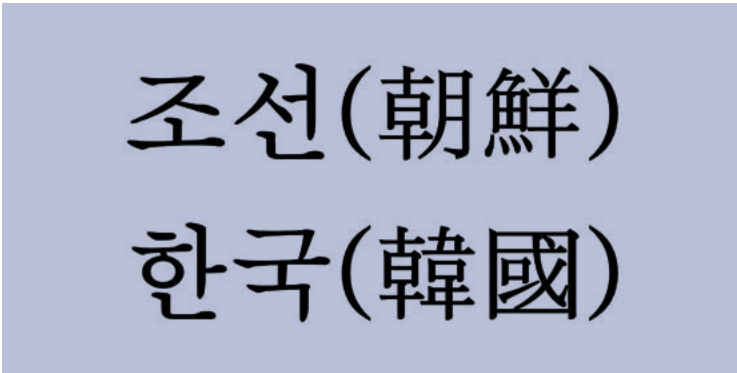
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Fig. 2: Visualisation of the difference in the general words for ‘Korea’ as normally used in North (Joseon) and South Korea (Hanguk) and, in brackets, the relevant Chinese characters. Source: Adam Zulawnik.



Introduction to the Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey

ISEAS
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INSTITUTE

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Youths make up a considerable chunk of voters in several Southeast Asian societies, and the group has become an essential consideration when states approach elections.

On the one hand, they are the children or grandchildren of the second or third generations of the post-colonial era (c. 1960s). They are thus least concerned about developmental and industrialization policies. Today, they are born into middle-class and educated families, and some are referred to as the sandwiched class, having to bear the tussle between care for elders in the ageing society and care for children.

On the other hand, their aspirations also differ. No longer are they interested in the nation-building issues of their parents, where nationalism was a key part of collective

identity formation; today, youths want to take greater ownership of their identities and sub-identities and even challenge dominant narratives levelled out by the state. In this regard, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute ran a Youth and Civic Engagement Survey among undergraduates from six Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The survey was conducted between August and October 2024 and drew responses from 3081 participants. The survey is most interested in the issues that concern youth the most: their religiosity, how religion impacts their political choices, their attitudes towards politics,

law enforcement and economic outlook, and their online and offline behaviour. The survey targets university students in urban cities and maintains a balance of STEM and non-STEM students as well as male and female respondents. ISEAS published a series of articles related to the survey findings, and the following is a selection of Fulcrum pieces showcasing reflections from the data.

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Prabowo Should Take Heed of Discontent Among Indonesian Youths

lim Halimatusa'diyah and Norshahril Saat

Two recent developments in Indonesia indicate that the country's youth are unhappy with the state of their country, to the extent that some have contemplated leaving the country. Their concerns warrant some examination and action from the incumbent government led by President Prabowo Subianto.

Recently, Indonesian university students held concurrent demonstrations across several cities in Indonesia, calling the movement “Dark Indonesia” (#IndonesiaGelap).¹ Two demonstrations have been held thus far – on 17 and 21 February 2025 – and Indonesian elites expect many more to come. Protesters have criticised Prabowo Subianto's performance during his first 100 days as president. The majority were displeased with Presidential Instruction (Inpres) Number 1/2025, which trimmed the state budget and has impacted education, health, public services, and poverty alleviation efforts.

However, a parallel digital movement is currently trending among the youth, united by the hashtag #KaburDuluAja (#JustRunAway).² Aligned with the #IndonesiaGelap movement, #KaburDuluAja is an online public expression of accumulated anger and despair due to the uncertain political and economic situation and unfavourable government policies.³ The implied message of the movement is that the country's youth should consider emigrating. Although the president is currently enjoying high approval ratings of 81 percent⁴ overall, the support is not equally distributed across all levels in society.⁵ Those with tertiary education showed a higher proportion of dissatisfaction compared to those with

secondary education or lower. It would be imprudent for the President to simply dismiss these online and offline expressions of youth discontent, as the protests might escalate and gain support from other segments of the population. They will form the bulk of Indonesian voters since Prabowo has declared his intentions to run for a second term.⁶

The state of unhappiness among the country's youth, whether online or offline, confirms the results of a recent survey conducted by the Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, which found that Indonesian youths tend to be the most pessimistic in Southeast Asia.⁷ The survey shows that they are frustrated with the country's unfavourable socio-economic and political conditions. While the president's populist policies to help young children with free meals could potentially make him one of the most popular presidents if executed well, he should quell youth unhappiness early to avoid a repeat of the *reformasi* movement in 1998, which toppled the authoritarian Suharto New Order regime. A coup or a large-scale protest similar to 1998 might sound far-fetched, but with social media and hashtag culture today – which were non-existent during the New Order – undergraduates can organise mass movements quicker and on a larger scale.

The ISEAS survey covered 3081 undergraduate students across six Southeast Asian nations. Respondents are 18–24 years old, with 48.1 percent males and 51.9 percent females. Indonesia was one of the six countries surveyed, in addition to Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. One of the areas the survey

covered was youth satisfaction with the political system and a country's economic outlook. At this, Indonesian youths were the most pessimistic.

Indonesian youths exhibit the highest levels of dissatisfaction with their political system compared to their Southeast Asian counterparts. Figure 1 demonstrates that 71.5 percent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction, with only 27.0 percent stating they were satisfied.

By contrast, the ISEAS survey also demonstrates that 63.9 percent of Indonesian youth agree with taxing the rich to help the economically disadvantaged – the highest compared to other Southeast Asian countries. Economic hardship is indeed a critical factor shaping youth pessimism. The survey indicates that 37.8 per cent of Indonesian youth perceive their national economy as “bad,” and only 2.6 percent believe it to be “very good” [Fig. 2].

Furthermore, only 62.6 percent of Indonesian respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the country's economic outlook over the next five years is promising, significantly lower than other Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam (88.1 percent) or Malaysia (84.1 percent) [Fig. 3].

The survey also reveals that perceptions of income inequality further exacerbate economic grievances. The survey shows that 67.3 percent of Indonesian youth viewed their country's income distribution as “very unfair” or “unfair,” the highest percentage in the region. By contrast, Vietnamese and Singaporean youths reported significantly lower dissatisfaction rates, at 18.3 percent and 30.6 percent, respectively. The perception that wealth and opportunities are disproportionately concentrated among the elite contributes to a growing belief that success is unattainable for ordinary citizens, reinforcing pessimism about both economic and political systems.

The significance of the recent physical protests notwithstanding, the government must not take the #KaburDuluAja youth digital resistance lightly, especially when it is aligned with their growing pessimism reflected in the survey. Young Indonesians are increasingly vocal about their struggles with unemployment, lack of upward mobility, and the societal pressure to

succeed quickly. In 2024, unemployment among youths aged between 15–24 years was the highest contributor to the national unemployment rate, reaching 16.4 percent.⁸ The high youth unemployment rate and difficulties in securing decent work have contributed to a sense of hopelessness, leading some to consider emigration.⁹ Indonesia can ill-afford a brain drain as it seeks to become a high-income nation by 2045.¹⁰

Unfortunately, some lawmakers from the House of Representatives and ministers have dismissed the youths' concerns as momentary emotional expressions and a form of escapism.¹¹ They have waved the nationalist card and stressed that the nation's development is the collective responsibility of all citizens, including the country's youth.¹² This argument will not go down well with the youth unless the government shows concrete evidence of their performance to bring about better socio-economic and political conditions. While the protest culture is a norm in Indonesia, it also signals youths' desire to channel their views without going through political representatives and the legislature. The Prabowo administration should listen to youth aspirations if it wants to maintain political legitimacy, run the government effectively, and slow down any slide in approval ratings.

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Fig. 1. Southeast Asian Youth Satisfaction with Political System.
(Source: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

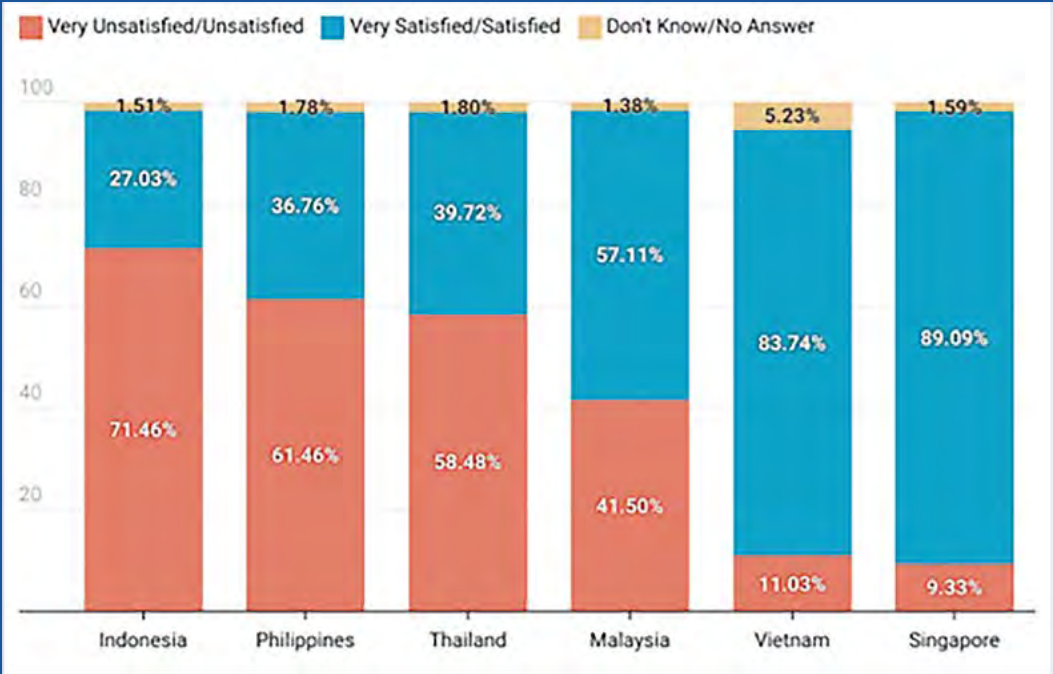


Fig. 2. Southeast Asian Youth Perception of Country's National Economy
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

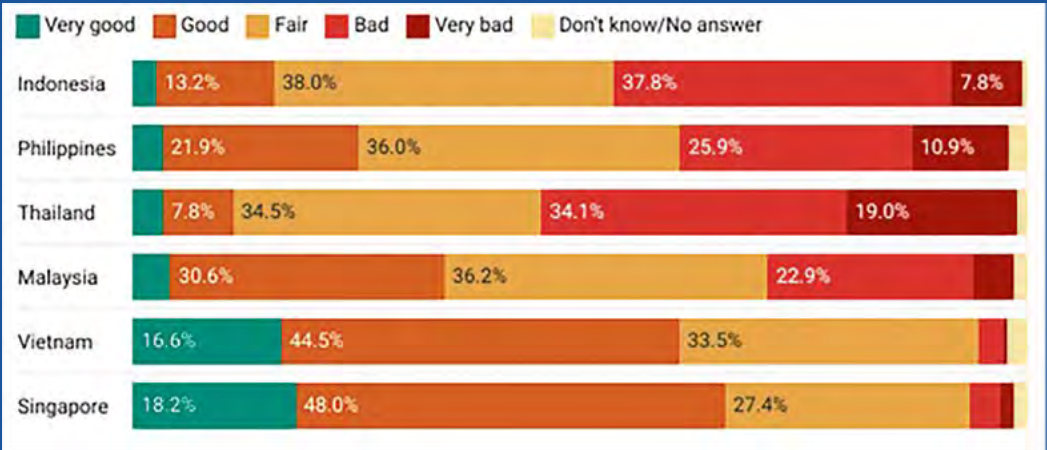


Fig. 3. Southeast Asian Youths' Optimism on Country's Economic Future
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)

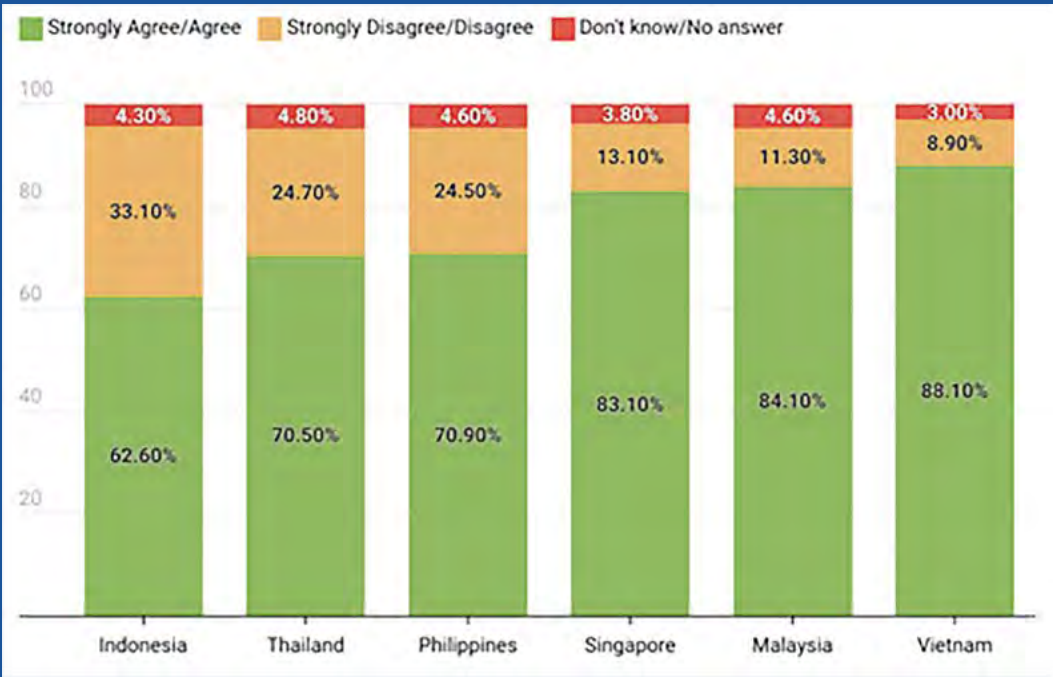
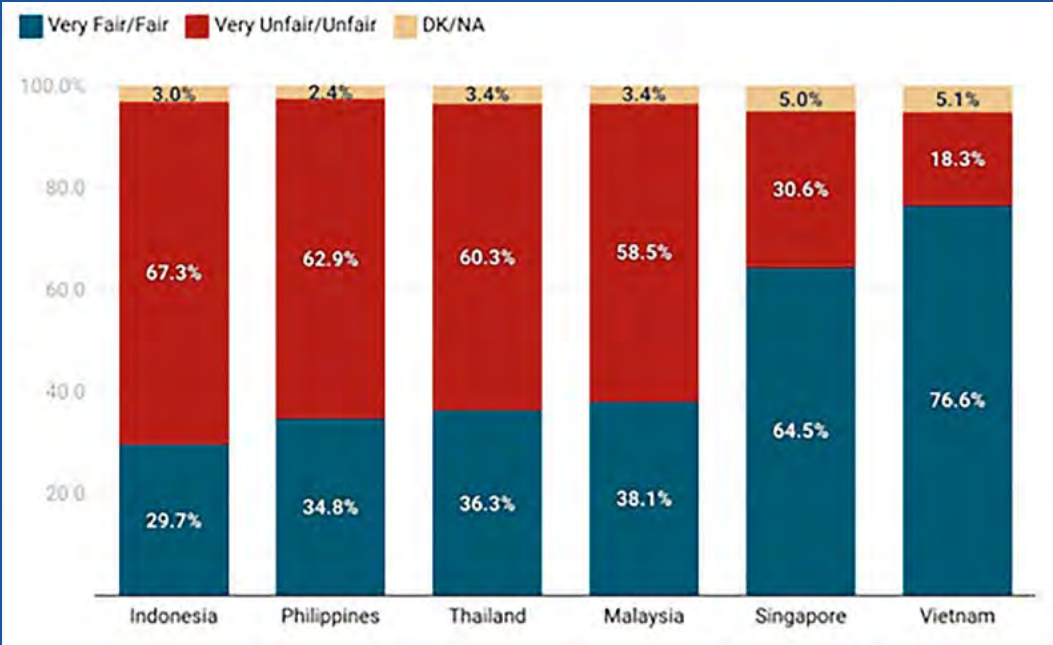


Fig. 4. Southeast Asian Youths' Perception of Country's Income Inequality
(Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024.)



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Malaysian Youths' Nuanced Take on Corruption in the System

Syaza Shukri

There are ongoing concerns about high-level corruption in Malaysia. These concerns are valid and warrant further government action. According to an ISEAS -Yusof Ishak Institute survey, however, Malaysian youths appear to have taken these concerns in stride amid growing political stability and economic growth.

On 25 January 2025, around 200 protestors, mostly university students, convened in Kuala Lumpur for an anti-graft rally.¹ Under the Unity Government led by Pakatan Harapan (PH) and headed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim from the reformist Parti Keadilan Rakyat, the public has expressed discontentment over court cases involving well-known politicians. The most notable case is that of former Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is pursuing legal means to move from incarceration to house arrest. Malaysia's 57th position in the Corruption Perception Index in 2024 showed no progress from 2023, even though it was ranked second after Singapore in Southeast Asia.²

Despite concerns about corruption, a large proportion of Malaysian youth have a positive outlook on the country's political system. In January, ISEAS released a report on youth and civic engagement in six Southeast Asian countries which sampled university undergraduates aged between 18 and 24.³ As seen in Figure 1, 57 percent of the Malaysian respondents were positive about the political system, whereas 42 percent responded that they were "not too satisfied" or "not at all satisfied." This showed that respondents were split in their views about the way the political system is working. Those who judged the political system negatively may have referred to corruption issues, whereas those who are positive may have looked more at the country's economy. In the survey, 84 percent of Malaysian respondents were optimistic about the country's economic future.

To understand the polarisation, the author conducted further studies about perceptions of the political system by socio-economic status [Fig. 2]. According to those additional findings, 61 percent of upper-class Malaysian respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the political system. On the other hand, more than 55 percent of the other classes responded positively. The classification was based on respondents' own perceptions of their socio-economic status. Because the survey was not followed by qualitative data, we can only suggest that economically less advantaged youth were satisfied with the political system because they were more likely to benefit from various government programs and initiatives, such as the cash assistance or *Sumbangan Tunai Rahmah* (Rahman Cash Contribution), which saw increased allocation in 2025.⁴ Bread-and-butter issues typically rank high when it comes to political perceptions.⁵ On the other hand, the upper class, who did not receive any assistance, might have looked at other matters, including the impact of corruption on the nation.

The fight against corruption is ongoing, but Prime Minister Anwar has been accused of being non-committal when it comes to reform. Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi's "discharge not amounting to an acquittal" (DNAA) was explained as necessary for a more thorough investigation.⁷ But more recently, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) detained four individuals linked to former Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob and seized more than RM100 million in cash.⁸ Ismail Sabri is known to be in a different camp from Zahid in the United Malays National Organization. This brings into question whether political stability is prioritised over fighting corruption. Malaysians are calling out Anwar's inconsistency,⁹ and they may have a point after 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) dropped its US\$248 million suit against Najib Razak.¹⁰

The people, like the government, have been less than wholehearted in the fight against corruption. While corruption remains significant, its perceived importance may diminish if the general populace experiences economic and political stability. This is not new in Malaysia. Despite being found guilty in the 1MDB scandal, Najib Razak continues to receive support from different segments of society.¹¹ In December 2024, some 1500 participated in a counter-rally in defence of Sabah Chief Minister Hajiji Noor, despite him facing allegations of corruption.¹² It is important to note that those who participated in the January 2025 protest did not reflect the collective sentiment of Malaysia's youth. The turnout of 200 people at the anti-graft rally pales in comparison to other protests, such as the #Lawan protest in 2021,¹³ which saw more than 1000 participants, or the two-day Bersih 4 protest in 2015, which saw between 80,000 to 100,000 people attending.¹⁴

The government has taken additional steps to bolster confidence in its ability to fight corruption. The Prime Minister showed that he listened to the country's youth when he conceded at the eleventh hour to allow the 25 January protest to go ahead.¹⁵ This was despite earlier setbacks on location approval. The government is also seeking to amend the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 to remove the requirement to seek permission for protests at certain sites.¹⁶ Following Anwar's comment in the *Dewan Rakyat* to stop probes into student-led protests, the Attorney General's Chambers decided not to prosecute a student activist who had organised an anti-graft rally in Sabah in December 2024.¹⁷ The government should continue to respect young people's demands for clean governance and welcome their courage to stand up for their ideals – ideals that PH championed for decades.

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Fig. 1: Satisfaction with political system by country. (Graphic by the author, 2025)

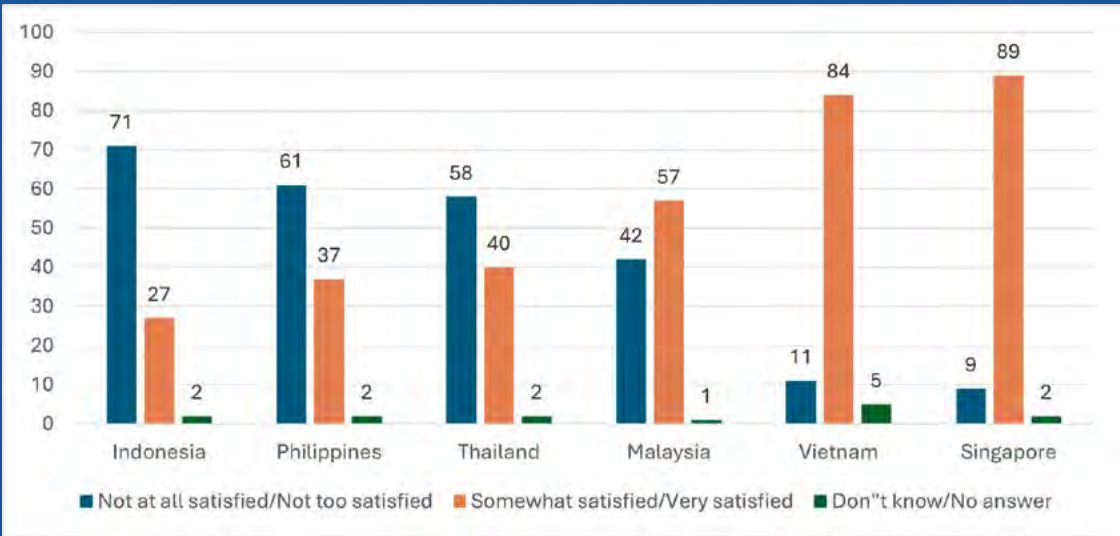
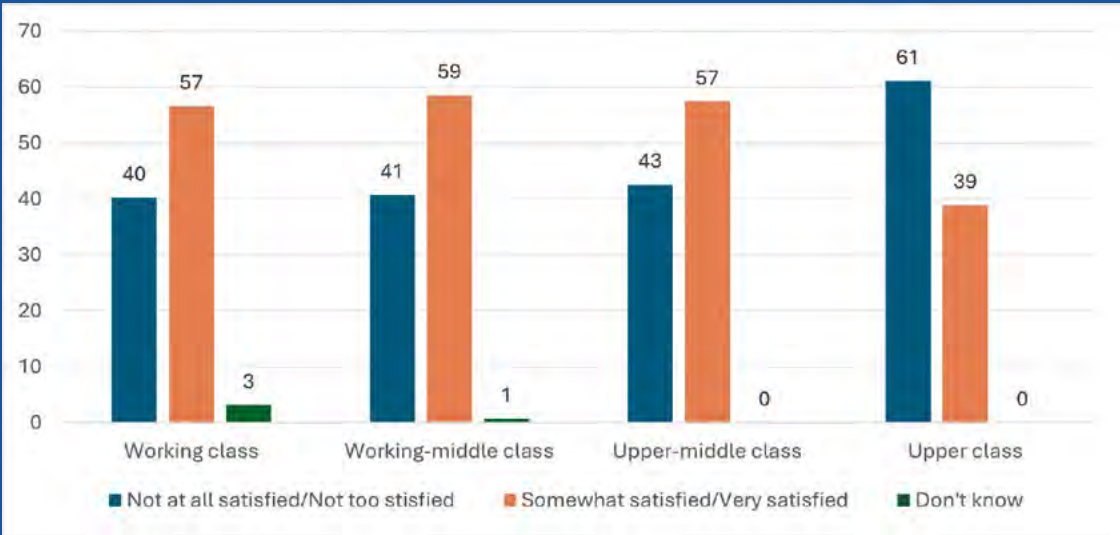


Fig. 2: Perceptions of the political system by socioeconomic status. (Graphic by the author, 2025)



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Online and Offline Support for Marriage Equality in Thailand

Panarat Anamwathana

On 23 January 2025, Thailand’s Marriage Equality Law came into effect.¹ Last year, Parliament² overwhelmingly approved the bill, and the King endorsed³ the Act in September 2024. The law replaces the terms “husband” and “wife” with gender-neutral language in Thai legislation, and it also ensures adoption and inheritance rights for all couples. This makes Thailand only the third country in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognise same-sex marriage. While the new law is undeniably the result of decades-long efforts of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) activists and their political allies, the momentous occasion was possible due to widespread public support in online and offline spaces.

Support for marriage equality has grown steadily in Thailand. In 2019, a YouGov poll found that 63 percent of Thais, especially 18-34-year-olds, supported the recognition of same-sex civil partnerships.⁴ In 2024, that number increased to 74 percent.⁵ This can be attributed to years of activism by LGBTQ+ rights groups and the introduction of a marriage equality bill by the now-defunct Move Forward Party in 2020.⁶

A recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey of the region’s undergraduates on youth and civic engagement found similar results.⁷ When asked if the state should protect LGBTQ+ rights, the response of young Thais stands out, with almost 70 percent of Thai respondents agreeing and only 7.6 percent disagreeing [Fig. 1]. The ISEAS survey asked respondents about the protection of LGBTQ+ rights – a broader question than in previous polls by others, which specified “same-sex civil unions.” It is thus possible that the ISEAS survey respondents may support only a marriage equality bill but not other rights for the LGBTQ+ community, such as protection from discrimination or recognition of various gender identities.

Religion partially accounts for Thailand’s LGBTQ+-friendliness. About 93 percent of Thai citizens practise Buddhism,⁸ which unlike Abrahamic religions does not unequivocally condemn homosexuality or non-conforming gender identities.⁹ This arguably allows more space for gender-

diverse individuals in Thailand.¹⁰ A 2023 Pew survey found that more than half of Cambodian respondents, also living in a Buddhist-majority society, endorsed marriage equality, and that Buddhist Malaysians and Singaporeans were more supportive than other religious communities of same-sex marriage.¹¹

These findings align with the 2024 ISEAS survey results, where only 11 and 15 percent of Indonesian and Malaysian youth, respectively, who live in Muslim-majority countries, endorse LGBTQ+ rights [Fig. 1]. However, their religion cannot be the sole explanation because Thai Muslim respondents showed greater support for LGBTQ+ rights compared to these two groups. Albeit a small sample size of just 22 Thai Muslim respondents, 31.8 percent of those believe that the state should protect LGBTQ+ rights [Fig. 2].

Thailand’s social and cultural acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community likely plays a crucial role in shaping its public support for marriage equality. Since at least the 1970s, Thailand has welcomed those seeking gender-reassignment surgery¹² and has culturally recognised “third gender” individuals (*kathoey*).¹³ In recent years, this acceptance is evinced by the prominent representation of queer people in traditional Thai media, including niche but increasingly popular “boys’ love (BL)” novels and dramas, which have gained fans across Asia.¹⁴ Scholars note that this increasing support for marriage equality has contributed to the growing popularity of LGBTQ+-related media.¹⁵ This, in turn, helped normalise LGBTQ+ experiences and foster greater acceptance even among conservative groups or older Thais.¹⁶

Social media platforms have also fostered Thailand’s LGBTQ+-friendly culture. According to the ISEAS survey, over half of Thai undergraduates use X (formerly Twitter) at least three to four days a week, and Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok daily. Meanwhile 77.6 percent use social media to receive news and 53.1 percent report using it to express their thoughts and opinions.

Throughout the years, activists, politicians, and Thai netizens have vocally supported LGBTQ+ rights online.

In December 2021, when the Constitutional Court ruled that marriage was only between a man and a woman “consistent with natural conditions and tradition,”¹⁷ the hashtag #ศาลรัฐธรรมนูญเหยียดเพศ [*#HomophobicConstitutionalCourt*] became the longest trending with over 260,000 posts on X in Thailand.¹⁸

Thais closely followed the legislative process for the marriage equality bill. During each parliamentary reading, the hashtag #สมรสเท่าเทียม [*#MarriageEquality*] trended on social media, with most users expressing their support. When the law was officially passed on 18 June 2024, the hashtag surged again, becoming Thailand’s most tweeted topic.¹⁹ Many politicians and celebrities participated in the conversation, further promoting the acceptance and normalisation of LGBTQ+ rights.

Over time, online support for LGBTQ+ rights transformed into tangible offline actions. This shift is evident in growing attendance at Bangkok Pride events, spurred by LGBTQ+ groups on social media encouraging allies to publicly demonstrate their support. While it is difficult to statistically ascertain the impact of such online encouragement, activist groups succeeded in organising well-attended Pride Parades in Bangkok. Bangkok Pride 2024’s popularity was reflected in its trending hashtag #BangkokPride2024 on X, and LGBTQ+ groups successfully organised parades in other provinces like Phuket, where the march had the explicit goal of supporting the marriage equality bill. In conjunction with the Marriage Law coming into effect on 23 January 2025, Bangkok Pride successfully organised a mass marriage registration involving 1839 same-sex couples.²⁰

Thai political elites are not typically inclined to yield to public pressure. Yet, Thailand’s Marriage Equality Law exemplifies a perfect cocktail of effective activism, political campaigning, and widespread public support, as reflected in opinion polls and social media trends. This highlights the potential of online activities to bolster a cause in real life, provided they are successfully translated into tangible actions to foster alliances among activists and political groups.

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Fig. 1: Southeast Asian youth attitudes to LGBT rights. Respondents were asked to quantify their attitude towards the statement “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights should be protected by the state.” (Source: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024)

	Country						
	Total	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
Base	3081	529	506	506	504	501	535
1 Strongly disagree	28.7%	68.1%	63.0%	12.3%	9.9%	3.6%	14.2%
2	7.6%	9.8%	7.7%	7.5%	10.5%	4.0%	5.8%
3	17.2%	8.1%	11.5%	20.3%	25.6%	18.9%	18.9%
4	13.8%	3.8%	6.7%	15.4%	25.8%	15.8%	15.7%
5 Strongly agree	28.7%	7.0%	8.5%	41.7%	23.8%	53.9%	37.9%
Don't know/no answer	4.0%	3.2%	2.6%	2.8%	4.4%	3.8%	7.5%

Fig. 2: Thai youth support of LGBT rights, by religion. (Source: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Youth and Civic Engagement in Southeast Asia Survey, 2024)

	Religion										
	Total	Islam	Protestantism	Catholicism	Buddhism	Hinduism	Confucianism	No Religion	Taoism	Folk Religion	Others
Base	501	22	7	8	432	3	4	19	1	1	4
1 Strongly disagree	3.6%	27.3%	-	12.5%	2.3%	-	-	-	100%	-	-
2	4.0%	-	-	12.5%	3.7%	33.3%	-	10.5%	-	-	-
3	19.0%	31.8%	14.3%	-	19.2%	-	50.0%	10.5%	-	-	-
4	15.8%	9.1%	-	25.0%	16.0%	33.3%	25.0%	5.3%	-	-	75.0%
5 Strongly agree	53.9%	22.7%	85.7%	50.0%	55.3%	33.3%	25.0%	63.2%	-	100%	25.0%
Don't know/no answer	3.8%	9.0%	-	-	3.5%	-	-	10.5%	-	-	-

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The Hong Kong History Centre at the University of Bristol

Robert Bickers, Vivian Kong, and Ray Yep

We are historians with a capacious understanding of what the discipline can and should do. Outside the histories of health, it would be fair to say that Hong Kong was little incorporated into wider historical discussions until the 2000s. China historians resisted seeing it as a real Chinese city; and British imperial historians concerned themselves with bigger fry. The oncoming handover of sovereignty in 1997 prompted some wider interest, but mostly Hong Kong's histories were insular, and very often administratively shaped: one British governor following another.

As with the Hong Kong History Project that preceded it, the Centre at Bristol has no specific thematic research agenda. We support excellent work brought to us



Fig. 1: Book stall, pedlar, and shoppers, Hong Kong, c.1938 (Photo courtesy of Historical Photographs of China Project, Hutchinson Family Collection, reference Hn-d044)

by PhD applicants, postdoctoral and visiting scholars, or those joining our workshops or conferences – projects that use Hong Kong case studies to intervene within, contribute to, and reshape wider debates. Our funded projects have included ones on British citizenship, migration and mobility, histories of US imperialism, and histories of refugees and occupation.¹ We have projects in progress on youth, elite networks, Kai Tak Airport, working class mobilities, and British subjecthood in the great era of Asian migration, as well as projects exploring colonial governance, Chinese medicine, and Cantonese music in the diaspora.

Certainly, the ten years of this project have coincided with ten years of unwelcome and disheartening changes in Hong Kong, which have led to a significant break with its past. More than ever that past needs better understanding, and at Bristol we are doing just that, and training and nurturing emerging scholars to take their work into mainstream debates and departments.

We are also working actively with communities internationally, in person in Hong Kong and in Bristol, and online through video profiles of practitioners in and outside the academy. Bristol's Faculty of Arts has a sustained record of engagement and co-creation with publics, and the Centre builds on that with its History Day events, community forums, and work supporting family historians.

The Hong Kong History Centre was formally launched in September 2022, evolving out of an eight-year Hong Kong History Project that had supported seven PhD projects, MA work, two international conferences, workshops, exhibitions, and related activities. The tagline was 'Rethinking a City's History', and this is what we continue to do, now with a better-resourced platform, a larger team, and busy collaborations with partners in Hong Kong, North America, Southeast Asia, and further afield. It is the first centre globally dedicated specifically to the history of Hong Kong.

We are also building an archive. Despite a nearly 200-year history of connectivity with its former colony, no institutional repository in the UK explicitly identifies Hong Kong as a collection development priority. HKHC has a team working within the University Library Special Collections who are cataloguing significant donations of material. Building on the Historical Photographs of China project,² we are building a Historical Photographs of Hong Kong platform. This strand of visual work already bore fruit with a collaboration with HK-based arts platform WMA and the Royal Photographic Society on an exhibition at the Bristol Photo Festival in 2024. The exhibition 'Realms of Memory' showcased new work by Hong Kong artists Billy H.C. Kwok, Jay Lau, and Lau Wai, inspired by historic photographs we hold.

We understand 'Hong Kong' as a subject providing a wide range of opportunities, as a city and a territory with a distinctive past that is entangled globally, and that has never been more alive than it is today. The accompanying essays showcase the work of some of our community of scholars that encapsulates this. Kelvin Chan looks at psychiatry and late colonialism, Hoi Ching Tracy Leung at government and youth after the Second World War, and Thomas M. Larkin shows how emerging digital humanities methods can map out novel understandings of the city. All chart new contributions in their fields, drawing on the richness and complexities of Hong Kong's history.



Centre website: www.hkhistory.net

Robert Bickers, FBA, is Professor of History and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. His most recent book is *China Bound: John Swire & Sons and its World, 1816-1980* (2020). He is preparing a new history of Hong Kong.

Vivian Kong is senior lecturer in modern Chinese history and Co-Director of the Hong Kong History Centre. Vivian is a social historian of colonial Hong Kong, and her work has focused largely on the city and its global connections. She is the author of *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong 1910-45* (2023).

Ray Yep is Research Professor and Research Director at the Hong Kong History Centre. He was formerly Professor of Politics and Associate Head of the Department of Public and International Affairs at City University of Hong Kong. His recent publications include *Man in a Hurry: Murray MacLehose and Colonial Autonomy in Hong Kong* (2024).

Notes

- 1 All now published: Vivian Kong, *Multiracial Britishness: Global Networks in Hong Kong, 1910-45* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Catherine S. Chan, *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong: A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Thomas M. Larkin, *The China Firm: Elite Americans and the Making of British Colonial Society* (Columbia University Press, 2023); Helena F. S. Lopes, *Neutrality and Collaboration in South China: Macau during the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2023)
- 2 The Newsletter previously featured the Historical Photographs of China project in issue #46 (<https://www.iasiasia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china-collections>) and issue #76 (<https://www.iasiasia/the-newsletter/article/historical-photographs-china>).

Madness, Medicine, and Empire: Rethinking Colonial Psychiatry in Asia through Hong Kong

Kelvin Chan

What if colonial governments presented themselves not through overt repression, but through promises of care and rehabilitation? This question first struck me when I began researching post-war Hong Kong. At first glance, Hong Kong may appear peripheral in the global history of psychiatry – a small, bustling city shaped by Cold War politics and British colonialism. But Hong Kong was deeply entangled in broader regional and imperial transformations, including urbanization, developmentalism,

and decolonization. By focusing on this site, I explore questions that resonate across colonial and post-colonial Asia: How was psychiatry adapted to colonial and decolonial contexts? How did it intersect with local knowledge systems such as traditional Chinese medicine?

My research focuses on the transformation of colonial psychiatry in Hong Kong from the 1940s to the 1980s. Drawing on hundreds of patient case files and government records from local archives, I examine how

psychological knowledge became central to welfare and legal reforms in the age of decolonization.

One of the clearest examples is the colonial government's campaign against heroin addiction. If opium symbolized the height of British colonialism, then addiction treatment marked the empire's decline. Pressured by the United States, colonial and postcolonial states across Asia were compelled to ban opium. Heroin quickly filled the gap. Beginning in 1959, Hong Kong – like many places in Southeast Asia – declared a "war on drugs." Addicts were sent to rehabilitation camps and psychiatric hospitals. American medical experts were invited to oversee experimental treatment programs. Methadone maintenance, then a controversial practice in the US, was trialed in Hong Kong through randomized clinical experiments, turning the city into a laboratory for international drug policy [Fig. 1].

These efforts were widely promoted as a model of modern addiction treatment. But a closer reading of the archives reveals a more



Fig. 1: The image of a "typical" addict from *The Problem of Narcotic Drugs in Hong Kong, 1965*. (Photo: author's collection)

complicated picture. Patients frequently relapsed, treatment centers struggled with violence and overcrowding, and staff found themselves caught between ideals of care and the realities of control. The goal was not simply to cure addiction but to reshape addicts into moral, productive citizens – able to work, conform, and reintegrate into society. These institutions blurred the line between welfare and discipline, highlighting the uneasy role of medicine in the final decades of colonial rule.

Alongside the expansion of psychiatry, another story unfolded – not in official reports, but in newspapers, street-level pharmacies, and the clinics of traditional healers. During this period, the diagnosis of “neurasthenia” – once popular in 19th-century Euro-American psychiatry – found a second life in Hong Kong. Though Western-trained psychiatrists had largely abandoned the term by the 1950s, it remained widely used by Chinese medicine practitioners and patients themselves. Neurasthenia, with its broad symptoms of fatigue, irritability, and bodily weakness, offered a culturally familiar way to express emotional distress without the stigma of mental illness.

My second strand of research explores how neurasthenia was commercialized in postwar Hong Kong [Fig. 2]. Advertisements for proprietary medicines promised to “restore nerves,” while popular self-help manuals framed the condition using a mix of Chinese medical idioms and biomedical vocabulary. Neurasthenia was described as a disease of modern life, brought on by fast-paced living, crowded housing, and social pressures. In this context, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners positioned themselves as experts in mental health, even as official psychiatry viewed them as unscientific or obsolete.

These dynamics were not unique to Hong Kong. Across Asia, neurasthenia has persisted as a common diagnosis – especially in Taiwan, mainland China, and among overseas Chinese communities – long after it disappeared from Western psychiatric classifications. Its continued use raises broader questions about how mental illness is understood in non-Western contexts: how symptoms are framed, which institutions people trust, and how medical categories travel and adapt across cultural and political borders.

In this sense, Hong Kong offers a useful lens to revisit larger themes in the study of Asia: colonial legacies, medical pluralism, and the politics of health. It sits at a crossroads between Chinese cultural traditions and British administrative structures, between regional migration and global medicine. The city’s psychiatric history is not only shaped by local conditions, but also by the Cold War, developmentalism, and decolonization. Its story reflects how global ideas of mental health were interpreted, contested, and reconfigured in specific Asian contexts.

As I continue this research, I find myself returning to questions that extend beyond the archive. How do people navigate systems that claim to heal, yet also surveil? And how might the history of psychiatry help us understand the present – not only in Hong Kong, but in other postcolonial societies still grappling with the inherited infrastructures of empire? These histories of medicine and madness, I believe, are not only about the past – they offer insights into the current global mental health crisis.

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Fig. 2: Deer antler pill that claimed to treat neurasthenia, Wah Kiu Yat Po 華僑日報, 1 February 1960. (Photo: author’s collection)

Guiding the Youth of the Colony: The Girl Guide Movement in Hong Kong, 1916-1997

Hoi Ching Tracy Leung

The use of ‘youth’ as an analytical lens in historical research on Hong Kong remains relatively underdeveloped. This approach offers a productive framework for re-examining state-society relations under colonial rules. Examining how ‘age’ intersected with other social categories, such as race and gender, allows historians to develop a more nuanced understanding of how young people were influenced by and responded to colonial policies and institutions. Following the Second World War, Hong Kong was a ‘young’ city. By the 1960s, nearly half of its population was under fifteen years old due to the significant influx of immigrants from mainland China and the post-war baby boom. This drastic increase in the youthful population and their dire socio-economic conditions ensured youth became a concern of the colonial state as never before. Nevertheless, historians of Hong Kong have not fully explored the topic of governance of youth and youth experience in the postwar colony. Likewise, Hong Kong is absent in the existing scholarship on the global history of youth. My research seizes the opportunity presented by this gap and aims to investigate the relationship between youth and colonial governance through different case studies. My MPhil research focused on the Girl Guide movement in colonial Hong Kong, and my ongoing PhD project examines a broader scope of governance of youth in postwar Hong Kong. The following section provides an overview of each project in more detail.

My MPhil thesis, “Guiding the Youth of the Colony: The Girl Guide Movement in Hong Kong, 1916-1997,” traced the transformation of the Girl Guide movement in colonial Hong Kong from a British middle-class youth activity to a popular youth movement that engaged Chinese girls of different social backgrounds. Drawing on underexamined official Girl Guide publications and documents, it argued that the Hong Kong Girl Guide

movement was significant to colonial governance as it provided a platform for colonial collaboration across different generations and races. To break the traditional top-down narrative in imperial history that often overlooks the historical experience of women and girls, I examined memoirs and collected and conducted oral history interviews to uncover girls’ motivation in participating in the Girl Guide movement and its impacts on their lives. Their accounts revealed that girls were able to gain a sense of achievement through the movement, and this further motivated them to organize Girl Guide training voluntarily for the younger generation.

One significant finding was the connection between the Hong Kong Girl Guide movement and Cold War politics in Asia. I argued that both the colonial government and the United States supported Girl Guiding in Hong Kong as a preferable youth leisure activity that shaped law-abiding citizens and countered communist influence. American funding played a key role in bridging local girls with the ‘free world’ while also making Hong Kong a strategic site for propagating the movement to Southeast Asia. As such, this study not only highlighted the importance of the movement in facilitating local governance in Hong Kong but also contributed to the broader scholarship on Girl Guiding within and beyond the British Empire.

My PhD project expands the discussion from one single youth organization to the broader area of colonial youth welfare from 1945 to the 1970s. The central research question is: how were young people in Hong Kong governed against a backdrop of local unrest, decolonization, and Cold War tensions in Asia? To answer this, my project explores three key areas: the construction and management of juvenile delinquency, the regulation of youth leisure through the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme, and



the international representation of Hong Kong youth. Specifically, I examine how the colonial state worked in partnership with voluntary associations and international actors, and also how the influence of the United States and Communist China shaped the development of youth welfare in Hong Kong. My initial research findings suggest that there was a transnational network of training for youth workers, highlighting how Hong Kong was interconnected with Britain, the United States, and Southeast Asia in shaping its governance of youth. Thus, my research situates the case study of Hong Kong in conversation with three major strands in the historical writing of youth, including literatures on juvenile delinquency in the colonial context, youth leisure in relation to governance, and the global politics of youth in the Cold War era.

All in all, my projects employ ‘youth’ as an analytical lens to understand colonialism in Hong Kong, while at the same time putting the story of Hong Kong into the global history of youth. Through examining the ways in which Hong Kong’s young people engaged with the government and youth organizations, my work aims to reveal how Hong Kong was deeply interconnected with global networks beyond its metropole.

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Fig. 1 (above): A Government Poster to encourage young people to joined uniformed youth groups. HKSAR.

Fig. 2 (right): Child learns English on a street ferry, 1984, photograph by Nigel Spry. (Image courtesy of University of Bristol Library, Special Collections (DM3263/1/1/13))



Revisiting the Past and Reimagining the Future of Hong Kong History through Digital Methods

Thomas M. Larkin

Whether a meeting place, in-between space, imperial periphery, nexus, node, point-of-transit, ‘Gateway to Asia’, or since 2001, ‘Asia’s World City’, vocabularies of connectivity and mobility abound in Hong Kong studies. With such a lexicon it is little wonder that the topic of Hong Kong has surged in popularity amongst global and imperial historians, scholars of colonialism and decolonisation, and, in recent years, digital humanists. My own early experiment with digital humanities, the Mapping Sino-Foreign Networks (MSFN), project reflected my attempts to grapple with the transitory, mobile, and integrated nature of Hong Kong society, while my more recent work – more parochial in focus – has in its own way been made possible by Hong Kong’s ongoing global entanglements.

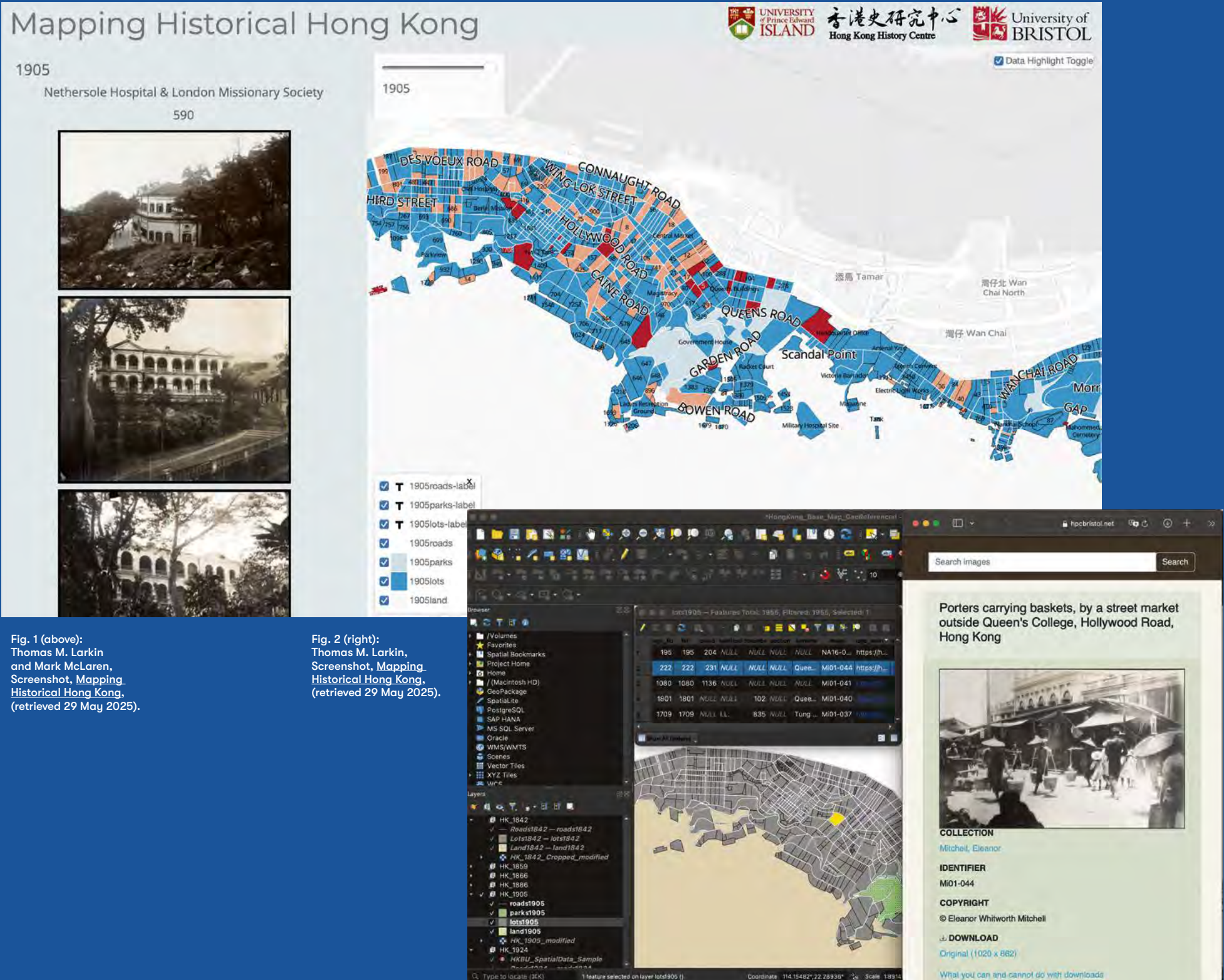
My turn to digital humanities evolved from the challenge of conceptualising the scope and scale of the social, commercial, and political networks that 19th-century migrants to Hong Kong cultivated and maintained. Migrants to Colonial Hong Kong found a space divided according to colonial hierarchies.

Such hierarchies were made more explicit due to the colonial society’s diversity, as imperial subjects from across the British world and extra-imperial adventurers converged on the port. The contents of the colonial archive often reproduce whitewashed narratives of an idealised segregation, but in reality, a more integrated society reflected pragmatic considerations. Multiracial and multinational networks blossomed through business, domestic services, and social and civic institutions – the exigencies of everyday life. This was also a transitory population. People moved on through the treaty ports, the Nanyang region, to Japan and across the Pacific, and further to Europe and the Americas. Chinese compradors, servants, and cooks followed the expansion of foreign firms, while thousands of labourers from Hong Kong and the surrounding provinces were contracted for infrastructural and agricultural work in India, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. Foreign merchants and colonial officials returned home following brief and sometimes lucrative tenures. And thousands more reached Hong Kong as part of the colonial project.

Digital humanities helps make sense of this confusion and mitigate the dangers of erasure that traditional archival research struggles to overcome. The experimental MSFN project, for example, uses network analysis and graphing to map how the 19th-century community that emerged in Hong Kong evolved and shifted over time and space. MSFN reinforces the premise that Hong Kong brought together a diverse cast of actors, but also emphasises the weight that the relationships established in the colony held as people relocated and spread these networks globally. The project’s hybrid quantitative and qualitative approach to recreating these networks leveraged digital tools to revisit the colonial archive, provide novel insights into network composition, and challenge narratives of colonial segregation. Digital tools are also well positioned to meet the challenges facing the future of Hong Kong studies. The shifting political climate and perennial concerns over archival access and preservation have embedded urban heritage projects, especially, with renewed importance. The Mapping Historical Hong Kong project (MHHK) was developed with such challenges in mind to explore the applications of digital tools for spatial and urban history and to support the global growth of Hong Kong studies and history initiatives [Fig. 1]. Aligned with the Hong Kong-based Spatial History Project, MHHK uses GIS to visualise Hong Kong’s urban growth between 1841 and 1997. The project collates and spatially organises historical data and archival resources to provide researchers and the public with a streamlined resource for exploring Hong Kong’s history [Fig. 2]. Both a tool

for analysis and a finding aid for a globally diffuse range of archival materials, MHHK represents the collaborative and integrative future of Hong Kong studies. If MSFN was meant to emphasize the ways Hong Kong was integral to the creation of, and then was integrated into, globe-spanning networks, MHHK brings the narrative full circle by capitalising on those very same networks. As these projects demonstrate, digital methods provide the tools for thinking about Hong Kong’s global entanglements and reflect the global future of the field, helping scholars the world over find new and robust ways to work together. I write this from my own little island (Prince Edward) nestled in the Gulf of St Lawrence, Canada. The islands and territories of Hong Kong are some 12,379 km distant, but nonetheless present in my research and teaching and accessible through academic partnership. This is in no small part thanks to the ways the digital age and digital humanities have reshaped inter-institutional collaboration. Resource sharing, the emergence of new archives, more flexible forms of funding, and a wealth of unique expertise have made it not just possible but fruitful to work on Hong Kong history from abroad. In its own peculiar but fitting way, Hong Kong once again becomes a conduit for the flow of people, goods, and ideas, facilitating international exchange, the sharing of resources, collaborative research, and transnational scholarly discourse and community.

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Pop Pacific: Stories from Around the World

Jayson M Chun And Patrick Patterson

The “Pop Pacific” describes how Asian and American popular cultures mix together, reflecting shared histories and connections. What we call “K-pop,” “J-pop,” and “Japanese anime” are national labels for this broader transnational culture that crosses borders. This cultural space shows how Asian and American media constantly influence each other through exchange and interaction. The result is new mixed styles, fan communities, and cultural practices that blend elements from both regions and beyond. The Pop Pacific emphasizes the hybrid nature of modern popular culture that cannot be easily separated into purely Asian or American categories.

Each essay is written by someone who loves K-pop, anime, or other forms of transnational pop culture. They share their personal experiences and show us what this popular culture means to them in their own communities.

Before reading these photo essays, let us tell you our backstories of how we became interested in this topic.

Jayson Makoto Chun, Honolulu, Hawai’i
I grew up in Hawai’i, so Japanese culture was all around me. As a kid, I learned J-pop songs from Japanese TV channels, but when I reached middle school, I thought they were too “nerdy” and switched to American pop music instead. It’s funny – now I love J-pop again. I first encountered anime and manga during my childhood visits to relatives in Japan. Back in Hawai’i, I watched anime on the local Japanese TV station, and read manga with a dictionary beside me. It was fun, especially when reading about a sexy space alien in a bikini from the 1978 manga classic *Urusei Yatsura*.

Fig. 1 (above left): Manga depicting the Pop Pacific by manga artist Kazuo Maekawa. He is known for his work on *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* and has conducted manga seminars in The Netherlands, United States, and Japan. He operates Manga Dojo Tokyo (<https://experiencetokyo-mirai.com>), a studio offering manga drawing instruction for visitors. For workshops, he can be contacted at alohamanga.contact@gmail.com.

Fig. 2 (above centre): Former K-pop idol Bekah from the group After School speaking to a class at the University of Hawai’i – West O’ahu. She spent an hour taking photos with the students. (Photo courtesy of Noah Padilla)

Fig. 3 (above right): Editor Jayson Chun’s office. Anime figurines and a bust of Jungkook from BTS on his bookshelf identify him as an anime and K-pop fan and help students feel comfortable entering his office.

My K-pop journey started in 1995 when I was a graduate student. During a layover in Korea, I heard Kim Gun Mo’s song “Wrongful Encounter” playing from a street vendor’s stall. A Korean friend bought me some tapes, and that’s how my interest in Korean pop music began. Decades later, I am a history professor who teaches East Asian popular culture. I’ve witnessed the worldwide spread of manga, anime, and K-pop. I watch anime every week and listen to K-pop while driving to work. I’m amazed at how much perceptions have changed.

Patrick Patterson, Portland, Oregon
I grew up and went to college in Western Oregon. Then went to visit a friend in Japan. I liked it so much I stayed for six years! My first year friends took me to a karaoke bar in a small country town. I could only sing English songs so I was limited to Elvis, Frank Sinatra, and The Beatles! I realized that the only way to sing cool songs at karaoke was to learn Japanese. So I did. Doing so also helped me make friends, and spurred an interest in Japanese culture. I decided to combine my love of history and my interest in Japan by studying Japanese history. I decided to write my dissertation on pre-World War II popular music.

I learned how to study popular music and to look into the music business in Japan and Asia. I watched K-pop surpass J-pop in global popularity. So I put my research skills to work, and learned as much as I could about Korean history and popular music as well. Today I listen to both K-pop and J-pop. I am lucky that my profession and my passion have converged.

How This Project Started

In 2023, we gave a presentation on the Pop Pacific at the Association for Asian Studies conference. Afterwards, Paramita Paul, the editor for *The Newsletter* of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), approached us. She offered us a blog (<https://blog.iias.asia/pop-pacific>) where we could publish our work in a casual yet academic manner. Our blog posts became a way for us to write about our hobbies while also creating a free and accessible resource for teachers, students, and fans around the world. All our posts are written with non-native English speakers and general audiences in mind. We hope you enjoy this collection of photo essays.

The Stories

Abena Asomiah from Togo, West Africa, explores what it’s like to watch Japanese anime when it’s been translated into French. She shows us the unique challenges and joys of experiencing Japanese stories through a French-speaking lens in Francophone Africa. Renu Deswal takes us inside the growing K-pop fan community in Delhi, India. She shares what she’s seen as K-pop has become more and more popular in her city and nationwide in India. Eshbekova Munisa Jabbor Kizi gives us a window into K-pop fandom in Uzbekistan, a majority Muslim nation. Her story shows how global pop culture finds its place in different religious and cultural contexts. Fine Lavoni Koloamatangi, who is Tongan and lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, shows us how Pacific Islander communities there connect with K-pop. Her essay reveals the special relationship between Pacific Island culture and Korean pop music.

Mylene T. De Guzman is both a K-pop fan and a geographer. She compares what it’s like to attend a K-pop concert in Seoul (where it all began) versus attending one in Manila. Her perspective shows us how the same music can feel different in different places. Jeon Seongkee looks at the Pop Pacific from Korea itself. He visits a jazz club in Incheon struggling to keep customers as K-pop and other popular music take over. His story reminds us that in Korea, cultural influences from abroad are constantly battling for public attention.

Why These Stories Matter

These essays teach us that popular culture doesn’t remain stationary. When K-pop travels from Korea to India, or when anime goes from Japan to Togo, it becomes something new in each place, shaped by local languages, religions, and fan communities. Each writer shows us their world through their own eyes, helping us understand how global culture becomes personal and local at the same time.

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Patrick Patterson is a professor at the University of Hawai’i – Honolulu Community College specializing in Japanese music and advertising history. He has written *Music and Words: Producing Popular Songs in Modern Japan, 1887–1952* (2018), on the beginnings of popular music in Japan. Email: ppatters@hawaii.edu

How Have You Never Heard of Lady Oscar?: A Snapshot of Growing up an Otaku in Francophone Africa

Abena Somiah



Fig. 1: The entrance to Librairie Bon Pasteur. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Fig. 2: A shelf of available mangas at Librairie Star. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Fig. 3: Shelf of mangas at the Lycée Français de Lomé's library. (Photo by the author, 2024)



My parents remember me sitting in front of the TV watching *Dragon Ball*, eagerly following Goku's adventures with his friends. I remember watching every episode, and of its sequel series, *Dragon Ball Z*, and not once did I find it strange for me, a young girl born and raised in West Africa, living in Francophone Togo, to be so fascinated by a Japanese animated series transmitted to me in French. Of course, my interest in manga and anime soon turned into keeping my television tuned to Mangas (the official channel for anime on my cable service, Canal+) all day. I watched almost every show they had on catalogue, then begged my parents to help me look for drawn manga volumes at the local bookstore on weekends after school. I familiarized myself with every manga genre I could get my hands on – from *shōjo* to *shōnen*.

During and after the pandemic, anime consumption seems to have hit another all-time high in terms of global viewership, with shows like *Hunter x Hunter*, *Demon Slayer*, and most recently, *Dan-Da-Dan* gaining huge followings on social media and attracting those who had never watched anime before. These viewers were turned into *otaku* (devoted anime and manga fans) thanks to the communities they had found through these shows. To me, this has made being a self-identifying *otaku* so much easier, accepted, and safe, at least compared to 10-15 years ago, where I could remember being jeered at by my peers for having a hobby that was too “strange” to be accepted – my “obsession” being with Japanese media rather than popular French animated shows like *Titeuf*. Now, it feels like almost everyone consumes or at least has interacted with Asian popular culture like K-Dramas, anime, K-pop, or C-dramas. And yet, despite it being easier to find people to talk about anime and manga with, I have never felt more estranged in my experiences with them. At first, I thought that this might be because I attend graduate school in Canada, and most of the country is Anglophone, unlike where I

grew up. But as I also spoke to my friends right across our border in the United States, the world's largest consumer of anime, I felt an unexplainable rift that went beyond the language barrier.¹

I usually felt this rift when talking with longtime fans, and we would discuss which anime/manga we thought were “classics” that everyone should watch. While I would recognize all the ones that they would recommend, I saw confusion on their faces as I told them mine such as *Lady Oscar*. I realized two things. First, there was a clear temporal gap in our favorites, as I would get recommended works from the early 2000s and 2010s, but my recommendations would be from the 90s and 80s. Second, consuming anime meant for the “French market” had left me with an altogether different experience than any of my peers that I would meet in North America. To be honest, due to me growing up in West Africa, even if I had met another French-speaking person in Canada, my experience as a Francophone African would still set me apart.

Surprisingly, not many are aware that France is one of the largest consumers of Japanese cultural products globally. While not at large as the US market, France's anime consumption stands out among European countries,² second only to the U.K, and is said to be the world's biggest manga importer as of 2023,³ with 55 percent of its local comic book distributions being of (translated) Japanese origin. There has been a long history of cultural exchange between France and Japan since at least the 19th century, but a surging interest in anime and manga in particular started in the late 1970s, with the arrival of *Goldorak* (known as *Grendizer* in Japan), an early mecha anime, on one of the country's three public TV stations.⁴ With *Goldorak*'s success, other major channels also decided to start importing more series for children's consumption, hooking young French minds onto *Saint Seiya* (translated into *Les Chevaliers du Zodiaque*) or even *The Rose of Versailles* (better known as *Lady Oscar* for French viewers). Today, Canal+, France's largest premium television service, has

several channels airing the latest episodes of your favorite anime, sometimes translated in French even before English – such as J-ONE, Game One, and my childhood favorite, *Mangas*.

Togo gained its independence from France in 1960, and like other past French colonial territories, conducts most of its operations in French. Lomé, the capital where I grew up, is home not only to lovely beaches, but also to pharmacies filled with French-imported medicines and bookstores containing titles freshly pressed from the biggest French print houses. Wouldn't it be funny to think of children reading the newest *One Piece* manga in French as a form of neocolonialism? Joking aside, it is quite interesting to see how France's large manga market and anime demand has been able to trickle down into its former colonies. Those who are fortunate enough to afford good cable in Lomé always turn to Canal+, the same way those who can afford to go into a good bookstore or go to a good school with a well-stocked library can buy or borrow the latest volume of *Naruto*. The African continent holds the largest number of Canal+ subscribers after France as of 2023, with more than 8 million watchers spread out over France's ex-colonies.⁵ This has led many African children to acquire much of the same cultural capital/referents as any person in metropolitan France would, and thus being able to engage in many of the same fandoms that would be popular in France. The first photo of this essay depicts one of the bookstores in which you can currently find manga distributed in Lomé – Librairie Bon Pasteur [Fig. 1].

The bookstore's selection is a bit scattered, located amongst children's books, and not large enough to occupy an entire shelf on its own [Fig. 2]. However, this is not the case everywhere.

When I was younger, another bookstore, named Librairie Star, had a far larger collection that I would browse through every other weekend. Today, Librairie Star is closed, making Bon Pasteur possibly the only major bookstore in the city. With Librairie Star gone, Bon Pasteur has had to think of

a way to keep up with the demand for the mangas people knew Star for. However, with new titles coming out every month, it is hard to know what people want just yet.

But for those who cannot buy a copy of their favorite manga every week, your next best bet would be your school library, which is where I would turn to more often growing up [Fig. 3].

Looking back at these well-worn tomes brings back memories of sitting in on weekly Manga Club gatherings with five other classmates. While that after-school club is no more, the same books we used to share and discuss still sit in the same room, ready to be opened by another young curious hand.

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- Notes
- <https://www.parrotanalytics.com/insights/the-global-content-marketplace-audience-demand-for-anime/#:~:text=By%20normalizing%20for%20the%20population,fourth%2C%20fifth%20and%20tenth%20respectively.>
 - <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/europe-anime-market-report#:~:text=Market%20Concentration%20&%20Characteristics,supportive%20platform%20for%20watching%20anime.>
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/mar/29/france-manga-anime-murakami-macron>
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/mar/29/france-manga-anime-murakami-macron>
 - <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/520210/vivendi-canal-abonnements>

K-pop in India: How the Hallyu Wave Swept through My Life and India

Renu Deswal

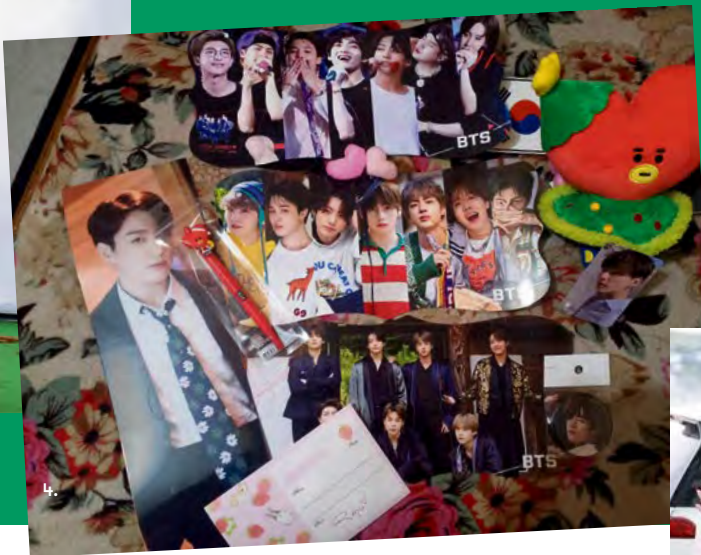


Fig. 1: Gathering of Indian K-Pop Fans At KCCI in Delhi Celebrating Birthdays Of BTS Members Jungkook And Naamjoon. (Photo by the author, 2019)

Fig. 2: K-pop dance by fan at graduation ceremony. (Photo by the author, 2017)

Fig. 3: The author, in Korea, posing with BT21 characters created by BTS members. (Photo by the author, 2022)

Fig. 4: K-pop merchandise distributed by fans at LG All India K-POP Contest. (Photo by the author, 2019)

Fig. 5: X:IN at airport in Philippines. Aria, from India, is in red, second from right. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user TV10, reprinted under Creative Commons license)

It started with a click. One moment, I was casually scrolling through YouTube, and the next, I was captivated by flashing lights, flawless choreography, and electrifying energy. The song? “Fantastic Baby” (2012) by BIGBANG. Before that, K-pop was just “Gangnam Style” to me – a viral moment, not a movement. But that one BIGBANG video changed everything. My YouTube recommendations soon filled with mesmerizing performances, live shows, and behind-the-scenes glimpses of idols. I was hooked.

Fast forward to today, and K-pop is no longer a hidden niche in India. It has transformed the way we consume music, fashion, and even language. Fan clubs thrive, dance workshops sell out, and Korean phrases slip into daily conversations. K-pop is everywhere – and growing faster than ever.

From underground to mainstream: K-pop’s early days in India

Back in the early 2010s, being a K-pop fan in India felt like belonging to a secret club. There were no concerts, no official merchandise sales, and certainly no K-pop songs playing in public spaces. If you wanted an album, you had to import it from Korea, pay hefty shipping fees, and wait weeks for delivery.

The community, however, was relentless. Fans gathered in Facebook groups, exchanged translations on Tumblr, and streamed performances from Korean TV shows like *M Countdown* and *Inkigayo*. The Korean Cultural Centre India (KCCI) in Delhi became a hub for passionate fans, organizing small events and dance competitions. Even without mainstream recognition, K-pop found a devoted audience.

The big bang: How K-pop exploded in India

Then came BTS.

By 2020, the global BTS phenomenon had taken India by storm. Indian media started covering K-pop, streaming numbers skyrocketed, and even those unfamiliar with the genre found themselves asking, “Who are these BTS blokes?”

But BTS wasn’t the only group making waves. BLACKPINK, EXO, SEVENTEEN, TWICE, STRAY KIDS, and NCT built formidable fanbases as well. Social media played a massive role – Indian fans trended hashtags, held online streaming parties, and contributed significantly to global music charts.

And then, events happened that helped spread K-pop’s growth in India. Dance competitions featuring K-pop routines gained national recognition, with Indian teams competing in Korea’s K-pop World Festival. In 2019, K-pop groups VAV, M.O.N.T, and IN2IT (now rebranded as Skye) became some of the first K-pop groups to perform in India in cities like New Delhi and Imphal. Accompanying the rise of K-pop, official merchandise became widely available, no longer a rarity in niche stores. In 2024, the K-Town Festival in Mumbai welcomed EXO’s Chen & Xiumin, GOT7’s BamBam, and B.I (formerly of IKON), proving India was now on the K-pop map.

K-pop in Daily Life in India

India is incredibly diverse, and each region has its own unique culture and identity. Despite its nationwide reach, K-pop’s strongest fanbase is mainly concentrated in urban, middle-class India. Metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Chennai lead the fandom, while the Northeastern states – culturally closer to Korea – embraced K-pop much earlier. But it is now spreading across the country.



Today, K-pop is not just an obsession for a niche group; it’s part of everyday Indian culture. Dance Studios have proliferated, and many now offer K-pop choreography classes featuring routines from groups like ITZY and NewJeans. Even Korean beauty and fashion trends have filtered in. K-beauty brands like Innisfree and Laneige are popular, and Korean fashion trends dominate Indian users’ Instagram accounts. K-pop has also promoted language learning, as more Indians than ever are studying Korean, fueling the rise of language institutes and mobile apps like Duolingo.

Due to the growth of streaming culture, K-dramas like *Crash Landing on You* (2019) and *Vincenzo* (2021) rank among India’s top-streamed shows. In the realm of music, according to a 2023 survey by Spotify India, K-pop listenership grew by 300% in five years, with BTS, BLACKPINK, and EXO being the most streamed artists. Google Trends also shows a rise in K-pop searches, particularly in major cities.

K-pop is Here to Stay in India.

For me, K-pop started as a passing interest but evolved into a lifelong passion. It’s not just about the music. It’s about the stories, the community, and the connections it fosters across borders. Once a niche interest, K-pop is now mainstream. In India’s ever-expanding cultural landscape, it has carved out a permanent place, proving that music truly has no language barrier. Whether you’re a casual listener or a die-hard stan, one thing is clear: this is just the beginning of India’s K-pop journey.

The future looks even brighter. There will be more concerts, and I wonder: will BTS, BLACKPINK, or SEVENTEEN finally perform in India? There will also be more Indian K-pop trainees. Aria, an Indian idol, made her debut in X:IN, marking a significant milestone as one of the first Indian members in a K-pop group. Her presence has sparked discussions about the potential for more Indian idols to follow in her footsteps. As global music scenes continue to blend, the question arises: could we soon see more Indian talent joining the K-pop industry? Moreover, with cultural crossovers on the rise, could Bollywood and K-pop collaborate in the near future? As the world becomes more interconnected, an Indo-Korean music partnership seems not only possible but inevitable, offering exciting possibilities for both industries.

Are you ready for the next wave?

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Notes

1 <https://www.nme.com/news/music/streams-of-k-pop-music-jump-over-300-per-cent-in-five-years-spotify-3800864>

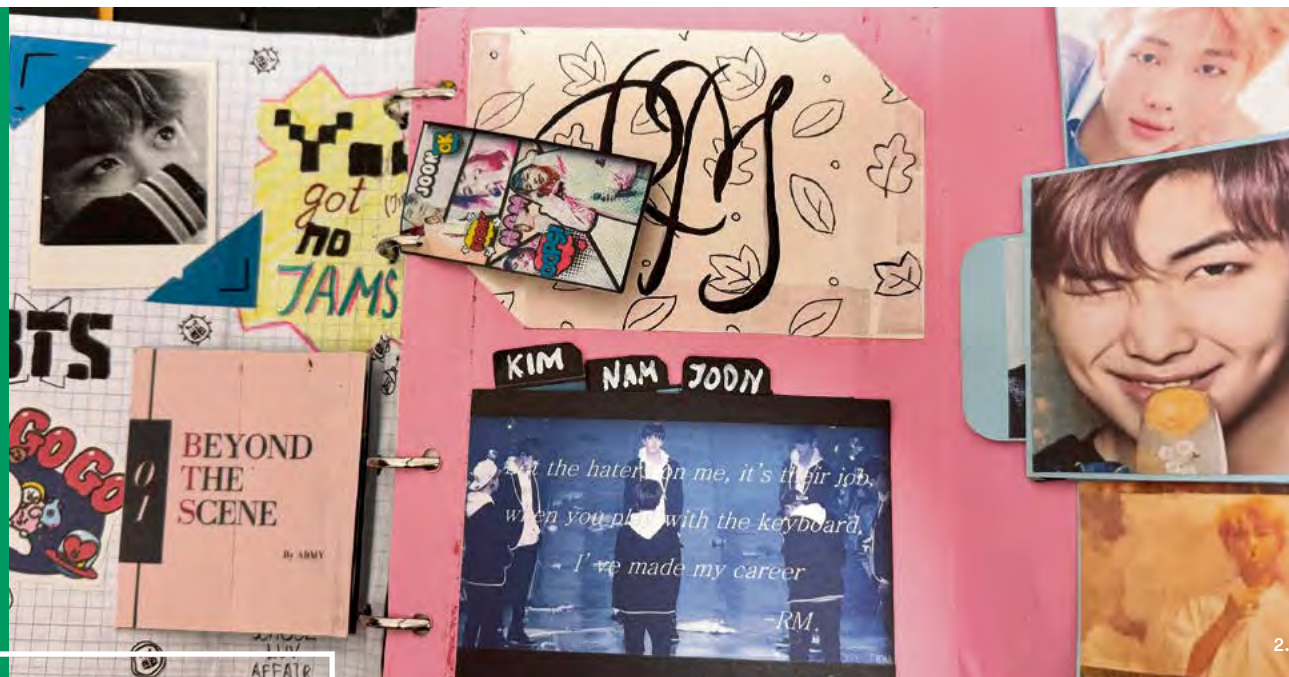
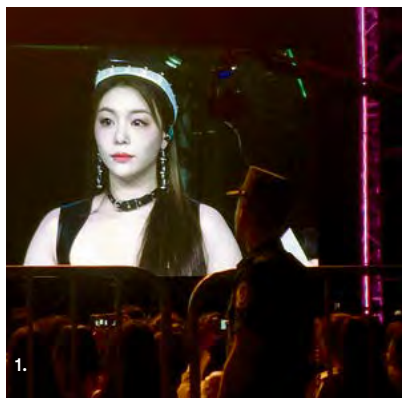


Fig. 1: Ailee wearing Uzbek headwear at 2022 Mokkoji Korea in Uzbekistan. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2022)

Fig. 2: Scrapbook made by the author. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2018)

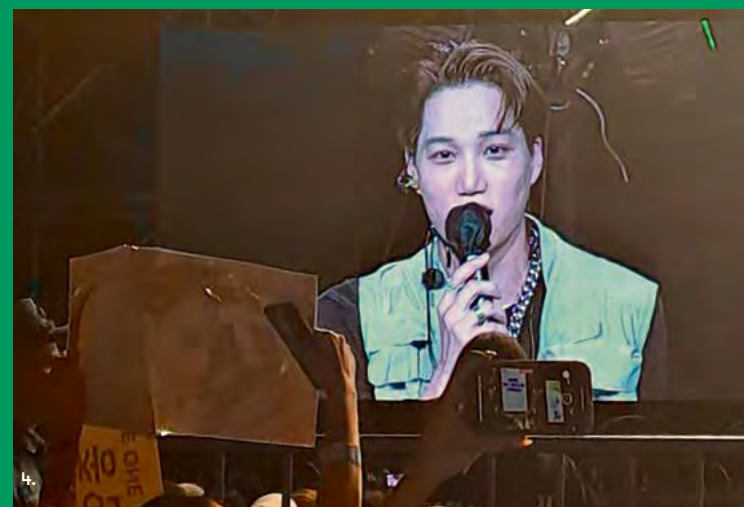
Fig. 3: K-pop World Festival. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2024)

Fig. 4: Kai giving an interview at 2022 Mokkoji Korea in Uzbekistan. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2022)

Fig. 5: Ailee performing at 2022 Mokkoji Korea in Uzbekistan. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2022)

K-pop in Distance: An Uzbek Fan's Perspective

Eshbekova Munisa Jabbor Kizi



I clearly remember my first introduction to K-pop. My older sister and cousin always watched videos on a computer and giggled while discussing them. As a 12-year-old girl who wanted to be included, I joined their video watching. In this particular instance, they were watching “Ring Ding Dong” (2009) by Korean boyband SHINee. The handsome group members and their catchy songs immediately got me interested in K-pop. I subsequently came across other groups such as BigBang, EXO, 2NE1, Got7, BTS, and Blackpink. K-pop idols exude charisma and confidence on stage, but seeing them on variety shows – where they are funny, clumsy, and playful – is truly fascinating. It is like witnessing two sides of the same person, which makes them even more surprising and endearing. At this point, it was impossible for me not to fall in love.

Uzbekistan is a nation in Central Asia with a population of over 37 million people. In the early 2010s, K-pop struggled to gain popularity there. One rarely came across another K-pop fan in those days, and the idea of seeing idols in real life was unimaginable. Many Uzbeks found K-pop unappealing. Uzbekistan is 94 percent Muslim, and K-pop culture clashed with the more conservative Uzbek culture. I remember being criticized for listening to Korean artists because they contradicted community social norms. For example, masculinity in Uzbek culture differs from K-pop. At least back then, male K-pop stars were more feminine with slim figures and youthful looks, while in Uzbekistan, men are expected to adhere to more traditional ideas of masculinity and maturity. Probably, negative criticism made the youth turn to K-pop as a way of expressing one's individuality and of rebelling against traditional expectations.

This article narrates how fans experience K-pop in a country usually excluded from the agendas and concert tours of K-pop artists.

K-pop trends first reached Uzbekistan through Tashkent, the country's capital city and the most populous city in Central Asia. Yet, even there I struggled to access K-pop merchandise. So whenever I saw any product related to Korean boy bands, I would immediately buy it. It must have been more challenging for fans in other regions of Uzbekistan. Because such products were rarely in stock, I used to make my own K-pop merchandise like notebooks, stickers, or posters. I even made a BTS-themed scrapbook [Fig. 2].

However, in the next couple of years, K-pop started to gain a following among mostly Uzbek girls. There were more online or physical shops that sold *Hallyu* (“Korean Wave”) products, and there were also more K-pop events. Since 2018, I have been going to the annual K-pop World Festival [Fig. 3], a competition where *Hallyu* fans are invited to South Korea after going through preliminary rounds in their home countries by performing K-pop songs.

Fan groups organize meetings, parties, and charity events to celebrate their favorite artists' birthdays. They have a good time singing along to popular songs, doing random dance challenges, and playing games. Moreover, the Palace of Korean Culture and Arts in Uzbekistan annually holds Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving Day), where visitors can enjoy Korean food, traditional and modern performances, and dance battles. The palace opened in 2019 as a symbol of friendship and respect for ethnic Koreans in Uzbekistan. The event has many visitors, especially fans of Korean pop culture.

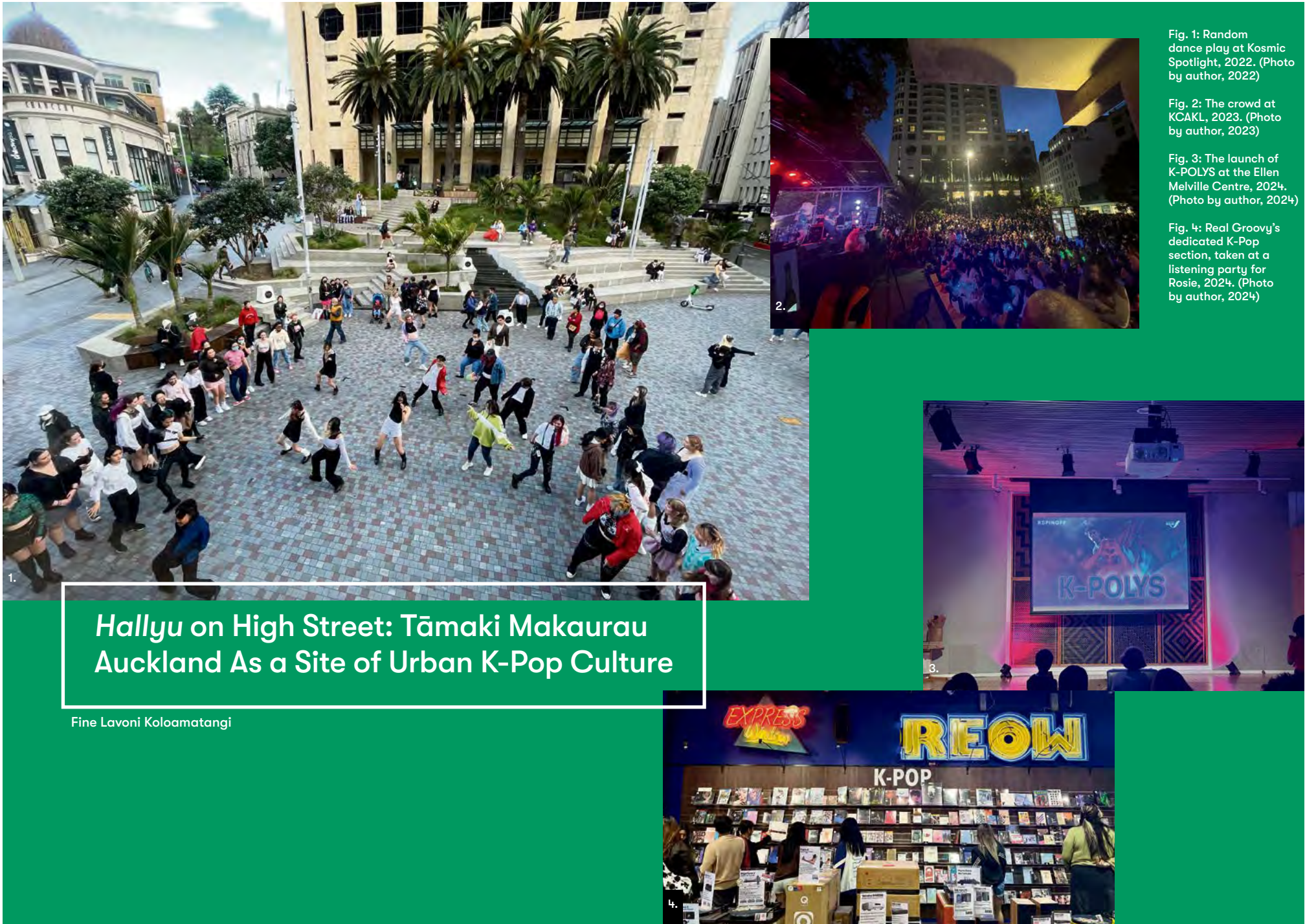
One of the biggest events held in Uzbekistan was the three-day Mokkoji Korea 2022 [Figs. 4–5], a global festival that travels around the world and exhibits Korean lifestyle and culture. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Korea hosts the event, and it is supervised by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural



Exchange (KOFICE). Uzbekistan fans could experience a real K-pop concert for the first time with the participation of Kai from EXO, Ailee, and the boyband Fable. Besides the concert, there was a high-five event and an interview with the stars. I received positive reactions as the first project of this kind. The festival provided fans with activities such as K-beauty and cooking classes, wearing a Korean school uniform or *Hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing), sampling K-snacks, or engaging in traditional games. The event visitors were mostly young females, although there were people of all ages. The unique taste of Korean cuisine, elegant costumes, and well-produced songs made me realize I love Korean culture, and it was not as unreachable as I thought. Now I am living in Korea as an exchange student, experiencing Korean culture firsthand and living my 20s as I once dreamt. I feel my interest in the Korean Wave had a big influence on my life decisions. For me and many fans, K-pop is more than a pastime: it is an inspiration. Many fans develop new interests

or ambitions thanks to their favorite artists. Some get into dancing, singing, or playing an instrument, and many decide to learn Korean. Moreover, idols express their feelings openly about mental health, hardships, and self-love through music, which many Uzbek fans find relatable. Such fans feel comforted knowing they are not the only ones going through hardship and that it is normal to feel different kinds of emotions. They get motivated witnessing their favorite artists' hard work pay off, and they develop a strong desire to face challenges in pursuit of their ambitions. Many people judge K-pop fans for wasting time and money over childish pursuits, but they fail to realize those ‘crazy’ fans have dreams to achieve something thanks to their passion.

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Hallyu on High Street: Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland As a Site of Urban K-Pop Culture

Fine Lavoni Koloamatangi

In Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland’s city centre lies the High Street district, well-known for its cafes, restaurants, boutiques, and bookstores. It is also home to Auckland’s unofficial Koreatown, although those living in Takapuna or Rosedale may beg to differ! Eateries selling Korean food, coffee, and desserts have proliferated in recent years, alongside Korean beauty outlets, photobooths, and *noraebang* (singing rooms). The High Street district and surrounding midtown have become manifestations of the *Hallyu Wave* worldwide.

The 2023 Census shows that around one-third of Aotearoa New Zealand’s population lives in Tāmaki Makaurau.¹ The city is also Aotearoa’s most multicultural, with large numbers of Asian, Pacific, and Indigenous Māori peoples throughout the region. As a K-Pop fan of Tongan descent, born and raised in Auckland and researching Pacific K-Pop fans, I have observed firsthand how changing demographics have impacted engagement with K-pop in the city.

The city centre embodies the intersection between location and demographics. On one side of the High Street district, towards Rangipuke Albert Park, are two universities, the University of Auckland and AUT University, which both boast sizeable student communities. These institutions help to increase the city centre’s daytime population significantly.² The area is therefore associated with young people, which is where the K-Pop dance scene comes in, as both universities currently have Korean and K-Pop student clubs.

In September 2022, *Kosmic Spotlight*, a performing arts charity showcase concert, took place at the district’s Ellen Melville Centre. This event resulted from a collaboration between three clubs: K-POP Planet, Auckland University Dance Association from the University of Auckland, and NZKDA, a group who have nurtured

a lively K-Pop dance community. All three groups comprise youth from different ethnic backgrounds including Asian, Māori, Pacific, and Pākehā (European New Zealander). The concert featured performances and included a segment of the popular ‘random dance play’ [Fig.1].³

KCAKL was held at the Ellen Melville Centre in March 2023 as the culminating event of a weeklong celebration of Korean culture. The area was packed, with the audience enthusiastically supporting performances by Paul Kim, AleXa, and Peakaboy [Fig. 2].

Less than a year later, *K-POLYS*, a documentary about the journeys of three Pacific K-Pop fans in Aotearoa,⁴ was also launched at the Centre [Fig. 3].

Although each of these events warrants individual consideration, their shared location enables a strong collective significance. The events represent localised instances of transnational *Hallyu* culture, and the High Street district has become an area where these localised instances converge and transpire.

Despite the concentration of *Hallyu*-related events in the High Street district, there has been diffusion to other precincts. High Street is bordered to the south by Victoria Street, where Real Groovy sits at its western end. Opened in 1981, it is Aotearoa’s largest supplier of new and used music. The store has a dedicated K-Pop section, which sports a range of old and new releases [Fig. 4].

In December 2024, Real Groovy and Warner Music New Zealand hosted a listening party celebrating the release of *Rosie*, BLACKPINK member Rosé’s album. The event was well attended, and although Rosé’s album was marketed as mainstream pop, most of the attendees were K-Pop fans – the photocards in phones or hanging from bags were a give-away! There was a subtle interplay of location and demographics, where local time zone

privileges were taken advantage of – attendees were technically the first fans in the world to hear the album. Moreover, local connections were highlighted: although she grew up in Australia, Rosé was born in Aotearoa, so it felt like we were listening to the musical output of a fellow Kiwi, albeit one who turned into a global superstar.

As part of an earlier generation of fans who mainly experienced K-Pop and *Hallyu* content online (necessitated in large part by Aotearoa’s geographical isolation), attending these events was surreal. Until recently, transnational popular culture could only be experienced intermittently, during concerts and niche events such as *Armageddon*, New Zealand’s largest annual pop culture convention, or in a small section of a novelty gift store tucked away in an old shopping arcade. Today, transnational popular culture is more visible in Tāmaki Makaurau, with K-Pop fan groups dancing around the city centre.

The increased visibility of transnational popular culture correlates with the increased visibility of migrant communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. But this is occurring amidst heightened awareness of the importance of honouring Māori as *tāngata whenua* (Indigenous; lit. “people of the land”). Central to this awareness is *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, a founding document of Aotearoa which, although viewed as a formal agreement between Māori and the British Crown establishing a bicultural framework of engagement, extends to encompass the different peoples who now call the country home. A key aspiration of *Te Tiriti*, underpinned by Māori values such as *manaakitanga* (hospitality; generosity; care for others) and *whanaungatanga* (relationship; kinship), is that Aotearoa would become a place where all communities could thrive. *Tāngata tiriti* (non-Māori who reside in Aotearoa) therefore have a duty to uphold *Te Tiriti* and, in light of the Crown’s failure

to honour their treaty obligations, support Māori in their fight for *tinio rangatiratanga* (sovereignty). Any recognition or appreciation of the country’s increasing diversity and multiculturalism needs to be premised with these points.

The High Street district growing into a transnational cultural hub is a prime example of the multifaceted changes occurring in Aotearoa. Its Asian stores, as well as the cultural events, add vitality and inject new meaning into the Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland urban landscape, making it a more authentic reflection of a diverse and vibrant society.

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Notes

- 1 Stats NZ. “2023 Census national and regional data.” Accessed February 3, 2025. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/infographics/2023-census-national-and-regional-data/#auckland>
- 2 Heart of the City Auckland. “City demographics.” Accessed February 3, 2025. <https://www.heartcity.co.nz/city-centre/results-and-statistics/city-demographics>
- 3 RDP is a game where participants form a large circle and K-Pop song choruses are played in succession. Anyone who knows the associated choreography runs into the middle of the circle to perform the dance.
- 4 The Spinoff. “Meet three Pacific K-Pop fans | K-POLYS | The Spinoff.” Documentary. Posted March 19, 2024. YouTube, 18:51. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M58OcY1xayg>



Fig. 1. Author's view at MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)

Fig. 2: The author (right) and her family in MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)

Fig. 3. MAMAMOO in MyCon Manila. (Photo courtesy of the author, 2023)



It took me a while to willingly accept that I, at 40, am a K-pop fan. I am fairly new to K-pop, only discovering the genre's allure and vibrant culture at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The household proceeded to be filled with K-pop beats, and my bedroom became a sacred place where family and friends gathered to watch BLACKPINK's online concert "The Show" in 2021, along with 280,000 others worldwide.¹ I can still recall the bouts of anxiety that I felt that day, praying that Metro Manila's spotty Internet connection would not fail during the concert.

Streaming platforms became the *de facto* form of leisure for everyone in my household, and my son repeatedly played Dingo's "Killing Voice" videos on YouTube, which showcase live singing, a much-debated issue within the K-pop industry. It was during one of these watch sessions that I chanced upon a video featuring MAMAMOO. To say that I was blown away by the performance would be a huge understatement. I sat in complete awe as these four women – Moonbyul, Solar, Wheein, and Hwasa – sang their greatest hits in a medley. Atypical for a K-pop performance, there were no back-up dancers or complicated choreographies, which allowed the viewers to focus on what mattered most: their voices. I quickly went down the MAMAMOO rabbit hole, consuming every video available on YouTube.

My fixation with MAMAMOO eventually led to the decision to pursue graduate studies in South Korea, and to immerse myself in the culture that birthed K-pop. By now, I have been to multiple MAMAMOO concerts, festivals, and musicals in Seoul,

Manila, and Seattle. Attending concerts in various countries gave me a unique perspective and allowed me to reflect on the differences and similarities of the K-pop fandom experience. MAMAMOO launched their MyCon World Tour with MyCon Seoul held across three concert dates from November 18-20, 2022. After MyCon Seoul, the group went to perform in eight cities across Asia (Tokyo, Hong Kong, Taipei, Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila) and nine cities in the United States (New York, Baltimore, Atlanta, Nashville, Fort Worth, Chicago, Glendale, Oakland, and Los Angeles. MyCon Seoul served as my baptism of fire into the MAMAMOO fandom. As a "baby moo," waiting for the online queue to finally let me enter the site to buy the ticket was nerve-racking, but I eventually successfully snagged a standing ticket that allowed me to see MAMAMOO up close. Ticketing for MyCon Manila was similarly stressful and was very quickly sold out. Thankfully, due to popular demand, more seats were added, and I was eventually able to purchase tickets for my family and me.

Queueing was painfully present at both concerts, but despite the long wait, fellow fans were organized and patient. To this day, I could still recall the tiny bursts of excitement that I felt every time the line moved.

In terms of production, K-pop concerts in Seoul are usually grander than overseas concerts. MyCon Seoul featured a live band during the concert, noticeably absent in the other MyCon stops.

As a first-time K-pop concert attendee, I was overwhelmed by the massive LED

screens, synchronized lightsticks, and the audience's disciplined fan chants – all of which were standard fare in the South Korean concert scene. For MyCon Manila, we arrived at the venue four hours before the concert started, and even then, there were already a lot of people around Araneta Coliseum. Several "moos" were distributing free fan-made merchandise, and there were a few individuals attempting to resell tickets at a much higher price. It was also the first time that I became aware of "Team Labas" – literally meaning "Team Outside," which refers to fans unable to secure a ticket. Basically, Team Labas stays around the arena and jams to the live music coming from the concert. Araneta Coliseum is popular among Team Labas, owing to its acoustics, which allow people outside to still hear the performances clearly. Team Labas members are usually well-organized and connected on social media, with some organizers also providing merch and, in some cases, even free tickets to the concert from donations.

Having already attended MyCon Seoul, I was familiar with the concert set list, but the concert experience in MyCon Manila was different from the one in South Korea. The LED screen was tiny in Manila, with those in cheaper seats barely able to see anything. The lightsticks were also unsynchronized, but it was a delight to see fans change the color of their lightsticks (most of them unofficial) to match the songs. The crowd was not just a group of passive spectators – we were active participants in the over three-hour collective musical experience. Filipino fans are renowned for their cheers and for singing entire songs, a stark difference from

the audience that I saw in Seoul, where fans mostly did chants. Hearing the entire stadium singing (mostly) mispronounced Korean lyrics to my favorite MAMAMOO songs was such an emotional experience. I could not help but shed tears several times during the show.

The fact that I was able to enjoy it with my family made the concert all the more emotional, and while I definitely had better seats in MyCon Seoul, watching a K-pop concert in my home country felt like a fitting homecoming. It represented a culmination of my transnational K-pop journey, which started in my bedroom in Manila, took me to multiple concert venues in Seoul, and then finally brought me back to my home city in the Philippines.

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Notes

1 Dong, Sun-hwa (2021, February 01). BLACKPINK's "THE SHOW" draws 280,000 viewers. *The Korea Times*. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20210201/blackpinks-the-show-draws-280000-viewers>

The Bottom Line of Jazz in Korea

Jeon Seongkee



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2.



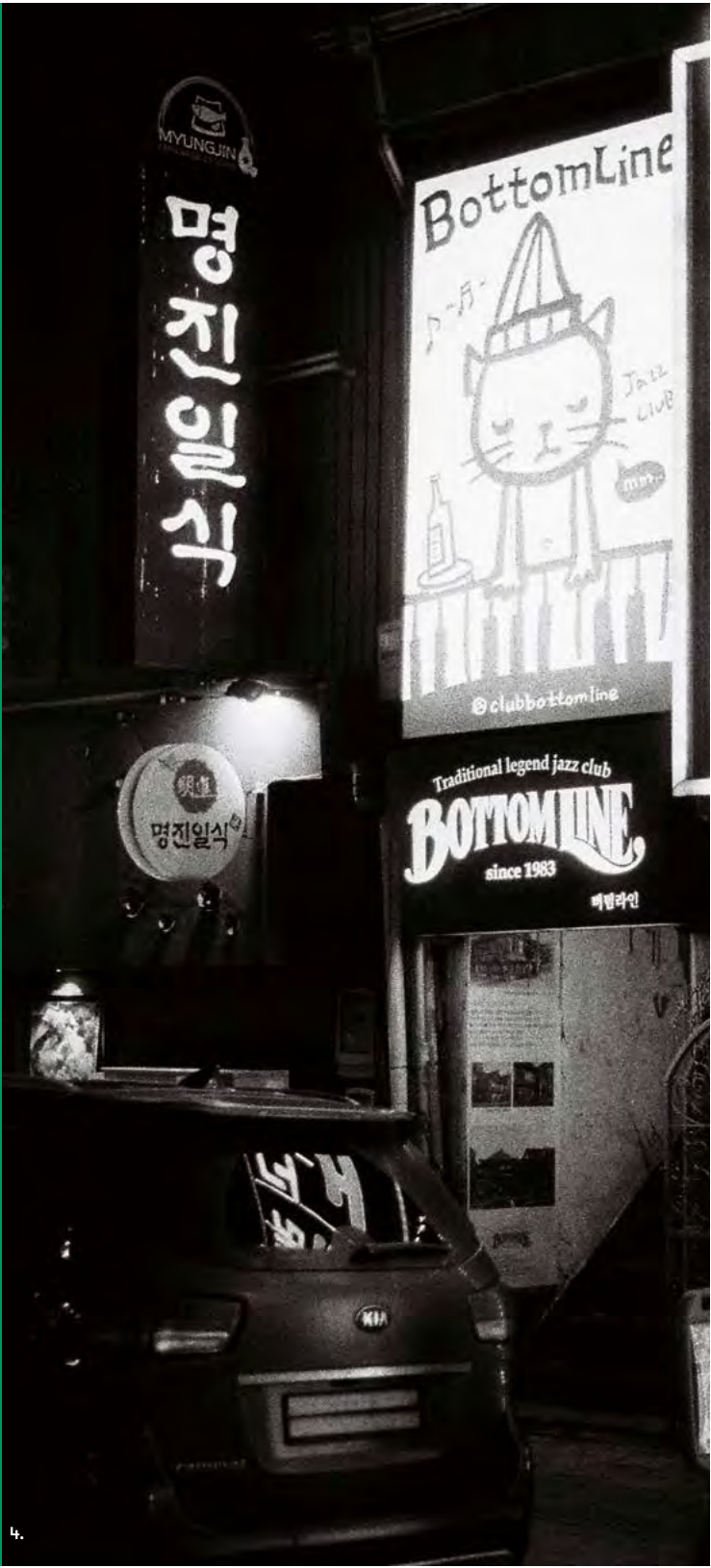
3.

Fig 1: Jazz pianist
in Moon Stone Band.
(Photo courtesy of
Kim Hyoungmin, 2025)

Fig 2: Moon Stone
Band. (Photo courtesy
of Moon Stone Band,
2025)

Fig 3: The owner
of Bottomline, Hur
Jungsun, with her
vinyl collection.
(Photo courtesy of
Hur Jungsun, 2025)

Fig 4: The entrance of
jazz venue 'Bottomline'
located in the heart of
old Incheon. (Photo by
Jeon Seongkee, 2025)



4.

Bottomline is Incheon's oldest jazz venue, and it has been running for over 40 years in Shinpo area. It was a shivering winter day when I visited Shinpo, one of many neighbourhoods where one can be immersed in the scenery of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Korea amongst the concrete jungle of vertical urban communities. Starting with Chinatown, which formed in the 1880s, you can see a glimpse of the history of transnational Incheon, including architecture from China, Japan, and the West dating to the 19th century, when the area became an international port city opened to trade following the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876).

It was a short walk to Bottomline from Sinpo station. Just like many other shops and offices on this street, the jazz venue was housed in a repurposed Japanese colonial-era wooden commercial building built over 100 years ago. As I entered the venue, a hand-drawn portrait of Miles Davis on the stage wall caught my attention. While mesmerised by Bottomline's vibe, I was pleasantly surprised by hearing such passionately played live music in this old hidden corner of Incheon. Moon Stone Band took the stage. Starting with a powerful performance of "Puttin' on the Ritz" and then transitioning to a mellow tempo with "My One and Only Love," the band moved on to a jazz interpretation of Pharrell Williams' hit

song "Happy". All my doubts about jazz in my local town evaporated, and I felt pure joy and excitement.

After the performance, I chatted with Hur Jungsun, the owner of the venue for the past 30 years. She has collected thousands of vinyl records and CDs of musicians from all around the world. Hur lost count of her collection long ago, as she saw no point in memorising how many items there are. During our conversation, many customers approached her and requested their favourite songs. She simply turned around and found the song straight from her massive record collection. She didn't take time to recognise the requested songs and find them amongst the thousands of albums, no matter the song's language or where the song is from.

Hur, as a lifetime Incheoner, described herself a regular customer of Bottomline since her early 20s. In the 1980s and 1990s music venues with DJs packed the streets of Korea, and Hur was amongst the many music enthusiasts. Korea was coming out of the shadow of the anti-communist dictatorship and its military censorship, and music of that era reflected the liberalisation of Korean society and the heavy influence of American culture. In 1995, Hur took over the Bottomline music bar business from the previous owner.

The venue gradually grew throughout decades and hosted the first generation of post-dictatorship Korean jazz musicians. It also has been inviting talented musicians

from abroad, regardless of genre, such as rock bands and artists who play traditional Korean music. Bottomline used to be a mainstream club where people could enjoy music from their favourite DJs and occasional live performances, and Hur built a stage and the venue hosted gigs once a month. Gradually, the frequency of live performances increased to two or three per week. Retro culture became a big trend in late 2010s, and Hur hoped to have daily live performances like other famous venues in Seoul. During those days, the number of young audiences (i.e., 20s and early 30s) increased, occupying more than half and sometimes even 70 per cent of all seats.

However, Hur noted that jazz has fallen on hard times in Korea recently. She emphasised the difficulty of running a jazz club due to the lack of awareness of jazz music and to general economic difficulties, especially since the COVID pandemic. She has also experienced a refund request when audience's high level of expectation was not satisfied. Running a jazz venue in an environment where trends change extremely fast was never easy, especially in Korea. Sinpo had been a street of youth and culture, as the area was so prosperous that it was called Myeongdong of Incheon, a reference to one of the busiest Seoul shopping districts that many foreigners visit. Recently, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Sinpo has gradually transformed into a nondescript commercial area driven by franchise restaurants.

Hur expressed her concerns about the future of Bottomline – namely, that the retro trend amongst young generations has come to an end with the economic downturn, and

that young consumers now tend to follow the top-selling and trendiest entertainment genres, such as K-pop or hip-hop. The prominence of these genres reflects broader global music trends, and jazz shows less popularity than even trot, which evolved from the colonial era and has seen a recent resurgence among both older and younger generations. Ironically, trot bears heavy influence from the early 1920s "jazz age" in Korea. But that is another story and shall be told another time.

The Korean government has designated Bottomline, a small 30-year-old local business, as a "100-year store", and the local government has designated it as an "Incheon Heritage Store." Therefore, the club became eligible for government financial support. However, Hur sadly stated that government support covered just enough money to change the storefront sign, and there has not been any further support yet.

I encourage people to visit Bottomline. I discovered a feast for the eyes and ears, but most of all, what left the strongest impression was meeting an individual dedicated to preserving this piece of tradition: the bottom line of jazz in Korea.

Jazz Club Bottomline can also be found on YouTube www.youtube.com/@bottomline1983 and Instagram [@jazzclubbottomline](https://www.instagram.com/jazzclubbottomline)

Jeon Seongkee received his MA in Cross-Cultural Communication at Newcastle University, UK. He documents the emergence and imagination of a borderless society on analogue films. Email: jeonseongkee@hotmail.com Instagram: [jsskee](https://www.instagram.com/jsskee).



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moussons

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Social Science Research on Southeast Asia
Recherche en sciences humaines sur l’Asie du Sud-Est

LOCAL LANGUAGES AN EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, NICOLAS SALEM-GERVAIS & JÉRÔME SAMUEL, EDS

Southeast Asia is a region characterized by linguistic diversity. Questions relating to local languages are therefore particularly acute, especially in terms of their place in education. The stakes involved in these school language policy choices are crucial: preservation of linguistic diversity, access to education, adherence to national identities. After an introduction, this issue of *Moussons* features contributions from six countries—Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines and Singapore—through which readers can enrich their understanding of the issues underlying school language policies.

Introduction

Nicolas Salem-Gervais, Local Languages and Education in Southeast Asia. Framing the Special Issue

Articles

Catherine Scheer, Cambodia, a Model of Multilingual Education? Past and Present Perspectives on Teaching Indigenous Minority Languages in a Khmer Nation

Jérôme Samuel, Education and Regional Languages in Indonesia: Between Necessity, Indifference and Regret

Souvannxay Phetchanpheng, & Marieke Charlet Notes on the Use of Ethnic Minority Languages in Lao PDR Classrooms

Nicolas Salem-Gervais, Amber Spreelung, Hawng Tsai & Pau Sian Lian, Local Languages and Education Amidst Conflict and Federal Aspirations in Myanmar

Maria Alicia Bustos-Orosa, & Lorraine Pe Symaco, Language Policy in the Philippines: The Ongoing Narrative of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

Gilles Forlot, When the Local Confronts the Global in Language-in-Education Policies: The Case of Singapore

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Research and field note

Adam Wilson *et al.*, From Linguistic Landscapes to Linguistic soundscapes: Exploring Linguistic Diversity through Collaborative Fieldwork in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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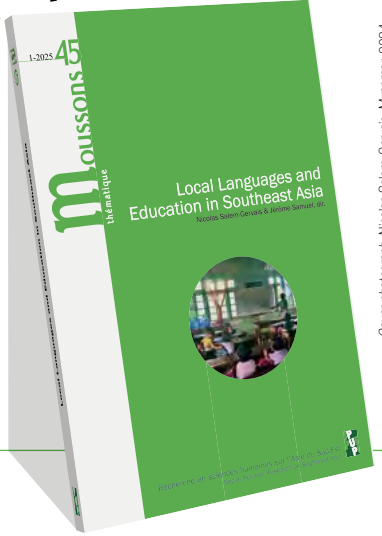
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Reviews

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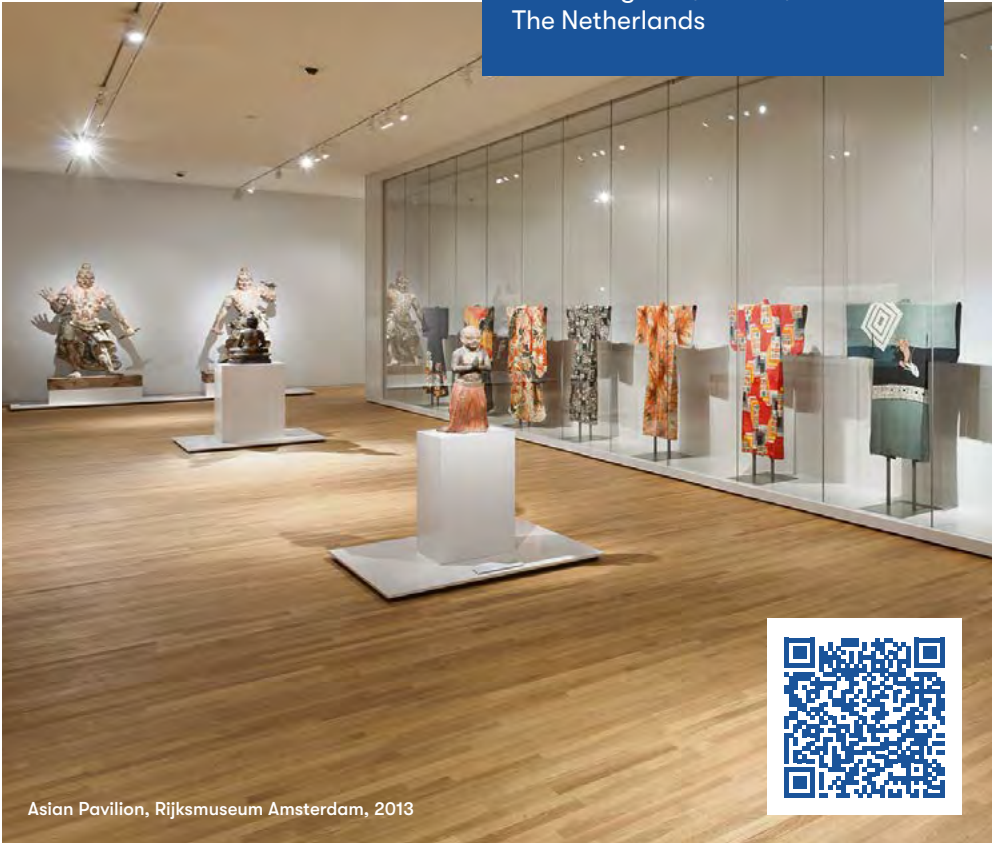
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Seminar:
New Perspectives
on the Presentation
of Japanese Art II

Date
Thursday, December 11, 2025
Time
10:00 – 16:45
Location
Museum De Lakenhal, Auditorium,
Oude Singel 32, Leiden,
The Netherlands



Asian Pavilion, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 2013

This December, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the Heinz Kaempfer Fund (HKF) are proud to present the second in a biennial series of seminars on Japanese Art. *New Perspectives on the Presentation of Japanese Art II* aims to demonstrate that the study of Japanese art is very much alive and part of a global discussion. The immense changes currently taking place in the attitudes and outlooks of scholars, curators, critics, policymakers, and those involved in the art market, reverberate within the study of Japanese art and affect the way in which Japanese art is displayed. The *New Perspectives* series shows that new narratives and challenges abound.

Confirmed speakers

Dr. Rosina Buckland (British Museum) *Staging the Samurai*
Dr. Alexander Hofmann (Asian Art Museum, Humboldt Forum Berlin) *To Facilitate Encounters and Inspire Questions: Arts of Japan at the Asian Art Museum in Berlin*
Dr. Mari Nakamura (Tunghai University, Taiwan) *Zen and Sustainability: MUJI's Approach to Minimalist Living and Design*
Dr. Ilona Bausch (Institute for East Asian Art History, Heidelberg University) *Shells and Shamans: Japanese Archaeology and the Sea*
Menno Fitski, MA (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) *Rethinking Challenges: Evaluating the Japanese Display at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*

Programme and Abstracts:

For the programme and abstracts, please see the IIAS-website here: <https://www.iias.asia/events/new-perspectives-presentation-japanese-art-ii>

Registration required

New Perspectives on the Presentation of Japanese Art II will take place on Thursday December 11, 2025 at Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, The Netherlands. Attendance is free of charge, and all are welcome. As seating is limited, please register on the IIAS website by clicking on the link below: <https://www.iias.asia/events/new-perspectives-presentation-japanese-art-ii>

Registration will close on Monday, Dec 1, 2025, 23:59h Amsterdam Time (CET). Please note that this is an **IN-PERSON** event on location only. It will NOT be streamed or recorded.

Organisation

This seminar is jointly organised by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the Heinz Kaempfer Fund (HKF)

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River Revitalization in Nairobi



One and a half years after devastating floods wiped out large stretches of riverside settlements along the Ngong River in Mukuru and Kayaba, Nairobi, the newly formed Ngong River Planning Consortium (RCN), together with the River Cities Network (RCN), IIAS, and the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET), gathered 15 experts in river revitalization from all over the world in Mukuru for an in-situ engagement project from 7-14 September 2025. The objective of the workshop was to help the Consortium foster learning across disciplines and sectors and to provide an opportunity to analyze and critique post-flooding river revitalization designs, while developing a multi-scalar framework for river basin planning.

The work took place at three levels. At the micro level, workshop participants engaged directly with Mukuru residents to integrate community-driven needs and artistic expressions into landscape designs, fostering site-specific and culturally grounded interventions. At the meso level, the focus shifted to neighborhood-scale engagement, where participants collaborated with communities to address future flooding challenges and to propose interventions to enhance the overall quality of the built and natural environment. At the macro level, the partners are contributing to the development of a planning framework for the broader Ngong river basin, synthesizing insights across scales to inform long-term, integrated strategies for riparian management.

The collaboration is part of an ongoing process. The RCN and its partners are committed to support the Ngong River Planning Consortium in creating a participatory and forward-thinking urban planning process for Mukuru and Kayaba by integrating artistic innovation, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. Through collaboration with artists, industries, and residents, the Consortium aims to deliver resilient, inclusive, and culturally vibrant urban spaces that serve as a model for sustainable development in the Ngong River riparian zone – and beyond.



Fig. 1 (left): Workshop participants engage in a transect walk along the Ngong River (Photo courtesy of Paul Rabé, 2025)

Fig. 2 (top right): Youth groups engage in tree planting on the newly vacated riverbank in Mukuru Kwa Reuben (Photo courtesy of Nuru Youth CBO Mukuru, 2025)

Fig. 3 (bottom right): Joint organizers of the in-situ engagement program. From left to right: Paul Rabé, co-coordinator of RCN; Jane Weru, director of Akiba Mashinani Trust; Rita Padawangi, coordinator of the Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network; Joy Mboya, director of the GoDown Art Centre; Satya Patchineelam, co-coordinator of RCN; and Patrick Njoroge, deputy director of Akiba Mashinani Trust. (Photo courtesy of Akiba Mashinani Trust, 2025)

Correcting My Myopia on Africa-Asia Relations

Filip Noubel

I was not sure what to expect when I was generously invited to cover the Third Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge Conference-Festival as a journalist. This would be my first visit to Francophone Africa, and indeed to Senegal. I felt positively puzzled when I looked at a program promising over 130 sessions, with over 700 participants presenting in at least three languages. What could I possibly make of such a bounty of knowledge, debates, people, connections, and ideas?



Fig. 1 (left): Natural Dyes workshop at the IFAN Museum of African Arts. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

Fig. 2 (middle): Panel session in the Faculty of Medicine during AA3. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

Fig. 3 (below): AA3 opening ceremony. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

The event took place in mid-June 2025 over four days at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in several buildings dispersed over the large campus in central Dakar, right on the ocean shore. The geography of the place mirrored what at first seemed a vast collection of unrelated topics: music, agriculture, gender, urbanization, food, migration, architecture, film, research methodology, climate change, linguistics, martial arts, real estate. But as I zigzagged across the campus, and sampled over 20 panels, embedded myself in conversations at coffee and lunch breaks, checked websites of projects and videos, something began to emerge: African-Asian interconnectivity. A much more diverse story than the over-covered story of China in Africa. A story that develops outside of state-sponsored frames. As this idea sunk in and kept me thinking and researching, I asked myself: But why are those stories of hybridity, innovation, and South-South exchanges not told outside of academia?

My background is in post-Soviet and China studies, and I visited the continent for the first time in 2012, travelling to Kenya from Beijing, where I had been based for six years. Back then, I had designed a 10-day long field trip for Chinese media and environmental professionals to meet Kenyan peers and to hear for themselves about perceptions of Chinese presence in an East African context. Also serving as an interpreter, I was often in the middle of conversations that showed a mix of genuine curiosity, mutual lack of knowledge, and a good measure of deeply ingrained prejudice on both sides.

This project coincided with a time when in China, Africa was amply discussed in media, at conferences, and in governmental speeches as an option for a sudden advancement in one's career, leaving me with the impression that China in Africa amounted to most of Asia's presence on the continent.

Then came Dakar in June 2025 and with it, a healthy exercise of correcting my knowledge myopia. I rapidly came to the conclusion I had to consider new perspectives. China is just one of the many Asian players in Africa, and while the relationship remains largely asymmetric in favor of Asia, Africans are also present in Asia, and when so, not just in China.

Africa-Asia: Thinking beyond China

China in Africa has become a trope in academia and media to the point that it marginalizes the role other regions and countries play: South Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan. This in itself is partially a consequence of a Global North-centric view of the continent: European nations invaded and occupied almost the entire African continent, and developed a colonial view with claims of political and economic ownership that remains to this day. The Soviet Union was the first to truly challenge Western influence during the Cold War but its power quickly disappeared in the late 1980s. Today, the only true competitor is China, which became significant in the late 1990s. The obsession with the country that "is replacing us" – meaning the West – has led to

a hypertrophy disregarding what other Asian countries are doing in Africa, even if China remains the major Asian actor given the levels of investments and large-scale projects, and the number of its citizens living in Africa.

Indeed, some of the most interesting panels I participated in discussed competition between North and South Korea in African projects and Japanese economic collaboration dating back to the 1920s in certain cases. South Asia also has a long historical presence going back to the 18th century, mostly through Western enslavement and trade routes. Today this history is represented by significant South Asian communities on the continent; in some countries such as Mauritius, 70 percent of the population is of South Asian origin. In South Africa, they account for about 1.5 million people.

India-Africa is another vital and growing venue: Trade is estimated at around US\$100 billion and expected to double by 2030. India is a major investor in infrastructure projects,

and it plays an important role in South-South exchanges as a member of the BRICS. More importantly, at least 25,000 Africans are studying in India.

Southeast Asia is also present historically and even linguistically: Malagasy takes its roots in the same language family as Malay and Indonesian. Wax fabrics, widely worn across Africa, originate in the Indonesian tradition of batik. Today, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia are the leading trade partners and investors from the region in Africa. But beyond the economic partnership, there is a growing sense of a shared history of colonialism, migration (including under colonialism), and political solidarity that is feeding new conversations and partnerships inspired by the awareness of a similar experience, and by certain shared conditions of political and economic development.

Africans have always invested in Asian geographies

There can be no doubt the Africa-Asia relationship tilts in favor of Asia: investment and infrastructure projects are all Asian and take place in Africa; Asia's trade with Africa remains dominated by extraction of natural resources; Asian modern technology is imported from Asia and dominates African markets; there are more Asians in Africa than vice versa; and more Africans learn Asian languages – mostly Chinese – than Asians study non-colonial African languages.

But this asymmetry, raised frequently in discussions at the AA3 ConFest in

"AA3 was an extremely enriching experience. It brought together academics, artists, and activists. Locating AA3 in Dakar was also a great decision, as it allowed participants to explore a city rich in culture, tradition and intellectual activity from a renowned African university."



Fig. 4 (above): UCAD Student Volunteers. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)



Fig. 5 (left): Book Donation Campaign at UCAD Central Library. (Photo by Khadiyatou Sene, 2025)



Fig. 6 (top far right): 40+9 Performance by Viet Le, Yoro Diallo, and Demba Ndiaye. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)



Fig. 7 (below far right): Workshop at AA3. (Photo by Pierre Deperouges, 2025)

“My time at the Africa-Asia conference was very enriching first of all intellectually, I attended excellent panels, sessions and workshops. The way the conference encouraged delegates to navigate the city and attend events outside of campus, as well as learning more about the history fo the campus helped ground the academic discussions in the local context of the conference and gave me a chance to develop my knowledge of Dakar, a City I had seen mostly in films. The different performances, exhibitions, tours and workshops that the conference proposed allowed me to meet colleagues in a friendly environment and atmosphere and my exchanges were very candid and stimulating. It's a fit to organise such an event and I very much look forward to attending the next Africa-Asia conference.”

Dakar as something to acknowledge and challenge, does not mean Africans are not present in Asia. In fact, their presence has long historical roots from black samurais in feudal Japan to police officials in early modern South Asia. Today, this presence is diversifying and generating a renewed interest in Asia among Africans.

Historically, trade, food, and religion have been avenues of intense exchanges where traces of African presence can be identified and are indeed studied across disciplines. Today African students, small-scale traders, performing artists, and athletes represent some of the most active communities living in Asia. In the case of Japan, where population decrease requires the import of foreign labor, particularly in the manufacturing and service

industries, an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 West Africans, mostly from Ghana and Nigeria, are working, living, developing their own community, and intermarrying with Japanese people.

Looking away from mega projects: Africa-Asia is guided by unusual individuals

Having established that Africa-Asia connections go way beyond the story of China in Africa, I was ready for my second myopia correction: some of the deepest encounters between the two continents are not the initiatives of state or large business actors, but

are in fact imagined, led, and lived by unusual individuals who often remain unknown or little-known to outsiders of the communities where African-Asian encounters happen.

The narrative about Asian presence in Africa is dominated by large projects in a language of finance and development that rarely tells individual stories. The reality is that many of the encounters linking the two continents are unique individual stories that ignore, or bypass, or counter official state and corporate decisions and projects.

One example that embodies this is the thriving Vietnamese community in Angola, now estimated at 40,000 people, who moved individually and through family networks to open mostly car repair shops, hairdressing salons, and restaurants. The community has its own local celebrity, Pham Quang Linh, a YouTuber with four million subscribers who showcases the life of Vietnamese people in Angola. In fact, he became so popular that he has been co-opted by the Vietnamese government as one of the members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front.

Similar examples can be found among African artists and singers who sing in Chinese on Chinese social media channels, participate in TV contest shows, and make a name for themselves as representatives of African culture but also their hybrid identities and the lived – and complicated – experience of being an African in China.

The stories of Nigerian and Ghanaian communities in Tokyo also show how migration and the development of the community is driven by family stories, as well as by individual decisions made around

burial sites linked to traditions and religion. This evinces local reinvention of hybrid identities in mixed families.

Bridging public and academic worlds

As a journalist, I became fascinated with many of those stories but immediately realized that they remain very much on the margins. Knowledge produced in academia requires time and is largely unknown outside of academic institutions. Media often frames Africa-Asia collaboration as win-win projects with too little critical engagement.

But what is needed is a real sharing of knowledge and a cultural translation of a critical mass of research, data, concepts, and documentation to the wider public. Media – local, regional, international, and in all languages – needs to have access to knowledge, and those who create it must be able to tell stories that return to the people who benefit, are affected, and want to participate as individuals in the fast-developing Africa-Asia exchanges. This is why events such as the AA3 ConFest in Dakar need to not only continue, but expand, include media professionals, facilitate access to experts, and lead to serve as a true and inclusive axis of knowledge. Intellectual myopia can be corrected when people meet in real life and hear each other's stories.

Filip Noubel is a journalist, China expert, and editor at *Global Voices*. Email: noubel@gmail.com



Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand

Alisa Santikarn

This book is the culmination of my PhD project, which began in 2018 at the University of Cambridge. Having one's final product look entirely different to the initial proposal is an experience I think many PhD candidates can relate to. In my case, I imagined a research project centered on the heritage of elephants and ivory. As I discuss in the book's introduction, it was a series of fortunate events, started by a research rabbit hole, following up on a reference to "[t]he most famous elephant people in Thailand,"¹ that led me to contact an email address left in a comment on a blog post.

This led me to Dr Sanong Suksaweang, who was, at the time, Vice President of the Kui Association of Thailand. This encounter completely redirected my PhD away from elephants and towards the supposedly famous 'elephant people' that I was only just hearing of for the first time. My research became a more personal project of learning and unlearning. Therefore, I cannot thank Dr Sanong enough, not only for first commenting on that blog post three months before I started my PhD, but also for coming to Bangkok with his wife to meet me and my family, teaching me about his

culture, and introducing me to the Kui Ajiang community in Surin, which came to be the focal point of my research. I am also, of course, incredibly grateful to the Kui Ajiang for sharing their time and knowledge with me, making this research possible. I also owe a large thanks to the ESRC, which funded a one-year postdoctoral position that allowed me to finish this monograph, and which supported the Open Access publication, as well as the fantastic team at IIAS and AUP, including (but not limited to) Michael Herzfeld, Mary Lynn van Dijk, and Inge Klompmakers.

Although, as the title suggests, elephants feature quite prominently in this book – with 'Kui Ajiang' meaning the 'elephant people' – if I've done my job right, they are only secondary characters. While this is a book about entanglement – of people and nature,

of the Kui Ajiang and the elephants – the characters I am trying to recenter, who have been comparatively hidden in existing narratives, are the Kui Ajiang, rather than their elephants.

My introduction to Dr Sanong and the Kui community in Thailand not only put my research on a new trajectory, but it also had me rethink my preconceptions about a country I thought I knew. I am Thai-Australian and spent the first twelve years of my life in Bangkok. During this time, I was taught in my 'Thai Studies' class at school that Thailand had 'Hill Tribes'. My teacher had an illustrative prop, with dolls of each of these groups – maybe seven of them at that time. Over the course of my research, this narrative was unravelled. The Thai state has consistently denied the existence of Indigenous Peoples within its borders. This is untrue. There are no exact figures – in large part due to this denial – but the Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand suggests 42 groups representing some four million people. Just recently, on 6 August 2025, Thailand's House of Representatives passed an amended version of the 'Act on the Protection and Promotion of Ethnic Ways of Life' – marking the country's first bill protecting the rights of the country's diverse ethnic groups (albeit with explicit reference to 'Indigenous Peoples' removed).

Another part of national history that I had to rethink was the assertion that Thailand was never colonised. Michael Herzfeld, who was the external examiner for my thesis and wrote the preface to this book (and who tried, as much as possible, to have me remove any split infinitives from the final manuscript), describes Thailand's relationship with colonialism as 'cryptocolonial', where 'independence' hinged on relinquishing considerable control to the colonising power.² On top of that is the element of what Sakdipat and Supatra describe as 'internal colonialism', whereby the state – known as Siam at the time – was the colonising force against its citizens, impacting particularly the country's Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities.³ And so, for a book that I have just said was about the Kui Ajiang, we do not actually come to them until Chapter 6. Chapter 3 focuses on where Thailand's attitudes towards its Indigenous Peoples originate, tracing this history from the colonial period through to the Cold War. Chapter 4 then ties this to the environment through an examination of national environmental discourse and territorialisation through the same period, into the present, while Chapter 5 provides an overview of national approaches to cultural heritage. In this book, I draw parallels between the restriction of cultural heritage as defined by Authorised Heritage Discourses (AHDs)⁴ that exist at various levels, and an Authorised Environmental Discourse – focused on the government's historical and continued environmental policies and their impacts on Thailand's Indigenous Peoples.

And then, finally, I come to the Kui in Chapter 6, and the domestic and provincial politics in which they find themselves embedded. The Kui Ajiang – as a subset of the Kui community, distinguished by their elephant-related heritage practices – represent a paradox. Historically serving as royal elephant keepers, responsible for procuring and caring for elephants for war,

as well as identifying and catching auspicious white elephants, the Kui Ajiang are closely aligned with the national AHD. However, the Kui and Kui Ajiang have been hidden within the historical record and are relatively unknown within wider Thai society. It is the elephants – not the elephant people – that have visibility.

Another misconception I had in my early research related to what caused the end of elephant catching. What, based on some initial readings, I had previously thought was a 'ban' on elephant catching, resulting in a firm end to the practice in 1958, turned out to be a slower dwindling, caused not by a ban (which did not exist until much later), but by a border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the ownership of Preah Vihear Temple. Environmental restrictions factor in later, preventing a return to elephant-catching. Contention over this border – and claims to heritage – has raised its head again in recent months, representing another nationalistic conflict that has once again impacted the Kui living on both sides of the border.

Centred on the end of this elephant-catching tradition, my book examines the run-on consequences in three key areas: (1) the elephant-catching lasso – called the 'Pakam rope'; (2) the role of the elephant catchers (*mor chang*) themselves; and (3) a language called *phasa phi pa* ('forest spirit language'), spoken by the *mor chang* during their time in the forest searching for elephants.

For the Kui Ajiang in Surin, instead of fixating on the end of their traditions, they are focused on their renewal and revitalisation, adapting traditions in response to contemporary restrictions and promoting Kui culture. These adaptations have produced intergenerational conflict over what constitutes 'authenticity', with the older generation of *mor chang* – those who experienced an elephant capture in their youth – preferring to keep to the 'rules' of their traditions, even if it means the practice will come to an end. This revitalisation takes place in three key spaces and brings the issue of heritagisation into play. In the book, the three 'sites of heritagisation', representing spaces for Kui culture, each controlled by different interest groups, are: the annual Surin Elephant Round-Up provincial festival, the transformation of a Kui village into the 'Elephant World' tourist attraction, and a local Kui temple called Wat Pa Ajiang.

Since finishing this book, I've continued to focus on the intersections of natural and cultural heritage in Thailand and Southeast Asia, starting a postdoctoral position at the University of Vienna, working with Dr Noémie Étienne on her European Research Council project 'Global Conservation: Histories and Theories (GloCo)' to develop a digital glossary of conservation, focused on community-based research to expand beyond current Eurocentric conceptions and terms. Under this project, I am pursuing two main research focuses: the first is on the role of spirits in conservation practice – both natural and cultural – in Northeast Thailand, and the second is on the idea of nature as a museum, and its role in embodying knowledge, memory, and traditional practices in Thailand and, more recently, also Cambodia.

Alisa Santikarn is a University Assistant (Postdoc) for the ERC-funded project 'Global Conservation: Histories and Theories (GloCo)' at the University of Vienna. Email: alisa.santikarn@univie.ac.at

Notes

- 1 Lair, R. C. (1997). *Gone Astray: The care and management of the Asian elephant in domesticity*. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.
- 2 Herzfeld, M. (2002). The absent presence: Discourses of cryptocolonialism. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(4), 899–926.
- 3 Sakdipat Chaovaluksakul and Supatra Amnuaysawasdi. (2017). Siam and colonisation: King Rama V Reign (1868–1910 A.D.). [สยามกับการล่าอาณานิคมสมัยรัชกาลที่ 5 (พ.ศ. 2411–2453)]. *Chophayom Journal*, 28(1), 71–78.
- 4 See Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.

Fig. 1 (above): Wat Pa Ajiang, March 2019. (Photograph by Alisa Santikarn)
Fig. 2 (right): Alisa Santikarn with her book *Indigenous Heritage and Identity of the Last Elephant Catchers in Northeast Thailand*. (Photograph courtesy of Alisa Santikarn, 2025)



Asia in the World

An Itinerant Fellowship Programme for Collaborative Knowledge Creation

In an increasingly multipolar world, where traditional knowledge hierarchies are constantly being challenged, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) is launching a new initiative that redefines how we understand Asia and its global entanglements. The *Asia in the World* Fellowship Programme responds to the urgent need for inclusive, collaborative, globally connected, yet locally grounded forms of knowledge creation. Our fellows will experience how institutions and environments can inspire different ways of understanding, researching, and engaging with Asia.

This itinerant fellowship is founded on a simple premise: knowledge is never produced in isolation, but is shaped by institutional, geographical, and cultural contexts. Each city, neighbourhood, university, and research centre carries not only its own methodologies but also distinctive aspirations and frameworks for interpreting Asia's complexity.

By creating spaces where perspectives meet and generate new questions, we are not simply reimagining how Asia is studied; we are encouraging our fellows to join a broader global conversation on the place and purpose of humanistic research and its institutions in addressing today's challenges.

The first seven selected post-doctoral fellows will spend six months at IIAS in Leiden before moving on to five months at one of our co-hosting institutions. We warmly thank Kasetsart University, Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads, the French Institute of Pondicherry, Taipei National University of the Arts, and Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme in Paris for hosting our first fellows. Finally, we would like to thank our selection committee, whose careful and dedicated work has been essential in building the IIAS research community worldwide.

Laura Erber is Global Partnerships and Fellowship Programme Coordinator at IIAS.
Email: l.rabelo.erber@iias.nl



New Fellows at IIAS



Amrita Pritam Gogoi

Research fellow
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Aileen Grace Andal

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Project: *Bordering Hope (and a few dreams to spare): Temporal Border-Making in Shaping Kampung Futures through Speculative Narratives*



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Winder Wen-Te Chang

Professorial fellow
Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University and IIAS
Project: *Supplementary History of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Taiwan during the Dutch and Spanish Occupations*



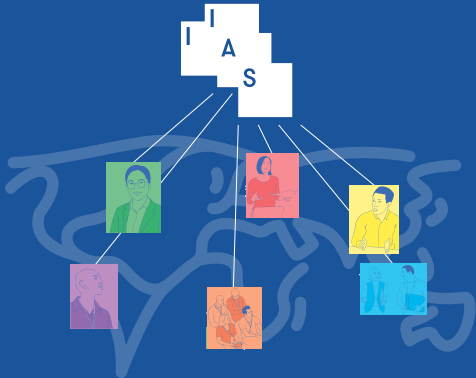
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Would you like to join the IIAS researchers' community? Apply for one of our fellowship modalities:

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Gonda-IIAS Fellowship

Promising young Indologists at the post-doctorate level can apply for funding with the J. Gonda Foundation of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) to spend three to six months doing research at IIAS.



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This short-term residential fellowship is designed to embrace a broad spectrum of researchers and practitioners, encompassing not only academics but also artists, curators, librarians and editors. The programme is dedicated to transforming practices in knowledge production through active collaboration with IIAS.



Professorial Fellowship for the Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University and IIAS
Are you a dedicated researcher and teacher who specialises in Taiwan Studies? You are welcome to apply for this professorship position, available for either five or ten months.



Information and application:
www.iias.asia/fellowships

IIAS Research, Networks, and Initiatives

IIAS promotes critical, humanistic, and collaborative work on, with, in, and beyond Asia. Our platforms and programmes revolve around five interrelated core priorities: Research, Education & Pedagogy, Civic Engagement, Network Building, and Communication & Dissemination. Our activities are carried out within three thematic, overlapping research clusters, built around the notion of social agency: 'Cities', 'Global Asia' and the Politics of Culture ('Asian Heritages').

IIAS programmes and initiatives are underpinned by a forward-looking South-South-North vision: an inter-regional dialogue among multiple stakeholders that recognizes the need to enrich global knowledge production with valuable insights from the South. Such insights are essential for successfully and equitably addressing both global and local challenges—including those faced in the North. To advance this goal, IIAS supports the development of direct cooperation and institutional partnerships between organizations in the Global South. As a facilitator based in the North, IIAS connects institutions within its network, supporting collaborations among Southern partners that develop organically and in line with their own priorities, thereby fostering a sustainable community of collaborative knowledge exchange.

More information

www.iias.asia/clusters

www.iias.asia/iias-core-priorities

www.iias.asia/about

Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA)

UKNA is an 'umbrella' network of scholars and professionals interested in urbanism in Asia and Asian cities from an international perspective. It was established with core support from the EU between 2012 and 2016, connecting over 100 urban scholars from universities in Europe, China, Hong Kong, India, and Singapore. UKNA is coordinated from IIAS, but the network's strength is its partners and partnerships across Asia and beyond. Its current flagship projects are the South-east Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET) and the River Cities Network (RCN).



www.ukna.asia

Coordinator: **Paul Rabé**

Email: p.e.rabe@iias.nl

Clusters: **Asian Cities; Asian Heritages**

River Cities Network



The 'River Cities Network' (RCN) is a transdisciplinary and global network to promote the inclusive revitalisation of rivers and waterways and the landscapes /waterscapes, cities and neighbourhoods that co-exist with them. The Network comprises over 30 project teams from around the world, each of which critically examines a local river-city relationship (the 'river-city nexus'). RCN is coordinated from the Urban Cluster at IIAS. Its Board of Advisors includes prominent people in their fields from the Humanities, Social sciences, and Natural Sciences.

www.ukna.asia/river-cities

Coordinators: **Paul Rabé**

Email: p.e.rabe@iias.nl

and **Satya Patchineelam**

Email: s.maia.patchineelam@iias.nl

Cluster: **Asian Cities**

Leiden Centre for Indian Ocean Studies



The Leiden Centre for Indian Ocean Studies brings together people and methods to study the 'Indian Ocean World', aiming to co-organize conferences, workshops and academic exchanges with institutions from the region. Together with IIAS, the Centre facilitates an inclusive and global platform bringing together scholars and institutions working on connections and comparisons across the axis of human interaction with an interest in scholarship that cuts across borders of places, periods and disciplines.

www.iias.asia/programmes/leiden-centre-indian-ocean-studies

Cluster: **Global Asia**

Green Industrial Policy in the Age of Rare Metals (GRIP-ARM)



GRIP-ARM

The ERC-funded research programme (2021-2026) *Green Industrial Policy in the Age of Rare Metals: A Transregional Comparison of Growth Strategies in Rare Earth Mining* (GRIP-ARM) examines the globalised supply and demand for rare earths, from mining to processing, manufacturing, use and recycling. Using a trans-regional comparison of China, Brazil and Kazakhstan, the proposed research is one of the first systematic, comparative studies on rare earths mining and economic development, bringing political science perspectives in conversation with natural resource geography and international political economy. GRIP-ARM is hosted by Erasmus University (Netherlands) and supported by IIAS.

www.iias.asia/programmes/green-industrial-policy-age-rare-metals-grip-arm

Coordinator: **Jojo Nem Singh**

Email: nemsingh@iss.nl

Cluster: **Global Asia**

Image courtesy [Wikipedia Alchemist-hp](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Alchemist-hp)



Humanities Across Borders

Humanities Across Borders' (HAB) is an educational cooperation programme, co-funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in New York, that aims to create shared, humanities-grounded, interdisciplinary curricula and context-sensitive learning methodologies at the graduate and postgraduate levels. Twenty universities in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas contribute time and resources to this unique and innovative venture. The HAB partners have forged a vibrant international consortium, committed to building new humanist capacities at the inter-institutional level,

including thematic projects, syllabi, and joint classrooms with other continents. This new phase (2021-2026) builds on the groundwork laid during the first phase of the programme, under the title 'Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World' (2016-2021).

Follow the stories on the [Humanities Across Borders Blog](#)
humanitiesacrossborders.org/blog
www.iias.asia/hab
Clusters: [Global Asia](#); [Asian Heritages](#)

Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN)

This network focuses particularly on the border regions between South Asia, Central/East and Southeast Asia. The concerns are varied, including migratory movements, transformations in cultural, linguistic and religious practices, ethnic mobilisation, conflict, marginalisation and environmental concerns. ABRN organises a conference in one of these border regions every two years in co-operation with a local partner.

Next ABRN Conference:
Negotiating Asian Borders: Actors, Displacements, Multiplicities, Sovereignities
Taipei, Taiwan, 13-15 January 2026

www.iias.asia/programmes/asian-borderlands-research-network
Cluster: [Global Asia](#)

Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge

Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge' is an inclusive transnational platform that convenes scholars, artists, intellectuals, and educators from Africa, Asia, Europe, and beyond to study, discuss, and share knowledge on the intricate connections and entanglements between the African and Asian world regions. Our aim is to contribute to the long-term establishment of an autonomous, intellectual and academic community of individuals and institutions between two of the world's most vibrant continents. We aspire to facilitate the development of research and educational infrastructures in African and Asian universities, capable of delivering foundational knowledge in the two regions about one another's cultures and societies. This exchange, we believe, is a prerequisite for a sustainable and balanced socio-economic progress of the two continents. It is also an opportunity to move

beyond the Western-originated fields of Asian and African area studies—something that would benefit Asian, African and Western scholars alike. An important development (in February 2023) is the birth of the 'Collaborative Africa-South East Asia Platform (CASAP)', a groundbreaking new network involving two universities in Indonesia and three in Africa.

Recent Conference:
Africa-Asia, A New Axis of Knowledge - Third Edition
an International Conference-Festival (CONFEST)
Dakar, Senegal, 11-14 June 2025

www.iias.asia/networks/africa-asia
Cluster: [Global Asia](#)



International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS)

The International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) is the largest global forum for academics and civil society exchange on Asia. It serves as a platform for scholars, social and cultural leaders and institutions focusing on issues critical to Asia, and, by implication, the rest of the world. The ICAS Conference-Festivals are organised by IIAS in cooperation with local universities,

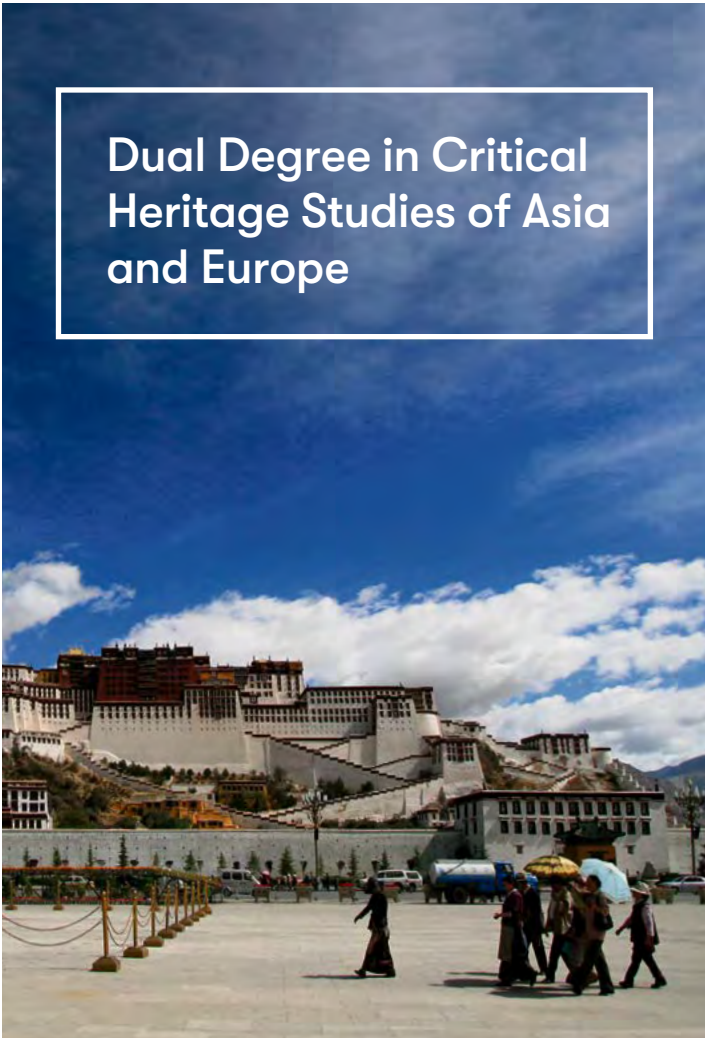


cities and institutions and are attended by scholars, civil society representatives, practitioners, artists, institutions and publishers from around 60 countries. Thirteen conventions have been held since 1997 (Leiden, Berlin, Singapore, Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Daejeon, Honolulu, Macao, Adelaide, Chiang Mai, Leiden (again), Kyoto (online), and Surabaya.

www.icas.asia



Dual Degree in Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe



This joint programme forms part of a broader ambition to decentralise the production of knowledge about Asia by establishing a platform for continuing dialogues between universities in different parts in the world. The institutions involved in the present Dual Degree programme – IIAS, Leiden University, National Taiwan University, Yonsei University and Gajah Mada University – have established a fruitful collaboration in research and teaching and talks are underway with several universities in Asia and North Africa. The Dual Degree programme offers selected students the opportunity to follow a full year of study at one of the partner institutes with full credits and two MA degrees.

www.iias.asia/programmes/critical-heritage-studies
Coordinator: [Elena Paskaleva](#)
e.g.paskaleva@hum.leidenuniv.nl
Cluster: [Asian Heritages](#)



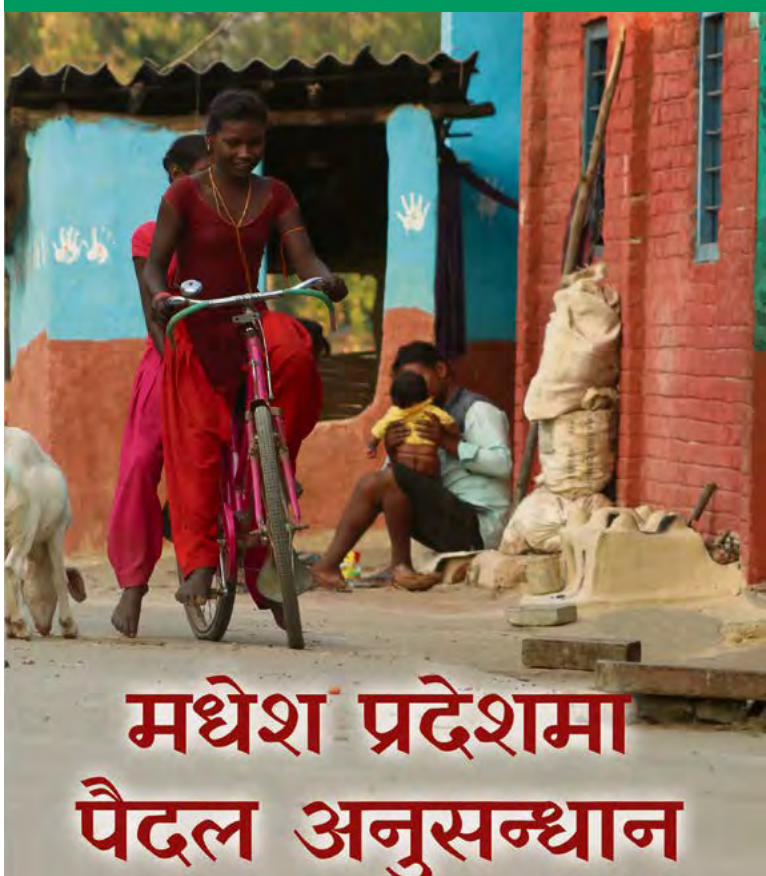
The Imprint

The Imprint highlights the critical work of small publishers around the world. Such presses, often located beyond the Global North, produce some of the most innovative, incisive, locally informed, and high-quality books within and beyond Asian Studies. With countless books getting published each year, many titles do not receive the recognition or circulation they deserve. All too often, the global publishing houses and major university presses – those with resources to invest in promotion – receive an outsized share of attention. Whether works of research, translation, literature, or art, the publishers featured on The Imprint regularly experiment to push against the conventions of academic and popular trade publishing. In this edition, we are pleased to highlight a selection of recent titles from the Martin Chautari Book Series in Kathmandu, Nepal.



Martin Chautari

Martin Chautari (MC) is an organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of public dialogue and the public sphere in Nepal, particularly in matters pertaining to democracy, development, pluralism/diversity, civil liberties, social justice, and academic research. It began as an informal discussion group in Kathmandu in 1991, allowing development professionals, social activists, and academics to meet every two weeks to share insights and experiences related to development and society in Nepal. In addition to its public discussions and seminar series, MC serves as the editorial home of the semi-annual journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society* and the Nepali-language annual journal *Samaj Adhyayan* (Studies of Society, established in 2006 as *Media Adhyayan*). In 2001, MC began publishing books, ranging from monographs and edited volumes to bibliographies and dictionaries. To date, the Martin Chautari Book Series has published 118 books, about 70 percent of them in the Nepali language.

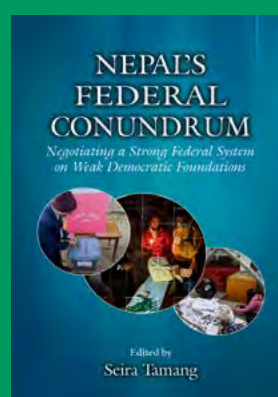


मधेश प्रदेशमा पैदल अनुसन्धान

मधेश प्रदेशमा पैदल अनुसन्धान

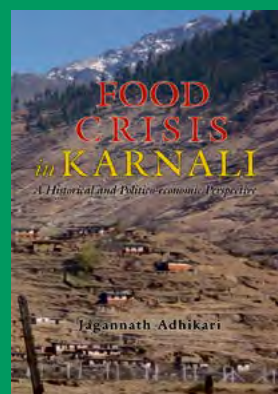
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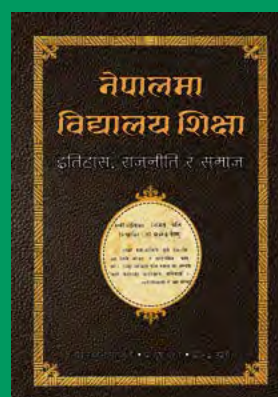
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Seira Tamang (ed.)
Martin Chautari, 2023

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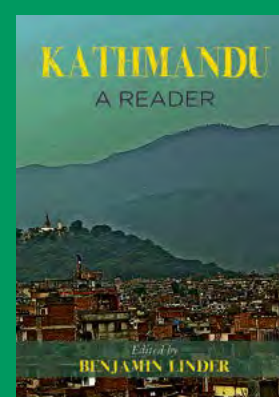
Food Crisis in Karnali
Jagannath Adhikari
Martin Chautari, 2024 (2nd edition)

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