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COMING IN OCTOBER

Russia and Eurasia

THE PERSECUTION OF ALEXEI NAVALNY, Russia's most prominent dissident, has become a strange international spectacle. After recovering in Germany from a poisoning, Navalny returned to Russia and was promptly sent to the Gulag. The Kremlin's eagerness to be rid of him suggests Navalny's anti-corruption message has touched a nerve. But quieter forms of nonstate action also have found a place in Russia—and Central Asia. *Current History's* October issue will cover these developments and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **Faith-Based Human Rights in Russia**
Melissa Caldwell, University of California, Santa Cruz
- **Russian Disability Activism**
Svetlana Borodina, Columbia University
Second in a series
- **Central Asia's Social Entrepreneurs**
Morgan Liu, Ohio State University
- **Nagorny Karabakh Enters the Multipolar Era**
Laurence Broers, Chatham House
- **Missing Trust in Moldova**
Petru Negură, Free International University of Moldova
- **Navalny and the Art of Dissent**
Alexander Etkind, European University Institute
- **Jokes and the Post-Soviet Condition**
Nancy Ries, Colgate University

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CURRENT HISTORY

September 2021

Vol. 120, No. 827

CONTENTS

- 207 Party-State Capitalism in China Margaret Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai**
China's economic model has evolved in recent years. Its main objective is now ensuring the political survival of the Communist Party, leading to new checks for tech giants and a backlash abroad.
- 214 Indonesia's Economic Futures: Who Will Pay? Doreen Lee**
The digital economy has transformed everyday financial lives in Indonesia, delivering many conveniences, but also trapping the desperate or unwary in a spiral of debt.
- 221 Khaki Capital and Coups in Thailand and Myanmar Paul Chambers**
Military regimes in the neighboring nations have long exploited their intrusive involvement in politics to build sprawling economic empires.
- 227 Pastoralism and the State in China's Inner Mongolia Thomas White**
The central government has reined in herders, ostensibly to halt environmental degradation of grasslands. The policy is eroding a pillar of Mongol culture and identity.
- 233 Disabled People's Fight for Rights in South Korea and Japan Celeste L. Arrington**
Drawing on international connections, activists have pushed for a shift from a medical model of disability to a social one addressing discrimination and exclusion. *First in a series.*
- 240 Japan's Younger Generations Look for a New Way of Living Susanne Klien**
Growing numbers of young people are opting out of a rigid social and economic system by moving to slower-paced rural areas for another kind of work, or leaving Japan for lives abroad.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 246 The Roots of America's Anti-Asian Violence. Annelise Heinz**
A historical viewpoint on the recent rise in attacks on Asian Americans reveals an old combination of white supremacy and misogyny fueling the hatred.
- BOOKS**
- 250 Gender and Sexual Politics in China's Online Dating Scene Zhiqiu Benson Zhou**
A new book shows how dating apps have allowed women, queer people, and others on the margins of a patriarchal system to express alternative desires and find spaces for community.

CURRENT HISTORY

September 2021

“In a party-state capitalist system, the state’s prioritization of political goals drastically limits the scope for making compromises with private capital.”

Party-State Capitalism in China

MARGARET PEARSON, MEG RITHMIRE, AND KELLEE S. TSAI

The structure of China’s economy has taken center stage as mounting global tensions and anxieties have accompanied the country’s increasingly global economic footprint. Along with the conservative turn under Xi Jinping’s leadership, China’s economic model has evolved to solidify a much stronger role for the state.

For decades, China has been cast as exemplifying “state capitalism,” a broad concept meant to explain mixed economies in which the state retains a dominant role amidst the presence of markets and private firms. State capitalist systems are found in a variety of regime types, ranging from authoritarian countries like China and Russia to democratic states such as Norway, Brazil, and India. These systems typically feature state ownership and other tools of government intervention that aim to achieve economic development goals, especially growth and competitiveness in globalized sectors.

Recent changes in China’s model, however, make it less comparable to state capitalist systems because the tools of state intervention and its underlying logic are different. Ruled by a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that is celebrating its centennial this year, contemporary China is better understood as a sui generis form of political economy in which the party-state’s political survival trumps developmental goals. This mode of what we call “party-state capitalism” has profound consequences for China’s domestic politics and relations with other governments.

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THE ROAD FROM ‘MARKET SOCIALISM’

China’s post-Mao economic reform process has always been multifaceted, nonlinear, and contested. It has not followed a singular established blueprint.

From the 1970s through the early 1990s, the CCP worked in fits and starts to layer market activity on top of a planned economy. Agricultural reforms set up markets for goods that farmers produced over and above required quotas. Private enterprises were informally encouraged, even as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) remained dominant and the state continued to control key economic inputs, especially land and capital. Special economic zones first demonstrated the viability and promise of foreign investment and export-driven growth before all Chinese cities were linked to the global economy.

It was only in the late 1990s that the CCP began to significantly privatize and downsize the state-owned sector. By the mid-2000s, China’s state capitalism was primarily about managing the remaining large SOEs to contribute to economic growth, create wealth for the party-state, and look out for its economic and strategic interests at home and internationally. This circumscribed role for the state left ample space for private businesses to grow, a phenomenon captured in the common Chinese phrase, “The private advances, the state retreats.”

As institutional and evolutionary approaches to political economy have established, even apparently stable systems are pressured to adapt to changing conditions or face the prospect of extinction. In developed democracies, postwar capitalism adopted the Keynesian principles of “embedded liberalism,” by which states were open to global trade and competition, while providing social welfare and other benefits to protect citizens

from the vicissitudes of global markets. But as fiscal crises associated with the rise of the welfare state emerged, this model was displaced during the 1980s by neoliberal reforms whereby many developed democracies abandoned or eroded protective interventions in order to more fully embrace laissez-faire market forces.

Likewise, in East Asia, rapid industrialization in the authoritarian postwar developmental states of Taiwan and South Korea generated structural changes in government–business and state–labor relations that supported their respective transitions to democracy. The Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s also led these governments’ leaders to question the sustainability of state-led industrialization.

By the late 2000s, China similarly faced a critical juncture in its reform process, out of which party-state capitalism emerged. The global financial crisis of 2008–9 amplified already widespread concerns in China about the country’s economic dependence on exports. Beijing responded to the crisis with a massive credit-driven economic stimulus, much of which went into infrastructure and land development. Within a few years, rising local government and corporate debt raised fears of oversupply in these sectors.

These economic trends, combined with growing social instability and widespread corruption, called for policy responses. Intellectuals associated with the “New Left” sought correctives to what they perceived as the more pernicious effects of markets and private ownership, especially inequality and bourgeois decadence.

Such views on the need to undo the harms of capitalism underlay the “Chongqing Model” of local Party Secretary Bo Xilai. Bo, widely seen as a rival to Xi Jinping before the end of the Hu Jintao administration, attracted national popularity and international attention for a suite of policies he carried out in the southwestern provincial municipality of Chongqing. He sought to use his leadership of this sprawling megalopolis to introduce a new development model. As some of its architects wrote in their 2010 book *The Chongqing Model*, it would “fuse capitalism and socialism” to “control the selfish desires and impulses” associated with Deng Xiaoping’s reform strategy of “market socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

The Chongqing Model promoted state-owned firms as capital investors in private enterprises,

massive infrastructure construction, social policies such as subsidized housing, and accelerated urban citizenship and public benefits for rural migrants working in cities. Bo also drew on Maoist-style political mobilization through anticorruption drives and campaigns to “sing red songs” that invoked revolutionary and Maoist nostalgia. But Bo’s political star fell in a spectacular scandal: his wife was accused of plotting the murder of a British businessman, a story revealed when Bo’s own police chief and anticorruption czar fled to the US consulate in a neighboring province to seek protection.

While Bo’s answer to the problems of market socialism was an emboldened state, prominent economic reformers, especially Wang Yang, the party secretary of southeastern Guangdong province, offered the competing case that greater liberalization and a diminished role for the state would better address economic distortions and social problems. When Xi assumed the mantle of the fifth-generation leader of the People’s Republic of China, it seemed plausible that he might introduce

bolder market reforms to break through bureaucratic and business interests vested in preserving a system of partial reforms. A prominent 2013 party document promised a new round of economic liberalization;

although it emphasized that the public sector would remain important, markets for the first time were slated to have a “decisive” role.

Yet the changes heralded by this document did not occur. Under Xi’s rule, the CCP has instead extended its authority and reach—organizationally, financially, and politically—into China’s domestic and foreign economic relations. Although prior developmental goals remain intact, they have been overshadowed by initiatives that place politics in command with the objective of mitigating perceived risks to the party’s political survival.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Xi’s initiatives have used state power to discipline private capital. He first targeted a problem widely recognized under the Hu administration: crony links between businesses and officials that have eroded the party’s legitimacy and internal discipline. Similarly, the excessive debt burdens that emerged in the 2000s in both local governments

*The party-state’s political survival
trumps developmental goals.*

and corporations were identified by the Xi administration as “grey rhino risks,” or obvious problems that are ignored until they move quickly and cause dramatic destruction.

These risks erupted into a financial crisis in 2015. The crisis was blamed on malfeasance and collusion between market participants and regulators. In the same period, capital flight threatened the value of the currency, the renminbi (RMB). With access to domestic credit, large conglomerates embarked on global shopping sprees, snapping up real estate and other prestige assets in developed markets.

Xi and his team subsequently restricted outward investment in sectors like hospitality, sports, and entertainment; detained or arrested executives of large firms; and even restructured or nationalized some of the country’s largest conglomerates, such as Anbang Insurance and HNA Group. Firms, including those with origins in the Chinese state, were no longer trusted to behave in ways that would advance the national interest.

The leadership also became fixated on acquiring the resources China would need to protect its economic security. In 2014, Edward Snowden’s revelations that the US National Security Agency had infiltrated Huawei’s servers to learn about the telecommunications company prompted widespread concern in China about dependence on foreign technology for its critical industries. If China was to advance beyond the status of a middle-income country and reach the top rank in global technological competitiveness, the leadership reasoned, it would need domestic know-how and innovation in frontier industries such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, nanotechnology, and robotics.

These became the target industries for Made in China 2025, a massive industrial policy introduced in 2015. By 2021, it would channel more than 10 trillion RMB into domestic firms at the forefront of these sectors. To grow and prosper in areas vital to national security, Beijing had decided that China could no longer rely on global supply chains and interdependence with the world.

It is important to emphasize that, while the emboldened role for the state in China’s economy and society seems to signal its strength, the underlying logic is one of threat and risk management. Xi took power aiming to address the threat of corruption, but he has encountered only increasingly diverse sources of perceived risk to the regime since 2013. Examples include trade and technology conflicts with the United States and others, the

politicization of China’s global Belt and Road infrastructure projects, and protests in Hong Kong. Party-state capitalism reflects the regime’s strength as well as its fears, both of which in turn have been politically consequential for domestic state–business relations and for realizing China’s ambitions in the world.

If state capitalism and “market socialism with Chinese characteristics” were characterized by familiar conceptual dyads—state versus capital, public versus private—party-state capitalism displays a novel blending of state power and firm organization, funding, and activities, a mixture that renders such dyads increasingly irrelevant. Three features of contemporary Chinese political economy in particular illustrate the political logic, as opposed to a more straightforward developmental logic associated with economic dirigisme, of China’s new model: further encroachment by the party-state on the economy; blurring of state and private sectors; and demands for political fealty from firms.

ENCROACHING INFLUENCE

In party-state capitalism, the tools for managing China’s economy entail not only state ownership and market interventions, but increasing party-state institutional encroachment in other realms of economic activity. These new means of control empower new agents and prioritize discipline and monitoring by party-state actors.

One example is an emboldened role for the party in corporate governance. A basic indicator of the party-state’s institutional expansion is the resurgence of party cells—units responsible to the party, and composed of party members—inside enterprises, including private businesses and even foreign firms. The presence of party cells in private and other “nonstate” organizations in itself is not new, but under Xi, emboldening party control and party building in firms became a key priority.

At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi declared that the CCP “exercises overall leadership over all areas in every part of the country.” Since then, both Chinese and international media have noted signs of the enhanced vigor and influence of party organizations in private firms and joint ventures. The CCP itself reported that 1.88 million nonstate firms had established party cells by the end of 2017, accounting for over 73 percent of all such firms.

As the party heightens propaganda calling for party branch construction within private domestic firms, many business owners have expressed

anxiety about the potential for state intervention in the management of their affairs. In addition to the party-state's own organization, key municipalities have assigned officials to new oversight offices within firms—including some of the biggest private companies, such as e-commerce giant Alibaba and automaker Geely. These officials report directly to the government.

Another expression of expanded party-state influence in the Chinese economy is “financialization,” meaning the control of firms through financial instruments such as equity stakes. Party-state encroachment entails the expansion of state capital well beyond firms that are majority-owned by the state. Since Xi assumed power in 2012, the CCP has encouraged the establishment of “state-owned capital investment companies” that invest in nonstate firms with growth potential in strategic sectors. Investments generally involve state shareholding firms acquiring small (typically less than 3 percent) minority stakes in nonstate firms through purchases on equity markets.

This practice ramped up during the stock market crisis of the summer of 2015, when sell-offs suddenly erased the gains of the prior year on the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges. As part of a menu of bailout actions, the China Securities Regulatory Commission arranged for a “national team” of state shareholding funds to purchase over 1.3 trillion RMB in stocks on both exchanges between June and September, eventually holding half the shares of all listed firms. This broad financial intervention was not about allocating capital in pursuit of growth, but rather about risk management and maintaining stability.

Expansion of state shareholding has not only been adopted in emergencies. Starting in 2013, the CCP began exploring the idea of creating “special management shares” for the state in media and technology companies—firms with strategic and political importance. Official documents indicate that special management shares are a class of equity shares with special governance power or greater voting rights than ordinary shares. The first purchase under this scheme occurred in 2016, when the official CCP newspaper *People's Daily* acquired 1 percent of a Beijing-based Internet company and installed a “special director” on the board who possesses veto power over content. The titans of China's digital economy—Baidu,

Alibaba, and Tencent—have reportedly been pushed to grant the government 1-percent special management shares.

Another manifestation of the party-state's economic activism is evolution in the scope of industrial policy. The Made in China 2025 strategic plan was launched to encourage indigenous innovation, technological self-reliance, and industrial upgrading. The broad contours of the initiative resonate with more traditional “state capitalism,” but its implementation, more than previous industrial policies, involves private firms as both targets of investment and managers of state capital. This blurring of state and private sector in China's efforts to advance its technological prowess has been met with alarm around the globe.

PRIVATE FIRMS, PUBLIC INTERESTS

China's private sector has been a major source of the country's economic “miracle,” outpacing the contributions of the state-owned sector by most measures. A common description of the private sector's economic value is “60/70/80/90,” meaning that

private firms contribute 60 percent of China's gross domestic product and generate 70 percent of innovation, 80 percent of urban employment, and 90 percent of new employment. Meanwhile, SOEs continue to accrue losses

and suffer declines in productivity. To some degree, these problems are endemic to the sectors in which state enterprises have been concentrated historically—strategic and declining industries—but that explanation is secondary to inefficiencies and misallocation of capital by state financial institutions.

Despite the importance of the private sector to China's economy, the common connotation of the term “private”—relatively hived off from the state—is belied by features of the new model. It entails intensifying blending of not just ownership, but also function and interests, in a manner that upends the familiar public/private binary and illustrates the distinctive political logic of party-state capitalism.

Private firms have become key actors in support of the state's domestic security objectives. The digital revolution has diversified China's security industry, as seen in the party-state's growing reliance on technology-intensive surveillance tools and big data to monitor and discipline the large population. Private firms dominate the supply of

Xi's initiatives have used state power to discipline private capital.

hardware, technology, and information infrastructure that comprises the expansive surveillance apparatus. China's largest video surveillance manufacturers, Hikvision and Dahua, were founded by private entrepreneurs. The relationship between these companies and the party-state is reminiscent of the US military-industrial complex—except in China's case, the products are geared toward maintaining domestic rather than national security.

Relatedly, a more recent addition to China's monitoring regime is its emerging "social credit system." Initiated in 2014, the system seeks to create a synthetic assessment of "creditworthiness" and "trustworthiness" for individuals and businesses by aggregating digital data on their past and present social and economic activities. The "trustworthiness" metric goes beyond traditional financial indicators of credit history, extending to normatively "sociable" or "unsociable" behaviors such as donating blood, jaywalking, spending time playing video games, and "spreading rumors" on social media. Those with higher social credit scores enjoy discounts on purchases, priority admissions to schools, and lower interest rates on loans. Whether the scores are used for commercial purposes or more Orwellian scenarios, the initiative relies on the capabilities and cooperation of private firms.

The relationship between private technology companies and different branches of the party-state is multifaceted—at times competitive, and yet unfailingly mutually dependent. The recent drama involving China's most famous entrepreneur, Alibaba founder Jack Ma, and his Ant Financial is a case in point. Ant is the parent company of Alipay, whose electronic payment system and Sesame Credit claim more than one billion users. For years, Ant's product development seemed to move faster than regulators, yet frequently with state support. In 2015 the People's Bank of China selected eight private technology companies, including Ant, to pilot consumer credit scoring. Three years later, however, the central bank tried to curtail Alibaba and Tencent's independent social credit programs due to concerns about their potential to market risky financial products.

In the fall of 2020, Ant was set to sell shares in the largest initial public offering (IPO) in history, but regulators abruptly suspended the IPO, and Ma disappeared from the public eye for several months. Weeks before the suspension, Ma had given a critical speech at a high-profile event,

exhorting China's regulators to tolerate more financial risk if they wanted to see growth and innovation. Although much has been made of the speech, the state's alarm about Ant was about more than Ma's outspokenness: documents filed for the IPO revealed the systemic importance of this nonstate firm. Ant was fined \$2.78 billion in April 2021 and forced to undergo a systematic restructuring of its business, with investigations still pending.

DEMANDING POLITICAL FEALTY

A third aspect of party-state capitalism in contemporary China is the expectation of adherence to party-defined political correctness, not just by domestic economic actors, but also by foreign corporations that do business in China and in territories over which it claims sovereign authority. Some firms have been proactive in demonstrating political compliance by establishing party cells in their China offices. Recently, however, a growing number of major foreign brands and organizations have been pressured to express contrition for various political faux pas, primarily relating to how Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet are portrayed in their advertisements, websites, or social media communications.

Businesses with significant stakes in the China market have changed their discourse and behavior, whether due to direct pressure or self-censorship. When the general manager of the Houston Rockets, a US National Basketball Association (NBA) team, tweeted support for Hong Kong protesters in 2019, the league was heavily criticized by state-owned China Central TV. The network suspended its NBA broadcasts and stated, "[W]e think any remarks that challenge national sovereignty and social stability are outside the category of freedom of speech." One of the league's top American players, LeBron James, concurred that NBA personnel should be wary of political commentary because of the repercussions for the league and players.

When protests erupted in Hong Kong against a proposed bill on extradition to China in 2019, Cathay Pacific Airlines suspended staff who participated in the demonstrations or expressed support for them on social media. Next came the resignation of the airline's chief executive.

When China introduced a National Security Law for Hong Kong in 2020, nearly all of the territory's tycoons and international business leaders signed a statement organized by the CCP's United Front Work Department in support of the law,

before its text was even released. News outlets refusing to retract their choice of words or coverage of sensitive topics (such as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*) have seen their reporters expelled from China on short notice.

Domestic business elites also have increasingly found themselves in the crosshairs of the CCP's efforts to silence dissent and maintain stability. If Ant Financial ran afoul of the state's regulatory apparatus, others have been dealt with by the state's repressive apparatus. Tycoons who spent decades cultivating ties with political elites, even managing their money, and building empires based on privileged access, have been detained for years without formal charges. Others who have spoken out against Xi or the CCP have been formally charged. After criticizing Xi's handling of COVID-19, property tycoon Ren Zhiqiang is now serving an 18-year prison sentence for corruption.

While the CCP has never been tolerant of criticism from business actors, domestic and foreign firms had typically been partners of the regime as it focused on economic growth. But in a party-state capitalist system, the state's prioritization of political goals drastically limits the scope for making compromises with private capital.

CONSTRAINTS AND BACKLASH

The manifestations of China's newly emboldened model suggest considerable power on the part of the party-state. Indeed, most accounts of China's political economy, including this one, emphasize attempts to preserve control over economic actors. Yet it is important to recognize how the state is constrained in executing its strategic intentions, including by the negative effects of party-state capitalism itself.

Principally, China's era of dramatic growth was characterized by a rough alignment of interests among the state, local officials, and firms in pursuit of economic growth—and, frequently, personal prosperity. The high-growth era was also characterized by engagement with global markets, many of which were eager to see nonstate firms succeed in China. Now, however, given China's growing global economic footprint and emphasis on regime security, party-state capitalism may threaten this alignment of interests, producing conflict between firms and the state. And it has

already provoked suspicion and backlash from foreign governments that view the fusion of state and private interests in China as a threat to their own national security.

Domestically, several trends point to increased anxiety among business actors whose space for autonomy has narrowed under party-state capitalism. Waves of asset expatriation and political crackdowns have generated instability in China's external accounts and uncertainty for business elites. Meanwhile, Chinese firms have marched abroad as party-state capitalism has taken shape. Although Beijing has encouraged this "going out," it is finding that internationalization presents an exit option for business actors as much as it offers a strategic opportunity for China. The CCP is now sending anticorruption investigators abroad and developing new means to align firms' global behavior with its own strategic interests.

The party-state's intolerance of instability, particularly in the financial sector, creates its own challenges. The expectation that the state will intervene to avoid instability may generate a sort of moral hazard, whereby firm managers, confident they will be

bailed out of any trouble, divert and misallocate resources at society's expense. Such a dynamic is unfolding in several arenas.

China Minsheng Investment Group, a private financial firm established by the

state to be "China's Morgan Stanley" and provide financing for firms in frontier sectors, fell into state receivership within just a few years, after self-dealing and poor decisions left it saddled with hundreds of billions of RMB in debt. Even in advanced technology sectors like semiconductors, local governments all over China have competed to nurture local firms only to find much of their effort wasted by fraud and malfeasance. Ultimately, if the state offers itself as a solution to economic instability, lack of discipline among market players may end up costing the state a great deal.

The international backlash against China's new model, especially from countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), has been dramatic. Blurred lines between state and nonstate firms have been used to justify sweeping new exclusions of Chinese investment, and even recommendations for economic "decoupling" from Chinese suppliers. In just the past few years, China has gone from

New imperatives of political stability and risk management govern the state's approach.

being a major tech investor in OECD countries to finding itself institutionally excluded. Major “national champion” firms such as Huawei and ZTE have been banned from building telecommunications networks in the West due to fears that networks built by these firms could be vulnerable to Chinese government intervention.

The backlash against Chinese capital—whether state, private, or hybridized—has mixed implications. On the one hand, anti-Chinese sentiment and protectionism could incentivize Chinese businesses across ownership categories to pursue nationalist goals. On the other hand, the impulse toward continued capital accumulation among all economic actors, regardless of ownership type, has already created centrifugal forces that are not readily reversed.

PARTY-STATE SOLUTION?

Over the course of most of the post-Mao era, market forces were invited to solve economic problems generated by the state’s historic dominance in various areas. By contrast, over the past decade or so, the party-state has increasingly imposed itself as a solution to the problems generated by markets. Party-state capitalism places the party’s leadership and political needs at the center of the organization of the economy. In addition to the deployment of state and market forces to pursue development and global competitiveness, new imperatives of political stability and risk management govern the state’s approach. From the CCP’s perspective, economic challenges to the regime abound domestically and abroad, and it is the

prerogative of the CCP to address them however it sees fit.

The idea of an unrestrained state able to fend off threats is a central theme in the work of Carl Schmitt, the twentieth-century German political theorist and Nazi, whose work has become popular in China over the past fifteen years. Although party-state capitalism in China cannot be easily understood in terms of other state capitalisms practiced in the contemporary global political economy, there is a shadow of a historical analogue in the rise of fascism in interwar Europe. Fascism, identified by many mid-century social theorists as “state capitalism,” was promoted as providing a political solution to the problems of market capitalism by fusing the interests of state and society. As the political scientist Sheri Berman observed, fascist regimes in both Italy and Germany during that era proclaimed that they would allow and even protect private property, but in each country the state put its own interests above any other social or economic interest.

With a similar logic, the CCP has shown its imperatives of domestic and national security to be the most fundamental force driving the emergence of party-state capitalism. This phenomenon is neither an opportunistic power grab nor the realization of a long-held plan, but rather the intentional adoption of a new model to present the party-state itself as the solution to China’s domestic and international challenges. Whether it succeeds, fails, or muddles through, the CCP’s new approach has already reshaped both China and global capitalism. ■

“[A]s Indonesia promotes smart cities, e-governance, biometrics, and cashless payments, ordinary Indonesians are constantly confronted with new technologies they must learn and integrate.”

Indonesia’s Economic Futures: Who Will Pay?

DOREEN LEE

On April 19, 2021, the long-awaited announcement of a merger among Indonesia’s largest Internet companies finally arrived. Rumors had floated since 2020 about which of the giants would merge. For a while the bet was on Grab and Gojek, two mobility-based startups that are major regional competitors. Gojek, the country’s premier “superapp,” began in 2011 as a motorcycle ride-hailing app. It has since expanded into a diversified portfolio of ride-hailing (motorcycles, sedans, and luxury vehicles), delivery, entertainment, and financial services in addition to the popular Go-Pay digital wallet. But instead of Grab, Gojek ended up combining with another behemoth: Tokopedia, which was founded in 2009 and has become the country’s largest digital marketplace, Indonesia’s equivalent of Amazon.

The merger formed Indonesia’s biggest Internet company, GoTo, with an estimated valuation of \$18 billion. To celebrate the deal, Tokopedia released videos of its world-famous spokespeople, the two top K-Pop groups, BTS and BlackPink, which have huge followings in Indonesia. The merger paves the way for a future round of investment set to more than double GoTo’s value.

This kind of spectacular financial news paints a rosy picture of Indonesia’s economic future, and casts the average Indonesian as a consumer in the digital marketplace. For now, though, the COVID-19 pandemic has put Southeast Asia’s largest economy in recession. Economists are still cautiously optimistic. They point out that Indonesia’s

economy has contracted less as a result of the pandemic than those of wealthy countries, and its outlook for next year is positive.

The Indonesian government has promised generous public spending to combat the pandemic’s economic fallout, and it stands by its goal of propelling the country out of the middle-income trap by the next decade. At the state and start-up level, things look promising. But what does financial life look like for the grassroots? In what ways might high and low finance intersect? What are the requirements for participation and inclusion in Indonesia’s economic future? Financial life has become an important measure of citizenship, and financial innovations stemming from the digital economy have already transformed people’s everyday lives.

PRESIDENT IN A HARD HAT

At the start of his second term in October 2019, President Joko Widodo (commonly known as Jokowi) named a new cabinet featuring the leadership skills of the corporate world. Most notable were the appointments of Erick Thohir as minister of state-owned enterprises and Nadiem Makarim as minister of education and culture. Both are extremely wealthy and famous on social media, and both enjoy a high level of public recognition for their previous roles: Thohir for his lauded stewardship of the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia and now for his management of COVID-19 vaccination efforts, and Makarim as the likeable millennial CEO of Gojek. Alongside such newcomers, the respected former World Bank director Sri Mulyani Indrawati returned for a second term as minister of finance.

The prominence of technocrats, start-up capitalists, and oligarchs in the current administration

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solidifies Jokowi's focused commitment to infrastructural investment and economic development across Indonesia. His inauguration speech highlighted ambitious economic goals for his second term, with no mention of cultural, environmental, or human rights issues at all.

Even though the economy has contracted during the pandemic, a new wave of speculative energy is set to descend on Indonesia as construction of the new capital city, the Ibu Kota Negara, gets under way. Inevitably, attention will shift from the old capital of Jakarta to the new one and its surroundings, the next frontier of Penajam Paser Utara in East Kalimantan.

The government has proposed the creation of a sovereign wealth fund, the Indonesian Investment Authority (INA), as a vehicle to fund national development, infrastructure projects, and pandemic recovery through foreign investment. The fund is intended to set a new threshold for global partnerships in Indonesia, and to deflect criticism that the nation is being drawn into China's sphere of influence through its participation in Beijing's Belt and Road global infrastructure initiative. To date, the INA has secured a \$10 billion commitment from the United Arab Emirates, and international development banks and pension funds have expressed interest.

It is no secret that the INA is linked to aspirations for the planned capital city, which will become the crown jewel of Jokowi's infrastructure legacy. Early digital renderings show a futuristic and monumental city. Much like the controversial Garuda-shaped reclamation project off the coast of Jakarta, the design boasts a blend of hyper-nationalist emblems and manicured, vertical rainforests. The Ibu Kota Negara will be a smart city that replicates the air-conditioned tropical modernity of Singapore's award-winning Changi Airport at a much grander scale. Plans have already been announced for the celebration of Independence Day in the new capital on August 17, 2024.

Such presidential pronouncements are released at a fast clip, on topics as varied as a digital literacy campaign or new airports and roads built in underdeveloped areas, often featuring images of Jokowi wearing a hard hat at a construction site. They confirm the massive scale of digital penetration and infrastructural intervention into daily life. The state's efforts complement private-sector

projects that introduce speed, service, and self-realization through the new economy. These are the standards that all private and state enterprises now seek to meet: becoming more outwardly ambitious, fast, and digital. Nowhere is this ethos more evident than in the superapp.

CONVENIENCE AND RISK

The emergence of superapps has enhanced and expanded the business of convenience. Tokopedia says it aims to democratize the digital marketplace and provide logistical solutions to the archipelago's 17,000 islands, while Gojek professes to go anywhere and do anything. The promises of these superapps suggest the reenchantment of daily life—things and people appear as if by magic, all meals can be delivered, and payments for utilities, insurance, and gym memberships can be made from one's phone, at an ATM, or at a local convenience store.

In using such conveniences, Indonesians must deal with an implicit level of risk. Whose motorcycle are they getting on for a ride to work? How do

they ensure that their goods will arrive as promised? Trust is built into the daily transactions that drive the online economy, exemplified by the rise of ride-hailing apps and digital payment schemes. They link urban mobility and

financial innovation, creating monetized encounters between the working poor and the middle and upper classes.

To take one example of the customized conveyances available: people in Jakarta will instruct a courier to deliver a handwritten note to their loved one (in the courier's own handwriting!) alongside a birthday cake or a sweet treat. Couriers are expected to procure desserts, drinks, and raw ingredients with a high level of specificity. The discovery that reserve labor can materialize one's desires prompts a high level of consumer satisfaction and imperious demands for immediate gratification.

As in other places where middlemen (known in Indonesia as *calo*) systems exist, the automation of such services can lead to unknown consequences, since institutional knowledge and muscle memory are still vested in people. Couriers and other gig workers receive little to no training to prepare them for the kind of service and logistical work that they do. Microinsurance is the financial

Financial innovations from the digital economy have transformed everyday lives.

industry's inevitable innovation and proffered solution to harvest the risk potential of the poor. These cheap policies offer couriers and drivers ("partners" per tech industry parlance) à la carte coverage for contingencies and are offered as available features in place of employee benefits, in contrast to more traditional forms of savings underwritten by secure, salaried positions or state benefits.

In his 2002 book *The Financialization of Daily Life*, American sociologist Randy Martin explained the process of financialization as the integration of calculating logics and finance norms into other arenas of life. As Martin put it: "Financialization integrates markets that were separate. . . . It asks people of all walks of life to accept risks into their home that were hitherto the province of professionals."

Part of this process involves cultivating responsibility as a form of identity: individuals must now bear a strong sense of personal responsibility for their financial choices, as the metrics of responsibility grow to encompass not just finance but life as a whole. Financialization promises the rewards of the good life to those who follow the correct protocols to build themselves as disciplined financial beings.

Yet there is also a temporal dimension to financialization: the innovations linked to finance always outpace the learning curve of the average person, such that sociopolitical anxieties converge around those "left behind." Moreover, the repercussions for refusing to honor the "new social contract" are severe. Hence, I call the coercive process by which citizens are brought on board the digital economy *conscription*.

There is a veneer of choice in which apps to download and which big bank to use. But as Indonesia promotes smart cities, e-governance, biometrics, and cashless payments, ordinary Indonesians are constantly confronted with new technologies they must learn and integrate.

A CASHLESS SOCIETY

The drive to create a cashless society can be felt at all levels. Tollbooths on roadways in Bali now automatically deduct e-payments as you drive by, surveillance cameras and e-traffic tickets have replaced the functions and bribe-seeking of the traffic police, and mobile phone apps, digital wallets, and cheap bank transfers are weaning Indonesians away from cash in their daily transactions.

One of the most influential vectors moving Indonesians toward digital payments and new

financial instruments has been the presence of the mobile phone coupled with the superapp. Together they facilitate as much as they necessitate a high degree of fluidity and flexibility between cash and cashlessness.

The financial possibilities of mobile phone technology are part of a person's "money repertoire," as anthropologist Bill Maurer calls it, in a complex ecology of instruments, trust, and habits. Mobile money repertoires would not be possible without the degree of intimate attachment that Indonesians have to mobile phone and internet usage. Indonesians participate in digital life intensively, ranking third in the world in Facebook membership at 140 million accounts, just behind the United States. There are 13.2 million Twitter users and 39 million WhatsApp users.

People can be found squatting on the roadside looking at their mobile phones or using them to watch videos during their bus and train commutes. Café customers sit and work on their laptops with their phones next to them on the table. Wealthy families dine out with three generations all interacting with their phones instead of each other.

The continuous stream of data generated by identity verification, password entries, address lookups on GPS navigators, and Google searches is ripe for harvest by hackers, state surveillance agencies, and private firms. Systemic risks loom in the form of lax data security and limited legal protections for users.

In May 2021, the government was forced to acknowledge a data leak involving over 279 million Indonesians registered in the national health insurance program. The data was openly sold on the dark web and included information about both living and deceased citizens enrolled in the program. The disclosure lent momentum to an effort in parliament to pass data protection laws to address the current regulatory gap.

Technological leapfrogging involves complex measures of state infrastructure, living standards, and citizenship that far exceed the initial goal of banking the unbanked. Where technocrats envision a seamless digital future, marginalized groups are continuously penalized by sudden, unilateral pronouncements of imminent technological upgrades. Coping is hardly as simple as opening a bank account and linking it to one's mobile phone. Becoming cashless entails a series of steps toward ensuring data security and enhancing the legibility of one's identity.

Mobile phone numbers must now be registered and linked to national ID numbers; those without national ID cards will have to find a workaround. The banked need to maintain mobile-banking capacities and be vigilant about monitoring their own account activities. Purchasing power and creditworthiness will be based on several verification regimes that connect private enterprises to state institutions. While private sector initiatives promise quick service, state mechanisms for verifying citizenship are less agile and more prone to corruption.

The divides that cashlessness brings to the fore are already visible in the European cities of Stockholm and Amsterdam, providing a glimpse into the near future. In Stockholm, as anthropologist Gustav Peebles recounts, over 60 percent of shops now refuse to accept cash as payment, and even public toilets are inaccessible without a card. In Amsterdam, a sharp distinction is drawn between locals who use direct debit for daily purchases and tourists who, expecting to be able to use cash, are turned away from café counters.

Such innocuous examples of cashless borders lead to more worrisome exclusions of refugees, internal migrants without papers, the very young and the elderly, and those with low digital literacy. Cashlessness and idealized but restrictive forms of citizenship have become conflated.

MIDDLE-CLASS CRUNCH

In the course of my research into the financial lives of everyday people in Jakarta, speaking to those who have bounced between irregular windfall and crisis, I became interested in precarity as a constitutive feature of the urban majority. A well-known figure often cited in the United States to illustrate the financial fragility of the American middle class is \$400. That modest sum, according to a 2018 Federal Reserve household survey, is the difference between solvency and disaster for much of middle-class America, across a range of blue and white collar professions. When every penny is spoken for, an unexpected \$400 expense places enormous strain on the average middle-income American.

The revelation that so many middle-class Americans were living paycheck to paycheck and had little savings arrived on the heels of the last great economic crash in 2008. Many Americans have

learned to manage their debt burdens by accessing credit rather than increasing their incomes, effectively eliminating any possibility of saving.

The financial lives of the Indonesian middle class and urban dwellers, by comparison, are less wellresearched and publicized. In Indonesia, one might instead consider both the consistency of financial pressures and the limited avenues for supplementing one's income with regulated forms of credit. There is no magic number to show how precarious middle-class Indonesians really are. But global attention to poverty alleviation through policy instruments such as cash transfers or the provision of national health insurance has produced a more grounded understanding of the challenges faced by the poor.

The standard of living for middle-class households in Indonesia's urban centers is based normatively on the needs of a nuclear family—two parents, two to three children, a small rented house, one motorcycle or car bought on credit, a laptop, three to four mobile phones, and private education. The Indonesian middle class is facing

rising living costs and upgraded lifestyles with stagnant salaries that range from the equivalent of \$300 to \$1,000 a month for office jobs.

Government schemes to provide affordable housing are commonly organized around election promises by individual politicians. Once those politicians are in office, implementation often falls short. The salariat has access to credit cards, but most people, especially those employed in the informal sector, do not. No matter how high their income, my informants experienced financial pressures at various points in their lives that left them vulnerable.

In a high-cost city like Jakarta, people frequently run out of money by the middle of the month. The remaining two weeks on the calendar before the next payday become excruciating. People stop socializing, pack lunch to take to the office, or just stay home in order to avoid spending. This self-restraint can be difficult, since Indonesians are famously sociable and trend-driven.

The boom-and-bust cycle is worse for those who are part of the gig economy and get paid once every few months. They face expectations to continue to see colleagues and friends on weekdays after hours, and on weekends for special trips often involving visits to the newest malls or food

*Debt can wipe out social mobility
and stability in an instant.*

destinations. Expensive coffee shops are ubiquitous, and the average cost per visit exceeds \$10.

Rent is also costly. The most common reason for borrowing money is the financial burden of renewing a housing contract; it is common practice in Jakarta to be charged one year's rent up front. Other typical reasons for borrowing are school fees, medical expenses for elderly parents or sick children that are often paid out of pocket, and payments for motorcycles and phones. People are always robbing Peter to pay Paul, or in the Indonesian version of the saying, digging one hole to fill another.

DEBT TORMENTS

In Indonesia, the original gateway purchase—a big ticket item that requires formal credit—is the motorcycle. The working poor in the villages and in the cities have found it necessary to purchase new or used models to get to work or school, and to keep up with everyone else.

With the expansion of ride-hailing apps as a form of self-employment for the poor, motorcycle ownership is seen as even more indispensably tied to income. Yet people often fall behind on payments and find themselves in the crosshairs of professional debt collectors who impound vehicles on sight. A person might leave home on a motorcycle and return without it, if theirs is on a “wanted” list for vehicles with overdue payments.

At the feet of the massive new apartment complexes in Jakarta that have been built for the new middle class and salaried workers who rent instead of buy, tens of thousands of motorcycles are parked as far as the eye can see. They spill onto sidewalks and outside the gates, often parked under the watchful eyes of local men whose job is to collect illegal parking fees. These motorcycle farms are also under the close watch of aggressive debt collectors called *matalang*, who establish stakeouts nearby, or at busy intersections where millions of motorists pass daily.

Aggressive lending practices abound in the real estate sector as well, but they are especially prevalent in the automobile industry. Leasing companies, as they are known, provide the financing for the vehicles they sell. Credit card companies target unsuspecting or aspirational consumers who, armed with credit, spend at unsustainable levels.

A taxi driver I spoke to had worked in the fast-paced marketing unit of a private credit company, targeting housewives and civil servants. He said he had quit the white-collar professional world of the

credit industry after one too many encounters with debtors who were in danger of losing their homes or desperately trying to keep their debts secret from family members and neighbors. It was too dispiriting for him to continue luring customers with credit and then punishing debtors by seizing their assets.

Recently, loan apps for mobile phones have become widely available, causing serious concern. Although technically under the jurisdiction of the Financial Services Authority (OJK), online lenders frequently operate without permits, simply relaunching themselves as new entities if they are caught. The OJK closed 3,193 illegal financial technology (fintech) companies in the brief period between January 2018 and April 2021. Between April and May 2021 alone, the OJK identified 86 illegal lending apps. In comparison to the large number of illegal entities operating online, there are only 125 online lenders that the OJK currently recognizes as legal and permitted.

Some of these phone apps have targeted new users who are unaware of the legal loopholes that they exploit. They may gain access to customers' phone data and charge predatory interest rates that can multiply a debt in a matter of days. Even securely employed civil servants have become vulnerable to online lenders—some have gotten caught in debt cycles as they open new accounts to service their mounting debt from other apps. An indebted person might have up to 20 different accounts with online loan providers, all but ensuring that their debts will never be paid off.

Debt collectors, who are either in-house employees or subcontractors working on commission, show up in person and will not leave until they have made contact with their targets. They torment debtors by loudly shaming them in front of their neighbors, or by incessantly calling and texting them. Online lenders utilize the data they have procured from the app download process to blast texts to a client's entire contact list, announcing the person's financial failings.

The debt collection business is an example of the kind of “gray” industry, composed of legal and illegal aspects, that is particularly rife in urban areas with high consumption patterns. Although debt is not criminalized, its effects and enforcement can be violent. This is why sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom calls it a means of “predatory inclusion.” The majority are conscripted into e-modernity by the weight of the fine print.

APP TRAPS

A young man I spoke to in Jakarta had fallen into the common trap of using several online lending apps in order to cover his business expenses. He was a struggling bookseller, translator, and café owner who roasted his own coffee beans and bought used books from the city's scavengers.

His profits never covered his growing debt, and he had resorted to borrowing from friends and pleading for gig work advances in order to fend off the debt collectors who called incessantly. He described the ease with which fintech had entrapped him, and also how his debt grew out of control due to hidden costs:

Two million turns into three million in the span of 15 days. Loans can be anywhere from 7 days, 15 days, to 30 days. There is an admin fee they take off the top immediately.

At first it seems easy. You want to avoid borrowing from friends. It's not nice. You feel shame, to be borrowing from friends constantly. . . . But then the payments start becoming overwhelming immediately. So you borrow to pay your debts. And the friends who seem more flexible, those payments you delay or prolong, to buy a few days for yourself.

Debt can wipe out social mobility and stability in an instant. The bookseller, for example, had been unable to finish his postgraduate degree at a local university and had to shutter his shop during the pandemic. Not only had personal debt harmed his social networks and ability to plan for his family's future, he could see no other recourse than to resume payments on loans that had already ballooned beyond his control.

Despite the growing frequency of financial dispossession, it is unlikely that victims of predatory lenders or other forms of financial fraud will organize collectively in a movement to strike against their debt. Especially in the global South, the politics of refusal are simply not available to poor borrowers. They have no way to resist the dominant frameworks of debt resolution, which operate through noninstitutional channels of negotiation, intimidation, and public shaming.

In the wake of so many financial scams and predatory practices, the OJK and the ministries of information and taxation routinely launch public awareness campaigns about predatory lenders and

the latest social media swindles. Popular talk shows also feature sensational stories of urban crime, tweeting and posting warnings to the public: "Be aware of the latest scam," or "Never give out your private information," or even "Beware of strangers."

Such approaches place greater responsibility on individuals to deepen their own digital literacy and maintain appropriate levels of caution. Consumer rights advocates and lawyers point out the fraudulent and violent means employed by credit companies and debt collectors, but sectoral trade representatives and the police take a predictable stance in favor of responsabilization. They claim that victims are often "not up to date" or lax in their consumer standards. Either way, as anthropologist John Cox says of popular pyramid schemes in Papua New Guinea, "Scams operate in the space between how people think the world works and how the world should work."

PANDEMIC GRAFT

The economic recession precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has unearthed other unsavory aspects of Indonesia's financial life—notably the frequency of corruption at the state level. Erick Thohir, the minister of state-owned enterprises, has declared a new culture of good corporate governance, taking swift action against executives involved in corruption scandals and leadership failures.

Most recently, the entire board of directors of a state pharmaceutical company was fired when it was revealed that several low-ranking employees had administered already used COVID-19 antigen tests to unsuspecting passengers arriving at Kuala Namu International Airport in Medan, North Sumatra. An even more egregious corruption case in 2020 involved the minister for social affairs, who demanded \$2.3 million in kickbacks from contractors supplying pandemic-relief food aid to the poor.

The trial of the former minister has unveiled the complex and crude ways in which elite political networks utilize party affiliations and private sector opportunities to engage in graft. Such elite tactics mirror market manipulations lower down the chain, where connected individuals have exploited their access to pandemic relief supplies and vaccines to commit fraud and theft. A state-employed doctor in Sumatra was found to have profited from

*The pandemic unearthed
unsavory aspects of Indonesia's
financial life.*

the illegal sale of free COVID-19 vaccines that were intended for prisoners. These cases belie the optimistic belief that good governance and a promised “mental revolution” in the civil service will eradicate systemic corruption.

In April of this year, the president’s official spokesperson visited the new capital city’s Point Zero by helicopter. The site was surrounded by forest and marked only by a simple stone; an official groundbreaking ceremony is scheduled for later this year. Unlike China, Indonesia has not yet experienced the ghost cities of endless real estate expansion. But speculation and powerful land developers have altered the landscape irrevocably.

New financial actors will profit from their investments in the Indonesian economy, blurring the lines between nationalist agendas and the opportunity to participate in one of Asia’s largest property developments in the near future. It is imperative for stakeholders—not only from the usual beleaguered groups of affected communities and activists, journalists, and watchdogs, but also

from a broader public—to press for financial transparency from the state and private institutions involved in the move to the new capital, as the potential for graft remains huge. Observers of the region will remember the fallout from the infamous Malaysian sovereign wealth fund, 1MDB, and its spectacular looting by state agents. Indonesians cannot rely on the politicized and weakened Commission for Corruption Eradication to police the capital spending spree.

How will Indonesia’s economic future make room for citizens whose lives resist or run counter to an idealized course of personal responsibility? Who will ensure that data protection is required by fair and just laws? And what would be a commensurate, humane response from the state and the private sector to ordinary citizens who have paid for the new economy with their own experiments, risks, and losses? These questions hint at the scale of the digital, financial, and political entanglements that will affect all Indonesians going forward. ■

“Unrestrained khaki capitalism is the natural product of militaries that enjoy domestic political dominion and legal impunity.”

Khaki Capital and Coups in Thailand and Myanmar

PAUL CHAMBERS

On May 22, 2014, and February 1, 2021, coups destroyed democracy in Thailand and Myanmar, respectively. In each country the coup was followed by heavy-handed repression of protesters. These events bookended a global trend toward authoritarianism. The Thai coup was followed by five years of military rule and a 2019 election that entrenched an arch-royalist, military-dominated façade democracy. Myanmar’s coup had a bloody aftermath that left at least 750 dead by April.

Military clout has persisted for decades in the two countries. The Royal Thai Armed Forces and the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) have long been leading political and economic actors—the former since the overthrow of Thailand’s absolute monarchy in 1932, and the latter since the nation then known as Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948.

The Tatmadaw derives its political legitimacy from being the institution that guided Burma to independence and forcibly kept it united. Its officers believe this gives them indisputable rights over Myanmar—and its economy.

In 1980, weakened by intense factionalism, the Thai military became the junior member in a power partnership with the monarchy. This asymmetrical arrangement has endured to the present day. The military has garnered its legitimacy from serving as the protector of national security, spearhead of development, and guardian of the monarchy.

While the Thai military has carried out fourteen overt coups, the Tatmadaw has fomented three.

Thailand has lived under direct military rule off and on for 32 years, whereas Myanmar has endured it for 49. Each country is led by a khaki-clad aristocracy, or “khakistocracy.” The military is either dominant or codominant and regularly intervenes in politics.

Both the Thai military and the Tatmadaw have engaged in forms of predatory capitalism, in which wealth is amassed through plunder, extortion, or other forms of exploitation. Their approach is similar to those of mafias that demand payments to provide merchants with “protection” from damage the racketeers themselves might otherwise inflict. The efficacy of such protection has often depended on the legitimacy of the managers of violence and their level of control over states that often have varying degrees of cohesion.

In khaki capitalism, which can be either formal and legal or informal and opaque, the military exploits its state-legitimized monopoly of violence to establish a parasitic or predatory mode of production. The military may influence state budgets; extract, transfer, and parcel out financial resources; and create career opportunities that can be directly or indirectly distributed to military personnel. Khaki capitalism is common in countries where elected governments are unable to effectively control their militaries, such as Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia.

The militaries in both Thailand and Myanmar incrementally boosted their khaki capitalist holdings, but by 2021 they had diverged in some respects. The Thai military rationalizes its extraction of enormous rents as the price for protecting the kingdom; the Tatmadaw simply takes what it wants. The former profits from being a predatory monarchical servant, whereas the latter forcibly collects tribute as a “royalesque,” parasitic elite.

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These interests, and the impulse to protect them, have shaped their handling of internal armed conflicts, their dealings with (and coups against) elected governments, and their relations with monarchy (in the Thai case), as well as their harsh responses to progressive democratic movements in civil society. The two militaries' economic interests have also affected Myanmar–Thai relations and their entanglements with outside powers.

TAKING CHARGE IN THAILAND

Before 1932, a form of patrimonial, monarch-centered capitalism existed in Thailand, then called Siam. Land, budgets, and leading corporations were under the king's thumb. When the military overthrew the absolute monarchy, becoming the preeminent political actor, it assumed control of many of these holdings, including most royal lands. It also helped sustain private (mostly ethnic Chinese) businesses in return for a share of profits or board seats.

By 1938, the defense budget had increased by a third. The dominance of the military during World War II and the beginning of the Cold War made it easy to rationalize the emergence of khaki capital. The number of state enterprises expanded to over 100, while two military-dominated holding companies—Taharn Cooperation Company and the National Economic Development Corporation—became the foundation for multiple private firms.

After US military assistance began flowing to the Thai armed forces in 1950, bases were expanded or built throughout the country. This led to military land grabs in the name of national security. Evictions were facilitated by the fact that borderland villagers often lacked proper title to their land.

Post-1965 anticommunist counterinsurgency operations in Thailand's north, northeast, and south became another convenient rationale for the military to indirectly obtain more land and build more infrastructure. The army acquired extensive holdings of mountainous and forested land along the frontier.

In 1958, junta leader General Sarit Thanarat returned properties to the monarchy, and the military became the king's partner in administering over 4,000 royally initiated economic development projects. From 1958 until 1986, those

projects were at the forefront of army-led “development for security” initiatives. This period also saw continuing growth in the defense budget and a persistent communist insurgency, especially from 1965 to 1971, as well as Cold War conflicts in neighboring Cambodia and Laos.

Until 1992, the military had substantial budgetary autonomy, and parliament rarely rejected defense appropriations. That changed somewhat after that year's Black May massacre. Thai soldiers fired directly into a crowd of peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrators, killing many. Perceptions of the military soured among the public, the media, and parliament. This led to intensified scrutiny of military appropriations and a decline in funding. The trend persisted, owing partly to the 1997 Asian financial crisis as well as to the growing turn toward “civilianization” in Thai politics, reflected in the “people's constitution” adopted in 1997.

In the following decade, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra controlled the defense budget by placing loyalists in key positions. During his years in office (2001–6), the share of GDP allocated to

the armed forces declined by 0.4 percent. The defense budget grew slightly again as Thailand dealt with a Malay–Muslim insurgency beginning in 2004. The 2006 military coup set the stage for a resumption of

more robust growth in defense spending. Although Thailand returned to a period of elected rule in 2008, civilian governments generally sought to appease the military, almost always deferring to the generals' budget requests.

Under the 2014–19 junta, the defense budget grew almost every year. It continued to do so even after Thailand transitioned to a limited democracy in 2019. In 2017, a national strategy enacted by the junta mandated that all future governments commit to growth in annual military appropriations, under threat of being forced from office for violating the law.

VARIED VENTURES

Thailand's May 22, 2014, coup ousted an elected, pro-Thaksin government, following months of antigovernment demonstrations that had received surreptitious support from military leaders and monarchical elements. After the coup, the junta established 10 special economic zones on public land in border areas. Villagers living in

*Almost all coups
in Thailand and Myanmar
had economic motives.*

these areas were often evicted with little compensation. To attract investors, requirements for environmental impact assessments were reduced.

The military is now Thailand's leading landowner, and land is the military's principal income-earner. It manages a diverse array of business ventures on its properties, including 36 golf courses, 3 sports stadiums, and 2 horse racing tracks, as well as hotels, restaurants, event venues, rice mills, housing projects for active-duty soldiers, convenience stores, and gas stations. Altogether, these ventures pull in annual income of more than \$30 million.

The junta's Eastern Economic Corridor project, for example, sits astride territory overseen by an organization called the Five Provinces Bordering Forest Preservation Foundation. The foundation's president is Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, a retired general who previously served as army commander and defense minister. Among the 25 members of its executive committee, 19 are military officials.

In February 2020, after public demands for reform, the Thai army signed a memorandum of understanding to transfer management of state lands and army-controlled businesses to the Finance Ministry, so that most of the revenue would flow into state coffers. The navy and air force made similar promises. But so far the military has done little to hand over any land or businesses to elected civilian authorities.

The military's corporate ownership and shareholdings have been reduced, however, due to glaringly inefficient management within military-led state enterprises. As a result of the restructuring, the number of state enterprises overseen by the army, navy, and air force fell from 100 to 56. The most prominent military-controlled enterprises today are the Bangkok Dock Company, Royal Thai Army Radio and Television Station (Channel 5), and Royal Thai Army Entertainment.

Until reforms adopted in 1992 took effect, it was common for senior Thai military officers to earn income by sitting on the boards of both private and public corporations. After further reforms in response to the 1997 financial crisis, only one or two active-duty military officials could sit on any state enterprise board. But the diminution of military influence was less than met the eye. In many cases, board members were now civilians nominated by the military.

Khaki capital in Thailand also comes in informal varieties, such as the drug trade. Before narcotics

were outlawed in 1959, leading generals vied for control over the opium and heroin market. Allegations that senior officers were profiting from the heroin trade in the Golden Triangle (where northern Thailand borders Laos and Myanmar) persisted throughout the 1960s and 1970s. One rumor had it that the junta leader's son, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, was involved. Others said General (and later Prime Minister) Kriangsak Chomanand profited from a connection with heroin kingpin Khun Sa.

In the 1990s, Thai military officials allegedly worked with guerrilla units of Cambodia's former Khmer Rouge regime to smuggle gems from Cambodia into Thailand. In the post-2004 counterinsurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces, security personnel allegedly have engaged in smuggling fuel and weapons. There have also been claims that military officials are pocketing kickbacks from weapons purchases.

The latest attempt by Thailand's military to find new ways to amass khaki capital has been its creation of the Palang Pracharat political party. Its controversial electoral victory in 2019—which elevated the former junta leader, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, to prime minister—has allowed the military to influence Thailand's economy even more thoroughly.

RISE OF THE TATMADAW

The Tatmadaw was a weak combination of anti-colonial independence fighters and former indigenous soldiers in British colonial forces at the time of Burma's independence in 1948, but it rapidly became the dominant institution in a fragile state. Throughout the 1950s, the military annually consumed 30 to 40 percent of government expenditures. This budget expansion coincided with deepening economic malaise.

By 1958, the Tatmadaw, under General Ne Win, was fighting multiple wars against separatist ethnic armies. From 1958 to 1960, Ne Win acted as caretaker prime minister. During this interregnum, the Tatmadaw entered into commercial business activities by establishing the Defense Services Institute (DSI), a holding company originally intended to provide services for soldiers. It mushroomed to dominate firms throughout the economy—in construction, textiles, tourism, banking, transportation, manufacturing, trading, and retailing. Following the return of civilian rule in 1961, an even larger military holding company, Burma Economic Development Corporation (BEDC), was formed.

In 1962, Ne Win led a coup that institutionalized the Tatmadaw's complete control over the country for the next fifty years. The state immediately nationalized private enterprises and other entities, including all firms controlled by BEDC and DSI. Ne Win's 1962–88 dictatorship was based on an ideology known as the "Burmese Path to Socialism." Officers and soldiers were forbidden from engaging in their own commercial businesses. Instead, much of the economy was put under the control of bureaucrats selected by Ne Win, guaranteeing that Burma would become the dictator's personal fiefdom.

In this pyramid of economic power, Ne Win was patron and Tatmadaw military officers were clients. But Ne Win's post-1974 Nationalist Program Party regime did little to help the economy, which plummeted to such depths that many soldiers had to engage in business activities to support themselves. Meanwhile, the costs of counterinsurgency war-waging forced the regime to increase its defense expenditures from \$91 million in 1962 to \$255 million in 1988 (in current US dollars).

Ne Win's fall from power in July 1988 briefly opened a window for civilian rule, but a new Tatmadaw faction seized power in a brutal September coup. The failure of Ne Win's socialist model led the new regime to adopt a form of military-led bureaucratic capitalism. The ensuing Western sanctions made the move expedient.

During these hard times, some officials continued their involvement in narcotics smuggling, though this traffic mostly ended by the early 1990s. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) regime, which assumed control after 1988—and was renamed as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997—revived the pre-1962 policy of promoting nonstate military holding companies and commercial firms.

Today, two such holding companies together monopolize Myanmar's economy—Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council identified 106 firms connected to them (34 other firms are directly owned by the Tatmadaw). They provide most of the off-budget revenue for the Ministry of Defense. Parliamentary oversight of MEHL and MEC is forbidden.

MEHL, formed in 1990, controls multiple firms in sectors ranging from banking to beverages. It is officially 40-percent owned by the Directorate of Defense Procurement, with the rest held by Tatmadaw officers. Most profits go to the "Patron Group" of senior officers. The 11-member board of directors includes only active-duty or retired military officers.

Established in 1997, MEC is wholly owned by the Ministry of Defense and managed by the Quartermaster General's Office. It also has a private subsidiary, MEC Ltd. Though the corporate structure is murky, the MEC Ltd. board includes seven top Tatmadaw officers. MEC controls even more firms than MEHL, operating in sectors throughout the economy.

State enterprises generate half of all government revenue. The most powerful are Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, perhaps the nation's principal income-earner, as well as Myanmar Mining Enterprises, Myanmar Gems Enterprise, and Myanmar Timber Enterprise. They provide alternative sources of revenue for the Tatmadaw.

Defense appropriations skyrocketed after 1988. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, they rose from \$255 million in 1988 to \$33 billion in 2005 (in current US dollars). As a share of the total

national budget, defense spending stood at 6.3 percent in 1987–88, Ne Win's last year in office. From 1988 until 2011, it averaged 10.3 percent, according to data from Myanmar's Central Statistical Organization. In 2010–11, it jumped to 17.3 percent as the Tatmadaw instituted a pay raise during a transition to semi-democracy.

Even under the new civilian-led government, defense spending stayed high, accounting for 15 percent of the national budget from 2011 to 2014. Following the National League for Democracy's landslide electoral victory in 2015, the government began to cut the defense budget. The Tatmadaw's irritation at these cuts factored into the 2021 coup.

LAND AND JADE

Although there are no public records delineating the full extent of the Tatmadaw's land holdings, it is clear that various units have engaged in land grabs. According to the scholar Maung Aung Myoe, the Tatmadaw extended its control across

*Khaki capitalism can be either
formal and legal or
informal and opaque.*

millions of acres of land under the 1988–2011 SLORC/SPDC regime.

In 1997, continuing Western sanctions and the regional financial crisis forced the state to take desperate measures to appease military personnel. It issued a “live off the land” order, which allowed security forces to seize resources from the local population. The directive merely formalized what was already happening.

Counterinsurgency became the pretext for Tatmadaw units to grab more real estate. In some cases, Tatmadaw units have seized land and forced villagers to pay rent for using it. In other instances, retired personnel (often members of the Myanmar War Veterans Association) have become Tatmadaw colonists in “retirement villages” on properties taken in military land grabs.

Jade has been another growing source of khaki capital for the Tatmadaw. According to Global Witness, the industry generated approximately \$31 billion in 2014, primarily due to demand from China. Centered in northern Kachin state, the jade trade has been dominated by the families of a former dictator, General Than Shwe, and his military cronies. In its quest for jade, the Tatmadaw has expropriated villagers’ land. The Kachin Independence Organization, an ethnic armed group dependent on jade for its own income, has increasingly warred with the Tatmadaw for control of this resource.

However, khaki capital also is generated through agreements between the Tatmadaw and the leaders of former ethnic insurgency groups. Since 2009, the Tatmadaw has sought to incorporate many ethnic armies into its Border Guard Forces (BGFs). These units tend to enjoy quasi-autonomy in terms of economic privileges. Such “cease-fire capitalism,” as the scholar Kevin Woods has described it, co-opts former warlords by permitting them to profit from land grabs that extend the Tatmadaw’s territorial control.

Whereas Tatmadaw soldiers normally rotate to new assignments after a period, BGF soldiers remain in place, which allows them to build up networks of border commerce. Some BGF forces have illegally imported Thai beer or run casinos.

Pro-government ethnic militias also enjoy Tatmadaw support. Some receive salaries; others are permitted to collect transit fees. Some militias are involved in commercial ventures including real estate, hotels, bus lines, gas stations, and logging. Militias may also engage in narcotics trafficking.

Ultimately, the Tatmadaw regards Myanmar as a parallel society. It holds itself separate as the lord

of the civilian population. This mindset justifies the military’s belief that it is entitled to take whatever it wants and use unrestrained force to protect and expand its economic holdings.

COUP ECONOMICS

Almost all of the many coups in Thailand and Myanmar have had economic motives. In Thailand, the 1932 “breakthrough coup” substituted a new military-led economic class for absolute monarchy. Other coups partly sought to guard the economic interests of one military faction against the monarchy, or else resulted from squabbles among military factions over economic spoils. The two most recent coups in Thailand (2006 and 2014) vetoed attempts by civilian governments to assert their authority against political and economic domination by the monarchy and the military.

In Myanmar, the 1962 coup freed the Tatmadaw from meddling by the civilian government in its budget and business holdings, while also protecting the military’s bureaucratic interests (such as control of promotions and influence over civil servants). The 1988 coup ensured that the Tatmadaw’s economic clout would remain untouched by resurgent pro-democratic forces. Although Myanmar’s post-2011 pseudo-democracy seemed to permit elected civilian rule, appearances were deceiving.

By law, the military enjoyed almost complete autonomy from elected civilian control: 25 percent of parliamentary seats were reserved for military officials (enough to block constitutional amendments), and the National Defense and Security Council was controlled by the Tatmadaw rather than the president. Nevertheless, the popular post-2015 elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi continued trying to boost its formal powers vis-à-vis the military.

The 2021 coup restored the military to preeminence. The putsch was a preemptive strike by the Tatmadaw after its setback in the November 2020 elections. Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy won by an even bigger landslide than it had in 2015, while the Tatmadaw’s Union Solidarity and Development Party lost even more seats. The military claimed fraud to nullify the result and prevent a new challenge to its economic power.

BORDER TIES

Given their similarly ruthless pursuit of economic gain, it is not surprising that the Thai and Myanmar militaries have engaged in cross-border collaboration on various khaki capitalist

enterprises. They maintain relations at the individual level (including among intermediate and senior officers) in areas such as illegal border trading. By some accounts, each side takes cuts from the import of Thai goods into Myanmar and the export of Chinese goods from Myanmar.

There are also allegations that cronies of Thai military officials have invested in casinos just over the border in Myanmar that are administered by the Tatmadaw or militias. Thai military and Interior Ministry officials regularly cross into Myanmar to visit casinos.

Security officials from each country have profited from facilitating the illegal movement of people (including forced labor) across closed stretches of the border. Both Thai and Tatmadaw officers reportedly have been involved in trafficking Rohingya refugees from Myanmar across Thailand to third countries. The Tatmadaw's systematic ethnic cleansing of Rohingya had some economic motivations, such as seizing land and natural resources where Rohingya villages once stood.

FOREIGN ENTANGLEMENTS

In recent years, external powers have become economically enmeshed with the Thai military and the Tatmadaw. China, Japan, and the United States are the leading investors in Thailand. Since the 2014 coup, the Thai military has increasingly balanced with Beijing against Washington, traditionally its leading foreign partner.

In 2020, the Defense Ministry invited foreign investment in Thailand's first military-industrial estate, a project that would enable the country to build weapons for export. China and the United States have both shown interest. In the Thai Eastern Economic Corridor, which allows foreign firms to lease parcels of land for up to 99 years, Chinese investment is rife. The Thai Canal Association, dominated by retired senior officers, has backed plans to build a mostly China-funded waterway across the Isthmus of Kra in southern Thailand.

China, Singapore, Japan, and Thailand have been the principal sources of investment in Myanmar. Some foreign firms, such as Benetton, entered Myanmar only in the post-2011 period and took care not to deal with military-owned companies. (Benetton has paused its operations in Myanmar since the 2021 coup.) But most major foreign companies (such as Total and Chevron) have collaborated with the Tatmadaw

since even before the 2011 pseudo-democratic transition. The national unity government in opposition has called on them to withdraw from these joint ventures.

Myanmar is a source of timber, minerals, hydroelectricity, and garments for China. The proposed China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative of global infrastructure projects, would connect southern China with the Indian Ocean harbor of Kyaukpyu, which Chinese firms are set to transform into a deep-sea port. But there has been rising tension between Myanmar (mostly Tatmadaw officials) and China, owing partly to President Thein Sein's 2011 suspension of the Beijing-sponsored Myitsone Dam project, and Myanmar has slowed progress on the Economic Corridor.

Western nations have sought to use sanctions to deter coups and human rights violations in Thailand and Myanmar. But they have not always had the desired effect. After Thailand's 2014 coup, sanctions pushed the military regime to lean toward China, and to some extent toward Russia. That prompted the Trump administration to offer more military aid to Bangkok.

Sanctions have proved to be even less effective with Myanmar, which maintained an inward-oriented war economy for decades. Sanctions on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise might put some pressure on the junta. But the Tatmadaw could respond by turning to Russia and China for economic and military aid, as Thailand has done. For sanctions to be effective, they need to be either more nuanced or universally applied.

Unrestrained khaki capitalism is the natural product of militaries that enjoy domestic political dominion and legal impunity. As long as democracy remains nullified in Myanmar or controlled and highly deficient in Thailand, their generals will never face the kind of security-sector reforms—imposed by elected, civilian-led governments—that could bring them under effective oversight and reduce their budgets.

At least for the near future, the dark days of khaki capitalism look set to continue in Thailand and Myanmar. Be that as it may, the 2020–21 Thai protests and the continuing anti-coup protests in Myanmar—both of which have faced deadly force—bear witness to the fact that people in both countries clearly are not content with military despotism, whether direct or indirect. ■

“If language and land use have been the two pillars of Mongol autonomy within the PRC, both are now targeted by an increasingly assimilationist state willing to override the very limited forms of autonomy still enjoyed by minority nationalities.”

Pastoralism and the State in China’s Inner Mongolia

THOMAS WHITE

In 2020, late summer brought rare protests in China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR). Ethnic Mongols were angered by reforms to the curriculum in Mongolian-language schools that would replace Mongolian with Chinese as the medium of instruction for three core subjects, to be taught via textbooks in use nationwide. Across the region, many Mongols responded by keeping their children away from school, and by circulating petitions calling on the government to uphold the guarantees of minority-language education that are written into China’s constitution. Several suicides in connection with the reforms were also reported. The school strike was broken after parents were threatened with dismissal from their jobs unless they sent their children back to school.

Unrest on this scale had not been seen in the IMAR since 2011, when large protests occurred following the death of a Mongol herder who was run over and killed by a Han Chinese truck driver working for a mine. If language was the focus of concern in 2020, these earlier protests spoke to the centrality of land use in the ethnic politics of the IMAR. In recent decades, the once-remote region has become a center of the Chinese mining industry, significantly contributing to the degradation of the grasslands that constitute the distinctive ecological feature of much of the region, and to the dispossession of the largely Mongol pastoralists who inhabit them.

Pastoralism is one of the key markers of Mongol identity. It distinguishes Mongols from the agrarian Han Chinese, whose large-scale settlement of

the region over the course of the twentieth century deprived Mongols of vast tracts of pastureland, while simultaneously ensuring that they would be an absolute minority even within their own autonomous region. (Mongols now account for less than 20 percent of the IMAR population.) As the Inner Mongolian scholar Uradyn Bulag has argued, pastoralism has served as “a barometer to measure the degree of autonomy Mongols could exercise in their autonomous region.”

If recent reforms suggest that autonomy is being curtailed in the sphere of education, in the context of an increasingly assimilationist state, what readings are now being given by this other barometer? Answering this question involves attending to the ways in which China’s governing of its ethnic minorities is today entangled with state environmentalism, since pastoralists themselves have come to be blamed for the degradation of the grasslands.

TERRITORY AND NATIONALITY

The term “Inner Mongolia” is a legacy of the different statuses of Mongolian regions within the Qing Empire. The princes of Outer Mongolia enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy, and the region remained largely insulated from Chinese settlement. Following the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911, Outer Mongolia achieved de facto independence from China in 1921, and in 1924 the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) was established, with the support of the Soviet Union.

The MPR would go on to adopt the Cyrillic script, while the IMAR still uses the classical, vertical Mongolian script. Even as they face increasing assimilationist pressures within China, Inner Mongols today are proud to have avoided this Russification of their script.

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An earlier policy had sought to prevent Chinese from settling in Mongolian regions, but by the time of its collapse the Qing had abandoned such restrictions, and large numbers of Chinese settlers poured into Inner Mongolia from neighboring provinces. They rented land to farm from Mongol nobles, decreasing the land available to Mongol commoners, who had enjoyed customary use rights to pastureland in their respective “banners,” the administrative units into which Inner Mongolia was divided. As the Qing fell, the territory administered by banners was reduced; Chinese counties were set up to govern the increasing population of Chinese settlers.

The defense of Mongol autonomy in early-twentieth-century China was distinctive in its concern with the preservation of the banner as an administrative unit. Today, the IMAR is the only part of China where an alternative, ethnically marked system of subregional administrative units exists. (Above the banner is the “league,” equivalent to the prefecture or municipality in other parts of China.) But success in this respect has been only partial; the territory of the IMAR is now a patchwork of ostensibly Mongol banners (most of which in fact have Chinese majorities) and Chinese-dominated counties. Several leagues have also been “upgraded” to the status of municipalities in recent years.

Another legacy of Chinese settlement and the concomitant decrease in available pastureland is the fact that a large population of agricultural Mongols exists in eastern Inner Mongolia. This region contains the highest concentration of Mongols anywhere in the world, and it has produced generations of Mongol revolutionaries, intellectuals, and officials. Despite this, the agricultural Mongols are largely ignored in representations of Mongolian culture and identity, such is the overwhelming focus on pastoralism. The standard dialect of the Mongolian language in Inner Mongolia, taught in schools across the region and used in broadcasting, comes not from this region but from the pastoral area of Shiliingol to the west.

In the course of the Republican era that followed the collapse of the Qing, Inner Mongolia itself was wiped from the map. Its western areas were subsumed into Chinese provinces, while the east became part of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. The IMAR was established by the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1947, two years *before* the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The CCP succeeded in co-opting a separate Mongol nationalist movement in eastern Inner Mongolia, which had leaned toward unification with the MPR, thanks in part to the political skills of a senior Mongol cadre, Ulanhu, who was to become China’s highest-ranking ethnic minority official. The Sino-Soviet treaty of 1945 had already foreclosed the possibility of Inner Mongolian accession to the MPR, as did China’s formal recognition of the latter’s independence.

The CCP promised to unify historically Mongolian territories that had been parcelled out among Chinese provinces following the collapse of the Qing. Yet this apparent concession to Inner Mongolian nationalism had the effect of reducing the political power of the Mongols, since they were significantly outnumbered by Chinese settlers in the expanded IMAR. This disparity would only increase as Chinese workers were brought in to develop the mines at Bayan Obo (the world’s largest deposit of rare earth metals) and the steelworks at Baotou. At the end of the 1950s, refugees fleeing the famine in neighboring provinces precipitated by Mao’s Great Leap Forward further reduced the proportion of Mongols within their own autonomous region.

The CCP’s policies toward minority “nationalities” (*minzu*) drew on Soviet models, but also reflected the importance of Inner Asian peoples and their territories to CCP strategy in the Chinese Civil War. These policies initially included the right to secession, though it was later withdrawn. A 1938 speech by Mao, declaring that minorities should not be forced to learn Chinese, and should be allowed to use and develop their own languages and scripts, was often cited on Inner Mongolian social media following the announcement of the educational reforms in the summer of 2020.

These nationality policies are now giving way to a more aggressively unitary nation-building project, which has intensified under the presidency of Xi Jinping. Prominent Chinese intellectuals in recent years have been calling for a “second generation” of nationality policies, which would involve an emphasis on self-ascribed, “depoliticized” ethnicity over the concept of nationality. This “depoliticization” would involve the disappearance of territorial autonomy and other privileges

Pastoralism is one of the key markers of Mongol identity.

granted by the state (including extra points for minorities on university entrance exams, for example), thereby making China correspond more closely, so these intellectuals believe, to the “melting pot” model that they regard as a particular strength of the United States. Recent events in China suggest that these “second generation” proposals now exercise considerable influence over policymakers.

THE PASTORAL EXCEPTION

The first test of Inner Mongolian autonomy was the CCP policy of land reform. In agrarian regions of China, this policy had proved instrumental in winning peasants over to the CCP cause. In the IMAR, however, differences of class, as identified by CCP cadres, were cross-cut by those of nationality. In agricultural areas, “landlords” were often Mongols, while the “poor peasants” were Chinese settlers. As a result, class struggle took the form of ethnic conflict.

In pastoral regions, land reform involved the division of herds among numerous households, reducing the ability of herds to reproduce themselves. In many cases, herders slaughtered their animals to prevent them from being confiscated. The result of this was the rapid immiseration of pastoral regions.

In response, Ulanhu managed to create a kind of pastoral exception to CCP policies formulated for agricultural regions of China, which also helped to consolidate pastoralism as a key signifier of the Mongol nationality. There would be no property distribution, no class labeling, and no class struggle in pastoral regions of the IMAR. This exception would come to serve as a model for other pastoral regions of China.

Ulanhu argued against a mode of evolutionist thinking, common among Chinese officials, that viewed pastoralism as a “backward” mode of production in comparison with agriculture. He resisted the state-led reclamation of pastureland for agriculture (and Chinese settlement), a strategy through which Chinese states had long sought to control their Inner Asian frontiers. After Mao in 1964 selected the farming village of Dazhai in Shanxi province as a model for the rest of the country to follow, Ulanhu chose the district of Uushin Juu in western Inner Mongolia to be a “pastoral Dazhai,” thereby again marking off pastoralism as requiring separate treatment, while simultaneously expressing formal fidelity to Maoist models.

As the 1960s progressed, however, the pastoral exception that Ulanhu had carved out for the IMAR was eclipsed by the violent persecution of Mongols. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, the cultural and linguistic ties between Mongols in the IMAR and those in the independent, Soviet-aligned MPR came to be framed in a dangerously political light. During the Cultural Revolution, thousands of Mongols were killed and many more injured, often falsely accused of belonging to a separatist “Inner Mongolian People’s Party.” Red Guards roamed the countryside, destroying Mongolian Buddhist monasteries and other religious sites. In 1969, large parts of the IMAR were lopped off and granted to neighboring Chinese provinces, as a way of reducing the perceived power of the Mongols.

In a climate of paranoid emphasis on “self-reliance,” Mongol pastoralists again found themselves ideologically exposed. They were chastised for consuming grain that they did not produce themselves, which was known as “grain of bad conscience.” Officials in pastoral regions were forced to reclaim pastureland for agriculture, thereby contributing to the degradation of the grasslands. It is this degradation that Chinese state environmentalism is today supposed to combat, though once more it is pastoralists who find themselves on the wrong end of state policy.

‘RETIRE LIVESTOCK, RESTORE GRASSLANDS’

The introduction of market reforms in these parts of China in the 1980s broke up the large collectives through which the pastoral economy had been managed since 1958. Herds were divided up among individual households, and this was gradually followed by collective pastureland being contracted out on long leases to individual households. This policy in pastoral regions mirrored what was being done in agricultural parts of China, but some Mongol officials hoped that the fragmentation of land use rights would help secure Mongol autonomy, since it might make the large-scale dispossession of Mongol herders more difficult.

Yet this form of privatization had heavy ecological costs. Herders were now limited in their ability to relieve pressure on pastures through the strategies of mobility that had long been important to animal husbandry on the Mongolian plateau. Although the term “nomad” conjures up an image of ceaseless, directionless wandering, “mobile pastoralists” in the region in fact tended to practice a kind of regularized seasonal transhumance

between pastures, supplemented at times of localized drought by more long-distance migration. In the collective era, such migrations had been coordinated by the various local governments. Numerous scholars now suggest that mobility on the part of herders on the Mongolian plateau is a sophisticated way of dealing with the nonequilibrium ecology of these arid grasslands.

Drawing on theories of desertification that had first been formulated in colonial Africa, however, the Chinese state blamed the degradation of the grasslands not on the barbed-wire fences that now transected them, but instead on overstocking by herders, and their alleged mismanagement of the pastures that had been leased to individual households. This attribution of responsibility is inflected by a long-standing stigmatization of pastoralism as a “backward” form of land use. In the wake of an increasing number of sandstorms that menaced northern China in the 1990s, a policy known as “retire livestock, restore grasslands” was adopted. It was implemented as part of China’s Great Western Development Strategy at the turn of the millennium.

In the IMAR, the “retire livestock, restore grasslands” policy involves bans on grazing in some areas, and the introduction of stocking limits in others. Herders then receive payments that are correlated

to reduction in herd size. In some cases, herders have also been given money to relocate to urban areas, sometimes on the condition that their houses on the grasslands are razed to the ground, making return impossible. Herders who remain on the grasslands are encouraged to raise their animals in barns with fodder, rather than grazing the rangeland, thereby increasing their dependence on the market.

In certain areas, herders receive subsidies if they fence off some or all of their pastureland and plant trees and shrubs, as part of a plan to turn Inner Mongolia into a giant shelterbelt protecting Beijing. Other tracts of rangeland have been declared “public benefit forests” and fenced off to prevent grazing. But monocultural afforestation projects, of the kind that are springing up in many parts of Inner Mongolia, can in fact deplete underground water and increase desertification.

While some commentators in the West have been impressed with the ambitiousness of China’s environmental policies, scholars Yifei Li and

Judith Shapiro have recently criticized what they regard as its “coercive environmentalism.” One example they mention is the forced resettlement of herders across China’s western regions, a policy known as “ecological migration.” However, a focus on such techniques, characteristic of what the political scientist James Scott has called “high modernist” states, can obscure some of the more subtle ways in which state environmentalism works, through a complex system of sticks and carrots that induces herders to move off the grasslands and into towns and cities.

For many herders, this is felt as the narrowing of options: fencing, stocking limits, afforestation projects, mining operations, the closure of rural schools, drought, and subsidized urban housing combine to make rural life unviable, until “voluntary” resettlement in the city becomes inevitable. The payments they receive for stock reduction are not enough to live on in the city, so they must seek low-status employment, often in restaurants or as taxi drivers. Others prefer to try their luck with small-scale trading—some deal in pre-

precious stones from remote parts of the Gobi—though they complain that they lack the business acumen and connections of Han Chinese in the region. But an older neighbor, without school-age children, might decide that

life on the grasslands, even with a much-reduced herd, is still preferable to the precariousness of urban life without employment prospects.

Even within a single banner, these environmental policies often are not implemented in a uniform manner. Some districts adopted them earlier than others, and the severity with which they are enforced can also differ. One unintentional effect of this uneven implementation is that herders facing strict stocking limits can lend some of their livestock to herders in another district who are not subject to the same limits, in return for a certain amount of money or meat. Such arrangements also allow them to imagine that they might one day be able to return to the grasslands. Others find ways around the policies—by herding animals at night, for example, or by moving their herds to inaccessible mountains or deserts.

The variegated nature of these grassland management policies, the fact that their implementation has by and large been delegated to local governments, and the different ways in which

*Pastoralists have come to be
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of the grasslands.*

individual herding households engage with them all serve to reduce the scope for the kind of collective protest, or “mass incident,” that the state fears. Nonetheless, many Mongols still perceive in these environmental policies an attack on a distinctively Mongolian way of life. They point to the fact that as the policies were being implemented, the IMAR was witnessing the proliferation of mining operations far more environmentally destructive than extensive animal husbandry. Many see the policies as a thinly disguised form of land grabbing, as pastureland vacated by herders is turned over to large-scale intensive agriculture or feedlots, mining concerns, military bases, or highly polluting factories unable to operate in more densely populated parts of China.

Following the 2011 events, protests over land have been more localized. Small groups of herders from certain districts have traveled to larger administrative centers, including even Beijing, to protest the confiscation of their pastureland by local officials. Such incidents tend to occur when officials overplay their hand and target large tracts of land, affecting multiple households simultaneously, without offering adequate compensation.

In such cases, protesters often downplay the ethnic aspect of their grievances, instead arguing that their legal rights to land (as individuals or as villagers with collective land rights), or to proper compensation, are being infringed. In keeping with a time-honored, institutionalized form of redress-seeking in China, they petition higher powers to intervene on their behalf as law-abiding Chinese citizens. The localized nature of these protests is partly a testament to the uneven implementation of the “retire livestock, restore grasslands” policies across the IMAR.

PASTORALISM AS CONSERVATION

A focus on sporadic forms of open protest can obscure the ways in which Mongol officials and intellectuals, working within the state and with its discourses, have continued to engage in the politics of pastoral exception, albeit while lacking the kind of influence once enjoyed by Ulanhu. In some instances, they have made connections with Chinese ecologists, inviting them to conduct research in pastoral regions. There now exists an extensive literature in Chinese which is critical of both the ecological and the social effects of these policies, and which argues that mobile pastoralism can in fact be beneficial to the ecology of the grasslands.

Whereas Ulanhu once defended pastoralism as a mode of production, some Mongol officials and intellectuals today in parts of the IMAR have come to champion it as a mode of conservation. The state's attempts to “modernize” livestock production in the region have involved the introduction of exotic breeds, which are often unable to tolerate the harsh environment of the Mongolian plateau and must be raised indoors. In recent years, Mongol officials and scientists have argued for the importance of maintaining populations of native breeds, especially of camels and horses. These animals were victims of the reform era, when they were replaced with more lucrative species, particularly cashmere goats. Herding native breeds also became impractical, since pastureland privatization reduced the land available for them.

In several parts of the IMAR, retired Mongol officials have established small organizations dedicated to the conservation of these native species and breeds. Globally circulating ideas of biodiversity conservation, particularly the concept of “animal genetic resources,” have made it possible to argue that these animals are vital to food security, and are key to enabling livestock production to adapt to future environmental change and shifts in market demand.

In some parts of the IMAR, certain native breeds have been granted exemptions from stocking limits and grazing bans. Their suitability to extensive modes of animal husbandry has afforded their advocates another means of criticizing the proliferation of fencing and stall-based modes of livestock production: they claim that the grazing of these native breeds, rather than destroying the grassland, is vital to its health. Growing demand for organic food in China, following high-profile food safety scandals, suggests potential new markets. Several Mongol scientists working in life sciences departments at Inner Mongolian universities have also sought to emphasize the potential utility of these genetic resources to biotechnology development, now a key focus of Chinese policy.

THE EROSION OF NATIONALITY

While it represents a new articulation of the pastoral exception, this refiguring of pastoralism as conservation also contributes to the gradual erosion of the salience of “nationality” within official discourse in China. Native livestock breeds are registered as part of China's “national genetic resources,” a form of biological nation-building that works to efface their associations with a particular

minority nationality. At the same time, these breeds, and the conservation politics that coalesce around them, often emphasize particular banner identities and accompany the promotion (or invention) of local place-based cultures.

Officials are keen to promote local distinctiveness at the league or banner level to catch the eye of tourists and investors, and culture at the scale of nationality is increasingly deemphasized in official discourse. So, for example, Uushin Banner, once the location of the model “pastoral Dazhai,” now brands itself as the home of the Uushin breed of horse, and the local government promotes what it calls “Uushin horse culture.” Nearby Alasha has earned the official title of “China’s Camel Country,” while to the east, Ujumchin Right Banner styles itself “China’s White Horse Country,” after a distinctive local variety of the Mongolian horse. Such appellations serve to tie together locality and nation-state, while transcending the IMAR and its titular nationality.

Rather than preserving a timeless Mongolian nomadic culture, these conservation initiatives are bound up with novel conceptions of value stemming from global biodiversity discourse, and they instantiate new kinds of place-based culture. Here it is worth noting the difference between approaches to language and land use in relation to the concept of nationality. Mongolian-language education has been a project of standardization and nationality-building, teaching students across the IMAR a singular version of the language, one which is also used in broadcasting and print media. By contrast, where pastoralism is still possible in the IMAR, it increasingly takes the form of what might be called an officially approved local dialect, emphasizing both the animal-genetic and the cultural distinctiveness of particular localities, such that culture and nationality are no longer isomorphic.

If language and land use have been the two pillars of Mongol autonomy within the PRC, both are now targeted by an increasingly assimilationist state willing to override the very limited forms of autonomy still enjoyed by minority nationalities. The downgrading of minority languages has already been pursued in the Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous regions. In the latter particularly,

*Many see environmental policies
as a thinly disguised form of
land grabbing.*

these language reforms have only been the thin end of the assimilationist wedge. Since 2017, a network of extrajudicial detention centers has been established in Xinjiang, where around one million members of Muslim minorities, predominantly the Uyghur, have been detained for “re-education.”

But grasping how pastoralism in the IMAR is being transformed by state policies requires moving beyond traditional narratives of “nomad sedentarization,” through which the relationship between modern states and pastoralists is often understood. While the Chinese state does continue to use the large-scale forced resettlement of peoples as a means of controlling its peripheries, state environmentalism also works at a different scale and pace in the IMAR, gradually making extensive animal husbandry unviable, while incentivizing herders to move to urban centers and embrace their “civilizing” influences.

The state’s conservationist discourse has also allowed some Mongols to articulate forms of pastoral exception, centered on particular breeds and localities. These exceptions are fragile, dependent

on the ability of their advocates to counter dominant representations of pastoralism as “backward,” and on the abiding attraction of local officials to more intensive forms of land use. The government of the IMAR in recent

years has begun to curtail some of the resource extraction for which the region had become notorious, seeking to transform it into China’s “Northern Ecological Security Shield.” Small-scale mines have been closed, and in the spring of 2021 this extended to shutting down energy-intensive cryptocurrency mining projects that had proliferated in the region.

State environmentalism, which has done so much to make pastoralism unviable in recent decades, might paradoxically enable its revival at least in a few parts of Inner Mongolia as a mode of conservation, in the wake of the abandonment of more environmentally destructive modes of land use. This, at least, is the hope against hope of those Mongols who have defended pastoralism from within the state. They must do so, however, in the context of an aggressive nation-building project—one in which the concept of “nationality” appears to have an ever-smaller place. ■

“Japanese and especially Koreans with disabilities have gained rights, and legal tools for defending and developing their rights, as a result of rising activism by disabled people advocating the social and human rights models of disability.”

Disabled People’s Fight for Rights in South Korea and Japan

CELESTE L. ARRINGTON

The rights of people with disabilities are increasingly recognized in Japan and South Korea, East Asia’s main industrialized democracies. In 2008, South Korea enacted unprecedented legislation to prohibit disability-based discrimination and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Japan passed similar anti-discrimination legislation in 2013, revised its Basic Law for Disabled People in 2011, and ratified the CRPD in 2014. These developments fit a global trend: the number of countries with prohibitions on disability-based discrimination grew from 40 in 2002 to more than 125 today. South Korea and Japan also recently bolstered regulations requiring accessible public transportation, barrier-free buildings, information accessibility, and employment quotas for disabled persons. These reforms indicate three interrelated changes in both polities: shifting understandings of disability, growing self-advocacy by disabled persons, and a more legalistic approach to governance.

South Korea and Japan have notable similarities. They were historically quite homogeneous societies, unwelcoming of difference. Longtime conservative rule—under authoritarianism in Korea and one-party dominant democracy in Japan—excluded certain groups from policy processes before the 1990s. Both governments also preferred flexible, cooperative regulatory approaches rather than legalistic ones until recently. And both societies are rapidly aging. Japan has the highest

proportion of people over 65 (28 percent) in the world, straining caregiving resources.

Until recently, Japan and South Korea were among the few countries that used centralized systems of grading disability based on medical criteria to determine eligibility for state assistance and benefits. These systems help explain the relatively lower numbers of officially recognized disabled people in both countries, which at 6 to 7 percent of each population is far below other OECD countries. It took a 1,842-day sit-in in a Seoul subway station for Korean disability rights advocates to persuade their government to replace this system in 2019 with one that assesses individual needs and situations, such as rural versus urban. Japan still uses the grading system.

Comparing rights-based activism in Korea and Japan highlights three shared trends and distinctive nuances. First, multifaceted reforms in both countries signal a paradigm shift away from the medical or welfare model of disability, toward the social and human rights models. Previously, disabled people were treated as objects of charity, medical care, rehabilitation, or welfare programs. The social model, however, focuses on how disabled people face discrimination and exclusion due to society’s attitudes toward their conditions and as a result of the built environment. The human rights model goes further, emphasizing the inherent dignity and rights of disabled individuals, including the right to assistance for daily life. Japanese and Korean laws increasingly protect disabled people’s rights, such as by banning discrimination and requiring reasonable accommodations to enable active participation in politics and society. Yet these reforms have helped people with certain physical and cognitive impairments more than others, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequities and remaining challenges.

Disability and Equality

First in a series

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Second, disability-related policy reforms in Japan and Korea are a testament to effective advocacy by—rather than just for—people with disabilities. Some disability subgroups, such as the blind in Japan, have been involved in policymaking for a century. In recent decades, more subgroups mobilized and cooperated across disability types to assert their equal rights and seek to access public transit, education, and care services. Some also pursued cultural, educational, or mutual help activities unrelated to policy. Japanese activists recall discovering “the importance of disabled individuals’ own advocacy for achieving systemic change” while taking turns living in Berkeley, California, on three-month visas in the 1990s to learn about the independent living movement begun there in the 1960s. Self-advocacy also had domestic roots. Disabled activists in Korea and Japan have adopted diverse tactics, including direct action such as protests and sit-ins, as well as institutional tactics like policy research, petition campaigns, lobbying, and litigation to push for reforms. A disabled Korean activist explained, “We protest to give rights meaning and obtain the welfare needed to realize our rights.”

Third, compared with the flexible and cooperative style of previous disability policies, which involved ongoing negotiations among stakeholders and agencies, recent reforms have a more formal, legalistic flavor. South Korea took legalism further, as seen in its anti-discrimination law. The term “legalism” refers to policies and implementation methods characterized by formal rules, enforcement mechanisms like fines, and dispute resolution processes—including via the courts. As a Japanese activist argued, “vague social norms” are insufficient: “We need clear legal rules that will make it easier for everyone to understand what constitutes discrimination.”

Japanese and especially Koreans with disabilities have gained rights, and legal tools for defending and developing their rights, as a result of rising activism by disabled people advocating the social and human rights models of disability. Disability rights activism and policy changes in both countries are also transforming social perceptions of disabilities.

GAINING A VOICE

Most Koreans and Japanese with disabilities were stigmatized and marginalized historically.

Confined to their homes, disabled people received care from relatives, usually women. Public assistance after World War II and the Korean War prioritized rehabilitating wounded veterans to integrate them into the formal economy, as in Europe and the United States. Select categories of disabled nonveterans also obtained support in Japan.

Activists used the international limelight of the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics and comparisons with athletes from the West to seek expanded welfare benefits and services. Policymakers embraced residential institutions as a cost-effective option. Institutionalizing disabled people also solved still-developing South Korea’s goals of promoting social order and lessening families’ burdens so nondisabled relatives could join the workforce. Human rights abuses abounded in Japanese and Korean institutions and are still being revealed: forced sterilizations, sexual abuse, beatings, and deaths due to such mistreatment.

Early activism focused on welfare benefits, maltreatment in institutions, and access to education and public transit, not on “rights” per se. Disabled people in Japan petitioned local governments for better care and services; parents sought access to regular schools for their disabled children. Residents at institutions staged sit-ins and hunger strikes. One oft-cited early activist group in Japan was Aoi Shiba no Kai (Green Grass Association), for people with cerebral palsy. It gained national attention in the 1970s by adopting confrontational tactics, such as protesting abortions or sterilization of the disabled under the Eugenics Protection Law and occupying city buses after disabled persons were denied rides. In the 1980s, an emerging “independent living” movement sought to address barriers in the built environment and gaps in services outside institutions.

In South Korea, meanwhile, a succession of authoritarian regimes hampered mobilization. Nonetheless, families and special education teachers collected signatures on a petition that resulted in exemptions from the physical fitness test for disabled secondary school applicants in 1972. A student and four bar exam passers with disabilities successfully sued for university admission and jobs as judges, respectively, in the early 1980s. Then, mirroring the broader pro-democracy movement’s oppositional tactics, students with disabilities mobilized to an

Disabled people gained prominence in activism.

unprecedented degree to boycott the 1988 Seoul Olympics and Paralympics and to demand legislation providing welfare and employment benefits for disabled people. They also established night schools (*yahak*) to supply high school equivalency education and foster solidarity among disabled people. Advocacy for specialized services and care accelerated with the emerging independent living movement in the 1990s, after mass protests led to democratic elections in 1987 and a new constitution with civil rights protections.

Through such activism, disabled people gained visibility. Fueling this trend was the philosophy that “affected parties”—*tōjisha* in Japanese, *dang-saja* in Korean—should be foregrounded more than professionals or nondisabled allies. One Japanese man with intellectual disabilities described an empowering transition from “not wanting to talk and not being heard,” when in a residential facility, to “coming to believe that we can reform society by telling our stories and discussing our needs.” As more Japanese and Koreans with disabilities engaged in self-advocacy, their activism increasingly advanced the social model, which transfers from individuals to society the onus for dismantling hurdles to disabled persons’ full participation.

GLOBAL LINKAGES

International developments bolstered Japan and South Korea’s blossoming disability rights movements, and Japanese and Koreans contributed to international trends. The first major catalysts were the UN’s Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 and Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–92) and the accompanying global activism. Japanese and some Korean disability advocates had previously hosted foreign activists (Helen Keller visited Japan and its Korean colony in 1937), taken study tours abroad, and joined international conferences. Yet initiatives in the 1980s facilitated domestic organizing and more sustained transnational engagement.

Aoi Shiba had established the progressive National Federation of Movements for the Liberation of Disabled Persons (*Zenshōren*) in 1976, and multi-disability organizations proliferated in Japan thereafter, with international linkages. The Japanese branch of Disabled Persons International (DPI-Japan) was founded in 1986 and grew to include nearly 100 allied groups. Independent living centers, many of which were founded in the 1980s and adapted US ideas to the Japanese context, coalesced into the Japan Council for Independent Living Centers in 1991.

In South Korea, multi-disability organizing began with the Federation of Disabled Youth and DPI-Korea in the late 1980s and accelerated with democratization. These youth favored direct action and *dangsaja* leadership. In subsequent decades they spearheaded the mobility rights movement, contributed radical tactics to the anti-discrimination law movement, and founded the group Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination, which organized the five-year sit-in to abolish the disability grading system. A pair of more moderate groups, the Korea Federation of Organizations of the Disabled and the Korea Differently Abled Federation, were formed in the 1990s. Such groups campaigned increasingly for the rights of all disabled persons (though certain subcategories of impairments were overrepresented) and engaged with foreign advocates.

The Japanese and Korean governments also responded to UN initiatives in the 1980s and early 1990s, but rights were not yet prioritized. More *tōjisha* were invited to become members of Japanese policy deliberation councils, which emphasized “normalization” and reducing barriers in daily life. Although revisions to the Basic Law for Disabled People in 1993 legally acknowledged disabled persons’ rights for the first time, they provided no enforcement mechanisms. Policy still relied on “welfare and good intentions (*zen’i*),” as one activist noted.

For South Korean dictator Chun Doo-hwan, who held power from 1981 to 1987, improving state support for disabled people fit his aim of turning Korea into an advanced country with a modern welfare system. The 1988 Seoul Olympics showcased Korean development and democratization globally, but activist groups criticized disability-related reforms as superficial. As in Japan, public assistance, special education, and employment opportunities gradually improved.

The 1990 Americans with Disability Act (ADA) provided a second accelerant for Japanese and Korean disability rights movements, serving as a model civil rights–style anti-discrimination law. In 1993, DPI-Korea translated the influential book *The Impact of the ADA* from Japanese. An online network of disabled and nondisabled Koreans started studying foreign anti-discrimination laws.

The ADA raised awareness about how law and lawyers could promote equality. After studying disability rights advocacy in Berkeley, Japanese disabled activists and lawyers founded Legal Advocacy for the Rights of Disabled Persons

(LADD) in 1996. The Japanese and Korean national bar associations created disability rights subcommittees at the turn of the millennium, and each added a chapter on disabilities to its annual human rights report. Activists and lawyers then published two drafts of anti-discrimination laws in each country, using the ADA and similar British and Australian laws as benchmarks.

The third, contemporaneous international catalyst was the CRPD, which Mexico jump-started in 2001, supplying the first draft for UN negotiations. The convention (which the United States has yet to ratify) declared that all international human rights also apply to people with disabilities, and specified adaptations needed for them to effectively exercise those rights. Japanese and Korean officials and disability organizations participated actively in the negotiations. The Japanese delegation contributed language to Article 13 about eliminating physical and communication barriers in courtrooms. The Koreans were crucial in drafting Article 6 (on women with disabilities) and Article 19 (on independent living). As with Japanese and Korean foregrounding of affected parties, CRPD negotiations emphasized the now-global phrase “nothing about us without us.” Japan and South Korea both signed the CRPD in 2007.

Involvement in the CRPD negotiations deepened Japanese and Korean activists’ international networks, as well as their ties to officials from their own countries. As an adviser to the Japanese delegation, Japanese lawyer and wheelchair-user Higashi Toshihiro helped write Article 13 of the CRPD, reportedly informed by the hardships that a client of his with intellectual disabilities had experienced in Japanese courts. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) later chose Higashi, instead of a career bureaucrat, to lead its new Cabinet Secretariat for disability policy reforms.

Korean women with disabilities, who had transnational advocacy experience from participating in the 1995 Beijing World Conference for Women, were prominent in South Korea’s delegation to the CRPD negotiations and championed Article 6. They were also invited onto the committee for drafting domestic anti-discrimination legislation and ensured that clauses about women were in the law. In such ways, CRPD-related connections, rhetoric, and experience often facilitated domestic policymaking to implement the CRPD.

ACCESS ACTIVISM

Access-related activism and reforms in Japan and South Korea began before the CRPD, but international developments added impetus for legislation with teeth. As a result of domestic activism, more elevators have been installed in both countries, raised strips and audio cues guide visually impaired riders, buses have lower floors, and buildings and information technology have become more accessible, though gaps persist.

Japanese access protests began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s, when the independent living movement capitalized on concerns about the aging population to advocate universal design. As in the United States, protesters’ demands first drew a response from local governments. Then, the Diet passed the so-called Heart Building Law in 1994, with subsidies for accessible design modifications but voluntary architectural standards. The first legal requirement for accessibility was the 2000 Barrier-Free Public Transportation Law. Activism for stronger regulations contributed to the 2006 New Barrier-Free Law, which expanded

the scope of people and facilities covered by the mandate for universal design and made policy processes more inclusive. In the late 1990s, another movement fought to eliminate the dozens of legal clauses that disqualified dis-

abled people from certain professional licenses.

In South Korea, fatal accidents, such as the 2001 death of a woman using a wheelchair lift in the Seoul metro, prompted disability groups to organize for the right to mobility (*idong gwon*). Activists with roots in the 1980s student protests occupied buses and chained themselves to train tracks. These demonstrations prompted the 2005 Act on Promoting Transportation Convenience for Mobility Disadvantaged Persons. It set mandatory standards, subsidized low-floor buses, loosened regulations on drivers’ licenses for disabled people, and established special transport services. The 1997 Law to Promote Convenience for Disabled People, Senior Citizens, Pregnant Women, and Nursing Mothers covered facilities and equipment and has been repeatedly revised.

The benefits that strengthening accessibility regulations would provide for ballooning elderly populations and the parents of young children bolstered support for such measures. Japan’s March 2011 triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and

The ADA raised awareness about how law and lawyers could promote equality.

nuclear plant meltdown) spurred reforms by exposing the sometimes-fatal consequences of inaccessibility, not just for disabled people fleeing the tsunami but also for the elderly. Similarly, after a lawsuit by disabled persons over inaccessible intercity buses in South Korea failed, the lawyers added older adults and parents with strollers as plaintiffs—and won.

Some policies intended to benefit both older and disabled groups have been detrimental to disabled people with different needs. When Japan merged the welfare systems for older and disabled people via the 2005 Independence Support Law (ISL), disability communities were angered because the legislation canceled popular new benefits and imposed a 10 percent co-payment for care, which can be costly in cases of severe disabilities. Arguing that the co-payment burden violated their right to life, tens of thousands protested. After the protests failed to prevent the ISL's passage, 71 disabled people filed 14 collective lawsuits. The plaintiffs were represented by 173 lawyers, and the cases raised awareness of disability rights among legal professionals. Replacing the ISL joined anti-discrimination legislation and CRPD ratification as the main objectives for disability rights advocates in Japan.

ENSURING RIGHTS

Disability discrimination legislation that was passed in 2007 in South Korea and in 2013 in Japan constituted milestones for disability rights and the activists who had sought such laws for a decade. The Korean law explicitly “prohibited” (*geumji*) disability-based discrimination, defined specific forms of discrimination, assigned the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK) to hear complaints (including from NGOs, not just individuals), and stipulated judicial recourse and fines. The NHRCK can investigate cases and issue nonbinding recommendations, even if the cases are also being litigated in court. The proportion of disability-related discrimination complaints submitted to the NHRCK leaped from 14 percent to 61 percent in the first eight months after the law's enactment.

Although Japanese activists sought similarly detailed definitions of discrimination and justiciable rights, the Japanese law, which took effect in 2016, aimed instead to “eliminate” (*kaishō*) discrimination. Its definition of discrimination was vaguer, and it offered no explicit judicial recourse. Although it obliged public entities to provide

reasonable accommodations, it relied on voluntary compliance from private entities—until 2021 revisions, which will go into effect within three years, made it mandatory for businesses to offer reasonable accommodations. The 2013 law also created regional disability elimination councils to facilitate communication among stakeholders and mandated consultation offices for dispute resolution. Consultation (*sōdan*) is often faster than court-based remedies, but cannot force compliance. The Cabinet Office reports that all councils include *tōjisha*, but three-quarters have no women *tōjisha*.

In sum, both laws improved disability rights, but Korea's more legalistic reforms offer more robust rights-claiming options for disabled people. Several factors explain why the Korean reforms were earlier and more legalistic than Japan's.

First, about 60 Korean disability groups united as the Disability Discrimination Act Solidarity of Korea (DDASK), while Japanese disability groups were less unified and pursued anti-discrimination legislation among other core policy objectives. DDASK decision-making was designed to secure buy-in from Korea's largest disability groups, which sometimes disagree. It also incorporated the mobility rights movement's leaders as a radical flank—they organized disruptive tactics alongside tamer negotiations over the law's content. With concerted pressure and support from the government, the DDASK persuaded liberals in the National Assembly to pass anti-discrimination legislation before the widely anticipated conservative victory in the 2007 presidential election. Japanese disability groups took a less centralized approach, with different organizations pushing to abolish the ISL, increase employment quotas for disabled people, curb abuse in institutions, and revise the election law to enfranchise people with intellectual disabilities. They achieved most of these reforms but ended up with an anti-discrimination law that was weaker than Korea's.

Second, a left-leaning government ascended to power earlier in South Korea than in Japan during this phase of disability rights activism. In both countries, left-of-center governments included disabled persons in policymaking to an unprecedented degree and prioritized reforming disability policies. In South Korea, President Roh Moo-hyun (in office from 2003 to 2008) had pledged anti-discrimination legislation on the campaign trail. His administration established a government–civil society task force to draft a bill. The DDASK selected representatives for the task force, which used the

DDASK's draft as a starting point. Such institutional tactics were coupled with weeks-long sit-ins and demonstrations. Although the final bill excluded some activists' demands, it detailed types and situations of discrimination and formal remedy procedures.

In Japan, disability activists received support from the center-left DPJ, but the party did not rule until 2009–12. This was only the second hiatus in conservative rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) since 1955. (The first was in 1993–94.) The DPJ's campaign manifesto pledged anti-discrimination legislation and additional disability policy reforms. The LDP-led government had proposed reforms in early 2009 to harmonize domestic laws with the CRPD, but the proposals were rejected as "cosmetic" by the Japan Disability Forum, the coalition of Japanese NGOs that had participated in the CRPD negotiations.

After its 2009 election victory, the DPJ created a cabinet headquarters for reforming disability policies. Committees set up by the headquarters to debate reforms included outside experts and activists, with unprecedented numbers of disabled persons; the lawyer Higashi and four other activists were appointed to the headquarters' secretariat. They shaped the content of 2011 revisions to the Basic Law for Disabled People and the ISL's replacement in 2012. But the anti-discrimination law was finalized, and the CRPD ratified, with less inclusivity under the LDP, which regained power in late 2012.

It should be noted that Japan often revises domestic legislation to harmonize it with international treaties *before* ratifying the treaties, whereas South Korea ratifies first and then harmonizes domestic legislation. These distinctive paths to international norm adoption also help explain why non-discrimination protections came later and were weaker in Japan than in South Korea.

GIVING RIGHTS MEANING

Comparing Korean and Japanese anti-discrimination laws indicates the emergence of a more legalistic regulatory style in both countries, but more so in South Korea. Consequently, while litigation is a last resort everywhere, Koreans with disabilities are better positioned to mobilize the law to give judges opportunities to clarify and delimit the scope and application of new rights

and raise public awareness. Since 2008, for example, the NHRCK and courts have expanded the definition of disabilities to include HIV/AIDS, in response to NGOs' lawsuits, and have clarified the definitions of discrimination and reasonable accommodations.

In Japan, the anti-discrimination law's impact has been more indirect. According to DPI-Japan, the fact that disability discrimination complaints to consultation bodies now occur "in the shadow of the law" may improve outcomes. The law apparently emboldened plaintiffs to overcome fears of stigma and file eight lawsuits regarding forced sterilizations of persons with intellectual or mental disabilities that were carried out under the Eugenic Protection Law, which was abolished in 1996. One of the plaintiffs' lawyers, the blind attorney Oogoda Maokoto, also attributed the courts' unprecedented accommodation of disabled observers in the galleries to the anti-discrimination law. Several (but not all) courts ruled the sterilizations unconstitutional, and a 2019 law provided monetary support to the thousands who were forcibly sterilized. Yet Japanese lawyers remain skeptical about the justiciability of the anti-discrimination law.

One advantage that Koreans with disabilities have for realizing their rights is the greater institutionalization of public interest lawyering

compared with Japan. Korean public interest law firms and foundations usually list disability law as a practice area. These new entities, an organizational form pioneered by the public interest law firm Gonggam in 2004, institutionalized an infrastructure that supplies salaried public interest lawyers, funds legal research and test cases, and mobilizes like-minded lawyers for cases. Since 2009, two of the largest Korean law firms have established public interest law foundations; both conduct and fund disability rights advocacy.

In 2011, lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and scholars established the Korea Disability Law Association (KDLA). Besides identifying test cases for litigation, researching foreign jurisprudence, and submitting parallel reports to the UN's CRPD committee, the KDLA published a manual on disability rights for lawyers and judges in 2013. Such institutionalized support for disability rights bolsters policy implementation and the legalistic turn in disability-related governance.

*Korea's more legalistic reforms
offer more robust
rights-claiming options.*

While the KDLA resembles lawyering networks in Japan in its loose structure, it partners with more formalized public interest law firms and foundations, which do not exist in Japan. This is not to say that experienced lawyers have been absent from Japan's disability rights activism. LADD-affiliated lawyers founded the Japan Federation of Bar Associations (JFBA) subcommittee on disability rights and wrote the first drafts of the anti-discrimination law. The Disabilities and Human Rights Lawyers' Network, created in 2002, has included several dozen members who handle individual discrimination cases and share know-how. The lawsuits over the Independent Support Law mobilized nearly 175 lawyers. Individual lawyers report giving more training sessions about disability rights for public employees since the anti-discrimination law was enacted.

But Japanese lawyers with disability law expertise remain loosely connected. They are thus less visible to potential rights-claimants, and they have fewer financial and organizational resources than their Korean counterparts.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Improvements in disability rights in Japan and South Korea notwithstanding, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the persistent challenges that disabled people face in both societies. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea and the public interest law foundation Duru reported that mandatory self-isolation after exposure to the virus deprived people with severe disabilities of their attendants. Communication difficulties left some disabled persons unable to access masks, testing, or timely information. DPI-Japan and the JFBA publicized similar pandemic-related problems. Closures of special schools and day-care centers placed a greater burden on families with disabled relatives. As in other countries, there were COVID-19 outbreaks in residential care facilities for the disabled, which added urgency to both countries' preexisting deinstitutionalization movements.

The 2016 mass killing of 19 disabled people by a former employee of a care home in the Japanese city of Sagami-hara had previously highlighted patterns of abuse in institutions, as had several Korean court cases and a 2011 Korean film, *Doga-ni*, about sexual assault in a school for the hearing-impaired. The number of psychiatric care beds in Japan remains the highest per capita among OECD countries, and South Korea's number is also above the OECD average. Although Korean and Japanese government policies increasingly facilitate deinstitutionalization via assistance and training programs, COVID-19 disrupted these services. It also exacerbated caregiver shortages, albeit less so in Korea, where relatives of the disabled secured the right to government pay as designated caregivers a decade ago.

On balance, however, disability rights have improved in South Korea and Japan, largely thanks to disabled people's activism. Rather than seeing disabled persons as objects of medical or welfare aid, both societies increasingly see them as rights-bearers. The anti-discrimination legislation enacted in 2007 in Korea and 2013 in Japan manifested this paradigm shift. So have other disability-related reforms in areas such as special education, employment quotas, and personal assistance services, though not all reforms work equally well for people with different disabilities.

Both countries' disability discrimination laws reflect a legalistic turn in governance. But the Korean anti-discrimination law contains more robust definitions, rights, processes, and remedies for claims-making. Without parallels in Japan, the Korean public interest law sector institutionalized support for legal mobilization to develop disability rights. Even more important may be the rise of organized self-advocacy, which continues to press for policy changes in both countries. As disabled Koreans and Japanese leverage these improved legal tools to protect and promote their rights, including full participation in society, they also seek to raise awareness of the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. ■

“Various trajectories reflect an increasing individualization of modes of working and living among younger Japanese. . . .”

Japan's Younger Generations Look for a New Way of Living

SUSANNE KLIEN

In March 2021, a month after he was forced to resign as chief of the Tokyo Summer Olympics, having caused outrage by blaming women for making meetings last too long, Yoshiro Mori committed another sexist gaffe. He asserted that a female political staffer was “too old to be called a woman.” Mori’s persistence in making misogynist remarks, even in the wake of the initial controversy that forced his ouster, was just one more illustration of the deeply androcentric culture in which Japanese society and politics are embedded.

Objectification of women is prevalent and rarely questioned: their external appearance is a regular subject of commentary in Japanese daily life and in the media. Television shows typically feature cute young women and elderly male commentators. Tokyo subways are adorned with advertisements for armpit and leg hair removal products for women. In the workplace, women are expected to be immaculately made up, and to wear skirts and heels in more conservative institutions. Corporate manuals with detailed descriptions of appropriate clothing and etiquette are handed out to new employees.

Women have been hit hard by the pandemic in Japan. A majority of working women are in precarious, part-time jobs, particularly in service-sector businesses such as restaurants and hotels. According to the Statistics Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the unemployment rate increased from 2.4 percent in February 2020 to 3.0 percent in December 2020. The Single Mothers Forum found that 59

percent of single mothers had faced falling incomes during the pandemic. Queues of needy people in Tokyo seeking free meals have reached unprecedented lengths.

According to the Japanese Welfare Ministry, 21,081 people took their own lives in 2020, a 4.5 percent increase from the previous year. The suicide rate for women under 40 rose by 25 percent, and the number of suicides among high school students doubled.

In a country where mental health issues continue to be stigmatized and most people are reluctant to seek professional psychiatric help, the double punch of economic pressure and social isolation during the pandemic has been especially challenging for women. The scant support provided by the government has done little to address this situation. By late 2020, a one-time subsidy of 50,000 yen (less than \$500) to single parents had been approved, but no regular financial support has been provided for those in the kinds of precarious, irregular work in which many single mothers engage.

Media representations, political gaffes, and a lack of financial support for single mothers all stem from the tendency for key stakeholders in Japan to be male and relatively old. In their eyes, a woman’s principal task is to help boost Japan’s rapidly decreasing population. At its most extreme, this attitude tends to regard single mothers as having failed in their role of keeping up harmony in the household through endurance (*gaman*).

Despite increasing signs that this long-ingrained, systematized patriarchy may not serve Japan well, the island nation on many fronts has been reluctant to embrace change. Even as the pandemic entered its second year, corporate workers continued to commute to offices in packed

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trains despite low levels of testing for the coronavirus and a vaccination rate far behind those of most other advanced nations. As of mid-June 2021, a mere 7.8 percent of Japan's total population had received at least one dose of the vaccine, compared with 43 percent in the United States. Despite the slow vaccination rollout, the government insisted on proceeding with the Olympics, heedless of strong public opposition.

OUTWARD BOUND

The other side of the coin is that an increasing number of younger Japanese adults, disenchanted with traditional norms, have relocated to rural Japan or overseas, or have started to consider such a move. Here are the stories of some characteristic cases I have interviewed in recent months.

Eri, a 27-year-old artist, has never considered Japan to be a place where she wishes to spend much time. She associates her home country with excessively rigid social norms, and she has had numerous encounters with stalkers. She is a *kikoku shijo*—a returnee—that is, someone who is Japanese, but has lived overseas and is thus categorized as different from “normal” Japanese. Having spent her teens in Europe, she is now completing her master's studies in Canada and is planning to move to China with her partner.

Sayaka, 35, relocated to Europe eight years ago. She concedes that in many ways, her life is not so different from when she was living in Japan. Most of her friends are Japanese or have ties to the Japanese community. She does business with Japanese companies as a freelancer, and reads Japanese books and news online. Yet she also emphasizes that her move has expanded her critical thinking skills considerably, and she is not planning to return to her home country. Perhaps most importantly, Sayaka says she has learned to value her own well-being and happiness, and has come to reject the notion that she must function as a cog in the workplace and society. For her, the key motivation to move abroad was her realization that as a dropout from a vocational school, she had little chance to find a career in a country that prioritizes degrees over performance.

Ryu, 43, is an information technology engineer who relocated to Europe two years ago with his wife and two children. Asked about his motives for the move, he says that Japan, with its lack of

diversity, does not seem to be a country that holds much hope for his children. With a chuckle, he adds that he is now doing most of the cooking and housework since he works at home and manages to keep his average work time to some three hours a day. Ryu enjoys preparing well-balanced, nutritious meals for his family, and he observes that this rearrangement of domestic duties means more time for his wife to play with their kids. In his view, this has contributed positively to the well-being of all family members. Back in Tokyo, when he was working long hours as a salaried employee, he hardly spent any time at home, and had no energy left to help with domestic duties.

In a similar vein, Saori, who is in their early thirties and describes themselves as third-gender and nonbinary, also now lives in Europe after working in many other places around the world as a programmer, web and app developer, and IT consultant. Despite their qualifications, they could not apply for a secure, permanent corporate job in Japan because they are a member of a sexual minority. On job applications, candidates must

check a box for their sex, with no option other than male or female. This binary pressure also applies to social life beyond work: Saori remembers that on many occasions, friends and coworkers

in Japan urged them to avoid any ambiguities with regard to their gender choices, appearance, and behavior in daily life.

On a positive note, on March 17, 2021, the Sapporo District Court issued the country's first judicial ruling that affirmed the legality of same-sex marriage and found that previous refusals by the Japanese government to accept such marriages were unconstitutional. While this constitutes a landmark ruling, the reality is that coming out as gay or lesbian can be difficult in Japan. Many people lead double lives to avoid social stigma, and gay clubs are known only to those in the scene.

RURAL RETREATS

Among Japanese who are relatively young and can engage in remote work, the pandemic has sparked a renewed interest in moving to rural areas. Data released in October 2020 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications indicated that for the fourth month in a row, more people had left Tokyo than had moved to the

Flight from cities is part of a larger paradigm shift.

capital. Departures from Tokyo had increased by 10.6 percent compared with the year before. Some major companies like Fujitsu and Panasonic have started offering the option of moving staff to rural areas, decreasing office costs and promoting more flexible modes of work.

Rural moves have been gradually increasing since the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Chances are that the ongoing pandemic will further enhance the appeal of rural life, especially in regions that offer the benefits of country living within easy reach of larger urban areas. In a way, the recent increase in rural relocations is not only about moving from one place to another. It also reflects a larger paradigm shift in modes of work as well as the constraints of an urban culture that revolves around an anthropocentric, consumerist lifestyle.

Rena, 32, has chosen to settle in a town with 5,000 residents in the mountains of a sparsely populated prefecture in western Japan. She had spent two years in Bangladesh working in international development and could not envision returning to Tokyo. Rural life seemed more in sync with her experience overseas, where social relations were deemed more important than work and income. She chose a rural area that offers multifaceted inspirations, not just idyllic nature. She was impressed by the contemporary feel of the town's official homepage, especially in comparison with other towns.

In fact, the town has seen an increase not only in new settlers from within Japan, but also foreigners. Locals can now enjoy craft beer brewed by an Irishman and peanut butter cookies made with a Californian touch by an IT entrepreneur who relocated from the United States with his Japanese wife. A few steps away, a British artist has opened a studio with his Japanese artist wife. Despite the small number of residents, there is a cosmopolitan feel to the town.

Newcomers to rural areas also include Japanese returning from overseas. For example, a remote hamlet near Rena's town recently welcomed a couple in their mid-forties who had lived in Europe for more than ten years. They are entrepreneurs in high-end garment making and say they are greatly satisfied with their new environment, where they can work at their own pace, rent is affordable, and their products can be shipped easily to customers across Japan.

Two years ago, Rena opened a guesthouse and offers classes in making Bangladeshi curry with

freshly harvested local vegetables. She enjoys living in a spacious house and has a wide social network, as well as time to herself. She renovated the old wooden house with friends to keep down costs. "My way to go about things may be low risk, low return," she laughs, sitting on her comfortable porch with a picture-postcard view of the mountain, valley, river, and forest stretching out below as birds sing in the background.

I think that life should be fun, above everything. Otherwise, it's just too stressful. Having fun, helping others, and not suffering are the main things needed to achieve a balanced life, in my opinion. Personally, it makes me happy if I can see the faces of people I work for rather than sitting in some office every day.

As tourism came to a halt with the onset of the pandemic, Rena worried about her livelihood. But her relations with the tightly knit local community saved her. Neighbors and friends helped her find part-time jobs to pay her bills.

By the spring of 2021, Rena's guesthouse was buzzing with visitors from across Japan. During Golden Week, a five-day holiday in May, her guesthouse had visitors from Tokyo and Osaka, including a British family with two children and a young British couple. She plans to work hard to host even more guests in the future, but she also aims to enjoy herself. In addition to the guesthouse, Rena takes on multiple jobs to boost her income, including farming, cleaning, writing, and looking after children.

ENTREPRENEURIAL INFLUX

An increasing number of visitors have recently come to the small town and Rena's guesthouse seeking information about rural life and a permanent place to live. The town has welcomed other female entrepreneurs drawn to rural Japan by low rents and living costs.

Yuki, now in her mid-forties, worked as a pastry chef in Tokyo before deciding to move back to her home prefecture. She has opened her own pastry shop in the house where she lives with her four cats. The shop is open only on Saturdays and Sundays, because the high-quality chamomile panna cotta and cookies that she makes by hand with free-range eggs take a lot of time to prepare. The garden in front of her shop is full of chamomile flowers—foraging is part of her business.

A local shop owner a few steps away observes that the influx of such innovative entrepreneurs is

a huge gain for the aging and depopulated community. Locals tend to think that setting up a shop involves high costs, but newcomers compensate for their lack of financial resources with creative ideas. For now, Yuki's small shop seems successful: by lunchtime, some of her products are sold out. Her sweets are also on sale in the local tourist shop in the town center, where plenty of visitors stop by on weekends.

Taku, 31, moved to a remote island in western Japan four years ago. During his university studies, Taku lived in Russia for a year, an experience that left him keenly interested in international careers. After graduating from his elite university, he joined a well-known company with foreign branch offices. However, overseas work turned out to involve less interaction with locals than he had anticipated. He eventually quit his job and applied for a position as a regional revitalization officer on the island where he now lives.

Taku's initial aim was to use his relocation as a starting point to acquire more skills, with the ultimate goal of relocating overseas and starting an entrepreneurial venture.

Three years ago, when I first met him, he was not very enthusiastic about island life. He missed chance encounters at bars and cafes, intellectual and cultural stimulation, and overall urban vibes. When I talked to him again in the fall of 2020, he seemed much happier. He was highly satisfied with his new job as a food coordinator, in charge of organizing the day-to-day management of an educational program that brings chefs from across Japan together with local youth who aspire to be chefs. He talked about the deep inspiration he gets from being surrounded by nature and eating freshly harvested food and fish just out of the sea. He still thinks about his plans to move overseas in the future, but for the time being he intends to stay on the island.

Taku enjoys the fact that his work is highly self-determined, in sharp contrast to his corporate job back in Tokyo. He earned much more in the capital, but he says that his standard of living on the island is much higher. Handmade tofu and fresh fish and vegetables are hard to find in Tokyo, no matter how much you pay, he says.

Like Rena, one of the things Taku greatly appreciates about rural life is time to himself. The other day, he posted a picture of a cloud on the

coast. "Running after a cloud is something that I could never have done back in Tokyo," he said. "It gives me huge satisfaction that I can do this occasionally when I feel like it."

WORK-LIFE REBALANCE

Many Japanese millennials I have interviewed over the years have observed that rather than following instructions and engaging in routine tasks, they are more comfortable with carving out their own work on their own terms.

Eri, 27, is one of them, working two part-time jobs. She puts in three days a week as an administrative assistant in the local government office of the rural town where she moved six years ago, after graduating from a university in the greater Tokyo area. On weekends, she works in a coffee roastery set up by another newcomer. Until a year ago, she worked for a company that delivers lunch boxes to senior citizens in the area, a job that turned out to be too stressful and exhausting.

Eri's husband, who is originally from Osaka, holds a well-paid IT job but has to work long hours, often on weekends.

Eri dreams of selling a variety of self-made specialties from a food truck, but she has not gotten around to starting the procedures to apply for permission. She concedes that after her last job in food

delivery, she is not too eager to go back to a full-time job soon and is thinking of ways to get by without working at all. For now, she enjoys making syrups and boiled dumplings with fresh, local ingredients in her free time.

As these vignettes indicate, Japan's millennials have different career and life goals than previous generations. They aspire to have a (relatively) slow but personally meaningful life, a network of friends, good food, and, last but not least, time for themselves. With its rigid rules of seniority and etiquette, corporate employment in Japan no longer seems to be an attractive option for them.

HIGH-FUNCTIONING HIKIKOMORI

Another group that has little interest in corporate employment consists of youth who live in social isolation, known as *hikikomori*. They have drawn a lot of attention and concern as a social trend in Japan over the past few years, viewed as a symptom of alienation and anomie in a society where individuals seem less and less keen on

Millennials have different career and life goals than previous generations.

interpersonal interaction and communication. More than 70 percent of hikikomori are male. They tend to spend much of their time at home, in their rooms, surfing the Internet, watching TV, playing games, reading books, newspapers, and manga, listening to the radio, and sleeping.

The most common reasons for their withdrawal are job loss or discomfort at work, social anxiety, and illness. Although they are perceived as a niche group, government sources estimate that approximately one million people fall into this social category in Japan. Most of these social recluses are in their twenties and thirties, but there is a growing group of hikikomori in their forties. The majority live in their parents' houses due to lack of financial means. They may be seen as irresponsible, avoidant, or at worst, societal failures.

However, not all is doom and gloom. Recently, examples of individuals who are socially withdrawn yet successful have come to light. Nito Souji, for example, has lived a socially hikikomori life for ten years. But he is an indie game developer who is well known for *Pull Stay*, a game released in 2020, and shares glimpses of his daily life on YouTube. In contrast to stereotypes about social recluses, Nito works every day at home on his game development and marketing, and may have more drive than the average corporate warrior.

Increasingly, writers who may not strictly fall into the category of hikikomori but lead relatively reclusive lives have gained prominence in the Japanese book market. Ohara Henri has authored the books *Living a Happy Life with an Annual Income of 900,000 Yen* and *Seclusion in One's Twenties: How to Live a Comfortable Life with Five Free Days a Week*. Having started seclusion—or as he calls it, “retirement”—at the age of 25, his most recent move was to Taipei. Living mostly on vegetables, tofu, and fresh fruit, Ohara has chosen a lifestyle that reduces his overall cost of living and allows him to spend most of his time pursuing his pastimes of taking walks, thinking, and reading.

Another emerging author is Tetsu Kayama, whose two volumes of manga, *Berlin Uwa No Sora* (Sky Over Berlin), have been highly popular. Depicting his daily life in Berlin, Kayama manages to portray small episodes of happiness with subtle humor. He offers a transnational take on subjective well-being, negotiating his identity between Japanese norms, German standards, and other expatriates' approaches to daily life: going to the supermarket to shop for food, venturing into a café

for a cup of coffee and some diversion from work at home, setting up projects with friends to support the needy. The scenes in Kayama's manga may seem quotidian, but they raise important social issues and give a sense of the place and its diverse residents.

SEEKING SELF-DETERMINATION

What do Japanese people who relocate to rural areas or overseas, classic social introverts, and Nito Souji and other artists and authors have in common? They all seek ways to escape postwar Japan's corporate culture and shift their focus to subjective well-being, a slower pace of life, more social engagement (if not necessarily of a face-to-face nature), and more self-determination.

Youth both inside and outside of Japan are withdrawing in diverse ways that make sense to them, and this may not necessarily be a negative thing. Given its conspicuous demographic trend, with a rapidly aging population and diminishing labor force, Japan is clearly in a transitional post-growth phase—and people are aspiring to new modes of living and (not) working, or working less.

The ongoing pandemic has highlighted the increasing gaps between social strata. As life in the metropolis seemed less and less attractive, given that entertainment and leisure pursuits always came with the risk of infection, those with education and white-collar jobs began to consider moving to less densely populated areas. As classes went online, innovative university students temporarily relocated to remote, rural areas, using such stays to gather hands-on experience in start-ups. Even government circles have started to use the term “workation,” a combination of work and vacation, to try to entice corporate employees to work in rural areas for limited periods of time. The Japan Tourism Agency has allocated 5 billion yen (more than \$45 million) in its 2021 budget to implement workation-related activities, hoping to boost the stagnating tourism industry.

Lifestyle magazines feature small towns across Japan with newly opened designer cafes, sleek boutiques, and hip restaurants with minimalist interiors, run by young or middle-aged ex-urbanites. Some cautiously pursue lifestyles in two places, commuting between Tokyo and a rural area within easy reach. Books on rural relocation with titles such as *Leave Tokyo Behind: The Reality of Rural Moves During the Pandemic* and *How Not to Get Murdered When Living in the Countryside* are recent bestsellers in Japan.

These anecdotes cover a multiplicity of contexts, but all point to increasingly conspicuous gaps between governmental, corporate, and individual notions of how everyday life and work should be organized. The postwar idea of the salaried worker being supported by the full-time housewife seems to persist in the media and in many Japanese minds, yet fewer people embrace this option. Post-familial lifestyle options are on the rise, as more millennials choose to live in collective housing or frequently use co-working spaces; others move overseas in a quest for more fulfilling and diverse choices in areas ranging from education to self-growth, gender diversity, or (reduced) work. These trends suggest new possibilities for Japan's future society, even if hope and despair are intricately intermingled.

In May 2020, Kimura Hana, a professional wrestler in her early twenties, committed suicide after suffering malicious cyberbullying in reaction to her role in the popular reality TV series *Terrace House*. This incident once again revealed the heavy toll that the male-dominated media industry takes on female professionals. One man has been held criminally liable but faced only token charges.

The case of journalist Ito Shiori has shaped the anti-sexual harassment and abuse “Me Too” movement in Japan, giving rise to a “We Too” wing that aims to prevent reprisals against individual accusers. In 2015, Ito claimed that she had been sedated and raped by an older, well-known male journalist

in a hotel room after a business meeting. Her colleague, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's biographer, denied all her accusations.

Ito eventually won a civil court case, was awarded damages, and was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2020. Her landmark case has broken the silence on rape in Japan and challenged an anachronistic legal system that has not been reformed for a century. Yet Ito has been widely criticized for speaking out, not least by many women in Japan. She has been subjected to extensive cyberbullying and now lives in Britain.

Despite the difficulty of pushing for reform of gender roles in a traditionalist society, such efforts gain momentum from being part of a wider generational shift that is increasingly evident across Japan. Various trajectories reflect an increasing individualization of modes of working and living among younger Japanese: female entrepreneurs in rural areas, social introverts in Japan and beyond, more people relocating overseas for educational or other reasons. They all seek more diverse ways of living that make sense to them—and in most cases, that also allow them to still make a contribution to society. These narratives highlight the stark inadequacies of the corporate and governmental establishment in Japan, yet also provide glimmers of hope for a more diverse Japan to come—in the not-too-distant future. ■

The Roots of America's Anti-Asian Violence

ANNELISE HEINZ

On March 16, 2021, a gunman purchased a firearm and used it to target workers at three Asian-run massage parlors in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Over the course of an hour, he murdered eight people. Seven were women, six of whom were of Asian descent. The shootings prompted an immediate outpouring of grief, horror, and calls to recognize the attacks as racially motivated hate crimes.

The killer's own words complicated that narrative. He stated that his aim was to "eliminate" sexual temptation, and denied that his actions were racially motivated. For a moment, it appeared that this false binary of racism versus misogyny might obscure the fact that for Asian American women, the two have always been intertwined. The spa workers were vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation in a business that relies on the sexualization and fetishization of Asian women.

The mass shooting happened in the midst of a yearlong rise in attacks against Asian people in the United States, a spike that many have linked to former President Donald Trump's relentlessly jingoistic response to COVID-19, which he called the "China Virus" and "Kung Flu." Such language clearly echoes the "Yellow Peril" scare, which painted East Asian immigration in the late 1800s as an overwhelming threat that would degrade American society.

In the past year, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders skyrocketed nearly 150 percent, in contrast to a dip in overall reported hate crimes. Asian women comprised more than two-thirds of those reporting verbal and physical assaults.

We cannot understand these attacks without thinking about both race and gender. As scholars

have long argued, gender and race—ideas of masculinity and femininity, of heritage and biology—co-construct each other as social structures bound up with power. The particular form that a social category takes, shaped by historical factors and given life through law and culture, creates specific vulnerabilities and inequities. Although the Atlanta murders brought some of this history to light in relation to Asian American women, very little coverage has recognized the importance of gender in the larger history of race.

MEAT VERSUS RICE

Gender's direct relevance to the ways in which ideas of race have evolved is evident in how racism has shaped the experiences of Asian American men. Ideas of manhood were central to the first period of sustained hostility to Asians in America. The anti-Chinese furor that shaped West Coast politics in the late nineteenth century fixated on Chinese men as illegitimate work competition. "Free Labor" politics coalesced around the ideal of the self-sufficient white male breadwinner.

In the early twentieth century, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) printed a pamphlet titled *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion. Meat vs. Rice. American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?* The title captured the main argument offered by the AFL and others: that "American" (white) men required fundamentally higher standards of living and therefore could not fairly compete with the degraded existence supposedly acceptable to semi-enslaved Asian laborers. (Notably, the authors insisted that their obviously inflammatory and racist language was "not inspired by a scintilla of prejudice of any kind.") Ideas of masculinity undergirded every aspect of this argument, from the contrast of "meat versus rice" to the feminized domestic and laundry work that Chinese men had been pushed into.

The AFL circulated the pamphlet in the US Senate in support of calls for a second extension of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Asiatic Exclusion League reprinted the pamphlet in

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1908, at a time when the negative stereotypes it perpetuated were increasingly used against Korean, South Asian, and Japanese immigrants.

Policies that aimed to restrict and confine Asian immigrants were animated by the imperative to “protect the American family.” The 1875 Page Act, the first national legislation intended to discourage immigration, was enacted after the transcontinental railroad was completed with the labor of Chinese and Irish workers. The Page Act set the stage for future immigration restrictions. Although it ostensibly prohibited “undesirable” Chinese men and women—defined as unfree laborers and convicts, as well as women brought for “immoral purposes”—in practice, it was not targeted at men. The law’s framers and enforcers aimed to screen out Chinese women as potential prostitutes, concubines, or sex slaves.

Legislators focused disproportionately on Chinese sex workers as alleged vectors of disease who threatened to infect both the literal and metaphorical body politic of white men. Historians have argued that this focus had the larger purpose of protecting monogamous, heterosexual marriage and male-headed households, which were enshrined by the turn of century as a bedrock of American society. (At the same time, state laws enacted across the country prohibited white Americans from marrying partners of other racial categories.)

These policies did not seek to ameliorate the root causes of economic and housing discrimination on the basis of race and gender that resulted in poverty, overcrowding, and sexual exploitation—or the racist violence that plagued many Chinese communities. Rather, white politicians often scapegoated immigrants as a danger to society in order to advance their own political careers. Legislation that prohibited most Chinese immigration, particularly the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, sparked further violence—effectively empowering white mobs across the West to beat and kill Chinese men, and to burn down Chinese communities with impunity. The attackers portrayed themselves as defenders of a free society built on white Protestant dominance.

Politicians, advertisers, and popular media consistently portrayed Chinese people as threats to the nation in strongly gendered ways. Most initial Chinese immigrants were men who sent money

back to their families. Their status as males separate from women and children, and increasingly segregated by a labor market that forced them to take up “women’s work,” set Chinese migrants outside the bounds of prevailing gender norms and family structures. Economic competition posed by Japanese farmers and Filipino workers often resulted in similarly pernicious stereotypes and legalized disadvantages.

Meanwhile, widely held assumptions cast “the East” as passive, traditional, and despotic, in contrast to a West depicted as active, modern, and enlightened. Thus, Asian men were reduced to neutered or feminized stereotypes—a far cry from the breadwinner patriarch—or deemed a sexual threat to white women.

In the early 1920s, the Chinese parlor game mahjong became a huge national fad as marketers emphasized its “exotic” Chinese origins. Despite the game’s mostly male background—from its masculine connotations in China, to the white businessmen who introduced it to an American public, to the male game experts who helped popularize it—mahjong quickly became known in the United States as a women’s game, feminized by its cultural associations with China. The feminine stereotype of Asian people has persisted to this day, manifested in a lack of

representation of Asian men as masculine Hollywood sex symbols and fueling discriminatory patterns in online dating.

TENUOUS GAINS

Over the course of the twentieth century, legalized race-based discrimination fractured and weakened, but gendered stereotypes changed more slowly. Hard-fought changes were shaped by decades of effort by an array of actors, including long-established Chinese American community groups, Filipino labor activists, middle-class Japanese American advocates, South Asian writers, feminists working across ethnic lines, and internationally minded radicals, among others.

Although working toward diverse and sometimes conflicting goals, these groups nonetheless built on each other’s efforts to reduce barriers against Asians in America. Their work combined with Civil Rights-era gains driven by Black activism—and shifts in global politics that made explicit racism a political liability—to change the

We cannot understand these attacks without thinking about both race and gender.

United States' relations with Japanese and Chinese migrants in particular. But the gains have often felt tenuous.

Beginning in the 1930s, more threatening Asian stereotypes in films and fiction were often replaced with friendlier characters: Charlie Chan succeeded Fu Manchu and Suzy Wong replaced the Dragon Lady. However, these images were equally limited and flattened—and often rooted in the same gender stereotypes of Asian women as acquiescent and sexually accessible. This association was strengthened by US military occupations of Asian countries. In 1945, the first liberalization of Asian immigration restrictions made way for war brides.

The recent rise in violence has reinforced Asian Americans' fears that their equal citizenship is dependent on the changing winds of economics and geopolitics, and shadowed by a perception of perpetual foreignness. Japanese Americans experienced such a loss of equal protection when they were forcibly removed from their homes during World War II on suspicion of being untrustworthy Americans, perhaps sympathizers of the Japanese enemy; two-thirds of those incarcerated were US citizens by birth.

In the 1960s, immigration reform profoundly remade US demographics and shifted the politics of race as well. The 1965 Hart-Celler Act replaced the system dating from the 1920s, which was explicitly designed to preserve a nation primarily composed of descendants of Protestant Northern Europeans through country-based (and effectively race-based) exclusions and quotas. The Hart-Celler Act reopened legal Asian immigration, but it prioritized migrants who were wealthy, well-educated, or relatives of American citizens. Deep-rooted stereotypes about Asian Americans morphed in this new context.

MINORITY MYTHS

This transformation occurred at the same moment as protests insisting on Black civil rights spread across the country. Soon, media outlets promoted an image of Japanese and Chinese Americans as what would be called “the model minority,” in direct contrast to African Americans. Portrayals of the model minority emphasized Asian Americans' supposed docility and sought to delegitimize Black protest. Stereotypes applied to Asian Americans had reversed from the early twentieth century. Now they ironically praised Asian family life, in contrast to the cries about the

threat to the American family that dogged Asian migrants less than a century earlier.

The model minority stereotype obscures widely divergent realities between, for example, Hmong refugees and Silicon Valley engineers. The murders of the Korean spa workers in Atlanta revealed once again what *New York Times* journalist Claudine Ko has called “two Asian Americas,” riven by class and status, one hailed as the “model minority,” the other struggling in the shadows.

The status markers of education and upward mobility associated with the model minority stereotype provided little protection against violence when ideas about manhood intertwined with economic fears of an Asian threat. In 1982, in the midst of the auto wars between Detroit and Japanese car makers, and layoffs in American factories, two white auto workers in Highland Park, Michigan, attacked and killed Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man whom they scapegoated for the decline of their industry.

In the ensuing trial, the killers bargained the charges down to manslaughter and ended up serving no jail time. The judge defended his lenient sentencing by explaining, “These weren't the kind of men you send to jail.” He added, “You don't make the punishment fit the crime; you make the punishment fit the criminal,” thereby making explicit the logic behind profound racial disparities in sentencing.

Chin and his assailants first encountered each other in a strip club during Chin's bachelor party. One of the murderers began by impugning the heterosexual masculinity of Chin and his friends. Their racial animus was motivated by economic resentments—one of the men who beat Chin to death had recently been laid off—but it was first expressed in a gendered taunt. Chin's death and the miscarriage of justice for his murder proved to be a turning point in Asian American activism.

Each of these historical patterns comes flaring to the surface during times of social stress, particularly when influential leaders direct popular anger and fear down well-traveled routes. The most pernicious stereotypes—of Asians as job-stealers, perpetual foreigners, or vectors of disease, and of Asian women as especially passive or vulnerable—are so widespread and enduring that they cross political, racial, and economic lines, exposing Asians to attacks from a diverse range of assailants.

CULTURE WARS

In this moment of acute tension, two divergent approaches to topics of race and gender are both gaining momentum: one focused on newly popularized understandings of history, and the other dead-set against it. As American society was struggling through a racial reckoning fueled by Black Lives Matter protests against police killings of Black men and women, a space opened for mainstream media to more rigorously engage with the rise in anti-Asian violence and its links to the long-term experiences of Asians in America.

After the Atlanta murders, reporters quickly brought the work of historians and sociologists before the public to examine the roots of these attacks. Amid reinvigorated mass feminism organized largely around the idea of intersectionality—the idea that intersecting identities create particular forms of oppression that cannot be solved by addressing only a single issue—more coverage highlighted the racialized misogyny experienced by Asian American women.

At the same time, however, conservative politicians and right-wing media have increasingly targeted “critical race theory” in the culture wars, along with adjacent ideas like intersectionality, accusing them of undermining belief in the United States as a land of individual freedom and opportunity. Their view can include condemnation of

anti-Asian violence (often in terms of being “un-American”), but it substitutes an emphasis on individual “bad actors” for an understanding of historical patterns and embedded social structures, and it insists on viewing race as separate from gender.

Conservatives’ culture war focus on race and gender has resulted in bills proliferating in state legislatures. Measures against transgender rights, and against defining gender as a set of social norms that have changed over time, have overlapped with more recent legislation banning history education that centers the development of racial categories and racial oppression.

As a society, we cannot prevent, understand, or heal from anti-Asian violence without an intersectional approach that accurately perceives these attacks as rooted in race and gender. Ideas matter. Ideas are cognitive tools, and tools for understanding race and gender are getting into more hands (and heads) far beyond the college classroom. But these tools are under serious threat of being locked away from public education, or of being made politically untouchable. Efforts to silence critical approaches to race and ethnicity, though seemingly focused on abstract theories of American history, make real-life people more vulnerable to violence rooted in historical legacies. ■

Gender and Sexual Politics in China's Online Dating Scene

ZHIQIU BENSON ZHOU

Dating apps are no strangers to many people today. Swiping left or right and searching for partners on platforms based on geolocation systems have become daily routines for people active on romantic or sexual markets. Although dubbed “dating apps,” these digital platforms are used for various purposes: not just hook-ups or marriage, but community building, or even business. Rather than continuing the study of users’ motives or behaviors in private settings (a commonplace approach in mass communication research), Lik Sam Chan, a scholar at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, chose to study the political implications of dating app uses in China.

Rooted in the tradition of second wave feminism, with its claim that “the personal is political,” *The Politics of Dating Apps* demonstrates how the uses of these services mirror the bigger pictures of China’s gender and sexual politics. It also contributes to scholarship on the liberatory potential of new media technology, particularly for women and queer people. Instead of jumping to a conclusion about dating apps’ power, Chan shows the different layers of their political potential.

COUNTERPUBLICS

Women and queer people have struggled to find spaces to build community and solidarity in heteronormative societies. Throughout history, marginalized people have created or taken advantage of spaces such as reading clubs, tearooms, and bathhouses, allowing them to temporarily depart from hetero-patriarchal gazes.

Chan has coined the concept “networked sexual publics” to demonstrate how digital media, such as

dating apps, enable oppressed groups to gain new positions that allow autonomy. The uses of dating apps contest a patriarchal system that limits venues for women’s expression of desires and practices of extramarital sex in China. They also challenge compulsory heterosexuality by generating room to enact same-sex desires and seek queer solidarity.

In recent years, Chinese feminism has been stigmatized online. Social media users condemn women’s pursuit of equal rights as radicalism, and digital platforms silence feminist voices by either removing their posts or closing their accounts. Meanwhile, authorities often police traditional queer spaces, such as parks and public toilets, leaving queer people vulnerable. Although there are burgeoning commercial queer spaces in urban China, they tend to be inaccessible to many queer individuals, particularly rural and working-class people.

In this light, dating apps’ lower bar of access allows more people at the margins to express alternative desires—and to counter social norms in a way that would be impossible in other spaces. Moreover, dating apps have connected people for an array of purposes. Straight women take advantage of apps as labs for sexual experiments. Many queer men have changed their favored cruising sites from physical spaces to dating apps, where they enjoy relative safety to express same-sex desires. As for queer women, in addition to seeking sex and romance on apps, some see them as ideal platforms for building community and use them as sites of activism.

With public space for feminist and queer advocacy in China shrinking, the importance of dating apps has grown. They have become counterpublics for marginalized people, facilitating the circulation of alternative discourses and development of oppositional practices. Sheltered under the names of “dating” or “networking” platforms,

The Politics of Dating Apps: Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

Lik Sam Chan
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these apps seem to be depoliticized and offer a means to expand space for transgressive desires or even political appeals, as long as no pornographic or explicit subversive content is found on their platforms.

In one manifestation of this trend, queer Chinese women are creating *quanzi* (circles), in which they provide each other with emotional support, share information, and discuss advocacy. The connectivity constructed in these digital communities empowers women who face overlapping predicaments due to their double marginal identities. It offers them either a harbor less disturbed by heteronormative pressures, or a space to engage in feminist and queer politics.

REINFORCING NORMS

However, these harbors are not entirely safe havens. There is another layer of uses that merits equal scholarly attention. Rather than presenting a utopian arena in which marginalized people subvert straight norms, Chan's empirical data demonstrate the reproduction and reinforcement of heteronormativity on dating apps. Gender and sexual norms are embedded in the digital infrastructure, users' daily interactions, and the platforms' management. This is why many users leave apps with mixed experiences or emotions and must continually negotiate their practices on them.

Situated in the genealogy of Chinese masculinity, Chan's study reveals how straight men perform and reformulate masculinities through profile creation and daily interaction on dating apps. He argues that "cute is the new manly." Rather than construct a masculine image aligned with Western criteria, Chinese men create less aggressive images online—gentle, innocent, and financially successful. In contemporary Chinese or East Asian popular cultures, a muscular body has rarely occupied a central position in masculinity construction. Instead, an androgynous self-presentation known as "little fresh meat" has gained a foothold, winning the hearts of today's younger audiences.

In order to maximize romantic and sexual opportunities, straight men incorporate cuteness into their online profiles. Yet underneath the cuteness lies the stability of straight men's

gendered privilege, and the cute masculinity trend has hardly shaken or destabilized gender inequality. Many straight men contend that their masculinity is determined by financial success, rather than their self-presentations. Consequently, their performances of cuteness on dating apps register only the appearance of a larger cultural repertoire that straight men can take advantage of in order to reinforce male privilege. This expands the boundaries of masculinity while reaffirming established hierarchies.

Queer apps have also reinforced gender norms through digital designs and byproduct creations. App users are expected to choose sexual labels on their profiles, often from binary options such as T/P (tomboy and *po*, slang for femme) for lesbian users, though more choices may be offered. Additionally, apps like Relat have produced various videos to increase their influence among queer users. Chan points out that these videos often represent people with binary gendered representations, such as outwardly butch and feminine features. These images perpetuate the necessity of assigning a gender role in same-sex relationships. The binary gender-based culture on queer apps weakens the queerness and subversiveness of these platforms in a heteronormative society.

Dating platform uses contest (or reinforce) gender boundaries in China.

OTHER DIRECTIONS

The tension between the counter-public and hegemonic features of dating apps prompts two research directions that may be worthy of future inquiry: the impact of China's dynamic political economy on dating app uses and gender/sexual politics; and trans uses of dating apps that rest on bounded identities. Exploring the two themes may further illustrate how this tension has been produced and manifested.

Dating apps have faced divergent fates since their debut in China; many have already shut down, such as Zank. Meanwhile, others, like Blued, have thrived in the market. Blued chief executive Ma Baoli has claimed that unlike in Western societies, queer politics in China should start from, and rely on, businesses—the pink economy—due to limited space for political expression.

In a 2020 article about Blued's listing on Nasdaq, media scholar Shuaishuai Wang called attention to a conservative turn on the part of Blued as it pursued a more ambitious commercial goal of

becoming a pink conglomerate. The platform adhered to 2017 government rules requiring the removal of all homosexuality-related terms and downplayed its identity as an app for gay men. In this light, it is necessary to understand how a shifting political economy has shaped dating app use over time, and to investigate whether users have had varied experiences in different periods or on different apps.

In Zank's early days, it attempted to provide a community for users, rather than merely a hookup tool. Despite this being a failed attempt in economic terms, many gay men still reminisce about early Zank. Some users believe that it cultivated queer cultures different from today's Blued and Fanka (which used the name Aloha before 2020). Zank provided many interest-based forums, which enabled gay men to develop various types of connections, in addition to short-term sexual relationships.

Such examples show the transformation of the dating apps market during the past decade and the distinctions among various apps. Delving into plural uses of apps over time and across platforms would illuminate which socioeconomic factors have shaped counterpublic and hegemonic cultures in these digital communities. The growing commercialization and tightening control of queer dating apps have refashioned the tension between their subversive and conservative potential. It is crucial to revisit what transgressiveness and queerness stand for in the shifting landscape of dating apps.

Chan's book presents his studies of four categories of cisgender people's uses of dating apps. This prompts another subject for future exploration: trans uses and politics. Is there a trans (counter)public on dating apps? Are they shunned as unideal users by these apps? And which apps are adopted most frequently by trans users?

It might be assumed that trans people can choose a particular app based on their self-identified gender and/or sexuality. Yet trans users have encountered extra struggles in finding a "home" among dating apps, particularly those who do not fit within a bordered gender. Grindr was originally designed for gay men, but in recent years more straight transwomen users and straight-identified men who are interested in transwomen have become active users. Their uses have created tension between groups, and an identity crisis on Grindr. This has happened on Chinese gay dating apps as well, though it is not as commonplace as on Grindr. Rela reportedly has refused trans lesbians' registrations in China because their gender identities do not align with their sex on their IDs.

Many queer dating apps are open to sexually queer people, while closing their doors to gender queer users. Thus, these apps turn out to be highly instrumental, catering to users with bounded identities that make data-driven matching simpler to manage. Understanding trans people's uses of dating apps complicates the politics of gender, not only in heterosexual society, but also in queer communities. It also elucidates how uses of these commercialized dating platforms contest (or reinforce) gender boundaries in China.

Chan's innovative research connects everyday digital media uses to China's larger issues of gender, sexual, and queer politics. Taking neither a utopian nor a pessimistic stance, he unpacks the multiplicity of dating apps' political and social effects on both marginalized groups and those in power. More importantly, this study precipitates further questions about dating apps' potential to challenge heteronormativity, and to create space for marginalized individuals, in a society with shrinking room for feminist and queer politics. ■