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Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Health Governance, Migrant Labour, and International Health Crises

ANOMA P. VAN DER VEERE, FLORIAN SCHNEIDER, and CATHERINE YUK-PING LO, eds.
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

Global Health and South Asia in a Time of Crisis: A Short Review

Introduction

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic may soon be behind us, researchers will be occupied for years trying to better understand its causes and how to handle the complex issues it brought up (Ali *et al.* 2024). Choosing the right actions required to address public health concerns in an effective manner while preserving confidence in public authority will be one of the challenges facing policymakers going forward (Aslam and Gunaratna 2022). In that regard *Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic* is relevant and provides some guidance, though it leaves certain significant holes unfilled. The chapters in this edited volume provide an extensive study of the worldwide

public health crisis that has plagued the world since January 2020, as well as how labor migration—a crucial component of the global political economy—complicated the virus's spread. However, the selection of case studies feature examples that are too distinct from one another to produce workable policy recommendations. And some of the important players have been left out of the debate on migrant labor despite its being recognized as a crucial aspect of global health governance.

Theme and Goals of the Book

The editors' main contention is that because Asia is a diverse continent, its nations responded to the pandemic in a variety of ways. However, the inclusion of Malaysia and Indonesia raises concerns about the exclusion of other significant nations such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, all of which rank among the top ten sending countries in the world for migrant arrivals. The book would have benefited from these nations' perspectives since it claims to be a discussion on transnational labor migration in connection with public health in Asia. These additions would undoubtedly have resulted in a longer book, though simply one chapter per nation would not have provided enough room for all crucial concerns. The briefness of the book's chapters, which provides limited opportunity for policy prescription and analysis, is another drawback.

Despite its drawbacks, the book clarifies that East Asian nations were prompt in their pandemic response. Thankfully, none of the writers have adopted the clumsy defense that the success of East Asian regimes may be explained by a common Confucian history and the presumed greater willingness of inhabitants to submit to rulers. Instead, the chapters emphasize the various aspects of state capacity that are either enabled or hindered by a small number of crucial policy decisions. As is sometimes the case with edited volumes with several contributors, the writings in this collection offer a range of viewpoints on the same subject. With the notable exception of the three coeditors, who are qualified to conduct research on global health, public policy, and political communication in East Asia, the majority of the contributors are experts on migration studies in the region. They have produced concise, factual chapters that include a surprising number of current online references. The editors' lack of expertise in migration studies may account for why only two of the four essays in the section on transnational migration truly address the issue.

Covid-19 and Global South Challenges

The volume's best chapters are the first three, which provide a global background for the initiatives by Asian governments. In the first chapter, Satoh Haruko points out that China has not been able to establish itself as a serious competitor to the United States for global leadership in spite of its economic expansion in the early stages of the pandemic. According to Koga Kei, the competition between China and the United States has shown both countries that they would be better off

learning from each other than depending on outside superpowers. This has given the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations a valuable chance. In their examination of the long-term effects of SARS's unexpected spread across Asia two decades ago, Ishikawa Yumi and Kohara Miki discover that scientific collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) lessened the public's mistrust of governments in the wake of the pandemic. Significant details are added to the story in the next four chapters. I wish there had been a chapter on the ways in which South Asian societies handled Covid-19 under the most challenging conditions, including widespread poverty and constrained state capacity. Surprisingly, these societies fared better than many much wealthier nations.

In response to the argument that China had an excessive influence on the WHO's decision making during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, Gong Xue and Li Xirui contend that China's contribution to the organization was insufficient for it to have undue influence. They go on to say that China's health diplomacy backfired and that its fragmented and illiberal governance hindered it from responding to the pandemic in a timely and effective manner. In his chapter, Brendan Howe contends that despite the major powers' challenges in managing the pandemic, middle-sized nations like South Korea took advantage of the opportunity to excel internationally by closely following the WHO's guidelines, and they did so rather well. Catherine Yuk-ping Lo's case study of Taiwan reveals an even more startling paradox: despite being shut out from the global community due to pressure from China, Taiwan managed to limit the impact of the pandemic. Taiwan made the case for its involvement in the WHO by taking required actions prior to the global organization declaring the outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). Anoma van der Veere argues in his chapter that Japan's suspicion of the WHO stemmed from the organization's perceived over-deference to China, a perception that was reinforced by the WHO's delay in issuing the declaration of a PHEIC. The main lesson to be learned from these four chapters is that even if the WHO's reputation was severely damaged by mistrust stemming from the acts of major powers, it could still support global governance through cooperative efforts amongst smaller nations.

The volume's third section discusses domestic Covid-19 reaction strategies. In their chapter, Nurliana Kamaruddin and Zokhri Idris note the value of a competent civil service in maintaining national unity in Malaysia in times of political unrest. They also observe that the pandemic made political authorities aware of the need to consider migrant workers' rights in order to balance the goals of economic expansion, political stability, and health security. The Korean government's acceptance of multilateralism and collaboration with the WHO in response to Covid-19 is discussed by Kim Eun Mee and Song Jisun, with the important caveat that the public lacks faith in the WHO. Nguyen Anh Tuyet observes that prior to the WHO issuing its Covid-19 warning, Vietnam, like Taiwan, took early steps to restrict movements across its border with China. The nation's relative success in containing the spread of the disease may be attributed to this early intervention,

though worries about the sustainability of this achievement will persist given the underfunding for the care of vulnerable groups such as the elderly. Studying the relationship between the state and society in Vietnam during the pandemic, Mirjam Le and Franziska Nicolaisen note that mobilizing the populace through nationalist appeals guaranteed adherence to public measures to contain the pandemic and strengthened the regime's legitimacy. However, they come to the same conclusion as Nguyen, noting that these gains were undermined by a lack of transparency and inadequate care for economically vulnerable populations. This section's value is diminished by the choice of case studies: two chapters focus on the same nation (Vietnam), and the other nations (Malaysia and South Korea) are so dissimilar that it is hard to draw any meaningful conclusions about the best ways to handle a health emergency like Covid-19.

The book's fourth section is even less successful: just two of the four chapters fulfill the promise made to explore how the pandemic affected international migration and the world economy. Lo emphasizes the degree to which China's Covid-19 containment measures compromised the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) performative legitimacy and the extent to which the nation's confinement threatened to undermine Li Keqiang's proposed "dual circulation strategy" for economic growth. The strategy called for a greater reliance on domestic consumption and a decreased reliance on exports. The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant losses in international migration, a subject that is not addressed in this chapter. The problem of international migration is tackled head on in the second and fourth chapters. Liu Mei-Chun draws attention to the vulnerability of Taiwan's public health system stemming from a lack of health coverage for migrant live-in caregivers of senior patients. She advises that the gap needs to be closed in order to limit the outbreak and protect the general public's health. Shibata Saori notes that the WHO's and national governments' attempts to offer guidance on public health were impacted by the socioeconomic structures in various nations. The different versions of capitalism that exist in many nations affected these nations' ability to manage public health during the Covid-19 epidemic. Sylvia Yazid examines sending nations on the other side of the labor migration spectrum. She notes that Indonesia needs to address both the danger of transmission posed by workers returning home and the domestic pandemic situation at the same time.

Concluding Thoughts

In summary, though this is a valuable collection of writings, the imbalance in case studies is one of its shortcomings. One chapter per country would have been plenty. An additional chapter on any of the nations discussed would have been insufficient to make up for the knowledge that could have been gleaned from the experiences of other significant Asian nations that surprised everyone by much being less affected by the pandemic than could have been anticipated given their circumstances.

It would have been good to hear about the policies of Thailand, the Philippines, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. These five nations, each in their own unique manner, produced outstanding outcomes (Ryan 2020). When it comes to the number of fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, Taiwan, South Korea, and the three heavily populated South Asian nations performed better than Japan, and the Philippines' death toll was almost identical to Japan's. These nations did not see the same death rates as wealthier Western European nations despite their comparatively low public investment in healthcare.

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Just Another Crisis? The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Southeast Asia's Rice Sector

JAMIE S. DAVIDSON, ed.

Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023.

Nearly all fields of social science have analyzed the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Just Another Crisis?* focuses on the pandemic's impact on the agricultural sector in Southeast Asia. This edited volume is based on the academic products of an online seminar held during the pandemic, in December 2021, by the National University of Singapore. The editor and the contributors, who attended the seminar, are experts on food, agricultural policy, and economics from research institutes in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. As indicated by its subtitle—*The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Southeast Asia's Rice Sector*—the book sets out to evaluate the pandemic's impact on the rice sector in Southeast Asia. The significant worldwide negative impacts of the pandemic on the industry and service sectors can be easily imagined. However, a novel conclusion of this book is that the pandemic did not cause a serious rice crisis in Southeast Asia, although it did have other negative effects, such as a widening