

***Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Health, Migrant Labour, and International Health Crises.* Edited by Anoma P. van der Veere, Florian Schneider and Catherine Yuk-ping Lo. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2022. Hardcover: 272pp.**

During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian countries were praised for their quick and decisive measures to curb the fast-spreading virus. Though tough and highly restrictive, these measures were necessary to see countries through the unprecedented public health crisis. Many attributed the early success of Asian countries' pandemic policies to their "national culture", which tends to be more "collective" and "consensus-based", as reflected in their high degrees of power inequality and uncertainty avoidance in the indexes established by social psychologist Geert Hofstede. The suggestion here, in other words, is that countries in Asia were effective in containing the spread of COVID-19 because their populations are compliant and risk-averse, have a strong respect for authorities and value consensus-building over individualism.

This volume, edited by Anoma P. van der Veere, Florian Schneider and Catherine Yuk-ping Lo, sets out to debunk the sweeping generalization that Asian countries were better at managing the pandemic due to their particular "national culture[s]" (pp. 12–13). While being a collective-oriented society certainly helped with the smooth implementation of pandemic policies—compared to the socio-political disarray seen in many Western countries during the first wave of the pandemic—it is not a satisfactory explanation as to why the approach taken by Asian countries was quite effective. Lest we forget, Asian countries experienced pandemic threats before, most notably in 2003 during the SARS virus outbreak. That experience forced many Asian countries to strengthen their pandemic preparedness and responses, which were already in place when COVID-19 arrived in March 2020.

The transnational nature of the pandemic required coordination among neighbouring countries. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN played a key role. In Chapter Two, Kei Koga details the challenges faced by ASEAN in coordinating a concerted pandemic response among its member states, including the region's dependence on external actors for resources, its geostrategic position of being sandwiched between the interests of China and the United States and the "ASEAN Way" of getting things done (pp. 55–56). As such, coordinating and

implementing a common pandemic policy among member states was a tall order, since national interests and structural barriers were a hindrance.

One segment of the population badly affected by the pandemic was migrant workers, especially those who lived and worked in close proximity to each other, especially in dormitories. COVID-19 cases among migrant workers in Malaysia rose exponentially as many were forced to work without proper social distancing by unscrupulous employers (pp. 169–70). Many of these ill-treated migrant workers were then rounded up by the government and placed in detention centres. In some cases, their living quarters were cordoned and blocked off with heavy concertina wires. All of this occurred amid the xenophobic hysteria that swept across the country during the first wave of the pandemic.

Indonesia, as a major exporter of migrant workers (especially to Malaysia), had to cope with the repercussions of the pandemic as the world economy ground to a halt. Jakarta had to resettle the influx of repatriated migrant workers while retraining those who could not leave the country for work due to the closure of borders. In Chapter Fifteen, Sylvia Yazid argues that the task of protecting migrant workers is also the responsibility of the home country. During the pandemic, the Indonesian government was able to comply with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) recommendations in terms of protecting the migrant workers' public health and economic livelihoods (pp. 262–67). Yazid's chapter on the Indonesian migrant workers prompted this reviewer to wonder if the Philippines, another major exporter of migrant workers, pursues similar policies when it comes to protecting its migrant labour force. Unfortunately, the book does not have a chapter on the Philippines. This is a lacuna that the book should have addressed, especially in comparison with the Indonesian experience.

Meanwhile in Vietnam, and in stark contrast to other Southeast Asian countries, the labour unions were highly organized and resolute when it came to protecting the rights of its members during the pandemic. Vietnamese labour unions successfully mobilized their members to pressure the government to keep workers safe at work and to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic (pp. 203–5). The labour unions were also incorporated into the national effort to curb the pandemic, as they helped to disseminate information to the general public. Any antagonism between the state and its critics were temporarily subsumed under a nationalistic exhortation for unity against the “foreign threat” of the COVID-19 virus.

This edited volume is one of many publications to have emerged over the past two years examining the pandemic responses of particular countries and regions and how those responses were shaped by their respective socio-economic-political dynamics. The abundance of literature on the pandemic can only serve to enrich our knowledge, while exposing the vulnerabilities and collective strengths of nation-states and regions as well as their inter-connectedness as the crisis travelled quickly beyond national boundaries.

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