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### In the Midst of Healing: Three Studies on the Cultural Impact of COVID-19

Yamamoto, Nobuto, ed. *The COVID-19 PANDEMIC and Risks in East Asia: Media Social Reactions, and Theories*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023, 240 pp.

ISBN: 978-1032194714, \$160.00 (pbk)

Lim, Tai-Wei, ed. *Crafting an Asian Future in the Post-COVID-19 Asia*. New Jersey:

World Scientific, 2023, 264 pp. ISBN: 978-9811253720, \$88.00 (pbk)

Erni, John Nguyet, and Theodore G. Striphas, eds. *The Cultural Politics of COVID-19*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023, 480 pp. ISBN: 978-1032155265, \$48.71

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This review covers three recently published academic works on COVID-19 (hereafter COVID) and its impact on culture. Each of the three is a collection of articles from a variety of fields, including political science and media studies. Two of the collections focus on Asia, while the third comes from a Cultural Studies perspective. COVID and its impact is still a current topic. The earliest among the three were published in 2023, and the most recent in 2024. So from our perspective in late 2024 we can say that all the studies suffer from a shortened horizon.

Beyond this structural issue the editors adopted different strategies, with varying results. *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Risks in East Asia* uses the concept of risk as the unifying theme. Unfortunately few of the articles engaged with the concept, choosing instead to describe events and reactions. In contrast to these two examples that focus on Asia, *The Cultural Politics of COVID-19* takes a disciplinary approach. All its articles were published in Cultural Studies during the early phase of COVID. So the collection overall reflects the view of that particular discipline.

*Crafting an Asian Future* and *The COVID-19 PANDEMIC and Risks in East Asia* had problems with English clarity. Several of the articles in these volumes had only one or two problems, which is perhaps understandable. But others had five or more blatant punctuation or incorrect pluralization issues that a good editor would have caught. Beyond these problems there are issues with language usage, where the words may be syntactically correct, but the expression is off-kilter. Several articles excelled/were exemplary in their use of English. Satoshi Abe's article on COVID-19 in Iran was exceptionally clear. Yoshihisa Godo's two articles on the agricultural sector in Japan

were similarly lucid and concise. Many of the others suffered from inadequate checking of English usage and readability, issues that are ultimately the responsibility of the publishers. The *Cultural Politics* collection was the exception—all the articles showed a degree of care for editorial standards and clear writing.

The reader will in some way be expecting a certain type of arguments in our discussions of COVID. While much early media coverage focused on disruptions and government measures, academic discussions of the social impact of the pandemic will inevitably ask to what extent society changed due to COVID. Another way to pose the question is to ask to what extent the much-discussed “new normal” has become widespread. Is the prospect of a life “after COVID” growing fainter by the minute, as expressed by John Erni (22), or was COVID simply one of the many pandemics that appear in human history, disrupting life for a time, then disappearing into the background?

This essay briefly describes each volume before focusing on the primary narrative threads, which taken together form a unique profile of the academic perspective on this seismic social event.

### **1. *The COVID-19 PANDEMIC and Risks in East Asia: Media, Social Reactions, and Theories* (2023)**

This volume grew out of a conference titled “Risk Society and Media in an Uncertain Age,” organized by Keio University in February, 2021. Generalizations for the entire region of East Asia, difficult at the best of times, are impossible. Defining East Asia is a perennial challenge in many fields. The majority of the studies here focused on Taiwan (the focus of four articles), Japan (4), Korea (2), with one each mentioning the Philippines and Vietnam. China, Hong Kong, and North Korea are notably absent, an obvious gap. Several of the articles adopted a comparative approach, which at least helps the reader to build up their own mental models.

The important findings deal with handling of the pandemic. The different states followed WHO pandemic guidelines without objection. This meant they adopted the now-familiar package of border checks, quarantines, contact tracing, masks, lockdowns, vaccinations, social distancing, and online classes. But implementation, even among this small sample of countries, varied widely. Vietnam implemented harsh lockdowns, while South Korea and Japan were relatively loose. In slum neighborhoods in Manila volunteer guards checked everyone who entered and left the community (216). Differences in national situations—population densities, preparedness, affluence, immigrant flows—led inevitably to different outcomes. These in turn created wide divergence in reactions—among the population. So despite adopting a similar package of measures, outcomes varied widely, given the wide diversity of cultures in East Asia.

*The COVID-19 PANDEMIC and Risks in East Asia* is most useful when it describes

not government policies, but popular reactions to the pandemic. However the concept of a risk society, floated briefly as a unifying theme, was not taken up directly by many of the writers, and so did not unify the various articles.

## **2. *Crafting an Asian Future in the Post-COVID-19 Asia (2023)***

This volume attempts to describe COVID's impact on Asia in terms of three broad socio-economic forces: globalization, the rise of new (Asian) geopolitical powers, and inequality. Most of the articles focus on either a single polity, such as Singapore or Iran, or a sector within a larger one, such as agriculture in Japan. The articles did not focus on broad comparisons between countries. Some passing statements note that the countries of East Asia have handled the COVID crisis comparatively better than other areas. These underline the fact that the articles were written in early 2021, at an early stage in the crisis, and scholars simply lacked the data to draw such wide-ranging conclusions. In that sense the polity- or sector-specific approach adopted here is a practical choice.

Many of the articles allowed the reader a glimpse into specific corners of the East Asia economy. Yoshihisa Godo's two articles on the agricultural sector in Japan are outstanding, both well-argued, concise, and analytical. Godo argues that the Nokyo, the agricultural cooperatives, were central organizations in Japan's civil society. They linked the ruling LDP party with grass-roots rural sectors (11). The Nokyo was a funding and influence-peddling organization as well, offering loans and insurance. Naturally conservative, Nokyo lobbied against rice imports which began in 1993 (23). Its position in Japanese society has generally weakened, requiring bailouts from the BOJ in 1996 (25). In his second article Yoshihisa clarifies the impact of COVID on rural Japan. Overall the rural sector was already losing social influence under the Abe government. There was a brief period after the financial crisis of 2008 in which agriculture was promoted as a "growth industry." Always more image than reality, this effort came to an end with the new Shiga premiership in 2020. COVID simply confirmed the increasing irrelevance of agriculture for national policy. In fact the connection between COVID and agriculture were tenuous in general. COVID and the government's policies around it simply underlined the sector's increasing irrelevance.

And so we find a similar debatable link in other articles that attempt to connect COVID to existing trends. Robotics, discussed in Tai Wei Lim's article on technology, continued to make strides in many areas of society; COVID simply accelerated the trend. Tracking devices, telemedicine, wearable technology, and Big Data collection were pre-existing trends (124–5). In Iran COVID brought tensions between religion-based and science-based views on health to the fore (114). These tensions pre-dated the pandemic, and no doubt continue.

Otherwise COVID is seen to have had only minor impacts on other sectors. Tenancy law and regulations regarding employment were adjusted in Hong Kong in light of

COVID events (139). Virtual funerals became more common in Iran than they had been (110). These changes are hardly major. One area in which COVID did have an immense impact was religious activities. In some countries traditional religious practices and gatherings were often allowed to continue despite COVID restrictions. Unfortunately, few articles focus on this aspect.

COVID's impact on business is worth discussing. World GDP did fall 3.4% in 2020, but it sprang back to 5.8% in 2021.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of 2024 it appears that the economic impact of COVID was fleeting. Foreign trade, while impacted temporarily by severe supply chain shocks in some areas, overall continued its relentless churning. Oil exports did not slacken. Consumer goods, though delayed to some extent, quickly returned to pre-COVID levels. Sales in some categories such as home improvements increased substantially during COVID.<sup>2</sup> Bottlenecks were real—shipping prices added an estimated 1.5% to worldwide inflation in 2021 (165). Certainly many workers in export-dependent industries lost their jobs. Yet such disruptions are not unknown in global trade. Businesses eventually adjusted, shipping rates returned to previous levels, and many workers were re-hired.

The biggest impact of COVID on East Asia may be summed up by Wong Lok Hung's article on globalization. Globalization, often described in these volumes as a core element of the neoliberal agenda, has characterized the post-WWII economy. And we may indeed be moving into a de-globalized world.<sup>3</sup> Yet COVID hardly caused any of this. As Wong notes the pandemic *may* have exacerbated the trend toward deglobalization, although this is also debatable (176). We should not be surprised to learn that in times of crisis national interests and geopolitical considerations rise in prominence, and the benefits of globalization may fade into the background.

Tai Wei Lim concludes this collection by noting that many East Asian societies showed resilience in the face of COVID, the implication being that other states, such as Europe and the US, did not. Again later developments cast doubt on such conclusions. The COVID pandemic also took place alongside other significant events that need to be mentioned. In the article on Hong Kong, it is remarkable that author discussed the resiliency of civil society (65) while never mentioning the National Security Law implemented at the height of the pandemic in 2020.<sup>4</sup> This law has led to the subsequent arrest of many pro-democracy individuals. Both COVID and the National Security Law were significant challenges to resiliency and need to be evaluated together before we can generalize about resiliency. COVID's greatest impact may in fact have been that it served as convenient cover for the implementation of other measures by the state, a theme not mentioned in any of these volumes.

### **3. *The Cultural Politics of COVID-19 (2023)***

This volume, released in mid-2023, reprints COVID-related articles from a single 2021 issue of the journal *Cultural Studies*. As such it is a handy snapshot of the state

of the field of cultural studies in that period. Cultural Studies has been known for its pre-occupation with authorial reflexivity and the status of the field itself. The insights found in this volume reveal much about the cultural studies approach, but unfortunately little about the COVID event.

Cultural Studies recognizes that relationships between phenomena are constructed. Practitioners thus tend to seek out specific articulations, that is, the way relations between two things are linked and expressed.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 would seem to be an ideal topic of research in Cultural Studies. Yet the contributors in this volume seem to struggle with drawing out clear linkages between COVID and other social phenomena. Instead they reach the same non-controversial conclusion found in the other two volumes: the COVID experience served as a means of bringing out existing social and ideological relations.

Where the *Cultural Politics* authors excelled was in discovering moods and tendencies—"structures of feeling"—that emerged with COVID. The pandemic brought about a deep sense of having lost something that had been longed for (Silva, 31, 37); the discovery of a deeply entrenched individualism (Bratich, 51); the prominence of a life-denying spirit of defeatist disillusionment, "necropopulism" (Bratich, 55); a sense of intensified racial oppression (Calvente, 63); a rising tide of "pathological whiteness" (Smicker, 86); in India, a clarification of such social imaginaries as "home," "village, and "people" (Shome, 115), in Australia, a perception of increased housing discrimination against Asian immigrants (Khorana, 101); the rise of "self-management porn" such as the practice of displaying and watching bread baking competitions during lockdown (Mohabeer, 199); parodies and repurposed melodies (Stratton 220); a widespread sense of uncertainty and alarm (Bennett, 143; Adelman 261); and in general a sense that the current, neoliberal order is tottering, and in falling will take down such cherished assumptions as the myth of constant improvement and limitless progress (Adelman, 262). Chris Ingraham's article illustrates the difficulty of capturing these issues of quality of life under COVID by focusing on gestures that served to rebuild community (Ingraham, 134–5). Such gestures as displaying teddy bears in living room windows and painted rocks served as ritual communications that maintained social cohesion.

This last point is shared by many of the *Cultural Politics* contributors. Many fell into the trap that the diverse reactions to COVID add up to an attack on the neoliberal order. But in contrast to many breathless predictions made at the time, as well as from our perspective in late 2024, and despite the continued presence of different forms of the COVID-19 virus, it appears that much of life has in fact returned to pre-COVID "normal."<sup>6</sup> The exporting powerhouses of east Asia continue to ship product.<sup>7</sup> Air travel has returned to pre-COVID levels. Schools have reopened. In the U.S., unemployment is at record lows (in many economies), and inflation is gradually returning to the pre-COVID level.<sup>8</sup> There are certainly international tensions, and the American population remains ideologically divided. But few would attribute any of

these conditions to our experience with COVID.

That is not to say COVID did not have an impact. Unfortunately, few if any of the *Cultural Politics* articles brought up these issues we in 2024 can see were crucial. Foremost is the impact of school closures on children, which it appears has created a generational impact on school-age children in those places that closed schools. Second is the eruption of Black Lives Matter riots, violent events often dismissed as having been “mostly peaceful.”<sup>9</sup> Third was the overall conclusion that the COVID crisis exposed the brittleness of certain institutions and practices, including supply chain risk, the overall state of health, and the precariousness of middle-class lifestyles.<sup>10</sup> These issues remain contentious and political, so consensus has not emerged yet, but consensus will build.

A World Economic Forum panel of futurists in 2022 highlighted the many social changes brought about by the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> First was the realization of the fragility of supply chains. The panel saw an increase in regionalism as well as automation in manufacturing. Politically they concluded that governments were only too happy to continue to exercise dictatorial powers flexed during the pandemic, leading to a worldwide “democracy deficit.” The experts also expect a continued trend to move day-to-day activities such as shopping online. Educators will continue to try online learning, with challenges expected.

Few of the authors in this volume do more than bring up problematic issues, such as racism, blaming them ultimately on the neoliberal order and associated institutions. There are few details, for instance statistics, and almost never any action calls beyond sharpening Cultural Studies pencils for more critiques. Almost no articles deal with governmental actions except in general terms. The consensus seems to be that the US (Trump) government performed poorly, while selected states—Korea, New Zealand, Singapore—performed well (Smicker, 91).

All of the articles here are light on statistics, and so did not fully use epidemiological data. They also shy away from overt criticism of governments. Instead they focus on the individual and social practices. At the same time civil society is curiously absent. This concept, rediscovered from the 1980s and 1990s to interpret authoritarian regimes and neoliberalism, can be a revealing lens through which to investigate the impact historical events and traumas on individual lives. The articles in *Cultural Politics* focus instead on the position of individuals and ideologies, as if civil society actors—churches, businesses, associations, NGOs—lacked agency.

One exception to this was Madhavi Mallapragada’s discussion of increased racial attacks on Asian-Americans during Covid (Mallapragada, 72). Mallapragada brings up what statistics have been published by the STOP AAPI HATE movement and other NGOs. Yet she doesn’t interrogate the received nebulous categories of Asian-American or the perpetrators of racism in a holistic way. Racism has certainly been present in America and racist incidents may have increased during COVID. Why? We would expect at least an attempt to understand the connection with COVID. Instead we are

left with the suspicion that anti-immigration and “contagion metaphors” alone do not explain racist and violent action, that COVID alone is not a sufficient explanation. And so it went with many phenomena that were ostensibly linked to COVID, such as pathological whiteness (Smicker 91) and urban population density (Khorana 106).

While several of the articles in *Cultural Politics* are typical of the Cultural Studies approach, the final article, by Ien Ang, illustrates many elements best. Ang sees COVID as bringing underlying tensions in the neoliberal regime to the fore. Issues include racial inequities, which erupted in the Black Lives Matter movement and discrimination against Chinese, as well as the new cold war between China and the U.S.; a simmering sense of rage and anger felt everywhere; and the climate crisis, which remained largely in the background during COVID, although it remains ranked as the most dire of all crises. Governments find themselves in conditions of cultural paralysis (396), moving from crisis to crisis without a gameplan (396). Ang borrows Gramsci’s concept of organic crisis as a process of unravelling that arises from intrinsic tensions (398).

Ang calls for a critical cosmopolitanism that can work against the organic crisis in which we find ourselves engulfed (396). But if she sees the current turmoil as moving us toward a “new world order, a new civilization,” she does not spell out what that post capitalist future would look like. Nor does she say more about how it would come about, except to assume that we require a “collective mobilization in the name of shared humanity and mutual solidarity” (401). In political terms this vagueness leaves space for actors with different agendas to grab power, as seen in many periods of transition, not least of all the transition from colonialism to modernity. For a discipline that calls for radical restructuring cultural studies is often politically naive.

Naivety is easily treated by strong doses of political history and engineering. Issues such as the reevaluation of the US-China ties, and decoupling, as well as practical approaches to climate change are beyond the range of the Cultural Studies framework, it seems. There are many options available to deal with issues facing humanity, including pandemics, that do not require an idealistic “cosmopolitan sense of pan-human solidarity” or even the collective action she calls for (405).

Overall, the *Cultural Politics* volume is a significant and well-edited collection of admittedly early thinking on COVID’s import. The articles by Charles Acland and Rebecca Adelman are particularly rich.

## Conclusion

These collections as a whole illustrate several themes in research on COVID-19. First, the importance of timeliness. While many of the pieces were written in 2021 or 2022 and published in 2023—fast by academic standards—quite a number of their findings have been rendered irrelevant by later events. The relative success of East Asian states in dealing with COVID has been overshadowed by succeeding surges in



Hong Kong, Taiwan, and especially China. China's abrupt volte-face in COVID policies is the most extreme example, but many of the countries encountering persistent COVID outbreaks had to adjust their approaches even if previously seen as successful.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, any discussion of East Asia clearly needs to include China, for a variety of reasons but none more relevant than its complete social and economic entanglement with surrounding states. Noburo Yamamoto, one of the volumes' editors, acknowledged that the absence of any treatment of China was a glaring problem. Yet incorporating China has been difficult. The Chinese government has not always shared data; a situation confirmed by WHO official Maria D. Van Kerkhove in April of 2023.<sup>13</sup>

A third issue is the need to evaluate economic impact as well as social factors. Any discussion of "successful" dealing with COVID that does not include issues of economic growth and disruption will be incomplete, since the economy is central to well-being. Indeed many measures adopted by states to deal with COVID showed varying degrees of concern for economy. At one extreme were the extreme lockdown policies requiring automatic quarantines for all flights, as well as strict lockdowns if a single person on a flight or in a factory was found to be positive, measures adopted in China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup> At the other extreme was a business-as-usual approach that privileged keeping business open, an approach taken in a number of U.S. states (not all).<sup>15</sup>

Fourthly, in many countries COVID resulted in a loss of trust in governance and institutions, such as public health, as well as government pronouncements overall. It is too easy to blame the ease of communication and online forums for this "infodemic." It is also possible that officials did give incorrect information or, more commonly, were unwilling to revise previous statements in light of evidence. There are certainly deeper problems involved here that COVID did help to uncover, but they were not all the fault of misinformation or misguided "resistors," as many media depictions imply. COVID brought to light the degree to which ostensibly scientific pronouncements are accepted without debate. Many pandemic measures, such as mask wearing or maintaining a 2 meter/6 feet distancing, were instead based on what was promoted as "best practices" and an implied moral code, instead of on the results of controlled experiments (Bennett 146). Such recommendations were often revised several times, leading to a suspicion that they were not authoritative or necessary.<sup>16</sup> Greatest suspicion rose around the topic of vaccination efficacy, an issue that remains sensitive today.

Overall these articles suffer from closeness to the events. There is certainly a rush to publish that characterizes some academic efforts to capitalize on events. In the case of COVID-19 the event dragged on for years; it can be argued we still live in the age of COVID. Thus any collection published in early 2021, a mere 12 months after the spread of the pandemic, is bound to be dated as soon as it is issued. From our perspective we



know that the virus had different histories in different locations. Some countries—Brazil, Italy, the U.S., India—were hit hard in the first waves but recovered fairly quickly. Others, including those that held lockdowns the longest, had near-spotless records until they didn't, when they allowed the spread of the virus into the population. Taiwan's 295-days without a COVID case can be seen in this light. Yes, the government there sprang into action quickly, instituting border closures and energetic tracing policies. But eventually COVID did enter. Cases began to climb in May of 2021.<sup>17</sup> The new measures resulted in shortages of instant noodles and toilet paper. In May of 2022 Taiwan abandoned its zero-COVID strategy in favor of home care and active tracing.<sup>18</sup> By March of 2023 individuals were no longer required to report mild symptoms.<sup>19</sup> In the end Taiwan did not escape the impact of COVID-19, it simply delayed its arrival. This is generally true of all the East Asian societies that instituted strict border controls in the first year—they eventually had to allow the spread of the disease. In other words, pandemics spread throughout populations over time, regardless of government policy.

Most of these articles did not to focus on government measures to combat COVID. This was wise. Assuming COVID management to be a source of “national glory,” seen in one example (Liu 171), is generally premature, and many of the positive comparisons in the foreign press will no doubt prove to have been fleeting. The success or failure of government policies can only be evaluated in the fullness of time. So none of these studies should be faulted for being too early. The urge to publish on a relevant topic is very real. And COVID had such a wide-ranging effect on every polity in the region that scholars have a responsibility to address its impact and attempt to understand the phenomenon. The key question raised by these studies is how best to address such a wide-ranging event. May it not be wiser to focus on questions in the initial stages, and to delay definitive analysis until later, once the phenomenon has cooled down? For complex events our understandings are often premature. In politics the advent of a Xi Jinping or a Donald Trump is unknowable in the early days, and observers are often surprised by outcomes. In business new business models and trends appear murky without breathing space. And in religious issues the full import of a new leader or idea is impossible to define or fully understand without the perspective of time. At the same time, we live in a world in which news and media calls for immediate comment, and scholars can be sucked in to the “immediate soundbite” mindset just as easily as politicians. We must resist this. In these cases we are best advised to outline a field of inquiry as it forms before our eyes, and to refrain from simple conclusions.

## Notes

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<sup>17</sup> “Covid: Taiwan orders toughest curbs amid infections spike,” *BBC Online*, 16 May 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57135647>.

<sup>18</sup> Chad De Guzman, “Taiwan Is Abandoning Its Zero-COVID Strategy in Favor of a ‘New Model’ of Coronavirus Containment,” *TIME*, 5 May 2022, <https://time.com/6174132/taiwan-covid-strategy/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Effective March 20, mild COVID-10 cases exempt from reporting, isolation and follow a ‘new policy of self-health management’ instead; Taiwan to relax other relevant epidemic prevention measures,” *Taiwan Centers for Disease Control*, 9 March 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov.tw/En/Bulletin/Detail/WSZT7bbeEkFGIR2km4-wAQ?typeid=158>.