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ASEAS 14(1) features a thematically open issue on recent developments in Southeast Asia, ranging from qualitative case studies to wider political and socio-economic dynamics in the region. The articles cover current developments in Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but the analyses presented transcend national borders, for example, in terms of transnational movements or the COVID-19 pandemic, and discuss related uncertainties and prospects.

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Uncertainty has become a popular term to describe current conditions and ongoing processes across the world, including Southeast Asia. The prevailing Coronavirus pandemic challenges societies and governments, and states in the region have dealt with this challenge to different degrees of success. Whereas some countries in mainland Southeast Asia, such as Thailand or Vietnam, have been portrayed as exemplary in dealing with ensuing states of emergency, others, particularly in insular Southeast Asia (such as the Philippines and Indonesia), have faced severe repercussions. Besides uncertainties with regard to health, the pandemic appears to lead to new state-centrism among the ASEAN states (Rüland, 2021) – a phenomenon that coincides with another factor of uncertainty in the region, namely, authoritarian tendencies, and the large-scale protests in response to these political shifts. Most notably, in Thailand, and recently in Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of young people went on the streets to express their disaffection pertaining to contemporary political crises. Military coups, however, are only one facet of authoritarian tendencies in the region (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018; Morgenbesser, 2020); and Thailand and Myanmar are not the only two countries to face massive protests. In Indonesia, for instance, a broad coalition of laborers, environmental and indigenous activists, among others, denounced the so-called Omnibus Law on Job Creation that was eventually passed on 5 October 2020 by President Joko Widodo. Demonstrations carried out throughout the year 2020 criticized the law for lowering standards with regard to working conditions and environmental impact (Mahy, 2021; Sembiring et al., 2020). In all cases, social media played an unprecedented role in shaping public discontent.

Southeast Asia is among the regions with the fastest growth in social media users, and a number of contributions to this issue recognize the urgency of analyzing ongoing developments by taking a closer look at the dynamics evolving in and beyond social media. In a Current Research article, Wolfram Schaffar investigates the transnational online movement evolving under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance in the wake of China's striving for hegemony in the region. His meticulous analysis outlines how a new generation of politically active young people connect to respond to the authoritarian tendencies in Thailand and beyond. In an interview with scholar-activist Pavin Chachavalpongpun, who runs the satirical Facebook group *Royalist Marketplace*, Schaffar further illuminates the shift towards a new form of political communication involving elements of transnational pop culture and fandom. Self-ironic TikTok videos and

sarcastic memes inform the new satirical style in which young activists in the region challenge authoritarian practices in their countries.

Social media are also in the focus of the Current Research article by Huang Linh Dang who provides a regional overview of how governments in Southeast Asia have used and restricted social media in terms of their measures against the pandemic. This contribution exemplifies the challenge of compounding regional dynamics directly linked to social media and related legislations, particularly in times where popular concepts such as information and disinformation require a critical approach. Also in the context of social media use during the Coronavirus pandemic, Gerhard Berka's Network Southeast Asia contribution investigates the rise of an Austria-based Facebook group in the wake of Malaysia's pandemic management. Berka interprets the activities in this group as a heightened interest in information that can be characterized as trustworthy. Just as the majority of Southeast Asians draw on social media for news and information, also marginalized minorities employ social media in their efforts to build and sustain marginalized socialities. Timo Duile's Research Workshop contribution sheds light on how social media depict an entry point in research on atheist life in Indonesia. In his contemplations of how social media has served – but also directed – his ongoing research, Duile raises important ethical questions with regard to dealing with virtually any information deriving from online-only encounters, and makes a valuable contribution to social media-based research among marginalized groups.

Uncertainty has different faces, and despite the rapid growth characterizing regional economies, or the speed with which new technologies are adopted in everyday practices, inequality runs deep throughout the region (The ASEAN Post, 2018). Migrant workers are among the groups who substantially contribute to the region's economic growth but who seldomly benefit from it. Choo Chin Low's Current Research article analyses ongoing legal reforms in Malaysia and their impact on migrant laborers' welfare. His detailed investigation presents an example of how legal amendments have been enforced in reaction to timely hazards, but have not managed to address some of the most vulnerable labor groups – undocumented migrant workers. Malaysian Indians form another minority group in Malaysia who originally came to the country as migrant laborers. In her Current Research article, Sue Ann Teo presents rich ethnographic material deriving from her dissertation research among Malaysian Indians, illuminating their social and political situation and agential responses through the case of temple demolition in Penang. Women are another group facing economic marginalization in the region, especially due to their unpaid domestic labor, and gender-based discrimination on job markets. In her Current Research article, Thi Kim Phung Dang investigates poor women's livelihoods in Ca Mau province in Vietnam, highlighting interlinkages with broader socioeconomic contexts – among others, the failure of rural development policies and poverty reduction programs to create employment for women. Finally, in her Book Review of the edited volume *Appropriating Kartini* (Bijl & Chin, 2020), Vissia Ita Yulianto emphasizes how the figure of Kartini – a Javanese woman and a national heroine – has been appropriated in various Western contexts in ways that often obscured and reproduced structural inequalities.

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The #MilkTeaAlliance: A New Transnational Pro-Democracy Movement Against Chinese-Centered Globalization?

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▸ Schaffar, W., & Praphakorn Wongratanawin. (2021). The #MilkTeaAlliance: A new transnational pro-democracy movement against Chinese-centered globalization? *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 14*(1), 5-35.

In April 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, memes addressing the Thai monarchy in a critical way appeared on Twitter under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance, which for a couple of days trended worldwide. Initially, the Twitter account of a Thai TV star was attacked by Chinese nationalists. But, different from similar incidents in the past, a new pan-Asian solidarity of Twitter users emerged, fought back the attack, and defeated the Chinese nationalists through highly self-ironic, witty, and political memes. In our article, we will discuss the meme war in its historic, political, and social context. Firstly, we claim that it can count as the inception of a new transnational movement comparable to the *globalization-critical movement* of the early 2000s, in so far as it targets the present, Chinese-led version of globalization. Secondly, we will challenge the dominant interpretation that the meme war was a confrontation between young Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese pro-democracy activists versus state-sponsored trolls from the People's Republic of China. Despite all distortions caused by censorship measures from the side of the Chinese government and Twitter, the meme war seemed to have opened a transnational space for debate.

Keywords: #MilkTeaAlliance; Fragmentation of the Internet; Meme War; Social Media; Transnational Pro-Democracy Movement

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, in the midst of the Corona crisis, memes addressing the Thai monarchy in a critical way appeared on Twitter under the hashtag #nnevvy, which for a couple of days trended worldwide.

The pictures (see figure 1 & 2) were part of a meme war, which erupted on the microblogging platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo and that involved more than 1,5 million entries and several billion clicks in the first two days on Weibo alone (Al Jazeera, 2020). Initially, the Twitter account of a Thai TV star – Vachirawit "Bright" Cheva-aree, who plays the main character on a homoerotic boy love (BL) series – was attacked by Chinese internet users because he had carelessly re-tweeted a message in which Hong Kong was called "a country" (**ประเทศ**). Moreover, his real-life girlfriend, who goes by the name *Nnevvy* online, had posted a message saying that she considered herself looking like a Taiwanese

Figure 1 (left)**.** Meme on the Thai King "NMSL! Your King is trash – Yes! he is.". (Twitter, anonymized tweet, 12 April 2020).

Figure 2 (right). Meme on the Thai King "Please don't say bad things about ur king". (Tayn. HK, 2020).

girl, not like a Chinese one. These postings were interpreted as questioning the One-China policy, and triggered a cyber-attack on their social media accounts from the side of Chinese nationalists. Different from similar incidents in the past, however, an alliance of Twitter users from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan emerged, fought back the attack, and defeated the Chinese users through highly self-ironic, witty, and political memes. Under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance – and also under a Thai and a Chinese hashtag #**ชานมข้นกว่าเลือด** (milk tea is thicker than blood), #奶茶聯盟 (milk tea alliance) – the crowd started discussing various taboo issues like the question of Taiwan's and Hong Kong's sovereignty, a Chinese hydropower dam project at the Mekong river, and the crackdown of the Tian'anmen protests of 1989; they even openly criticized the Thai monarchy and the Thai government – as shown in the memes cited above. This incident is one of the predecessors of the Thai democracy movement, which gained pace in July 2020, and opened the floodgates for an explicit, critical discussion of the monarchy for the first time since 1932.

As the meme war escalated, it drew the attention of established (off-line) media and was covered by many regional newspapers in Asia (*South China Morning Post*, *Liberty Times Net* 自由時報 from Taiwan, *Hong Kong Free Press*) and in the Arab World (*Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya*), and also by international newspapers (*Reuters*, *Guardian*, *The Diplomat*, *Foreign Policy*)[1]. The dominant interpretation was that a "Twitter spat over the weekend created a new pan-Asian solidarity between young Thais and China's foe" (Buchanan, 2020; on Vice), and that "Thais show how to beat China's online army" (Teixeira, 2020; in Foreign Policy). The incident was interpreted as a "Twitter War Between Chinese Nationalist Trolls and Young Thais" through which "the fears of the Chinese and Thai governments eventually came true. The pro-democracy

1 For the first wave of media coverage, see Banka (2020), Buchanan (2020), Chan (2020), Al Jazeera (2020a), McDevitt (2020), Patpicha and Potkin (2020), Patpicha (2020), South China Morning Post (2020), and Teixeira (2020). The meme war was also taken up very quickly by media from the PRC, such as Global Times (2020a) – of course from a very different perspective. A second wave of media attention started in the end of October, as a result of the sustained pro-democracy demonstrations in Thailand.

youth movements in the respective countries have now taken a step closer together, bonded in spirit by their alliance in 'the battle of #nnevvy'." (Buchanan, 2020).

The meme war, its emergence, dynamics, and outcome were indeed remarkable in several ways:

a. Inside Thailand, it marks a change in the content and style of political communication on social media. In contrast to earlier pics, which were circulated on social media to challenge the draconian lèse-majesté law, these new memes follow a style of sophisticated, self-ironic political communication, characteristic for the *meme-fication* (Bulatovic, 2019) or what can be called the *TikTok-ization* of political debate. It was further developed in the hugely successful Facebook group *Royalists Marketplace* by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (see Schaffar, 2020, this issue), and in the use of pop culture elements (Harry Potter[2] and Hamtaro costumes, drag fashion shows, etc.) during the street protests that started in July 2020.

b. The incident also mirrors the emergence of a new generation of politically active young people. The trajectories of their politicization and the forms of their political activism differs from the rather middle-aged-based movements of the Redshirts and Yellowshirts, which used to be the dominant political polarization over the past 15 years. What is remarkable is the fact that the social base of the meme war came from a scene that many would have considered a-political: Social media-savvy young people who are united in their fandom for K-pop and homoerotic BL TV dramas.

c. The alliance's most interesting characteristic is its international or transnational scope, bringing together democracy activists and BL series fans from Thailand, Taiwan, Hongkong, and to a lesser extent also from the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, and India. These connections rest on the transnational structure of Asian pop business, with Taiwanese singers working as part of Korean K-pop groups, and actors of Thai BL dramas trending in mainland China. The issues that were taken up, however, were not pop-related topics. They also went beyond the original incident connected to the One-China policy, and included ecologic and economic issues as well as human rights problems. The Thai participants in the online rally characteristically drew parallels between the authoritarianism of the Chinese and the Thai governments and thus articulated a general demand for democracy.

This article discusses the meme war in its historic, political, and social context. The analysis is based on tweets, memes, and other postings from Twitter and Facebook, and to a limited extent from Sina Weibo, in a period between April and October 2020, written in English, Thai, Chinese, and Japanese. It also includes

2 Elements of Harry Potter novels, especially pictures of Lord Voldemore – also known as "He Who Must not Be Named" – were already used during the Redshirt protests in 2010 to allude to the King of Thailand. Yet, it needs to be stressed that criticism of the monarchy was neither in consensus with the 2010 Redshirt movement, nor was it possible to openly address this issue.

a small number of interviews with activists as a base for interpretation[3]. The article argues that, firstly, the MilkTeaAlliance was triggered by the Corona crisis, and that the #MilkTeaAlliance can count as the inception of a new, transnational movement comparable to the *global justice movement*, or *anti-globalization movement*, which emerged in the early 2000s (also known under the name of *alter-globalization movement*, *globalisierungskritische Bewegung*, or *movimento altermondista*). The new movement targets the present, Chinese-led version of globalization, but it is crucial to note that it goes beyond a nationalistic anti-Chinese campaign.

Secondly, this article challenges the dominant interpretation that the meme war was a confrontation between young Thai, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese pro-democracy activists versus state-sponsored trolls from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The dynamics of the movements on both sides were more complex. In the wake of the protests by the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA that unfolded after the murder of George Floyd on 24 May 2020, memes from the side of Chinese nationalists started articulating a sophisticated criticism of the US political system. This debate, however, was put to a premature end by Twitter's decision on June 12 to delete 170,000 accounts from China, with the justification that they were identified as fake accounts. Against this backdrop, this article discusses the technical infrastructure and social base of the debate. While the #MilkTeaAlliance opened a transnational space for debate, the deletion of accounts and Chinese censorship measures are leading to an increasing fragmentation of the internet.

CHINA AS THE NEW HEGEMON AND CHINESE-LED GLOBALIZATION

The world is currently in a phase of hegemonic transition from a US-centered world system to a new system with China as its economic and political center. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was started as Xi Jinping's prestige project in 2013, has been discussed in this context. While the fact of a hegemonic transition is rarely doubted, the question of how to conceptualize the new era is highly contested.

BRI as New China-Led Globalization

Many authors characterize the BRI as a new form of globalization (Hoering, 2018). While some voices welcome China as a new guarantor of free trade at times of rising protectionism, authors from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), such as Liu et al. (2018), or Liu and Dunford (2016), focus on characterizing the new globalization as explicitly anti-neoliberal. They highlight the principles of green development that they believe it incorporates, or alternatively, the fact that it is a form of South-South cooperation (for critical accounts, see Chun, 2018; Hoering, 2018; Rudolf et al., 2014). A second tendency in the literature, by contrast, sees the BRI as a sign of the rise of a new global power or even a new imperialism, which is accompanied by an aggressive and imperial foreign policy (Benner et al., 2018; Brady, 2017; Reeves, 2018).

3 About 10 interviews were conducted in a semi-formal setting, mostly at the occasion of protest events of Thai activists in Europe. The interviews also include longer exchanges with activists outside Europe, such as the interview with Pavin Chachavalpongpun from end of August 2020, which is published in this issue (Schaffar, 2020).

A third line of argumentation can be distinguished in the work of authors such as Godehardt (2016), who take the view that the new international relations established in the course of the BRI are linked to the traditional system of tributary states. That the Chinese government increasingly perceives its own political role in terms of such categories is documented in Noesselt (2015).

Nevertheless, as Heilmann et al. (2014) point out, China increasingly established parallel structures to a wide range of existing international institutions that are, or used to be, the institutional backbone of globalization of the 1990s. A crucial difference between these views concerns the question of how far the hegemonic shift and the new round of China-centered globalization is accompanied by a shift towards authoritarianism. In March 2019, the European Union (EU) (and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) released a strategy paper in which China is designated as a "systemic rival" that is "promoting alternative models of governance" (European Commission, 2019). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) followed in December 2019 and – for the first time – used similar words.

Chinese Style Authoritarianism and Internet Governance

An important element of the perceived "alternative mode of governance" can be seen in China's internet regulation. For many years, utopists considered the Internet to be a realm of liberty and a catalyst for democratization. Several US presidents and secretaries of state, with regard to China, used the metaphor that trying to censor the Internet was like "nailing Jell-O to the wall" (Clinton, 2000). But in fact, the Chinese administration succeeded in developing a range of techniques to govern the Internet in such a way that it enables economic growth but does not strengthen political rights and liberties or encourage political organizing. As Allen-Ebrahimian (2016) puts it, the Chinese government effectively managed to "nail Jell-O to the wall". Authoritarian governance of the Internet, thus, has a strong link to Chinese statecraft.

In the 1990s, the city state of Singapore served as a first laboratory for authoritarian internet regulation. Here, several techniques to induce self-censorship were developed and exported to Mainland China (George, 2007; Lee, 2010). What became known as the *Great Firewall* (GFW) is a strategy to seal off the Chinese internet from the rest of the world and provide domestic versions of popular social networks and media applications for the users inside the firewall. Originally, Chinese platforms like WeChat and Sina Weibo (新浪微博 xinlang weibo) were copies of the US-based global players Facebook and Twitter. Only recently, the platform TikTok (抖音 douyin), which was programmed by a Chinese company, managed to become successful beyond the Chinese Great Firewall (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

In addition to technical provisions, China became known for optimizing the strategy of influencing public opinion through state-sponsored trolls, which became known as China's *Five Cent Army* (五毛党 wumaotang) (Han, 2015). It is estimated that over two million government officials or paid trolls are posting more than 480 million messages per year, mostly on Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧, the most-used Chinese communication platform), with pro-government content (Kin et al., 2017).

These techniques were also exported to other countries as part of technical assistance and development aid programs under the heading of fostering *cyber sovereignty*.

For example, the internet infrastructure in Ecuador and Ethiopia and other countries in Latin America and Africa were developed based on Chinese technology, together with trainings for the administration of internet regulation techniques (Gagliardone, 2014; Mozur et al., 2019). Throughout Southeast Asia, cyber security laws were adopted, which were modeled after the Singaporean and Chinese blueprint. The Thai Cyber Scouts program of 2011 to monitor social media, and Rodrigo Duterte's trolls' army in the Philippines (Ong & Cabañes, 2019), can be seen as local adoptions of the Chinese Five Cent Army program with different characteristics.

The Corona Crisis and Its Impact on Chinese-Led Globalization

The outbreak of the Corona crisis has not only accelerated global political processes. It also put the hegemonic transition of the economic center from the USA to China in a new context[4]. In March 2020, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2020) pointed out in a public interview that Germany's and Europe's reactions to the crisis will be part of a global contestation of political governance systems. Many analysts see China's version of rational authoritarianism (Atlanticist, 2020) on the winning side over the erratic, populist authoritarian governments of the USA or Brazil, or even over the European-style democratic approach. In any case, the Chinese government has stepped up its efforts to influence global public opinion in three respects. First, the government enhanced its material development and used it for public relations aims. The BRI is being combined with the concept of the Silkroad of Health (健康丝绸之路) (Ngeow, 2020; Rudolf, 2021). In what is dubbed 'mask diplomacy', medical equipment is sent to countries that suffer under the crisis and that are BRI partners, such as Italy, but also Thailand, and the Philippines (Loh, 2020).

Second, the Chinese administration is also stepping up its efforts in the field of internet governance and influencing global public opinion. Analysts have noted that internet governance has shifted from being primarily focused inward to more actively projecting outward (Fang & He, 2020; Segal, 2020; Zhong et al., 2020). To this end, Chinese trolls are being employed to spread the word that the Chinese reaction to COVID-19 was a success story, and to portray China as the solution, not the source, of the Coronavirus pandemic (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020; Klabisch & Straube, 2020). At the same time, the success of Taiwan in containing the pandemic is silenced and a new round of restrictive legislation in Hong Kong is being enacted (The Epoch Times, 2020).

Third, China is using the paralysis of most countries and of the international system to push its expansionist agenda. This can be seen in new activities in the South China Sea, but above all in policy towards Hong Kong. After the extradition bill was blocked by mass protests in Hong Kong, the government in Beijing used the limbo of the Coronavirus pandemic to launch a security law that goes far beyond the extradition law, and effectively incorporated Hong Kong into the Chinese political and judicial area (Wong, 2020). Also, new, strong criticism against Taiwan was voiced at the occasion of the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen on 11 January 2020 and in connection with her inauguration on 20 May 2020 (Lee & Blanchard, 2020).

4 See Dunford and Qi (2020) for an early account, which also mirrors the view of the Chinese leadership. The paper was published in August, 2020. By the end of 2020, the authors' predictions and assessments had largely materialized.

In Thailand, Sino-Thai relations were an issue on different levels, and were highly contested even before the outbreak of the Corona crisis (Szumer, 2020). Economic connections to China and the question of who controls the implementation of the Belt and Road projects in Thailand have arguably led to an intra-elite contestation and triggered the coup d'état in 2014 that brought the present Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha into office. Waves of Chinese tourists came to Thailand and substituted the declining numbers of Western tourists, who stayed away after the coup d'état (Associated Press, 2014). On the military level, the new administration under Prayuth distanced itself from its long-term ally, the USA, in a highly symbolic deal to purchase submarines from China (Zhen, 2020). Most importantly, Prayuth's central economic project, the Eastern Economic Corridor project, was put under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019 (Lin, 2019).

In general, this new orientation towards China on different levels of society, politics, and culture is unfolding on the basis of a renaissance of overseas Chinese heritage (Kasian, 2017; Pavin, 2016). Thailand's biggest economic player, the Charoen Pokphand Group Co. (CP), has evolved out of a family business with overseas Chinese roots. By today, it is the world's largest producer of animal feed, shrimps, and – among other sectors – also runs the top telecom company in Thailand. It is still controlled by the family, with Dhanin Chearavanont, son of the founder and the richest man in Thailand with assets estimated USD16,5 billion, acting as senior chairman (Straits Times, 2019). In October 2019, Thailand's government and a consortium led by Charoen Pokphand Group signed a contract for the country's largest-ever rail project, which will link three international airports around Bangkok with high-speed trains (Kishimoto, 2019; Schmidt & Natnicha, 2019). With this deal, which also involves the state-owned China Railway Construction company and that turned the project into an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, China for the first time became the largest foreign investor in Thailand (Pimuk, 2020).

It was against this backdrop of rising Chinese influence on the military, cultural, and economic level, and of the closeness of the Prayuth administration to China, that the Corona crisis was interpreted in Thai society. In the first couple of weeks of the crisis, Chinese tourists and Thai migrant workers coming back from Wuhan were discussed as potential sources of infections. The scarcity of medical equipment, mostly imported from China, and cases of corruption in connection with the government's procurement of masks dominated the news for weeks. In the end, it was CP's senior chairman Dhanin Chearavanont who used his exclusive connection to China, chartered an airplane to transport mask making machines and raw material to Thailand, and started a domestic production of masks to be delivered for free to the medical sector and ordinary Thais as an act of charity in the crises (The Nation, 2020).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE #MILKTEAALLIANCE

This is the background against which the meme war under the hashtag #nnevvy erupted on 10 April on the microblogging platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo, with more than 1,5 million entries and several billion clicks in the first two days on Weibo alone (Al Jazeera, 2020a). Apart from the prominence of Chinese issues in the media, the incident is connected to specific pop cultural phenomena and to the Corona crisis.

The Thai pop star, Bright, who was attacked by Chinese internet users because he carelessly re-tweeted a message in which Hong Kong was called "a country" (**ประเทศ**), plays one of the leading characters in the BL series *2gether – the series*.

Figure 3. Cover picture of the BL series **เพราะเราคู่กัน** (literally "because we are a couple"), official English title 2gether – the series. (GMMTV, 2019).

The genre goes back to Japanese *yaoi* manga and anime, which featured male-to-male erotic or romantic stories. What used to be a specifically female sub-culture with limited audience throughout the 1980s and 1990s started spreading throughout Asia and developed into a pan-Asian pop genre (Lin, 2018). Thailand recently evolved as the main actor in this field.

Drawing on the rising popularity of BL novels, GMMTV, the producer of the series *2gether – the series,* was the first film production company to start dropping BL characters into heterosexual love series, and gained great success with its first BL series. The breakthrough, however, came with the Corona crisis. Line TV, a free streaming platform that had been broadcasting GMMTV's BL series since 2016, jumped from a market share of 5% in 2019 to 34% in the first quarter of 2020 (Koaysomboon, 2020). With more than 30 different BL series in stock on Line TV, the genre left the niche of a subculture and has gone mainstream. *2gether – the series*, produced by GMMTV and aired by Line TV, brought a huge international success:

> Throughout the 13 weeks of its airing, the #2gethertheSeries hashtag topped global trends on Twitter – the most favored social media of Boys Love fans – and triggered millions of virtual conversations about the series in various languages, from Thai to Chinese to English. The series was so popular that its lead actors, fresh-faced Vachirawit "Bright" Cheva-aree and Metawin "Win" Opas-iamkajorn, garnered more than a million Instagram followers from all over the world in just a few weeks. 2gether: The Series became the global phenomenon no one expected. (Koaysomboon, 2020)

On the basis of this success, analysts expect that the BL series will become a key part of Thailand's export strategy, comparable to Korea's K-pop industry, which accounts for cultural content exports worth 9.55 billion in 2018 (Koaysomboon, 2020). The BL products and BL fandom has a transnational scope. The publishing house sold the

rights to their stories to Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese companies, but also inside mainland China, where the BL genre arrived through the mediation of Taiwan. Bright and *2gether – the series* is followed by a large fandom and reached highest attention not only on Twitter, but also on Sina Weibo. For the producers of BL series, apart from future plans to expand to Europe and Latin America, the market in mainland China is actually the most important (Smith, 2021; Young & Xu, 2017).

This exceptionally high attention of the series is the reason why Bright's posting on 9 April triggered such a large reaction. Since all of his moves and postings were closely followed, the single sentence "four pictures from four *countries* – Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Thailand" (emphasis added), which was actually part of a product placement for a Nikon reflex camera (see Figure 4), could draw so much attention. When Bright's girlfriend published a posting saying that she considered herself looking like a Taiwanese, not like a Chinese girl (see Figure 6), this prompted a strong reaction by nationalist Chinese Twitter and Weibo users, who saw Bright's and Nnevvy's comments as an attack on the One-China policy of the Chinese government. Despite Bright's immediate apology (see Figure 5), their accounts were flooded.

Figure 4 (left)**.** Retweet by Bright, calling Hong Kong a country '**ประเทศ**'. (Poetry of Bitch, 2020a).

Figure 5 (center). Tweet by Bright apologizing for his "mistake". (Poetry of Bitch, 2020b).

Figure 6 (right). Bright's girlfriend Nnevvy considering herself to look like a Taiwanese, not a Chinese girl. (Everington, 2020).

The History of Cyber Mobbing Campaigns and Boy-Band Fandom

The exact sources of the attack against Nnevvy and the identity of the people who mobilized are not known. In the mainstream media coverage of the event, two different explanations are given. On the one side, analysts speak of an attack from state sponsored trolls – the Five Cent Army. Others mention the so-called *Little Pinks* (小粉红 xiao fenhong) as the relevant group behind the attack – young girls from chat fora who normally exchange on BL series and K-Pop singers, but who have appeared as a driving force behind nationalist cyber-attacks, such as the *Diba* (帝吧) incident, since 2016 (Liberty Times Net 自由時報, 2020; Liu, 2019; Xu, 2020).

In January 2016, the Facebook account of the newly elected Taiwanese prime minister Tsai Ing-wen (Liu, 2019) was attacked in an orchestrated campaign. Her election was preceded by an incident in which the 16-year-old Taiwanese K-pop star, Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜) was attacked by nationalist bloggers from China for having shown a Taiwanese flag in a TV show in South Korea. The attack against Chou helped Tsai Ing-wen, who was campaigning for a tougher stand for Taiwanese independence, to win. After her electoral victory, Tsai herself became the next target of the nationalist bloggers from Mainland China. They used the *blowing up the board* (爆吧 baoba) strategy against Tsai's Facebook account – a form of cyber war that chat forum users in China typically use against competing chat fora. This first nationalist cyber-attack by Little Pinks became known under the name of the chat forum from where it was launched – the Diba (帝吧) forum on Baidu (Liu, 2019).

The reaction against Bright's girlfriend Nnevvy is also reminiscent of notorious K-pop fan wars. BTS, the most popular Korean boy group, call their fandom "Army"; "EXO-L" is the name of the fandom of EXO, another K-pop group. The fan groups perform their loyalty to their idols by trying to hype their band on social media with all the means and strategies possible – including mobbing of the competitor bands. The omnipresence of fierce cyber mobbing that is applied by the fans against the competitors are in contrast to the image of the stars themselves, who are portraited as soft, gentle, non-violent, and caring for their fans[5].

The parallels between the cyber mobbing of Bright and Nnevvy and the Diba incident and K-pop fandom wars are striking. However, the case of Bright and Nnevvy took an unexpected turn. During their campaign, Chinese nationalists tried to attack Thai Twitterers by insulting the monarchy – very much in the style of K-pop fandom wars – maybe assuming that this would be the utmost assault and would provoke a fierce reaction. However, Thai users agreed with such assaults – in an ironic way – and thus perplexed the nationalists and won the meme war.

Memes as a New Communication Style

Deeper investigation into the meme cited in the introduction provides an illustration of the specific communication strategy that emerged during the incident. At first sight, the meme seems not very sophisticated. It is slightly skewed and contains misspellings. But a closer etymological reconstruction reveals quite a complex structure and an amazing level of *intertexuality*. It is derived from a drawing *Batman slapping Robin* – a common source for memes that goes back to a 1965 comic book, *World's Finest #153*. The story is based around an alternate reality in which Batman believes that Superboy and Superman are responsible for the death of his father. The parodies go back at least to 2008 (see Figure 7), and ever since, it has been used so often that a collection was started on Facebook, on a Pinterest page[6], and on Reddit[7], and new memes can be created automatically with the help of a ready-made

5 The violence of cyber mobbing caught international attention after three K-pop stars committed suicide in only two months in late 2019 (Hahn, 2020).

6 https://www.pinterest.de/danielh86/batman-slapping-robin/

7 https://www.reddit.com/r/BatmanSlap/

template[8]. In the early parody of 2008, Robin asks what Batman will get from his parents for Christmas, and Batman answers: "My parents are dead" – a sentence that emerged as a secondary tag[9] for the parent pic on the internet.

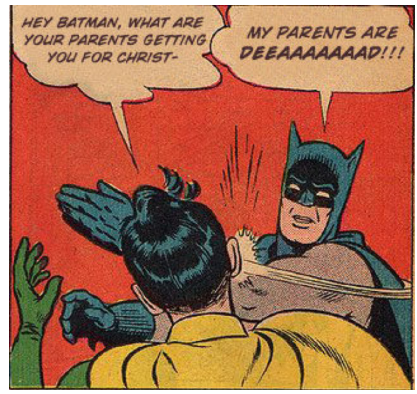

Figure 7. Meme of the meme family "Batman slapping Robin" aka "My parents are dead". (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-parents-are-dead-batman-slapping-robin).

In the present parody form, the Thai flag was used to designate Batman as Thailand or the Thai bloggers, and Robin as Chinese bloggers or trolls. Robin attacks Batman verbally, saying "NMSL!", and "Your King is trash". "NMSL" is an insult typically used by Chinese bloggers when they are upset and run out of arguments – roughly the equivalent to the English "fuck off" (Urban Dictionary, 2018, 2020). It goes back to a Southern Chinese video blogger. One of his clips, where at one point he repeatedly shouted the curse "Your mother is dead" (你妈死了ni ma si le), went viral in China, and later the initial letters of the Pinyin transcription "NMSL" became a fixed expression of cursing on Chinese social media (Fang, 2020).

With Batman's answer, "Yes! He is.", and Batman slapping Robin, the meme summarizes the strategy that was employed in the heated Twitter storm between Thai and Chinese bloggers: The Thai bloggers took the Chinese curse "NMSL" literally and used it as the bridge to the meme's etymology and its meaning, "My parents are dead". The current parody conveys the message that the curses and insults uttered by the Chinese about Thailand – including the criticism of the monarchy – are actually true. But admitting and reflecting upon this truth is a sign of strength and not of weakness. With this move, the Thai bloggers also rejected any simple idea of nationalism – the idea that an offence against symbols or representatives of the Thai nation (government and monarchy) could be used to offend someone personally. And – for the domestic context this is especially important – they rejected the idea that the monarchy is a sacred and taboo element of Thai national identity.

What is amazing is the new ironic and sarcastic style. The emergence of satirical memes and the shift towards a new form of political expression was noticed already at the occasion of the general elections in March 2019 (Teirra, 2019) – albeit not in

8 https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/Batman-Slapping-Robin

9 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-parents-are-dead-batman-slapping-robin

connection with the taboo issue of the monarchy. It can also be seen on TikTok, where it was extensively and very successfully used by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (see Schaffar, 2020, this issue) in his satirical Facebook group *Royalists Marketplace*, founded in April 2020. The first traces of satirical memes and the shift towards a new form of political expression, however, were already noticed at the occasion of the general elections in March 2019 (Teirra, 2019).

Pop Culture, Transnational Political Mobilization and the Emergence of the MilkTeaAlliance

The campaign to fight back the attack on Nnevvy's and Bright's social media accounts evolved spontaneously and unfolded within a few hours over the weekend of 10-11 April. Due to the transnational scope of Nnevy's and Bright's fandom, a young crowd from all over East and Southeast Asia got involved. Soon, key democracy activists and party leaders from Hong Kong took up the momentum, joined the campaign, and augmented its reach. Interestingly, they did not shy away from using explicit homoerotic pictures from the BL series in their postings as a sign of progressiveness.

Nathan Law Kwung-chung, a former student leader, founder of the *Demosisto Party* (香港眾志) and well-known democracy activist from Hong Kong, jumped on the meme war on 12 April and in one of his Tweets drew on the particularly ironic style: "So funny watching the Pro-CCP online army trying to attack Bright. They think, every Thai person must be like them, who love Emporer Xi. What they don't understand is that Bright's fans are young and progressive – and pro-CCP army always make the wrong attacks." He illustrated his Tweet with a homoerotic scene from the BL drama.

Figure 8 (left)**.** Nathan Law tweets his solidarity with #nnevvy on 12 April. (Law, 2020).

Figure 9 (right). Joshua Wong tweets his solidarity with #nnevvy. (Wong, 2020a).

Joshua Wong, Nathan Law's fellow party leader, joined the debate and declared his solidarity on 12 April, also with a reference to the BL drama.

The Chinese Embassy in Bangkok reacted on 14 April with a statement published on Facebook. But by then, the meme war was already in full swing. The "Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Thailand Concerning Recent Online Statements Related to China" starts with the sentence: "First of all, I want to underline

that the One China Principle is irrefutable and China is firmly opposed to anyone making any erroneous statement inconsistent with the One China Principle anytime, anywhere." The statement goes on underlining the excellent relations between China and Thailand by drawing on a well-known expression, which suggests a family relation between the two nations. "The friendship between China and Thailand dates back to ancient times, and the expression of 'China and Thailand as one family' is a genuine epitome of our bilateral relationship."[10]

The claim of a family relationship has a long tradition in the modern history and diplomatic relations between the two countries (Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt & Kanya Phuphakdi, 2018). It was used to encourage the integration of overseas Chinese into Thai society at the beginning of the twentieth century and played a crucial role in the normalization of Thai-Chinese relations during the Cold War[11]. However, against the backdrop of the arrogant and authoritarian wording of the Embassy, the often-cited blood relationship was explicitly rejected by the bloggers. Instead, they promoted milk tea as a counter concept – a drink that is popular among young, urban middle-class kids in various countries around East and Southeast Asia[12]. The Thai hashtag #ชานมข้นกว่าเลือด (milk tea is thicker than blood), alongside the English and Chinese counterparts #奶茶聯盟 (milk tea alliance), soon evolved as the central reference for the meme war, which earlier was tagged under the personal hashtags of #nnevvy and #bright. According to #nnevvy, the hashtag was first used by ShawTim, a Twitter user from Hong Kong, and took off the ground when the artists behind the Hong Kong-based café *Milktealogy* popularized it through heroic drawings that were published on the commercial Facebook account of their business on 14 April (Nnevvy, 2020).

Figure 10 (left). The promotion of the concept of Milk Tea Alliance. (ShawTim, 2020).

Figure 11 (right). The café Milktealogy in Hong Kong promotes illustrations for the new concept. (奶茶通俗學 Milktealogy, 2020).

10 The Chinese wording is 中泰一家亲 (zhong tai ijia qin) (Chinese Embassy Bangkok, 2020).

11 The transnational success of the Thai BL dramas actually partly rests on this relationship, too. Bright is perceived as highly attractive, with white skin, typical for the Bangkokian middle class of Chinese descent. Nnevvy is also perceived as integrated Chinese.

12 See Mak (2021) for a detailed account of the heritagization process of milk tea in Hong Kong and its different shades of meaning.

With the newly established name and the heroic drawings, the online movement got a framing and an identity. The comment by a young guy, which is one out of more than 1,200 comments reacting on the first drawing on Facebook, illustrates the formation of this identity[13].

> Let's call Thailand is part of Taiwan would make more sense than Thailand is part of China. Because Taiwan Milk Tea is every 500 meters and you can find it [in] any far away districts or villages. 555
>
> And I really don't mind to make fun or insulted Thailand because even we're under Junta but our spirit is free.
>
> And of course I support Democracy and Freedom in Hong kong & Taiwan!
>
> (Comment on the posting of Milktealogy on Facebook, 14 April 2020)

The boy from Bangkok expresses a feeling of *cultural proximity* to Taiwan and Hong Kong on the basis of a common consumerist culture, of which milk tea is a symbol. In addition to the shades of meaning that Mak (2021) points out in the case of Hong Kong milk tea, the boy from Bangkok adds a political connotation, stressing the notion of having a *free spirit* – and being able to think independently and not be blinded by nationalism as a defining characteristic. And he subscribes to the fight for *democracy* and *freedom* in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Broadening the Agenda

At the beginning of the movement on Twitter, the core issue was the rejection of the nationalists' crusade against Bright and Nnevvy. But very quickly, the range of issues addressed under the newly established hashtag broadened. This happened in two ways. First, the way the Thai and Chinese bloggers interacted naturally brought up different issues, and eventually led to a more general discussion about authoritarianism. Second, political activists and key actors of prodemocracy movements in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan took the initiative and actively fed in discussions and political campaigns to the news stream (Fung, 2020).

One example for the first process – this is, the interaction on the grassroots level of the campaign on both sides – concerns the issue of the COVID-19 crisis. Many early postings from Chinese nationalists, such as the one from 11 April cited in Figure 12, criticized Nnevvy for being ungrateful towards China[14].

Figure 12. A typical tweet criticizing Nnevvy in the course of the nationalists' cyber-attack. (bbbbwwwyl, 2020).

13 The quote is given in its original wording and spelling – including elements from Thai internet language standards, such as "555". In Thai, it reads "ha ha ha" and corresponds to "lol" or to the Emoji 😂.

14 This tweet was sent from a fake account, which no longer exists. This is why we did not anonymize it.

Such postings directly mirror the PRC public relations campaign, which tried to portray China as the solution and not as the source of the COVID-19 crisis. As a reaction to reproaches of being ungrateful, the Thai side countered with memes stating that COVID-19 was actually coming from China. Many of the memes used by the Thais were retweeted from other threads, such as the meme in Figure 13 from the US-based anti-CCP channel, *Political Energy* (天下政經), which combines the critique on China's Corona crisis public relations' initiative with notorious issues of Hong Kong's and Taiwan's sovereignty.

Figure 13. A meme used to counter Chinese nationalists' attack on Nnevvy. (Donahue, 2020).

Yet other memes drew on existing pictures and symbols of ongoing conflicts. One example is a meme that goes back to the satirical drawing by the Danish cartoonist in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 27 January 2020, which used the Chinese flag and replaced the golden stars with sketches of the Coronavirus. Immediately after its publication in Denmark, China demanded an apology, since it considered the drawing "an insult to China" and said that it "hurts the feelings of the Chinese people". This harsh reaction from the side of the PRC put the incident in line with the Muhammad cartoons in the same newspaper in 2005, and led to a broader debate on the Chinese influence on Western media (Orange, 2020). The meme used on #MilkTeaAlliance replaced the four small stars with the letters NMSL, expressing that China is not only the source of COVID-19 but also of hate speech. It is another example of the multilayered intertextuality and sophistication of the memes used for the #MilkTeaAlliance (see figure 14).

Examples for the second process of broadening the agenda – the use of #MilkTeaAlliance by activists in other fields – could also be observed from the very

Figure 14. Meme derived from a contested satirical drawing from the Danish Newspaper Jyllands Posten. (Onrush, 2020).

beginning. Already starting on 16 April, environmental activists used the hashtag to re-tweet several memes promoting the campaign against a Chinese dam construction at the Mekong River. The dam is being criticized for its potential to cause water scarcity in Southeast Asian countries downstream.

In June, activists posted about the forced disappearance of Wanchalearm, a democracy activist who – like many others opposing the coup d'état of 2014 – was in exile in Cambodia. His abduction is one of several incidents of forced disappearances of dissidents, some of whom were later found dead with traces of severe torture (Wright & Issariya, 2020). Among other scandals, this incident triggered the re-emergence of the street protests in Thailand in mid-July.

Figure 15. A retweet drawing the attention to the forced disappearance of the activist Wanchalearm. (Piyarak_s, 2020).

The beginning of June saw another peak in activities, through which experienced democracy activists from Hong Kong and Thailand created new campaigns and events directly tailored for the #MilkTeaAlliance in order to re-invigorate and further develop the conceptual frame. One such example is the campaign for the commemoration of the 31st anniversary of the crackdown of the Tian'anmen demonstrations. The Thai pro-democracy group, *Delicious Democracy* (ประชาธิปไตยกินได้ edible democracy), headed by the political science graduate and well-known activist, Netiwit Chotipatphaisal, from Chulalongkorn University, produced milk tea-flavored cookies in the shape of the Tian'anmen Gate and of the Tank Man as giveaways for a protest event in front of the Chinese embassy in Bangkok (Khaosod, 2020). The event was covered by critical newspapers, and the video footage and photographs were tweeted under #MilkTeaAlliance through Joshua Wong in Hong Kong.

Figure 16 (left). Announcement of the protest event in commemoration of the Tian'anmen massacre, using milk tea flavored cookies. (Delicious Democracy, 2020).

Figure 17 (right). Joshua Wong retweeting a footage of the protest event by the Thai activists in front of the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok. (Wong, 2020b).

The group's name and the campaign itself show the features of self-ironic pop culture that later became a trademark of the Thai students' protests of July 2020. The Thai name of the Facebook group Delicious Democracy alludes to a political slogan of the Redshirt movement of 2009/2010, which called for a meaningful democracy beyond formal procedures, with a real, "edible" material effect (Pitch, 2009). The homepage of the group is registered under the Facebook commercial category of *dessert shops* and is a persiflage of the online promotion strategy of fashionable start-up cookie shops.

Through the involvement of experienced democracy activists, the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance moved away from its original issue – the cyber-attack against Nnevvy's and Bright's accounts – and was increasingly used for the coordination and framing of a transnational movement. Postings on specific issues and comments to the postings served to carve out commonalities between the emerging movements in the different countries. There were several attempts to include more countries – such as India, the Philippines, Australia, and Brazil – in the virtual alliance whenever activists challenged authoritarian practices in these countries or when conflicts with Chinese involvement occurred. One such example was the military stand-off at

the Indian-Chinese border; another example was the attempt of the Beijing government to intimidate MPs in Brazil in order to prevent them from congratulating the Taiwanese Tsai Ing-wen for her re-election (Fiallo Flor, 2020). However, until the end of October 2020, the hashtag was largely identified with the cooperation between movements in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

This alliance eventually spilled over to the off-line world. It has re-enforced pre-existing links between the Hong Kong movement and the movements in Thailand and Taiwan (Elemia, 2020). Not only did Netiwit organize a protest in solidarity with the Tian'anmen protests in Bangkok. During the recent protests in Thailand, Joshua Wong also staged a protest in front of the Thai embassy in Hong Kong and called for solidarity with the Thai protesters. When one of the central activists behind the Thai democracy protests, Francis Bunkueanun Paothong, was arrested on 15 October, possibly facing a life sentence, he addressed the Thai movement in an emotional video message: "Don't worry about me. I will fight, for the people of Thailand, for the people of the MilkTeaAlliance, I will fight for you." (Vice News, 2020).

A New Anti-Globalization Movement Targeting Chinese-Driven Globalization

The invocation of "the people of the MilkTeaAlliance" by Paothong and the solidarity campaigns are part of a formation process of a transnational movement. The outcome is still open, but it shows some key commonalities with the early formation process of the *anti-globalization movement* (aka, *global justice movement*, *globalization critical movement*) of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The founding moments of the new transnational movement back then were the mobilizations against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) of the OECD in 1995, or the mass demonstration against 1998 Ministerial of the WTO in Seattle. In both cases, a new alliance of initiatives, movements, and NGOs, addressing various issues such as ecological degradation, the problem of food sovereignty, access to land, or the erosion of public services, succeeded in derailing the meetings. What united the movements was their opposition to corporate-driven neo-liberal globalization, which was mainly pushed by the USA and Europe through the WTO and other multilateral institutions in a post-cold war world order, with the USA as only remaining super power (Mertes, 2004).

The MilkTeaAlliance shows striking commonalities. It is directed against China as an upcoming superpower. The common narrative is the opposition against authoritarianism, which appears in various shapes. Firstly, it targets authoritarianism directly connected to the government of mainland China, such as China's increasingly aggressive PR policy that directly intervenes into other countries through the export of censorship technology or trolls. Secondly, it targets authoritarianism that is more indirectly linked to Chinese influence, such as dam projects, or economic influence. And lastly, the movement addresses authoritarianism such as the Thai military regime, which is only indirectly linked to Chinese influence but mirrors the general tendency of de-democratization in the entire region.

In the same way as the anti-globalization movement was not anti-American, the framing of the MilkTeaAlliance does not draw on essentialist, ethnic/racist (Sino-phobic), or nationalistic perspectives. On the contrary, the movement started

from a reaction against Chinese nationalist bloggers and gained momentum through making fun of their blind nationalism. Moreover, a crucial part of the alliance are the democracy movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which discuss issues of sovereignty, but not in terms of an ethnic discourse. The movement can best be described as a new anti-globalization movement, targeting negative effects of the new, Chinese-style globalization – economic and ecologic problems connected to Chinese, large infrastructure and development projects, and, above all, the spread of authoritarianism. Tellingly, the formation of the alliance was triggered by the Corona crisis, which exacerbated and augmented Chinese influence on various levels.

The alliance is a genuinely transnational movement that emerged from the transnational K-pop and BL fandoms. These fandoms transgress national boundaries, with singers from Taiwan working in South Korea, Thai actors trending in mainland China, and fans from various countries uniting under the hashtag of their idols on Twitter or Sina Weibo. The base is a new generation of social media savvy young people, who make good use of and navigate between different apps and platforms and draw on a repertoire of protest forms based on pop culture in a creative and unexpected way. In this perspective, the MilkTeaAlliance looks like the late fulfillment of the utopist expectation that social media will bring about democracy, exactly through the emergence of new social movements. For a long time, this expectation was disappointed by the experience of Facebook and other apps, which turned out to be an arena for right-wing mobilization and authoritarian surveillance (Schaffar, 2016). The MilkTeaAlliance, finally, seems to emerge as an example for a genuinely social-media based, transnational pro-democracy movement.

FANDOM-BASED MOVEMENTS, FRAGMENTATION OF CYBERSPACE, AND GEOPOLITICAL ECHO CHAMBERS

Despite some striking similarities, the MilkTeaAlliance also differs from the anti-globalization movement of the 2000s in crucial respects. In the case of the anti-globalization movement, protestors targeted the World Trade Organization (WTO), international institutions, transnational corporations, and banks. During their mass demonstrations, they clashed with the security forces of those states where negotiations were being held – the police force under the command of governments. In the case of the MilkTeaAlliance, the contestants on the 'other side' are a competing fandom – internet users whose backgrounds and motivations are largely unclear.

As discussed above, the mainstream media accounts of the meme war are not clear about the question of who exactly was behind the initial attack against Nnevvy's and Bright's accounts. Most analyses see either state-sponsored trolls – the Five Cent Army – or Little Pinks – female young nationalists – as main actors. First of all, it is difficult to identify and characterize the protestors because of technical reasons connected to the Great Firewall. The tweet in Figure 12, for example, belongs to an account that cannot be traced; it has almost no followers and apart from four tweets from mid-April, it shows no activity. One plausible explanation is at hand: Since Twitter is blocked within mainland China, any person who wants to reach the Twitter account of Nnevvy has to use a VPN channel and needs to create a fake Twitter account for this special occasion. Behind the traces we find on Twitter, there

can be any person – a payed Chinese official or a Little Pink fan. To avoid what Wu, Li, and Wang (2018, p. 32) call an elitist and biased analysis, a sound empirical study on the dynamics of the movement and the social backgrounds of the participants in mainland China would be needed. For the time being, we have to consider the findings of empirical analyses of the Diba incident of 2016.

Fandom Nationalism

On the basis of an empirical investigation of the Diba case – the cyber-attack on the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 – Fang and Repnikova (2018) claim that Little Pink is a suggestive, gendered label largely projected from outside, while the real actors behind the campaign were mostly male trolls. Due to their investigation, these actors captured the chat forum of the female K-pop and BL fans and made strategic use of the image of Little Pinks. The authors, thus, question the existence of Little Pinks as an independent group altogether.

Other authors take the Little Pinks as real but see them as heavily influenced or even controlled by the Communist Party of China itself. One indication is the official endorsement of the Diba campaign by the Communist Youth League (Meisenholder, 2019). Another key indication are the recruitment programs of the Youth League, which were launched in 2015 to "reinforce youth belief in the CPC and pump vigor into the cause of national rejuvenation" (Lam, 2016; see also Wong, 2015). The recruiting program aimed to organize an online force for keeping the internet clean. These accounts suggest that the Little Pinks have grown out of the Youth League or are at least closely connected to it.

Following seminal ethnographic research, as in Liu (2019), in the case of the Diba incident as well as in the case at hand, the Little Pinks are real and deserve to be taken seriously as a collective actor in their own right. On the organizational level, the meme war against Nnevvy suggests that the group developed independently and on the basis of the transnational K-pop and BL fandom (for a similar observation, see Wu, Li, &Wang, 2019). The popularity of Thai BL series is a very recent phenomenon, and the emerging fandoms transgress national boundaries and also the Great Firewall. There is no reason to assume that the fandom that attacked Nnevvy is less real than the fandom that defended her.

The Little Pink movement also shows signs of organizational autonomy when it comes to the technical requirements of the attack. As mentioned above, in order to launch attacks against Facebook or Twitter accounts, they have to use VPN technology to overcome the Great Firewall and create fake Facebook and Twitter accounts. As documented in the Diba case, all this needs knowledge sharing and coordination, which is not organized, for example, by the Youth League, but achieved in chat fora like Diba. According to Yang et al. (2017, p. 115), this autonomous strategy even brings the Little Pinks into a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to use the tactics of Internet subculture to spread pro-PRC messages and to promote loyalty to the Chinese state. On the other hand, they are doing it by collectively transgressing technical and legal norms of the PRC.

Meanwhile, this strategic knowledge of the use of VPN technologies seems to have become general knowledge and practice. After the Nnevvy incident, Tong (2020)

reports on another spontaneous movement, which organized transnationally across the Great Firewall. Professionals working in the creative industry launched the initiative to leave Weibo because of the increasingly restrictive environment inside China, and set up a new network outside the Great Firewall on Twitter under the hashtag #ACAC (A Catalogue of Artists from China). Such incidents show the organizational and strategic autonomy of social media-based movements inside the PRC.[15]

More importantly, the Little Pinks deserve to be taken seriously as independent actors because of their political views, which go beyond the stereotypical NMSL curse. According to a study of the think-tank MERICS, Little Pinks represent one strand among several competing clusters in the PRC internal debates about the political future of China. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017, p. 41) characterize them as leftists and nationalists, who are mostly "young, tech savvy university students and young professionals", of which many have travelled abroad more than average. They can be distinguished from other clusters, which the report describes as *party warriors*, *Mao lovers*, *China advocates*, *traditionalists*, and more. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017), and Liu (2019) also account for the Little Pinks' political positioning against the backdrop of their social and economic situation. Shi-Kupfer et al. (2017) discuss the personal living conditions, economic difficulties, and the resulting frustration with their economic situation. Such trajectories of politicization are also assumed for the supporters of populist authoritarian leaders such as Donald Trump, Marine le Pen, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Hong, 2016). Interestingly, we are confronted with the same contradictions, which characterize the analyses of the social base of authoritarianism: On the one side, it seems that supporters are well educated and come from a middle-class background; on the other side, the feeling of economic deprivation seems to be a crucial factor for the political positioning.

From a slightly different perspective, Wu et al. (2019) discuss that the economic position of their home country, mainland China, gives the Little Pinks an inferior position inside the transnational fandom. This feeling of inferiority and jealousy – one might speculate – could be behind the initial outrage over Nnevvy's remark that she considers herself to be Taiwanese, and not Chinese, in terms of style, fashion, etc.

New Debates and a New Fragmentation

The ideological independence can also be seen in the dynamics of the debates, which unfolded under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. The murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement led to a split in the Hong Kong democracy movement. Parts of the movement had sought the support of the USA and the Trump administration as an ally against mainland China. Some even went as far as holding up posters pleading for an intervention of the USA in the conflict (Li, 2020; Napolitano, 2019; Wong, 2019) (see Figures 18 & 19.)

During the Black Lives Matter protests, Chinese state media extensively covered issues such as racial discrimination and riots in the USA, and – drawing on historic connections – supported the Black Lives Matter concerns. This brought the Hong

15 For another account of autonomous self-organization in the wake of the Corona crisis, see also Klabisch and Straube (2020).

Figure 18 (left). Photo of Hong Kong prodemocracy activists demanding the invasion of Hong Kong by US troops. (Global Times, 2020b).

Figure 19 (right). A splinter group of the Hong Kong prodemocracy demonstrators. (Hong Kong Autonomy Action, 2020).

Kong demonstrators into a difficult situation. The leadership declared their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and saw it as a likeminded movement against state violence, despite the fact that, with this declaration, they found themselves on the same side of their foe, mainland China. Other parts of the Hong Kong movement, however, kept silent in order not to snub the US administration (Davidson, 2020).

In social media, the difficulty of the Hong Kong movement to find a position was exploited by state propaganda and nationalists. Memes directly targeting the proximity of parts of the Hong Kong movement to Trump were also retweeted under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance and led to controversial debates.

With memes such as this, the framing of the MilkTeaAlliance as an anti-authoritarian, pro-democracy movement was questioned – at least as long as they referred to a discourse of human rights in the tradition of the United States.

Figure 20 (left). A meme showing Joshua Wong asking the US security forces for intervention in Hong Kong. (Andrew Hans, 2020).

Figure 21 (right). Meme showing a montage of the Statue of Liberty near New York with the scene of the killing of George Floyd. The tweet, which was answering to Joshua Wong's tweet from 12 April 2020, translates as "Take the freedom you want!" (你要的自由拿去!). (I Can't Breathe, 2020).

Even more, the tactics of Thai pro-democracy bloggers were partly copied and used against them. The meme in Figure 22, produced by state propaganda, with two juxtaposed video clips is an example for this.

Figure 22. Two juxtaposed video clips with the titles Tank Man 坦克人 and Autobot 汽车人 (car man). The original post, tweeted by a PRC propaganda account, comes with the suggestion/command "use this comparison" (要用这种对比图). (Shanghai Mental Health Center Dr Yang, 2020).

To fight back the attacks by Chinese nationalists, Thai users frequently pointed to the Tian'anmen massacre – a taboo in Mainland China – to expose the Chinese nationalists' blindness for historical facts. These clips, however, show openly the famous Tank Man episode, recorded in 1989, when a desperate man walked in front of a tank. The clip shows how the tank approaches and stops. It does not show that the man was arrested by secret police and disappeared ever since. This video is juxtaposed with a scene from the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, where demonstrators are standing in front of a police car, climbing on its hood in order to stop it. Here, the car does not even slow down, but instead hits the protestors, speeds up, and drives off. Memes like this, which relativize and play down the Tian'anmen massacre or create *alternative interpretations* of it, were posted through various Twitter accounts and were also shared under the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance. This had two effects. First, the iconic pictures of the Tian'anmen massacre were being reproduced and retweeted – different from the almost complete censorship inside the Great Firewall. Secondly, in the thread connected to the posting, fierce discussions unfolded about police violence and about historic facts. Sources and references were shared and discussed. What came about was a transnational space for discussion, which included fans from inside and outside of the Great Firewall – albeit distorted by the fact that from the inside of the PRC, the identity of the participants was hidden, since the discussants had to use VPN channels and fake accounts.

Fragmentation and the Creation of Echo Chambers

Such debates, however, were muted from two sides. On Sina Weibo, inside the Great Fire Wall, a free debate on the issues discussed under the #MilkTeaAllaince never

unfolded. But also on Twitter, the debate was muted soon after the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum. On Friday, 12 June, Twitter deleted about 170,000 accounts[16] which they saw as part of a Beijing-backed influence operation, on grounds of violation of the platform manipulation policies (Taylor, 2020). The number comprised 23,750 accounts that were highly active and according to Twitter constituted the core network of influencers, and 150,000 amplifier accounts. The accounts were identified through quantitative statistical data concerning their behavior and their activity. On this basis, they were identified as the same state actor responsible for the approximately 200,000 accounts suspended in August 2019[17].

Moreover, Twitter cooperated with two research institutions that undertook a detailed analysis of the content of the tweets and the network of the accounts (Miller et al., 2020; Wallis, 2020). According to these studies, the network constituted largely "an echo chamber of fake accounts that spread geopolitical narratives favorable to the Communist Party, focusing on deceptive narratives about Hong Kong, the coronavirus pandemic and other issues" (Al Jazeera, 2020b).

A superficial overview of the deleted accounts and the debates reveals that the criteria for the deletion were a rather coarse grid. What was also deleted was the account of Milktealogy[18], which was the creator of the visual identity of the MilkTeaAlliance – presumably because it fell under the category of high-performance accounts. Moreover, it is not known how many of the accounts that showed low activity were actually from Little Pinks, created in the course of their strategy to overcome the Great Firewall.

We want to argue that, instead of removing an "echo chamber of fake accounts", the effect of the deletion on 12 June was the deepening of a split between two echo chambers, through the separation of an ongoing debate. Among other effects, the deletion cut off the publication of challenging memes (from the Chinese state propaganda) and hindered other active accounts from participating in the debate. The largest effect, however, was the exclusion of Little Pinks, who might have taken part in the debates, even if only as inferior and soon to be defeated participants.

CONCLUSION

The current MilkTeaAlliance can be characterized as a new anti-globalization movement – reacting against the new, Chinese-dominated globalization process, which is unfolding in the wake of the current hegemonic transition. Different from the anti-globalization movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this new movement mainly reacts to the increasing authoritarianism in various forms, but also – to a lesser extent – addresses other issues, such as ecological issues connected to Chinese infrastructure projects.

The hashtag started in a bottom-up process, out of a spontaneous movement in a cyber war, typical for K-Pop and BL fandoms. It can be called a politicized fandom war. However, through the involvement of democracy activists, it was systematically

16 For another account of autonomous self-organization in the wake of the Corona crisis, see also Klabisch and Straube (2020).

17 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/information-operations-june-2020.html

18 https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information_operations_directed_at_Hong_Kong.html

developed and expanded. Currently, the sustained Thai pro-democracy movement is the most visible off-line effect – a movement that increasingly refers to the MilkTeaAlliance in terms of their concepts and ideology, as well as in terms of their strategic use of self-ironic and sarcastic forms of political communication and protest. Together with the huge success of the Facebook group Royalists Marketplace (see interview with Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Schaffar, 2020, this issue), or the TikTok Campaign against Donald Trump (Hahn, 2020), the MilkTeaAlliance is one example of a new cycle of social mobilization that rests on pop culture and fandom strategies. This is also the greatest difference to the anti-globalization movement of the 1990s/2000s. In the first accounts, which are available in the mainstream media, the movement appears as a youth movement on Twitter. This view leaves out the 'other side' – the movement inside of the Great Firewall on Sina Weibo, where the initial cyber battle was being planned. Due to the lack of empirical data and due technical reasons that make it difficult to reconstruct the actors inside mainland China, the competing fandom – the Little Pink movement, their political ideology and social background – remains largely unknown.

From this angle, the cyber battle of Nnevvy and the emergence of the MilkTeaAlliance looks less like the birth of a new pro-democratic youth movement, but more like the articulation of a deep political polarization within the transnational fandoms of pan-Asian pop cultures, which is reminiscent of the political polarizations in the USA, UK, and other countries with rising populist authoritarian regimes. This (transnational) polarization partly follows or is an articulation of a split between media apps inside versus outside of the Great Firewall, with the Chinese nationalist views dominating the discourse on Sina Weibo and Baidu fora, and the liberal-democratic view dominating on Twitter and Facebook. The meme war was a clash between these two sides, with repercussions in the Twitter sphere as well as in the Weibo sphere.

The decision by Twitter to delete more than 170,000 accounts allegedly behind a state-organized disinformation campaign effectively led to a segregation of political discourses in two different spheres, to a further fragmentation of the cyberspace, and to the creation of two echo chambers. What we know about the MilkTeaAlliance is largely based on data from the echo chamber that comprises Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong – the world outside of the Great Firewall. The future development of the new transnational pro-democracy movement will, to a great extent, be decided by the success or failure of the pro-democracy movement in the offline world – on the streets of Bangkok and Hong Kong. But it will also be decided by the questions of whether or not the fragmentation of the Internet can be overcome, and whether a transnational debate including the cyber space inside the Great Firewall can be organized.

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Social Media, Fake News, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sketching the Case of Southeast Asia

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As a result of lockdowns across Southeast Asia, the use of all types of social media has reached high records in the whole region. Yet, the rapid social media response manifested in the form of an infodemic – an overabundance of false and misleading information. Concurrently, the region has also witnessed a significant rise in various governmental measures targeting social media actors. In the name of combating fake news, various legal enactments, including enhanced censorship and sanctions, have been pursued by Southeast Asian authorities. These, however, are often deemed unjustified and aggressively restricting of freedom of speech and expression, especially at a time when ASEAN member states have gained notoriety for their lack of civil liberties. This article aims to reveal connections between the infodemic and legal responses in Southeast Asia on the basis of a qualitative literature review and content analysis. It looks at the term infodemic along with the proliferation of different forms of fake news in the context of Southeast Asia's social media use. It also highlights discrepancies between legal responses and the impacts of fake news during the early days of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Emergency Laws and Regulations; Infodemic; Social Media; Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

From the start of the coronavirus outbreak, large-scale examples of false and misleading information campaigns were found to be prevalent on social media, ranging from scurrilous rumors and inaccurate allegations to harmful medical hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Fake news "spreads faster and more easily than this virus" and "we are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic", were the words of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO).[1]

The COVID-19 outbreak was not the first major infectious disease to occur in the era of social media.[2] Many studies delved into the substantial role of social

1 Delivered at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, in mid-February 2020. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference

2 Since the era of social media is considered to start around 2008 with the emergence of YouTube and Facebook (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), the first major infectious disease that occurred in this era is the 2009 swine flu.

media during previous disease outbreaks. Real-time data collected from social media posts have been considered valuable in detecting, monitoring, and mapping the spread of these diseases (Chunara et al., 2012; Lampos & Cristianini, 2012). Today, social media has matured significantly, and yet, it is getting more difficult to identify accurate and useful information, to communicate fairly, and to build trust. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, researchers raised concerns about the prevalence of false information on social media. Analyzing Facebook posts and videos circulated within a week during the 2016 Zika outbreak, Sharma et al. (2017) discovered a surprising prevalence of misleading posts that far outnumbered those containing accurate information about the disease in the US.

In recent years, Southeast Asia has witnessed constrictions of internet freedom (Freedom House, 2020). It is also deemed the most dynamic region with regard to legislation on anti-fake news during the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. This article seeks to reveal connections between the dissemination of fake news on social media and legal responses in the region. Particularly, the article focuses on three sets of questions: (1) What is fake news and what is the role of social media in the context of Southeast Asia; (2) how can we classify COVID-19 related fake news and what are considered the harmful impacts of the COVID-19 infodemic; and (3) how do Southeast Asian governments respond to the infodemic and how are their measures perceived? To answer these questions, a qualitative literature review and content analysis have been carried out during mainly the first months of the pandemic, from March 2020 to June 2020. Information has been collected from various online sources, of which #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance[3] serves as the main data source for illustration of the situation of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia. Led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute in Florida, USA, the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance unites more than 100 fact-checkers around the globe in publishing, sharing, and translating facts surrounding the coronavirus. Launched in January 2020, the Alliance is presented as the largest collaborative project ever launched in the fact-checking world.

The article is structured along the three key thematics. The following section provides an overview on fake news and related concepts, such as infodemic, and on the use of social media in Southeast Asia. This is followed by an overview of the proliferation of different fake news reports in social media during the outbreak of the pandemic, and the socio-economic impacts of the infodemic in Southeast Asia. Finally, different governments' responses are reviewed and assessed. The article ends with several observations and recommendations.

FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN OVERVIEW

The term *fake news* has a different meaning for each person and each community, and varies, with different shades of meaning, depending on the context. A review of 34 academic articles between 2003 and 2017 showed that the term fake news took on different operationalizations, including news satire, news parody, fabrication,

3 #CoronaVirusFacts Allience is a project led by the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter Institute. For further information, see https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/

manipulation, advertising, and propaganda, classified according to levels of facticity and deception (Tandoc et al., 2017, p. 1). Klein and Wueller (2017, p. 6), and Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 51) characterize fake news as fabricated, completely untrue, and having no factual basis. Besides this status of falsity, the underlying intention of the publishers, such as the deception of the audience, the infliction of harm, or the pursuit of self-interest – such as popularity or financial gain – is also considered in definitions of fake news. Some researchers note that fake news does not necessarily refer to completely false or fabricated claims alone. Some statements can be "misleading", containing "significant omissions", especially taking claims out of context in ways that undermine truth (Dentith, 2017, p. 66) or tend to "mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 100). Other forms of content, namely brazen hoaxes, pranks, satires, or parodies, might be included in fake news, but "they need not be slurs on the truth" (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2018, p. 11).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that several items of content, such as hate speech, harassment, memes, and satire, cannot even be described as 'news'. They indicate that fake news is only part of a broader and underlying issue – an *information disorder*. Information disorder is constituted of three main elements: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (see Figure 1).

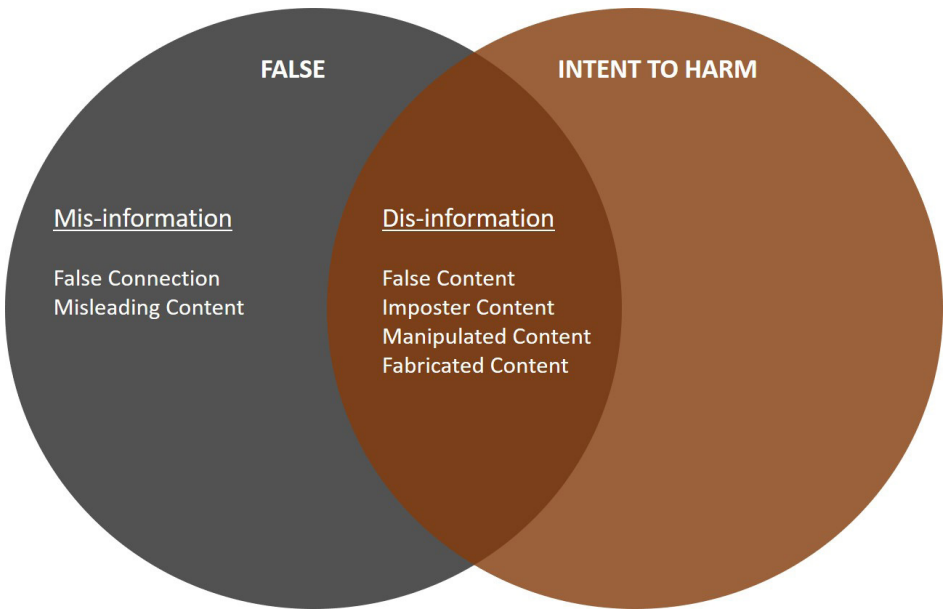

Figure 1. Constitution of information disorder. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The first type, misinformation, is used to designate false connections and misleading content that is not intentionally created or disseminated to cause harm. The second type, disinformation, refers to false information harbored and disseminated deliberately for personal benefit or to cause harm to another party. The third notion, mal-information, indicates content containing a connotation of facts but intentionally used to detrimentally target a person, an organization, or a

country.[4] Accordingly, a statement is assessed based on two factors – its falsity and the actual intention/motivation of the originator.

Fake news mostly falls into the conflation of the first and second notions. It is noticeable that the term fake news has been overused and misused in political debate. It is a term often repurposed by politicians and public figures to counter social criticism against them or to describe dissenting or unflattering reports that, indeed, might well be factually true and accurately represent reality (Gelfert, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017; MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2018). However, in the context of crisis and information asymmetries, while it is relatively easy to examine and check certain pieces of information through verifiable sources, it is often a considerable challenge to interrogate actual motives without access to concrete and open evidence and clarification.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO (2020a) launched the term *infodemic* as "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (p. 2). Infodemic is a blend of the words info(rmation) and (epi)demic and is not a new term. It was coined in 2003 by David Rothkopf (2003) in the *Washington Post* amid the SARS outbreak:

> What exactly do I mean by the 'infodemic'? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities.

Infodemic, in Rothkopf's definition, is a mixture of a few facts (accurate information) with uncertain or doubtful truth and sentiments that spread far and wide. Rothkopf also intended the word infodemic to have a broader application, not only occurring in responses to global health scares but also to terrorism and shark sightings (Rothkopf, 2003). Meanwhile, the WHO has brought out a more contemporary interpretation of the problem arising in the midst of the disease outbreak by emphasizing the massive amount of related information that is overwhelming and a mixture of both accurate and completely inaccurate. Public interest in the term has also risen tremendously. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, search traffic on the term shows it re-appeared regularly during the 2006 avian flu, 2009 swine flu, and 2014 Ebola outbreak.[5] It was also geographically concentrated in only some areas, such as the US, India, and the UK (see Figure 2). However, with the arrival of the current coronavirus pandemic, people's search for the term infodemic has peaked worldwide. This is not without the influence or impact of social media on online information traffic.

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4 Examples of mal-information are someone using a picture of a dead person (with no context) to flare up hatred against a specific ethnic community, or moving private information into the public sphere, such as secrets or private images.

5 Search traffic, presented by Google Trends Analytics, reflects what people are curious about or how frequently a given search term is entered into Google's search engine relative to the site's total search volume over a given period of time.

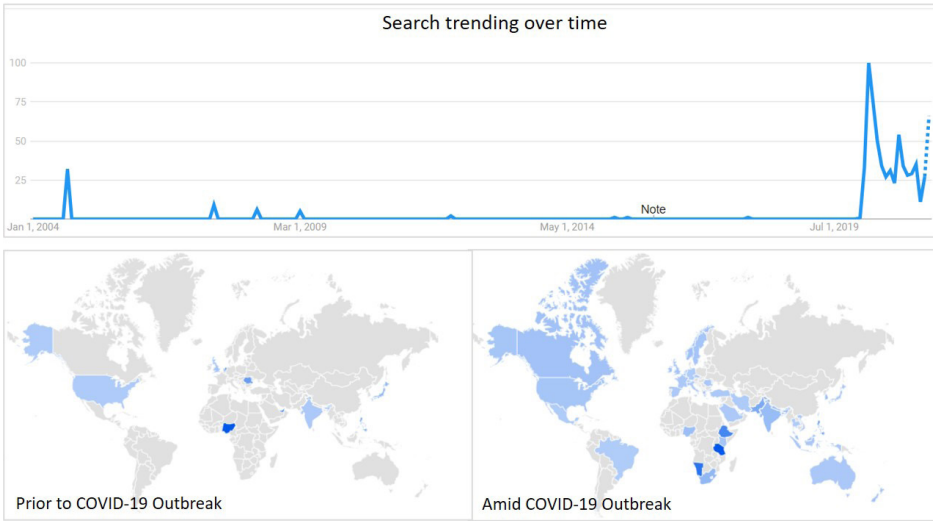

Figure 2. Global search trending of 'Infodemic' before and after the outbreak of COVID-19, as of 28 October 2020. (Google Trend Analytics).

Social media is a key pathway to news. They are seen as one of the cheapest and fastest ways to access news, regardless of format and types of content, or whether it is from individuals, organizations, or governments. Most of the online content consumed by Southeast Asian millennials is on social networking and video platforms[6], amounting to 80% and 76% respectively, followed by messaging platforms with 38%. Traditional information channels, such as news platforms, corporate websites, magazines, and podcasts, have lost popularity with under 20% each (ASEAN Post, 2019).

COUNTRY	SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION (%)	TIME PER DAY USING INTERNET (HOURS)	DAILY TIME USING SOCIAL MEDIA (HOURS)
Philippines	67	9.45	3.53
Thailand	75	9.01	3.55
Indonesia	59	7.59	3.26
Malaysia	81	7.57	2.45
World average	***49***	***6.43***	***2.24***
Vietnam	67	6.30	2.22
Singapore	79	6.48	2.08

Table 1. Social media penetration, time spent online, and social media in some ASEAN countries, as of January 2020. (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a).

6 Video platforms are exclusively for creating, streaming, sharing, and hosting videos – for example, YouTube. In contrast, social networking platforms refer in this article to social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, that focus on building community/contacts-based relationships, and disseminate various formats of information, such as texts or infographics.

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020a), Southeast Asia, home of some 655 million people, boasts the highest social network usage worldwide and an internet penetration of 66% (more than 400 million), outnumbering the global average of 59% as of January 2020. About 63% of the Southeast Asian population use social media compared to 49% globally, with a year-over-year growth of 7.7%. Daily, they spend more time on the internet than the global average, and use around one-third of their time online accessing social media. In particular, Filipinos spend 9.45 hours online daily and 3.53 hours on social media – the highest number in the world. Regionally, Indonesians (7.59 and 3.26 hours) come close in second, followed by Thais (9.01 and 2.55 hours).

COUNTRY	Facebook	YouTube	Instagramm	WhatsApp	Facebook Massenger
Thailand	75	72	50	17	55
Singapore	70	71	44	73	42
Malaysia	70	69	49	68	47
Vietnam	61	59	32	-	47
Indonesia	41	43	38	40	24
Philippines	57	56	36	15	49

Table 2. Most active social media platforms (% of population) in some ASEAN countries. (We are Social & Hootsuite, 2018).[7]

Varied types of messenger apps, as well as social media platforms, have been used across Southeast Asia. Facebook is the most prevalent social media platform, with 360 million active social media users, followed by YouTube and Instagram. Accordingly, Facebook messenger and WhatsApp are the most popular messenger apps.

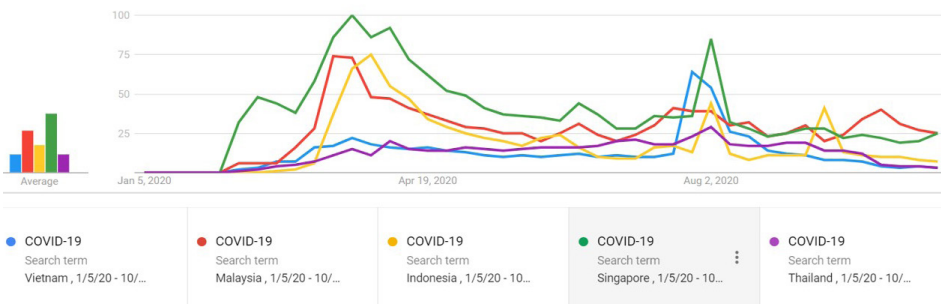

Figure 3. Search trending during coronavirus pandemic in Southeast Asia, as of 28 October 2020. (Google Trend Analytics).

Southeast Asians' concern with COVID-19 has become evident in their search trends. In some countries, Google searches relating to COVID-19 witnessed the first major rise relative to all search traffic towards the beginning of March 2020, when the number of COVID-19 positive cases in the region started to soar. COVID-19 saw

7 In average, about 55% of Southeast Asia's total population (11 countries) are active Facebook users (~360 million).

its highest levels of search traffic from mid-March until the end of April 2020, especially in Singapore, which witnessed the largest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the region. Social distancing measures and governments' encouragement to stay at home disrupted many people's lifestyles. They relied on social media to share news, stay in touch with friends and family, as well as access entertainment. This triggered a sharp increase in the use of all social networking sites and their features, such as video calls and messaging. Online traffic directed to publishers of news relating to the coronavirus and the pandemic also reached record highs.

The Philippines and Singapore witnessed the largest surge with 64% and 39% of users spending more time on social media during the pandemic, according to a report by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020b). The Philippines' number was the highest worldwide. Southeast Asia also experienced a 60% surge in mobile streaming through a wide variety of products. The curfew and closure of retail shops boosted Thai merchants' Facebook Live social sales by 216% from February 2020, something that is predicted to continue after the pandemic (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2020). Social media praised the joint attempts of scientists, doctors, celebrities, and media influencers, who raised public awareness as well as urging people to stay alert and follow regulations. The hand washing song known as *Ghen Co Vy*, performed by several Vietnamese artists, went viral and gained media attention worldwide. The song and its dance routine, which aimed to promote good hygiene practice and cleanliness, was supported by international and national organizations.

There are various motives behind the creation and dissemination of fabricated news on social media, from straightforward profit to a vast array of political interests from which advantage can be gained during the current pandemic. As COVID-19 became a trending topic, every item of news related to it had a greater opportunity to go viral, especially when information is scarce and opportunists, who are willing to trade on chaos and fear, exist in large numbers. Curtis (2020) showed that viral content can bring financial profit for fake news publishers through gaining additional traffic, growing an audience base, and/or generating 'clickbait' that translates into increasing financial value via their social media profiles. The higher the potential benefit generated from surging traffic on social media, the higher the temptation is for people to forward fake news, which requires little investment and carries a very low risk of attracting any penalty.

INFODEMIC IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 Infodemic: Observations From Southeast Asia

Since the beginning of the era of social media, Southeast Asia is said to be facing its first 'true' social media infodemic (cf. Hao & Basu, 2020). Before COVID-19 turned into a pandemic, fake news was already a significant concern for Southeast Asians. According to a survey of international communications consultants Ruder Finn in 2019, false information was the biggest concern of 60% of respondents across all social media and messaging channels (ASEAN Post, 2019). Meanwhile, about half of the respondents expressed their concern about dishonest content and 39% were worried about inappropriate or biased content.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, The Complex Multilayer Networks Lab (2020) developed the COVID-19 Infodemics Observatory to monitor the spread of fake news related to the pandemic based on Twitter data. Based on their infodemic risk index, Singapore is ranked first out of 83 countries for the most reliable and accurate information shared on Twitter. The risk indexes of Malaysia and the Philippines also remain relatively low for most of the observed periods. These three countries demonstrate the highest news reliability calculated with respect to messages in the country's native language. Meanwhile, the rest of the countries, especially Indonesia and Vietnam, face a much higher risk of unreliable and low-quality information, while demonstrating the lowest news reliability concerning messages written in local languages.

Mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 is usually replicated and mutated across multiple social media platforms and in multiple languages before being condemned. It varies in format, theme, scope, and reach. Key themes of online false information relating to the coronavirus and the pandemic in Southeast Asia are (1) origins; (2) symptoms, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment measures; (3) false and misleading statistics; (4) socio, environmental, economic, and health impacts; (5) governmental actions and regulation; (6) targeting political, religious/ethnic groups; (7) content driven by fraudulent financial gain designed to steal people's private data; and (8) targeting public figures/influencers. Disinformation about COVID-19 has harnessed three main formats, namely (1) emotive narrative constructs and memes; (2) images and videos created or modified fraudulently; (3) fake company or government websites with false sources and polluted datasets.

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF VERIFIED NEWS	MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
Thailand	46	Facebook, Twitter, messaging app Line and YouTube
Indonesia	115	Facebook, Tiktok, YouTube and Instagram
Philippines	208	Facebook, YouTube and Instagram
Malaysia	9	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
Myanmar	56	Facebook
Singapore	12	Facebook
Total	**446**	

Figure 3. Information disorder in Southeast Asia, as of 25 May 2020. (author's compilation; CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, false information related to symptoms, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment measures of COVID-19, and governments' responses to it, went viral on social media platforms, mainly on Facebook. They are followed by false and misleading reports and contents targeting political, religious, and ethnic groups.

Inaccurate advice on the prevention and treatment methods of the infection is considered the most harmful content. In the Philippines, a false health graphic found in hundreds of posts encouraged people to gargle salt with water to cure the disease. Videos of a Filipino netizen that accumulated 2.5 million views and more than 135,000 shares insisted on killing the virus by drinking warm salt water (VERA Files, 2020).

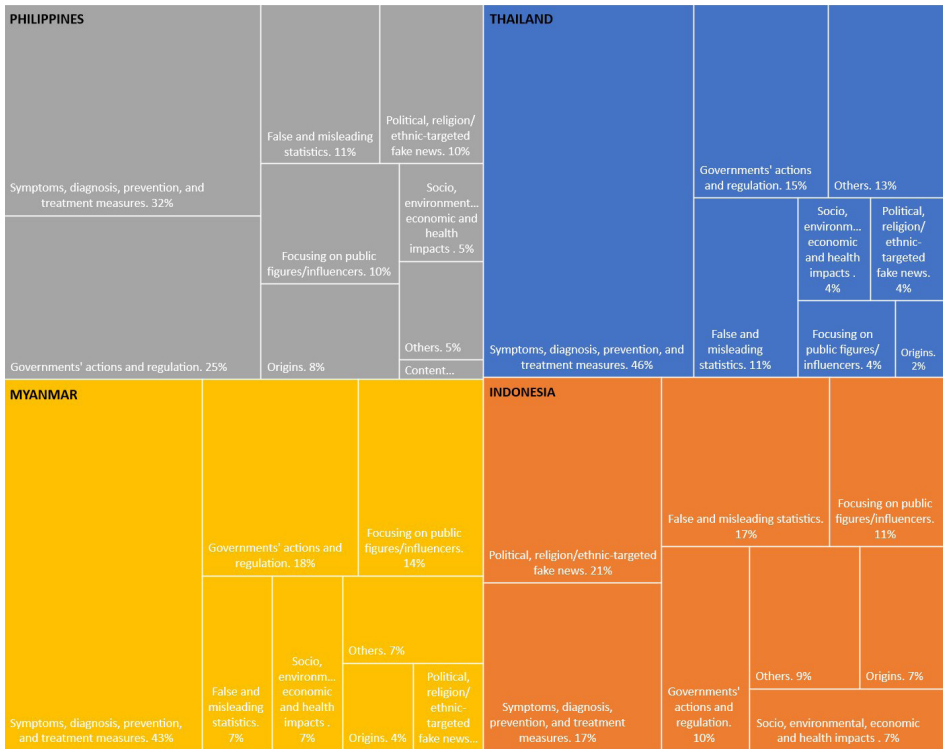

Table 4. Content classification of Information disorder in Southeast Asia, as of 25 May 2020. *The total can exceed 100 as some content can be categorized under more than one category*. (author's compilation; CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).[8]

Likewise, in Indonesia, ubiquitous posts on social media claimed that COVID-19 could be treated by an herbal combination of curcumin, ginger, and other ingredients, which, coincidently, are also the main ingredients of a *Jamu* drink (Wijaya, 2020).[9] Some Facebook posts found in Thailand and Indonesia claimed that smoking could protect people from the virus. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, a screenshot showing a photo of a cannabis plant with the headline "Breaking News: Weed Kills Coronavirus" circulated on Facebook with 12,500 shares, more than 3,700 reactions, and 723 comments, as of 18 February (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).

Nutrition scammers or unscrupulous pharmaceutical companies cash in on such online promotions proclaiming the benefits of certain products in preventing or curing COVID-19. The stock of companies producing or trading in such products could rise accordingly in value. In the Philippines, an advertisement for a vitamin supplement named Honey-C was published on Facebook on 31 March 2020 and became widely shared. The supplement was advertised as an immunity-boosting

8 Table 3 and 4 are aggregated from https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/. They do not reflect the amount of fake news in each country, but the amount of fake news that has been detected and checked by the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance.

9 This *Jamu* drink is a turmenic ginger refreshment drink promoted as a traditional immunity booster.

agent against COVID-19, complemented with an approval from the Philippine Food and Drug Administration. However, this product was later confirmed as unregistered and the accompanying ad deemed deceptive marketing related to COVID-19. The manufacturers of the product were requested by the regulatory agency to remove the misleading advertisements, on the penalty of sanctions (AFP Philippines, 2020).

A number of false information is linked to official authorities' actions against the diffusion of the disease. For example, while there was no law issued on mandatory facemask wearing in public in Thailand as of March 2020, a statement that said police in Thailand can charge anyone who does not follow the rule was repeatedly shared on Facebook, Twitter, and Line Messenger (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020). Another claim shared more than 10,000 times in various Facebook posts stated that Thailand ranked number one in the fight against COVID-19, based on an international health security index, and that the country had the lowest number of infected cases at that time. The reality, however, is that Thailand did not have the lowest number of positive cases, neither in Asia nor worldwide, and the index cited was in fact published months before the pandemic (AFP Thailand, 2020). Other pieces of information spread false statements and messages from politicians, public figures, and influencers. In early April 2020, multiple posts on Facebook shared a message from Myanmar's health minister that a vaccine had been discovered. It was later confirmed to be fabricated content with embedded sexual links (Fact Crescendo, 2020).

Fake news targeting specific political, religious, and ethnic groups was rampant. Especially in Indonesia, videos viewed several thousands of times on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube showed Chinese citizens converting to Islam as a result of the pandemic. Those videos displayed events that had taken place long before the pandemic (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020). Similarly, false statements that spread hatred towards Chinese people were found in the Philippines. In Malaysia, most of the racist comments detected between 27 February and 27 March 2020 aimed at Islam/Malay, Chinese, and Indians. Islamophobia also cropped up since March, when Tabligh groups were insulted by social media users after a mass gathering held by Tabligh missionary groups was said to have caused the biggest single-day jump of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia (Chin & Santa, 2020).

Research from *The New York Times* found that malicious websites with COVID-19 information were fabricated by hackers with digital traps set up to steal personal data or break into readers' devices (Frenkel et al., 2020). Social media is also an ideal place for organized criminal elements, from making threats, bullying, and harassing to fraud and selling counterfeit products, as well as conspiracy theorists and anarchist groups capitalizing on the proliferation of disinformation. The excessive demand for medical masks and equipment supplies triggered the emergence of fake social media accounts that claimed to offer these items. After transferring money to scammers, victims would either receive counterfeit products or nothing at all. In Malaysia, online scams involving facemask sales during the Movement Control Order were reported to cause a loss of about MYR 5.5 million (as of 4 June 2020) (Redzuan, 2020). Facemasks scams have also emerged in other countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Chan et al., 2020; Trong Dat, 2020). The Anti-Fake News Centre of Thailand detected a series of fabricated and imposter domain names that

used the name of the government's Thai Chana platform[10] to phish for shoppers' personal information via the downloading of malware applications amid the COVID-19 crisis (Bangkok Post, 2020b).

Socio-Economic and Other Impacts of the Infodemic

In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while accurate and helpful information plays a significant role in improving public safety, an infodemic was found advance severe public health and socio-economic consequences as well as dampen attempts to protect public health and security.

Several studies have examined the mental and psychological health consequences of misinformation and disinformation amid the COVID-19 outbreak (Barua et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020; WHO, 2020b). Information quality and information sharing are among key factors driving human emotion, perception, and behavior, including individual decision making and problem solving when facing an infectious disease (Browne et al., 2017; Lee & Jung, 2019). A study by Islam et al. (2020) shows that about 800 people across 87 countries died and nearly 5,900 others were hospitalized after following fake cures of COVID-19 spread on social media between 21 January 2020 and 5 April 2020. Research also indicated that false information might cause unwanted effects on public behavioral patterns, which makes it harder to control the spread of the virus and exacerbates the negative effects of the pandemic on public health and security (Leitner, 2020; Tuccori et al., 2020). Claims that underestimate the potential damage of the virus and the pandemic could also increase the level of public complacency. Unproven statements related to the prevention and treatment of coronavirus, such as taking a vitamin supplement or an herbal drink, might not directly take away people's lives, but might result in a false sense of security and public ignorance when complying with health protocols (Purba, 2020).

In Indonesia, where the government has failed to deliver a consistent message about the coronavirus and the pandemic, social media influencers and self-styled experts spread false information with quack remedies. An online questionnaire implemented by Nasir et al. (2020) between 4 and 11 April 2020 in Indonesia shows that 13.2% of the respondents believed that Indonesia's warm climate can halt the spread of COVID-19 and 19.6% believed that the coronavirus can be killed by gargling with salt water or vinegar. When Indonesia had more than 108,000 cases with more than 5,130 deaths (end of July 2020), the majority of people still went out without masks, often ignored keeping a safe social distance, and crowded into shops, markets, or busy cafes and restaurants, even in the most affected provinces (Paddock, 2020; Purba, 2020). Conspiracy theories targeting China and local ethnic Chinese have amplified a wave of panic, provoking racism towards Indonesian Chinese communities and, thus, posing a risk of social unrest (Sibarani et al., 2020). Not only local Chinese Indonesians but also Indonesians returning from China were victims of misinformation during the COVID-19 outbreak. Many of the 238 Indonesians evacuated

10 A tracking application developed to monitor the density of people on the premises and alert people if a Coronavirus patient is found in a place they visited.

from Wuhan, China were faced with suspicion by the locals (Savitri & Syakriah, 2020). Hate messages blaming people of a specific origin for diffusing COVID-19 exacerbate societal and racial discrimination, especially when the outbreak worsens, but little efforts are made on countering hate crime.

Information disorder related to governmental regulations, disease prevention, and treatment on social media triggers panic buying, unnecessary stockpiles, escalating prices, and opportunities for scams. An analysis of ISEAS teams in April 2020 showed that social media in several ASEAN countries witnessed a spike of the keyword 'panic buying' before critical events (Temby & Hu, 2020). A considerable number of tweets amplified a sense of goods scarcity, thus, multiplying commodity hoarding and panic purchasing. In Indonesia, people were feverishly searching for *Jamu*, which was rumored by social media users as a COVID-19 remedy after the announcement of the first COVID-19 cases in early March. This caused an escalation in the prices of *Jamu* ingredients. In Singapore, after the raising of the DORSCON (Disease Outbreak Response System Condition) level, posts with images of long queues and emptied shelves in stores and supermarkets became viral on social media channels (cf. Temby & Hu, 2020).

Similarly, when COVID-19 began to spread, growing anxiety and uncertainty about the infection caused a surge in the demand for facemasks. Social media posts about police punishment for not wearing facemasks in public places or about the shortage of medical facemasks worsened panic buying and caused an overprice of this item in physical stores and on e-commerce websites. When governments attempted to control facemask prices in these two retail channels, social media platforms, especially Facebook, became an extraordinarily lucrative marketplace for swindlers. Profiteering also occurred as sellers sought to exploit people's fears by raising prices exorbitantly, far beyond the government-enforced limit. The price of facemasks jumped by 1900% in Thailand and 827% in Indonesia (Hicks, 2020; Temby & Hu, 2020). The abundance of fake news poses a serious challenge to business, as it becomes increasingly difficult to effectively filter accurate and crucial information required to sustain business operations at a time when restrictive measures on economic activities are implemented across the world.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS' CONTROVERSIAL LEGAL RESPONSES

Fake News in Southeast Asia's Legislations Prior to COVID-19

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of laws and government task forces against fake news across Southeast Asia. Countries like Singapore and Thailand have enacted fake-news laws that impose specific sanctions on the creation and dissemination of false information. To remove impugned content from the internet and social networking sites, government task forces (Indonesia, Thailand), directive teams (Cambodia), and site-tracking (Myanmar, Indonesia) were also established. In Malaysia, although the Anti-Fake News Act enacted in April 2018 under the *Barisan Nasional* regime was repealed by the new *Pakatan Harapan* regime in October 2019, fake news on social media is still addressed under existing laws, such as the penal code and the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act. In Thailand, the 2017

Computer-Related Crime Act was adopted by the government to clamp down on any information that is deemed false.

Despite legal enactments and practices already in place, the term fake news still remains either absent of proper official definition in most of Southeast Asian countries, or vaguely defined and elaborated. In Singapore, a false statement is defined as "false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears" under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (2019, General interpretation, 2b). Within its scope, only false or misleading statements of fact are taken into account, whereas opinion, criticism, parodies, and satire are excluded. The Act, however, has been criticized for the lack of an explicit prescription for determining the falsity of a statement and for ambiguous definitions of public interest (Ives & Zhong, 2019). Furthermore, existing related legislation does not stipulate thresholds or criteria to determine what is deemed false or fake and provides no distinction between purposive disinformation and non-malicious and unintentional misinformation.

On the basis of this shortage of proper definitions and strong legal action in recent years, Southeast Asian governments are often criticized by human rights advocates for overusing and abusing wide-ranging powers. This is not surprising, since they are not only in charge of judicial interpretation, but also solely responsible for decisions on falsehood, what constitutes the public interest, and evaluating the impact of a false statement on the public interest, not to mention societal stability, and perhaps most crucially, national security.

Southeast Asian Governments' Responses to the Infodemic Amid the Outbreak

Various measures have been deployed by governments, organizations, and tech companies to crack down on inaccurate content circulating online during the pandemic. Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Myanmar utilized previously established laws, such as criminal defamation laws, telecommunications laws, and the penal code, while Brunei and Laos pursued widespread self-censorship (Gomez & Ramcharan, 2020b). Aside from the increased use of previously established anti-fake news laws, there was a rise in emergency laws in the remaining countries with tougher legal action by governments. In the Philippines, the emergency law Bayanihan to Heal as One Act was enacted in March 2020, temporarily giving authorities special emergency powers to deal with the pandemic and the dissemination of fake news. Individuals or groups could be summoned if they were found to be "creating, perpetrating or spreading false information about COVID-19 crisis on social media and other platforms" (Philippines Department of Health, n.d., Section 6f, p.13). If found guilty, lawbreakers could be sentenced to jail for two months and/or charged up to USD 19,500. On 26 March 2020, the Thai government declared an emergency decree giving it powers to prevent the escalation of the pandemic, including prohibiting false and misleading media content. The violators would be issued warnings, and in cases of triggering severe impacts, they would face penalties of up to USD 1,200 or a maximum of two years in jail (Bangkok Post, 2020a). In April 2020, the Vietnamese government enforced the 15/2020/Decree, which replaces the 174/2013/Decree and specifically targets the proliferation of fake news. Accordingly, outlaws may be charged between USD 430

and USD 860, equivalent to around three to six months of basic salary in Vietnam (Tuoi Tre News, 2020). Similarly, Cambodia's parliament approved an emergency legislation on 10 April 2020 that allows the government to "control media and social media, prohibit or restrict distribution of information that could generate public fear or unrest, or that could damage national security" (Prak Chan Thul, 2020).

Southeast Asian governments' sanction measures towards the proliferation of fake news during the outbreak, especially in countries using criminal laws, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, have been widely condemned by human rights groups. They have raised alarm over the key articles targeting the dispersion of false and misleading information in issued emergency legislations. Suspicion stems from the vague or overly broad provisions made in these legislations, which could be exploited by the respective governments to bolster existing censorship beyond the pretext of COVID-19 and to quash dissents and choke off free speech deemed unfavorable to them (Amnesty International, 2020a; Bachelet, 2020; Glahan, 2020; Gomez & Ramcharan, 2020a; Human Rights Watch, 2020b; Lee 2020). In Vietnam, for example, the new 15/2020/Decree is put under critique as it extends far beyond tackling fake news on social media and cements government surveillance tools already heightened by the cybersecurity law enacted in 2019 (Nguyen & Pearson, 2020). Southeast Asian governments are also criticized for heavily sanctioning not only fake news but also hate speech and harassment (Sochua, 2020). In the Philippines, among the individuals suspected of spreading false information were also those "merely airing their grievances online" (Amnesty International, 2020b).

Censorship is another tool that has long been used by Southeast Asian governments to restrict online content. There are several criteria to evaluate the justification of censorship (Jansen, 1991; Sen, 2014). Transparency, for example, plays a crucial role, given that censorship is only regarded as justified "when its groundings are open to public scrutiny" (Jansen, 1991, pp. 24-25). Non-discriminatory is a further criterion emphasized by the United Nations (United Nations, 2020, p. 4). Except for the Philippines, Southeast Asian governments' restrictions on the internet and digital content are generally described as non-transparent and lacking judicial oversight and an independent appeal process, according to the evaluation of Freedom House (2020). Governments also periodically or routinely require websites and social media platforms to remove what they consider negative content. Practice during the pandemic shows that Southeast Asian anti-fake news laws do not require published evaluation on the impact of individual statements on the public interest. In Myanmar, 67 websites were blocked after deemed as spreading fake news. There was neither an explanation of what exactly constituted false news or information nor was the complete list of these websites made available for public access (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2020; Kyaw et al., 2020). Although preventing the spread of fake news was claimed by the government to be the main reason for this censorship, ethnic media outlets are assumed to be amongst these censored sites.

Indonesia was criticized for problematic pandemic management, particularly the inability to deliver a consistent message and to provide data transparency and access to information to combat COVID-19 (Daraini, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020a). The central government struggled with limited data and a significant data discrepancy between local administrations and the Health Ministry's statistics. Even though

an official website (www.covid19.go.id) was later launched to provide official information on COVID-19, a survey conducted by Pramiyanti et al. (2020) showed that only about one-fifth of all respondents used the website often, and most of them had never or rarely used it. Instead, more people relied on information obtained from news outlets and the mass media (Pramiyanti et al., 2020; Suherlina, 2020). Another survey conducted by LaporCOVID-19 (2020) revealed that government officials fell behind medical doctors/health experts and religious leaders in the ranking of the most trusted sources of COVID-19 information.

Despite criticisms by human rights advocates, allegations are mostly dismissed by the governments and media censorship measurements are likely to remain in place. In Thailand, legal enactments targeting social media posts have continued to be tightened in recent years and during the pandemic. This is reflected by the establishment of the Anti-Fake News Center in 2019 and the extension of emergency decrees amid the pandemic. This extension is viewed as having no legitimate basis, being arbitrary and disproportionate (Human Rights Watch, 2020b).

Beside governments' actions, major social networks and tech companies have cooperated to combat false and misleading information circulated online. Tech companies have also taken stricter rules for ads and limited monetization as almost all social networks have banned advertisements that mention the COVID-19 infection. Southeast Asian authorities, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are provided ad credits to run COVID-19 education campaigns (O'Reilly, 2020). Twitter prioritized authoritative health information on their platform via expanding search prompt features for #coronavirus in many countries, including those in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. There is also close cooperation between researchers and fact-checker teams to monitor the infodemic, track and verify false claims, and provide corrected information. Examples are the COVID-19 Infodemics Observatory developed by The Complex Multilayer Networks Lab, and the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute, which was also used for data collection in this article.

There are several factors catalyzing the ubiquitous proliferation of false information. Firstly, in a social media age, people are able to access information in near-real time. However, social media platforms, which are financially driven by clicks, promote a rapid proliferation of news far beyond the time required for adequate verification. Using the Zika virus as a case study, Sommariva et al. (2018) found that rumors on social networking sites gained three times more shares than verified information. Similarly, Vosoughi et al. (2018, p. 1146) concluded that "falsehood diffused farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information". Other factors include the initial scarcity of information about COVID-19, a low digital media literacy, the inadequacy of media gatekeepers, and legal loopholes in certain countries. In spite of an increasing number of online media outlets, Cambodia's current Press Law still excludes digital media. It is deemed not only outdated but also poorly and ambiguously drafted (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2019). Yet, as shown above, even where legal measures and censorship are encouraged and well in place, their lack of adequacy and transparency additionally hamper trust in government measurements and decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Southeast Asia features the highest social network usage and Internet penetration worldwide. It also witnessed an unprecedented rise in social media use during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. As the novel coronavirus experienced a dramatic rise worldwide and became a matter of great public concern both in online and offline social networks, many individuals tried to cash in on its popularity by creating and propagating disinformation on social media channels. Combined with misinformation, harassment, and hate-speech, the information disorder fuels an infodemic considered almost as dangerous as the virus itself.

While fake news on social media platforms in Southeast Asia can be broadly categorized into eight themes, the most common ones refer to disease symptoms, prevention, and treatment measures, as well as to governmental bodies' responses to the diffusion of the disease, including incorrect reporting of incidence and mortality rates. In several countries, fabricated and misleading contents targeting specific political, religious, and ethnic group are rampant. Social media have also proved an ideal place for organized scammers and hackers with malicious content set up to steal personal data. Among different categories of fake news, those related to prevention and treatment measures are considered particularly harmful since they might directly cause fatalities. Panic buying is also fueled by false and misleading information about prevention and treatment measures as well as governmental regulations. Meanwhile, hate crime, misleading content, and online hoaxes with conspiracy theories cause mistrust in the government, deepen social divides and heighten political, ethnic, and racial tensions.

In response to the infodemic, Southeast Asian authorities have pursued strong legal enactment and sanctions. Yet, their measures, especially censorship, are often criticized for being draconian and politically biased. The concern of human rights advocates is not unwarranted. It stems from the shortage of proper descriptions of fake news in legislations while governments' actions, in the name of tackling fake news, are still lacking transparency and independent appeal processes. Fact-checking coalitions have been helpful in monitoring the infodemic, while tech companies have taken restriction policies for ads relating to COVID-19 infection and limited monetization on communication platforms. Yet, any attempt to legislate against fake news falls short if not raising the general questions of how fake news is identified, who decides on its falsity, harmfulness, and the underlying intentions behind the creation and dissemination of it, and whether the legal actions against it are justified or not. Even if restriction measures are reasonable and justified, false and misleading information on messaging channels, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, is almost impossible to monitor while protecting privacy.

According to Donovan (2020), instead of being a source where fake news thrives, social media could play a significant role in ensuring global users receive timely, reliable, and accurate information. Government authorities can currently switch on emergency alert protocols across cellphones, TV channels, and radio to promptly reach out to the public, a feature that, however, is not available for social media. Social media companies could be included in these emergency systems to enable the timely transmission of reliable information. Their massive online advertising infrastructure

could be utilized for this purpose. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that no communication system is perfect and that, in the epic battle against COVID-19 falsehoods – as in the fight against the virus itself – responsibility rests not solely with governments, but also with the joint efforts of social actors, from civil organizations to businesses and citizens themselves.

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Legal Reforms in Protecting Migrant Workers' Welfare in Malaysia: Labor Law and Social Security

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▸ Low, C. C. (2021). Legal reforms in protecting migrant workers' welfare in Malaysia: Labor law and social security. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 14*(1), 59-80.

This article examines how Malaysia has sought to improve migrant workers' welfare through the revision of its labor laws. Migrant workers' welfare in Malaysia has been hindered by the absence of social security frameworks, outdated labor laws, multiple dependence on labor intermediaries, and employers' lack of accountability. In 2019, two labor laws were amended based on International Labor Organization standards: the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act (1990) and the Employees' Social Security Act (1969). The amendments have equalized the statutory protection between national and migrant workers, increased employers' accountability for their migrant workers' welfare, and addressed forced labor. With this legal framework, Malaysia's migration management has been associated with better social security protection for migrant workers, which was previously absent from foreign worker policies. The legal reforms indicate the government's attempt in solving the tension in Malaysia's migration management, by ensuring balance between migrants' welfare, labor market needs, and immigration control. These observations and analysis draw upon legislations, federal government gazettes, Hansard records, official reports of intergovernmental organizations, press statements of civil society actors, online newspapers, and secondary literature.

Keywords: Forced Labor; Labor Law; Migrant Worker; Social Security; Worker Accommodation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines two legal reforms implemented by Malaysia since 2019 to improve social security protection of migrant workers, ensure employers' accountability, increase workplace enforcement, and address forced labor practices. Amendments to the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act (Act 446) and the Employees' Social Security Act (Act 4) are important because the inadequate regulatory framework has been considered the main barrier to migrant workers' protection. Prior to the amendment, the standards for housing conditions provided by employers varied due to ineffective enforcement, resulting in overcrowding and a lack of basic amenities (World Bank, 2013, p. 106). The poor living conditions in workers' accommodation affected migrant workers' health, well-being, and safety. Sub-standard living conditions are one of the 11 indicators of forced labor identified by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2012; ILO, 2018a). In terms of social

security protection, migrant workers' insurance coverage was limited and much lower compared to Malaysian workers, despite the fact that the country recorded a high number of migrant fatalities and occupational injuries (ILO, 2016; Rasiah, 2019). The overcrowded living conditions and limited social security coverage are closely associated with unhealthy business practices – the "race to the bottom" – in order to decrease labor costs (Ang, Murugasu, & Chai, 2018, p. 8).

This research attempts to answer three research questions: What are the major factors underpinning migrants' welfare negligence in present-day Malaysia? What is the role of legal reform in protecting migrant workers' welfare? What are the impacts of the reform? Legal and institutional labor reforms are much needed as there are inadequate national legal frameworks for safeguarding foreign workers' rights and the existing labor laws are outdated. Without a comprehensive national foreign worker policy overhaul, labor exploitation and human trafficking would continue to flourish. Workers' rights groups and non-governmental organizations urged the Malaysian government for a comprehensive labor migration reform based on the ILO conventions and fundamental human rights principles (Civil Society Organizations, 2018). According to Tenaganita, a human rights group, foreign workers are trafficked and placed in forced labor conditions because the country has not sufficiently addressed workers' protection and living conditions. The foreign worker policy, according to Tenaganita, "has been driven by the corporate world, and that is the commodification of migrant workers" (Pillai, 2018).

A comprehensive reform of labor laws in Malaysia has been long overdue. Labor laws in Malaysia introduced in the 1950s and 1960s are archaic, and have been outdated for 60 years. They are no longer appropriate for the current employment landscape in terms of recognition of human dignity, human values, and workers' rights. In 2018, the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) proposed a series of labor law reforms to ensure that employers provide secure accommodations for their migrant workers. This was followed by another announcement in September 2018, which provided social security protection to migrant workers through an amendment to the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 (Annuar, 2019; Varughese, 2018). There was an urgent need to update domestic legislation in line with international treaties on labor standards for the benefit of workers, employers, and foreign investors. During the National Labor Advisory Council meeting in January 2019, Human Resources Minister M. Kulasegaran recognized that "many labor laws are terribly outdated with the changing employment situation around the world. We need to be abreast with the situation" (Ramasamy, 2019). The labor law reforms in 2019 provided the legal framework to bring about positive changes in Malaysia in three aspects. They addressed the inequality in treatment between national and foreign workers in terms of social security protection, increased employers' accountability for their migrant workers' welfare, and protected fundamental labor rights.

This paper suggests that the recent labor law reforms could be regarded as an attempt to balance security and labor market needs with better workers' welfare protection. It should be noted that Malaysia's migration policies in the past had not been situated within the context of migrants' welfare. The foreign worker management, prior to the reform, was aimed to regulate the inflow of foreign workers, to reduce irregular immigration, and to protect Malaysian workers in the local labor market,

without sufficient attention to foreign workers' conditions of labor, their welfare, or their role to the nation's development (Harkins, 2016, p. 24; Nesadurai, 2013, p. 103; World Bank, 2013, p. 114). Since 2015, there has been a fundamental shift in Malaysia's foreign worker policies, which witnessed new initiatives taken to address labor rights. The 11th Malaysia Plan (2016–2020) envisaged a comprehensive migration reform that takes into account migrants' welfare and the industrial needs. The MOHR is tasked with policy-making for foreign worker management, including monitoring migrant workers' welfare. As for the employers, a strict liability principle was introduced, making them directly responsible for the recruitment and welfare of their foreign workers (Malaysia, Economic Planning Unit, 2015, chap. 5). In addition, the government obliged employers to sign a pledge called the Employers' Undertaking (previously known as Employer Mandatory Commitment) effective since 1 February 2017. The pledge outlined 11 mandatory commitments of employers, including providing accommodation and basic amenities in accordance with the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act 1990, settling all medical bills if their foreign workers are unable to do so, and abiding by all the government requirements on the employment of migrant workers. Failure to comply with the requirements of the pledge would subject the employers to legal actions and to administrative sanctions, including being blacklisted from hiring foreign workers (Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, 2017; ILO, 2018a). These initiatives of ensuring employers' accountability were further enhanced with labor law reforms, which improved social security protection and the living conditions for foreign workers.

This article examines how Malaysia has reformed and implemented the amended labor laws to address the limitations in its migration policy. First, it examines the social security framework at international, regional, and national levels. Then, it surveys migrant rights and forced labor in the Malaysian context. This is followed by a discussion of two labor law reforms: the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act (1990) and the Employees' Social Security Act (1969). Next, it looks at the enforcement of the amended acts in ensuring employers' compliance. Finally, it analyzes the impacts of the reforms. This paper is based on an analysis of legislations, federal government gazettes, parliamentary debates, official reports of intergovernmental organizations, press statements of civil society actors, online newspapers, and secondary literature.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of building social security systems is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. SDG 1.3 highlights the importance of social protection for sustainable development in reducing and preventing poverty. It calls for the implementation of nationally appropriate social protection floors that guarantee a basic level of social security to all. Social protection (also known as social security) is a human right. The United Nations' efforts reaffirmed the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation of 2012 (also known as ILO Recommendation No. 202) (ILO, 2017a, p. 1). Migrant workers have limited access to social security benefits in the receiving states because access is unequally distributed between national

workers and migrant workers. Some social security schemes are only available to citizens or permanent residents, excluding the majority of migrant workers who often lack proper documentation. Undocumented workers are excluded from social security because of their immigration status (Cuddy et al., 2006, pp. 17-18; Nguyen & Simoes da Cunha, 2019, pp. 49-50).

The social protection of migrant workers and their families among ASEAN member states is generally poor due to weak provisions in national legal frameworks on immigration, labor, and social security, and the absence of bilateral arrangements. This is the case from both a labor and especially a social security rights perspective. Compared to the national workers in a state, migrant workers "enjoy much less protection in social security law and in practice than their national counterparts" (Olivier, 2018, p. 1). Legal reforms are important because legal barriers are the main barrier faced by migrant workers. Restrictive national legislations and nationality discrimination provisions in social security have undermined migrant workers' rights. Migrant workers are either not covered for social security coverage and entitlements or covered with lower benefits compared with national workers. The barriers to the extension of coverage to migrant workers are greater in precarious employment in the informal economy when workers are not covered by labor laws and social protection schemes (ILO, 2017a, pp. 63, 65).

ASEAN countries have stepped up their efforts in safeguarding the rights of migrant workers. Member States of ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers during the 12th ASEAN Summit in 2007 in Cebu, Philippines. The Cebu Declaration outlined the receiving states' obligations, such as promoting fair and appropriate employment protection, payment of wages, and adequate access to decent working and living conditions for migrant workers (ASEAN, 2007). In 2018, ASEAN Member States adopted a framework for cooperation on migrant workers through the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, while recognizing the contributions of migrant workers in both receiving and sending states of ASEAN. The ASEAN Consensus outlined migrant workers' specific rights, such as the right to access employment-related information, to be issued an employment contract, to fair treatment in the workplace, to adequate accommodation, to fair and appropriate remuneration and benefits, to retain benefits from their employment upon leaving the receiving states, to transfer their savings, to file a complaint relating to labor dispute, and to join trade unions (ASEAN, 2018, chap. 4). In the area of social protection, ASEAN collaborative efforts are visible through the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection adopted during the 23rd ASEAN Summit in Brunei Darussalam in 2013. Member States recognized that social protection is a human right and everyone, especially vulnerable groups, is entitled to have equitable access to social protection based on a rights-based or needs-based approach (Art. 1, ASEAN, 2013). In 2015, ASEAN Member States developed the Regional Framework and Action Plan to Implement the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection. The framework served as a move towards the equitable and sustainable development of the target groups, which included poor, at-risk, and vulnerable groups (ASEAN, 2015).

Migrant workers in Malaysia were excluded from social security schemes due to (1) inadequate regulatory instruments in terms of workplace protection, (2) multiple

dependence on labor intermediaries, and (3) employers' lack of accountability (Devadason & Chan, 2014; World Bank, 2013, 2015). Prior to Malaysia's social security reform in 2019, migrant workers were administered under separate and less advantageous schemes for health services and workplace compensation, compared to the national scheme enjoyed by local workers. The two categories of workers were covered under different schemes beginning in 1993. Malaysian workers were protected under the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 scheme provided under the Social Security Organization (SOCSO), while migrant workers were covered under an insurance scheme called the Workmen's Compensation Act (WCA). The Foreign Workers Compensation Scheme (FWCS) provided under the WCA offered lower protection in case of permanent disability or death. This differentiated treatment resulted in many foreign workers being uninsured or under-insured and led to unpaid medical bills by employers (World Bank, 2013, pp. 107-108). Between January and October 2017, the Department of Occupational Safety and Health recorded 1,645 workplace accidents resulting in permanent or temporary disability. Though migrant workers contributed to the country's economic growth, they were denied equal treatment in workplace compensation. According to a five-year simulation done by the ILO (1 January 2010 – 31 December 2014), in the case of a permanent injury, a national worker was entitled to periodic payments of MYR 425,000 under the SOCSO scheme, while a migrant worker was entitled to a lump sum payment of MYR 23,000 under the WCA. The entitlement gap in workplace compensation was very wide, as migrant workers were only entitled to 5.4% of the entitlement granted to national workers (ILO, 2018b; ILO, 2017b, p. 84).

Second, multiple dependence on labor brokers and intermediaries under the outsourcing system has negatively affected foreign workers' welfare. In principle, the outsourcing company is responsible for overseeing the welfare of workers, including providing accommodations, transportation, and medical benefits. In practice, the welfare of the workers is not adequately protected due to ineffective monitoring by the Department of Labor and various malpractices by agents causing working and living conditions to be substandard, workers not being paid the minimum wage, and not having secure employment. Under this so-called labor contract system, the management and accountability of foreign workers is transferred from the employer to the outsourcing company, leading to labor abuse by recruiting agents. Employers are not held accountable for the legal status of employees, working conditions, or workplace violations (Abella & Martin, 2016, pp. 108-110; Verité, 2014, p. 93; World Bank, 2015, p. 56). Outsourcing practices have thus negatively affected the occupational safety and health of both local and foreign workers. Many cases occur in factories or workplaces in which workers who are disabled cannot be cared for because there is no insurance coverage and no benefits can be claimed through SOCSO. The reason for this is because the employers did not contribute to SOCSO (see the following section on Employees' Social Security Act 1969 for more detail). The situation is aggravated when factories hire workers through outsourcing companies, and these workers are not considered factory workers. As a result, they have no SOCSO coverage through the factory in the event of workplace accidents (Malaysia, 2018, p. 39).

Third, employers' lack of accountability has resulted in the negligence of the welfare and interests of migrant workers. Foreign- and locally-owned companies

have outsourced their work in order to avoid paying SOCSO or any other insurance scheme. Sometimes, in the event of an accident, there is no party willing to admit that they are the employer of the worker involved in the accident. Some employers change workers' working status from permanent to contract work in order to avoid contributing to SOCSO. Unfortunately, the country has no law that prevents employers from operating in this manner (Malaysia, 2004, p. 71). Workplace accidents happen to foreign workers who no longer have legal documents (even when they entered with documents all in order). When employers fail to renew workers' temporary work permits upon expiry and allow them to continue working, the employers compromise their workers' safety and welfare in Malaysia. These workers are afraid of enforcement operations, living in fear or searching for places to hide. The Department of Labor's inaction against employers who do not protect the welfare and safety of their workers has resulted in major labor exploitations (Malaysia, 2019a, p. 149), which will be presented in the following.

MIGRANT RIGHTS AND PROTECTION IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a destination country for low-skilled migrant workers, and the migrant labor workforce is a crucial contributor to Malaysia's economic development. The majority of migrant workers fill important workforce gaps in low-skilled jobs, as educated Malaysians work in high-skilled jobs. Low-skilled workers are mostly involved in labor-intensive sectors and in 3D occupations (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) (World Bank, 2015, p. 29). Out of the total workforce in Malaysia, migrant workers comprised 14.1% (2010), 13.8% (2011), 14.2% (2012), 15.7% (2013), 15.2% (2014), 15.1% (2015), 15.6% (2016) and 15.5% (2017) (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018, p. 120). In 2017, migrant workers constituted 51% of the workforce in low-skilled jobs, 17.3% in semi-skilled jobs, and 2.7% in skilled jobs. Thus, migrant workers complement rather than compete with local workers. In 2017, the migrant worker workforce was 2.3 million compared to the Malaysian workforce at 12.7 million (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018, pp. 124-125). The majority of migrant workers fill in the employment gaps in the agricultural, construction, and manufacturing sectors, which have inherently higher risks of workplace injury and accidents. The nature of the work is hazardous due to poor working conditions, occupational stress, lack of adequate medical care, and the inequitable social security scheme for migrant workers. While migrant workers face higher risks of workplace injury, there is unequal access to the social security scheme that would provide insurance coverage and compensation for workplace accidents (Harkins, 2016, pp. 20-21).

Migrant workers also experience disparities under the labor regulations, such as the absence of employment contracts, denial of collective bargaining under the outsourcing system, prohibition of joining trade unions, discouragement from contributing to the national social security, inferior insurance benefits for workplace accidents, non-payment of wages, unfair dismissal, wrongful deductions from wages, and substandard living conditions (Devadason & Chan, 2014, pp. 29-30). They work in unconducive working conditions under long, overtime hours and are paid under the minimum wage. Disparity in protection between migrant workers and Malaysian workers still exists, when poor migrant workers, trapped in situations of

debt bondage, are at "the mercy of their employers" (Suhakam, 2018, pp. 128-129). Human rights and labor rights violations are closely related to forced labor. There are 11 indicators of forced labor identified by the ILO: abuse of vulnerability, deception, restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and threats, retention of identity documents, withholding of wages, debt bondage, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime. In some cases, a single indicator may suggest the existence of forced labor, while in other cases, there are several indicators of a forced labor situation (ILO, 2012). A joint report prepared by the Malaysian Employers Federation and the International Labor Organization identified the factors that contributed to forced labor practices in Malaysia among employers and workers. Among the factors related to employers are the lack of awareness of forced labor, lack of knowledge about policies, fear of workers' abscondment, acceptance of forced labor practices as being the industrial norm, and deliberate acts by errant employers. For workers, the factors included misleading information provided to them, misguiding by recruitment agents, isolated location of employment, lack of enforcement, limited number of prosecutions of forced labor offences, and limited access to grievance mechanisms (MEF & ILO, 2019, p. 8).

One of the major causes of rights violations is the power imbalance between the employers and workers. Migrant workers are often faced with various exploitation in terms of forced labor, when employers control the renewal of their work permit. If the employer fails or refuses to renew their permits, migrant workers become undocumented (ILO, 2018a, p. 2). Malaysian visa and work permit policies tie the legal status of migrant workers to their employers. This situation results in their "multiple vulnerability" to dismissal, denunciation, and deportation if they question a work arrangement, fail to satisfy the work expectations, or do not follow instructions (Verité, 2014, pp. 163, 181). Malaysia's sponsorship-based immigration system makes foreign workers dependent on the continued support of their employers to have their immigration passes renewed. Employers exercise delegated state power over migrant workers' legal status and non-compliance resulting in the cancellation of immigration passes (Nah, 2012, pp. 498-499). Due to their precarious legal position, any conflicts with their employers or outsourcing agents could cause the workers to become undocumented. A study conducted by the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO, 2013) found that: "Migrant workers have a weak rights position in Malaysia and are often faced with repressive anti-migrant policies and practices" (p. 6).

Malaysia recorded a high number of migrant fatalities due to weak migrant protection. Between 2003 and 2017, there were 3,800 Nepali migrant workers' deaths, the major reasons being cardiac arrest and heart attack. Other causes included workplace accidents, road accidents, suicide, physical assaults, and chronic disease. Nepali rights groups questioned the reliability of reports released by Malaysian hospitals. They believed that heart attack and cardiac arrest were reported as the major causes of death because Malaysian employers are not obligated to pay compensation and insurance claims if the death is not caused by a workplace accident. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, many Nepali workers worked in hazardous conditions ("After 3,800 Deaths in Malaysia", 2017). Human rights and migrant rights groups doubted the actual cause of death; they believed

that employers and agents were avoiding insurance claims. Poor working conditions, workplace safety, stress, overwork, and dehydration may have contributed to these deaths. Official statistics recorded the number of Nepali worker deaths as follows: 361 (2014), 425 (2015), and 386 (2016), indicating a statistical average of one Nepali worker death per day ("Report: 386 Nepalese Migrant Workers", 2017). A report by ILO (2016, p. 11) on Nepali migrant workers' occupational safety in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Malaysia recorded a total of 1,562 deaths in seven years (2008–2015) out of 908,156 Nepali workers in Malaysia, revealing a death rate of 1.72 per 1,000 migrant workers. Fatalities from cardiac arrest were listed as the major cause of death followed by heart attack, natural causes, unidentified cause, traffic accidents, suicide, workplace accidents, and murder (ILO, 2016, p. 13).

Bangladeshi migrant workers have a higher fatality rate in the country – two deaths per day and 96 deaths in January 2019. This high rate made Malaysia the 'killing fields' for many young workers ranging between 18 and 32 years of age, who had been certified as medically fit prior to their employment. The government was called upon to investigate the actual cause, as the major reasons being strokes and heart attacks was highly suspicious. Other contributing factors, such as poor living conditions, led to infections and delays in seeking medical treatment because of the high costs. Debt bondage and modern-day slavery are directly linked to these deaths. Bangladeshi workers incurred heavy debt in order to pay MYR 20,000 recruitment costs to migrate to Malaysia. Exploitation by agents, such as contract substitution, unexplained salary deductions, and short-changing overtime payments make it difficult to settle the debt incurred in their home country (Rasiah, 2019).

The Embassy of Nepal in Malaysia recorded 2,945 deaths of Nepalese workers between 2005 and 2014. In 2015 alone, there were 461 deaths reported. About 70% of Nepalese workers' fatalities were attributed to massive heart attack or sudden cardiac arrest, while 30% were due to workplace accidents, alcohol consumption, and suicide for monetary reasons. Sudden cardiac arrest was attributed to working long hours in hot conditions, causing fatigue and eventual death while sleeping. Many Nepalese workers worked more than 12 hours per day to settle debts owed to their agents in Nepal. The Employment Act 1955 stipulated that workers are allowed to work only eight hours daily. In fact, migrant workers often asked for overtime work as the only solution to repaying their debt ("Most Deaths of Nepalese Workers", 2016). As for Indonesian migrant workers, there were about 120 deaths of Indonesians in Malaysia from 2016 to 2018. Partly due to the high cost and complexity of legal migration, Indonesians were vulnerable to human trafficking syndicates and worked in the country without documents. Rights groups such as Migrant Care advocated for cheaper and safer migration processes to prevent modern-day slavery and workers' exploitation (Barker, 2018).

Since 2019, the Malaysian government has taken positive measures to ensure employers' accountability for their workers' welfare. The government required employers to 1) contribute to the Employment Injury Scheme for their migrant workers under the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 and 2) to guarantee their basic rights to decent living conditions under the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Act 2019.

WORKERS' MINIMUM STANDARDS OF HOUSING AND AMENITIES (AMENDMENT) ACT 2019

A major reform in the Malaysian state's labor law is the amendment to the Workers' Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act (1990). Amendments to Act 466 widened the coverage of the existing Act to all industrial sectors, such as plantation, construction, and manufacturing. The amendments aimed to ensure compliance with international standards for developing countries, while promoting sustainable economic growth and attracting foreign investment. Amendments to Act 466 came into force on 1 June 2020. Worker accommodations had to fulfil basic aspects: a minimum space requirement, basic facilities, safety, comfort, and cleanliness standards. Employers were given a three-month grace period to improve the living conditions of their workers and the enforcement of Act 446 came on 1 September 2020. Companies that failed to provide proper housing could be fined MYR 50,000 per worker. Employers are considered responsible for taking measures to contain the spread of any infectious disease and to segregate workers suffering from an infectious disease. Under the amended Act, penalties for the failure to provide the necessary medical arrangement and treatment for workers suffering from an infectious disease increased from a maximum fine of MYR 2,000 to MYR 50,000 (Carvalho & Tan, 2019; Thomas, 2020).

Prior to the amendment, the statutory regulation on accommodation facilities was not standardized for all industries. The Act was only applicable to workers in the estate, plantation, and mining industries. For those in other industries, employers had to provide minimum housing benefits according to the standards set by the local authorities, and local councils were responsible for overseeing the implementation (World Bank, 2013, p. 106). As there was no standard housing regulation for workers employed in urban areas, such as in service sectors, the accommodations provided were unhygienic and overcrowded, affecting migrant workers' health, well-being, safety, and right to privacy (ILO, 2018a, pp. 19-20). A survey among migrant workers in the Malaysian electronics industry by Verité (2014) indicated that the major issues faced by foreign workers were bad living conditions, lack of a secure place to store their belongings, crowded living quarters with more than eight people sharing a room, and unsafe neighborhoods. The study found that 92% of the respondents stayed in housing provided by employers or brokers. They had no bargaining power regarding living conditions, as foreign workers were highly dependent on their employers or brokers for housing (Verité, 2014, pp. 131-132).

The Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Bill 2019 was passed by the lower house on 15 July 2019. During the second and third reading of the bill, the government recognized that it was time to amend Act 446 to enhance and extend the protection of working-class welfare in terms of housing and related facilities. The amendment would also make Act 446 consistent with the development of international labor standards, and, in particular, in compliance with international standards R115 ILO – Workers' Housing Recommendations of 1961. In general, the bill to amend Act 446 was aimed to achieve several purposes – first, to bolster the statutory benefits in Act 446 to ensure that workers in all sectors enjoy better housing, basic amenities, and secure health and safety. Employers were

given the choice of building, renting, or relocating their employees in centralized accommodations. The second purpose was to adhere to international labor standards regarding the provision of housing to workers, which would facilitate trade between Malaysia and other countries. This monitoring also allows Malaysia to enter into free trade agreements and prevents Malaysian companies from being subject to trade restrictions. Third, the amendment purposed to fulfil the Pakatan Harapan government's promise to ensure the protection of workers' rights, to improve the dignity of the working class, and to guarantee their rights in accordance with international standards. Another purpose was to uphold the speech pronounced by Yang di-Pertuan Agong (Malaysia's constitutional monarch) during the opening of Parliament on 11 March 2019. The monarch stated that the government would reform its labor laws to ensure that they comply with international standards while improving aspects of protection for workers (Malaysia, 2019a, pp. 139-140).

The Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Bill 2019 is significant in several ways. The Act applies to employees who are working at places other than on an estate (Malaysia, 2019b, Section 24a).[1] Accommodation provided to an employee must possess a Certificate for Accommodation, failure of which will result in the employer or the centralized accommodation provider being charged with an offence. The employer is liable for a fine not exceeding MYR 50,000, while the centralized accommodation provider is liable for the same fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or both (Malaysia, 2019b, Section 24d). It is the obligation of an employer and a centralized accommodation provider to ensure that all accommodations provided are in compliance with the minimum standards specified under Act 446 (Malaysia, 2019b, Section 24f). The increased penalties imposed on employers who fail to comply with Act 446 serve as a precautionary measure to demonstrate the government's decisiveness in addressing the issue of housing that does not meet the minimum standards set. This is taken seriously by the international community, as workers' housing is often associated with forced labor and human rights violations (Malaysia, 2019a, p. 193).

In drafting the amendment to Act 446, the MOHR convened a comprehensive governance session with stakeholders, especially trade unions, employers' associations, and relevant government agencies (Malaysia, 2019a, p. 139). Nevertheless, there are several weaknesses in the amended Act, the most obvious being the provision stating that it is not compulsory for employers to provide workers' accommodations. If an employer agrees to provide housing, it must comply with the minimum standards set out under this Act. However, the government does not intend to compel employers to provide accommodations. A parliamentarian questioned the strength of the law, as this provision may be abused by irresponsible parties in order to save their operating costs (Malaysia, 2019a, p. 163). It is also questionable with regard to implementation. Although the Penang State Government initiated its workers' dormitory project, there are problems with the implementation, as there are no specific laws – state or federal – requiring workers to stay in the hostel. There is no legal provision requiring local or foreign workers to stay in the dormitory. Therefore, foreign

1 The bill is applicable in Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan only. Equivalent provisions were later included in the Sabah Labor Ordinance and the Sarawak Labor Ordinance, subject to approval of their respective state governments (see section on Law Enforcement).

workers continue to live in low-cost housing meant for the locals (Malaysia, 2019a, pp. 160-161).

Another weakness lies in the lack of civic awareness among Malaysian employers of their workers' rights. In the case of workers' welfare, the international standardized Act may not be meaningful when employers and others still discriminate against foreign workers and treat them as second- or third-class citizens. The government's efforts to create a sense of respect for the rights of both foreign and local workers were queried. Complaints from employers are anticipated as they now have to spend money to protect workers' welfare. One example shows that housing is misused by putting more than 10 to 20 foreign workers in a space with the capacity to accommodate only five or six people (Malaysia, 2019a, p. 154). Workplace inspections were inadequately carried out by the Labor Department and the Occupational Safety and Health Department as stipulated under ILO's Labor Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81). The living conditions were deplorable, with foreign workers staying in cramped and dirty conditions at workers' quarters at construction sites or rented apartments (Ram, 2020). Foreign workers in restaurants and construction sites are commonly housed in shop lots. In Cyberjaya, many shop lots were used by employers as worker dormitories. The Sepang Municipal Council disallowed shop lots being used as dormitories after receiving public complaints on workers' living conditions and rubbish disposal. The Council found that shop lots housed around 30 workers without partitions to separate sleeping accommodations from living areas (Chen, 2019).

Effective 1 July 2021, the government made the Certificate of Accommodation as a pre-requisite in hiring new foreign workers in its effort to enforce Act 446. Employers must obtain the certificate from the MOHR prior to the issuance of a visa by the Immigration Department. Without fulfilling the pre-requisite, their foreign workers would be regarded as irregular migrants ("Accommodation for More", 2020). In order to facilitate the implementation of the amended Act, the Ministry of Human Resources set two new regulations titled: 1) Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities (Accommodation and Centralized Accommodation) Regulations 2020, and 2) Employees' Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations and Amenities (Maximum Rental or Charges for Accommodation) Regulations 2020. The first regulations required all employers and centralized accommodation providers to offer basic items that shall not be shared: a single bed with a measurement of no less than 1.7 m^2 (the space between the two beds shall not be less than 0.7 m if a double decker bed is provided), a mattress of not less than 4 inches (including a pillow and a blanket), and a locked cupboard (of not less than 0.35 m length, 0.35 m width, and 0.9 m height) (Malaysia, 2020a, Section 4 of the Regulations). The size of sleeping area in a dormitory shall not be less than 3.0 m^2 for each worker and the size of a bedroom in a non-dormitory shall not be less than 3.6 m^2 for each worker (Malaysia, 2020a, Section 5 of the Regulations). The second regulations set MYR 100 as the maximum rental charges that may be collected by an employer from a worker in respect of any accommodation provided by the employer or any centralized accommodation provider under section 24g of Act 446. Act 446 allowed employers to make deductions from the workers' wages for accommodation charges (Malaysia, 2020b, Section 2 of the Regulations). Both regulations, which took effect from 1 September 2020, were important because the congested

living conditions increased the risk of COVID-19 among foreign workers, identified as one of the high-risk groups (Lim, 2020).

EMPLOYEES' SOCIAL SECURITY ACT 1969 AND EMPLOYMENT INJURY SCHEME

The next reform in foreign workers' welfare is the extension of national social security protection to foreign workers. Beginning 1 January 2019, employers hiring foreign workers (excluding domestic maids) must register their workers with Malaysia's Social Security Organization (SOCSO). The new ruling makes it compulsory for employers to contribute to the Employment Injury Scheme (EI) for their foreign workers under the Employees' Social Security Act 1969. The contribution rate of 1.25% of the insured monthly wages is payable by the employers. This policy of registering with SOCSO is applicable to new foreign workers entering Malaysia on or after 1 January 2019. For existing foreign workers who were still covered under the previous Foreign Workers Compensation Scheme (FWCS), their employers have to register them with SOCSO after expiration of the FWCS on 31 December 2019 (SOCSO, 2020).

Prior to the reform in 2019, foreign workers' insurance coverage under the FWCS was limited. Since the establishment of SOCSO in 1971, the organization provided insurance coverage for foreign workers in the event of workplace accidents. The SOCSO scheme provided periodic payments to workers of industrial accidents and the issuing periodic payments to foreign workers after their return was administratively burdensome. Beginning 1 April 1993, foreign workers' insurance coverage was transferred to the FWCS under the Workmen's Compensation Act (WCA). The FWCS scheme offered only a lump sum payment at lower amounts for cases of permanent disability or death. The transfer of foreign workers' protection from the SOCSO scheme to the WCA in 1993 created inequalities of treatment between national and non-national workers (Harkins, 2016, p. 21).

With the new policy in place, it is mandatory for employers to register all foreign workers with the SOCSO scheme beginning 1 January 2019. The equal protection policy came about after the ILO sent a direct contact mission in 2018 to ascertain Malaysia's adherence to Convention 19 (C19), following complaints received by the ILO regarding the plight of millions of migrant workers with limited workplace compensation coverage. The three-day mission examined the access to healthcare in case of occupational injuries and assisted the government in implementing C19 – equality of treatment in accident compensation for national and foreign workers ("Migrant Workers to be Fully Socso-Insured", 2019). Consequently, SOCSO took over the accident compensations for foreign workers (SOCSO, 2018). The move was in line with ILO standards: The Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No.19), and the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards under the ILO (Abas, 2018). Under the new policy, the government has an efficient protection control system with better data for tracking the numbers and profiles of foreign workers, including their employers' information. Employers' failure to contribute to SOCSO would lead to necessary enforcement action. Foreign workers are eligible to be registered with SOCSO if they possess valid working permits. Their existing insurance coverage under the FWCS would continue to be valid until the expiry date in 2019 (Dermawan, 2018; "Kula: Workmen's Compensation Act", 2018).

The scheme would also benefit employers in reducing the medical costs of their foreign workers involved in workplace accidents ("Deputy Minister: Foreign Workers", 2019).[2] From 1 October 2019, employers are eligible to claim repatriation costs for the remains of their foreign workers in non-workplace death cases if they registered with SOCSO. The maximum payment claimable by employers is MYR 4,500. The employers must comply with the following conditions: a) the foreign worker is a legal foreign worker and is registered with SOCSO; b) the death of the foreign worker occurred in Malaysia and was confirmed through a death certificate issued by the authorities; c) there is information related to the death of the foreign worker by the employer if the foreign worker is still working with the employer; and d) the death of the foreign worker occurred on or after 1 October 2019. This benefit is not applicable if the foreign worker is already covered under the existing social security scheme of the country of origin for the repatriation of remains (SOCSO, 2019).

In 2020, SOCSO also provided subsidized screening tests for registered foreign workers when the government implemented the compulsory COVID-19 screening test for foreign workers. Beginning 1 December 2020, all foreign workers in all sectors were required to take COVID-19 screening following increased positive cases at factories and construction sites. The first phase of COVID-19 screening involved six red zone states (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Labuan, Sabah, and Negeri Sembilan). Only foreign workers registered with SOCSO were eligible for the subsidized COVID-19 test. The cost of the COVID-19 test kit (MYR 60) was borne by SOCSO, while the screening costs were borne by their employers (Chan, 2020; Perimbanayagam & Arumugam, 2020). The MOHR then extended the scope of the COVID-19 Screening Program for Foreign Workers to the rest of the country beginning 2 February 2021. With the additional allocation of MYR 54 million, SOCSO bore the cost of the test kit and employers paid the service charge imposed by the clinic. Employers must bear the total screening cost for foreign workers who are not SOCSO contributors (Ministry of Human Resources, 2021).

Domestic workers had been excluded from the social security reform under the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 (Act 4). In April 2021, the government announced the extension of a similar social security protection to domestic workers, expected to be implemented on 1 June 2021. A total of 89,400 foreign domestic workers, as well as 15,000 local domestic workers, would be protected by the Employment Injury Scheme under Act 4. The extension is meant to benefit those working in the informal economy, such as maids, drivers, gardeners, and babysitters (Tang, 2021).

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND EMPLOYERS' COMPLIANCE

The legal reforms on the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Act 2019 (Act 446) and the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 (Act 4) were followed with stricter enforcement operations. Swift enforcement of Act 446 was necessary because many employers did not take the issue of accommodation

2 Though the government announced its implementation in January 2019, the new policy only took effect in 2020 due to the existing insurance policies under the FWCS. As of September 2019, only 1.01 million of the 2.1 million documented foreign workers were registered under the Employment Injury Scheme – a rather unsatisfactory rate.

seriously. The crowded and unsanitary living conditions of migrant workers in Malaysia are a violation of the ILO standards. Many countries use the ILO indicators as a benchmark to prevent forced labor. Failure to address the issue of the treatment of migrant workers, including their living conditions, would have negative consequences for Malaysian companies in international trade. The US authorities blocked the products of two Malaysian companies – Top Glove and WRP Asia – to prevent forced labor (MEF & ILO, 2019, pp. 20-21; Ram, 2020). In July 2020, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) barred imports from two of Top Glove's subsidiaries due to the presence of forced labor practices. The ban was extended to all disposable gloves produced by Top Glove factories in Malaysia in March 2021. The CBP took enforcement actions and directed the seizure of products from the company ("US Customs Determines Forced Labour", 2021).

The MOHR stepped up its enforcement operations nationwide to ensure employers' compliance with Act 446 following the rising number of COVID-19 cases involving foreign workers in workplaces, such as construction sites and factories (Dermawan, 2021). Since the enforcement of the Act on 1 September 2020 until 31 October 2020, the government only received applications for Certificate of Accommodation for 8.89% out of the 1.6 million foreign workers in the country. This indicated that the accommodation for 91.1% or 1.4 million foreign workers in the country did not comply with Act 446. Although Act 446 is applicable to both local and foreign workers, the emphasis during the COVID-19 pandemic was on foreign workers ("Accommodation for More", 2020). During raids conducted at foreign workers' dormitories, the Department of Labor Peninsular Malaysia opened investigation papers under Act 447 against companies that failed to provide proper accommodation. The offenses included failure to obtain an accommodation certificate, to ensure the beds are spaced 0.7 meters apart, to provide lockers for the workers, to provide 4-inch thick mattresses to each worker, and to provide sanitary living conditions (Mat Arif, 2021). In March 2021, the glove manufacturer Top Glove was charged by the Sessions Court in the state of Perak for not meeting the minimum housing and amenities standards. Ten of their worker accommodations in Perak did not receive accommodation certification ("Malaysia's Top Glove Charged", 2021).

In order to increase compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic, Act 446 was gazetted as part of the Emergency Ordinance on 17 February 2021. The Emergency Ordinance (Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities) 2021 widened the scope of the Act and the power of the Labor Department. The application of Act 446 was extended to Sabah and Sarawak. The director-general of the Labor Department had the authority to order the owners to replace, alter, or upgrade the facilities. The penalty for non-compliance was increased to MYR 200,000 or imprisonment of three years or both (Nik Anis, 2021). The director-general had the power to immediately transfer the workers from "overcrowded and uninhabitable" accommodation to temporary accommodation (Thomas, 2021). Employers must bear all the cost associated with the temporary stay and transport (Thomas, 2021). Under the Emergency Ordinance, employers must report their undocumented foreign workers so that they are also included under the COVID-19 vaccination program. The amendments, which were effective throughout the emergency period until August 2021, empowered the MOHR to direct any department or agency to enforce Act 446 (Perimbanayagam, 2021).

At the same time, the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 (Act 4) was also enforced on employers hiring foreign workers. To track down errant employers who failed to register their companies and workers with SOCSO, an enforcement operation called *Ops Kesan* has been initiated since 2009. The 11th *Ops Kesan* (launched in April 2019) extended to legal foreign workers in the country, following the new mandatory ruling for employers to make SOCSO contributions for foreign workers beginning 1 January 2019 (Yong, 2019). The operations conducted in 2019 concentrated on industrial areas where most of the companies employed foreign workers, such as Nilai 3 Industrial Area in the state of Negeri Sembilan. Errant employers violating the Act were liable to a fine of up to MYR 10,000 or imprisonment of up to two years or both. *Ops Kesan* operations focused on Sections 4 and 5 of the Act ("No Excuse for Employers", 2019).

Employers who failed to register their companies with SOCSO violated Section 4, which stated that every industry shall be registered with SOCSO. Employers who failed to register their workers with SOCSO violated Section 5 of the Act, which stated that all employees in industries to which the Act applies shall be insured in the manner provided by the Act.[3] As of March 2020, only 1.42 million of 2.7 million foreign workers in the country were registered by employers, while the rest failed to be registered with SOCSO. Enforcement operations were further carried out through the 12th *Ops Kesan* (launched in March 2020) to track down employers who failed to register their businesses and workers. However, many employers caught claimed that they were not aware of the new ruling of registering foreign workers, or of small businesses having to be registered, or of the need to register contract workers or new workers. Despite *Ops Kesan* being carried out for 12 continuous years, there is still an unacceptable lack of compliance by employers (Landau, 2020; Nawawi, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS: THE IMPACTS OF THE LEGAL REFORMS

Reforming Malaysia's legal system on foreign workers' welfare has three implications. First, the set of welfare policy changes indicates the government's attempts in solving the tension in Malaysia's migration policy, by ensuring a balance between migrants' welfare, labor market needs, and immigration control. Since the 1980s, the implementation of a consistent policy on foreign workers has been undermined by the tension between fulfilling the labor market demands and imposing immigration control on undocumented migrants. Immigration enforcement exercises were governed by the national security framework; yet, Malaysia's economic dependency on foreign workers frustrated any enforcement operations (Nesadurai, 2013, p. 103). The state creates and sustains the temporariness of migrant workers through immigration control, which deports them during economic crises and welcomes them during economic development. Their temporary status contributes to reducing social security costs while preventing their incorporation into Malaysian society (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012, pp. 81-82). With the labor law amendments in 2019, the government is more committed to incorporating migrants' welfare in its policy reform, rather than viewing labor migration solely as an economic issue and a security concern.

Second, labor law reforms witnessed a shift in migration control from intensified

3 The Act is applicable to all industries having one or more employees (Section 3).

raid operations to a legal-institutional reform approach. The new approach demonstrates a change from criminalizing migrants to protecting them. By instituting a legal framework for equal social security protection and standardized accommodation facilities, the government implemented a rights-based approach in protecting migrants' welfare. This can certainly be seen as a positive step, considering that Malaysia's immigration control strategy since the 1980s had been centered on a hardline approach, including raids, detention, and deportation. On-going operation campaigns called Ops Nyah I (Get Rid Operation I) and Ops Nyah II (Get Rid Operation II) had been carried out since 1992 to reduce the number of undocumented migrants. Ops Nyah I was initiated to curb illegal entry at the borders, while Ops Nyah II aimed to arrest and deport the undocumented migrants in the country. Migrants arrested under both enforcement operations were sent to a detention center and subsequently deported once the sentences were served, which included fines, imprisonment, and, in some circumstances, whipping (Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011, p. 22). Over the years, the government's large-scale crackdowns on undocumented migrants have been intensified through Ops Tegas (2005), Ops 6P Bersepadu (2013), Ops Mega (July 2017), Ops Mega 2.0 (February 2018), and Ops Mega 3.0 (July 2018). The conducted raid operations often involved human rights violations as in the case of large-scale public arrests on city streets and of warrantless raids on private dwellings (Amnesty International Malaysia, 2018; Loh et al. 2019, pp. 23-24; Low, 2017, pp. 113-114). Past crackdowns have not addressed the problem of why migrant workers become undocumented in Malaysia. Migrant rights groups criticized the government for its failure to provide redress mechanisms for human rights violations resulting from human trafficking, debt bondage, contract violations, and labor exploitation. For migrant rights groups, the crackdowns have been "definitely a step-back and violation of any human right" (Tenaganita, 2018).

Third, while the labor law reforms address the welfare of legal migrant workers, they still leave undocumented workers behind. As the SOCSO coverage is only extended to documented migrants, there were concerns about the fate of millions of undocumented migrants in Malaysia. The Malaysian Trades Union Congress urged the government to legalize these undocumented migrants and to include them in national social protection. Without legal status, undocumented workers are vulnerable and excluded from any healthcare and workplace accident coverage ("Socso Must Cover All", 2019). Recognition of the rights of undocumented workers employed in Malaysia was deliberated in the independent committee on migrant workers set up in August 2018. NGOs participating in dialogues with the committee reiterated that recognition of undocumented workers under the law is important for these workers to be eligible for protection and legal redress mechanisms (Syed Jaymal Zahiid, 2018). The Malaysian Bar called for human rights protection of migrants regardless of their immigration status, in line with the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Together, they underline that all migrant workers, regardless of their migration status, have contributed to the development of Malaysia and their home countries (Abdul Gafoor, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This final section provides possible answers to the research questions: What are the major factors underpinning migrants' welfare negligence? What is the role of legal reform in protecting migrant workers' welfare? What are the impacts of the reform? The discussions above showed that legal barriers, outdated labor laws, dependence on labor intermediaries, and employers' lack of accountability are the major factors that create conditions of vulnerability among migrant workers. Legal barriers are the most important barrier that prevents workers from accessing similar social security benefits as local workers. The two legal reforms implemented in 2019, the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446) and the Employees' Social Security Act 1969 (Act 4), have attempted to lift legal barriers. Both amendments were made to ensure equality between local and foreign workers in terms of living conditions and employment injury coverage. These reforms, together with the swift enforcement of the amended laws, have targeted the accountability of employers in upholding migrant workers' welfare. Both amendments are aligned with ILO standards: Workers' Housing Recommendations of 1961 (No.115) and the Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention of 1925 (No.19) and United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1.3 of Universal Social Protection.

These reforms are significant as Malaysia's foreign worker policy is now situated within the context of welfare protection. Migrant labor management in the past was conceptualized in terms of security and economic concerns. Since 2015, there has been a major shift in the government's policymaking, which has included the protection of migrants' welfare and the commitments of employers. The shift has been gradually implemented through the 11th Malaysia Plan, the strict liability principle, and the Employers' Undertaking, acknowledging employers' business responsibility in preventing forced labor. The reform of labor laws can be seen as an affirmation of the state's attempt in solving the tension in Malaysia's migration policy, by ensuring balance between migrants' welfare, labor market needs, and immigration control. However, the legislative frameworks for Malaysia's labor law protection would only serve their purposes under the premise of documented migration. Undocumented migrants still lack legal protection due to their immigration status. Without formal immigration status, migrant workers are subject to labor exploitations by their employers and to raids, detention, and deportation by the authorities. With the legal frameworks in place, preventing migrants from becoming undocumented and from losing their documented status is important in strengthening labor protection.

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Marginalized Minorities in Malaysia? A Case Study of a Demolished Estate Hindu Temple in Penang

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In the literature, Malaysian Indians, as minorities, are marginalized and discriminated against, while their agency is either conspicuously lacking or one-dimensional. As a result, the mainstream discourse concerning Malaysian Indians is discursive and renders them subordinate. I argue that despite the marginalization and discrimination, grassroots Malaysian Indian Hindus are not powerless. With a case study of a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang, I unpack their agential compliance and lack of confrontation when the state government destroyed their community temple. Their agential responses reflect their diverse political and social experiences as minorities and the myriad ways of interpreting the political rivalry between the ruling federal and opposition-led state government. Analysis of the case study is derived from ethnography and in-depth interviews with the estate Hindus.

Keywords: Hindu Temple Demolition; Hindus; Malaysia; Penang; Religious Minority

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INTRODUCTION

Changes in the political status quo of Malaysia during the last two decades have proven that there are limitations to the existing literature about Malaysian Indians as minorities. More importantly, the erosion of political dynamics has brought to surface the contour of power relations at the grassroots levels – this is, between the government and minority groups. This article aims to address the absence of such complex and complicit power relations in the mainstream discourse. I argue that the existing mainstream discourse, which has been consistently rendering Malaysian Indians, especially the Hindus, as subordinate and powerless, is problematic. With a case study of a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang, I demonstrate Malaysian Indians in diverse and changing social and political realities from individual to group associations and communal representations.

This case study also challenges the discursive notion that the demolition of Hindu temples in Malaysia is mainly caused by the predominantly Malay Muslim ruling government as the perpetrator. The demolished estate temple was located on land belonging to the state government of Penang. At the time, Penang was governed by the opposition political alliance, *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR). PR was a coalition formed by the *Democratic Action Party* (DAP), *People's Justice Party* (PKR), and

the *Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party* (PAS) on 1 April 2008, after the 12th General Election. DAP and PKR are multi-racial political parties, and PAS is an Islamic political party. The state was one of the five states that PR won over during their unprecedented political victory in the 2008 general election.[1] The election was popularly known within Malaysia as a political tsunami, as it was the first time in its history that the ruling alliance, the predominantly Malay Muslim *Barisan Nasional* (BN) coalition, had come close to losing an election to their opposition counterparts. Many scholars argue that the mass rally by Malaysian Indian Hindus in November 2007 was an important contributing factor towards the result of the 2008 general elections. The impetus for the rally was precisely the continuous demolition of Hindu temples by the ruling government (Noor, 2008), and the rally is seen to be a major factor in rattling the political status quo of the country, which was reflected in the results of the 2008 general election (Noor, 2008). More importantly, the opposition political parties had shown their public support to the Hindu leaders and the rally, and that show of support had won them a substantial amount of electoral votes from the Malaysian public (Mokhtar, 2008, p. 96). The political victory of the PR in Penang may lead to an assumption that Hindu temples in that state, especially those located on privately owned lands, were safer from demolition than Hindu temples in states governed by the BN. But the following case shows a contrasting view.

The primary focus of this article is the response of the estate Hindus when the authorities announced their intention and subsequently demolished their community temple. By presenting their responses, I will demonstrate a dimension of complexity in the issue of the demolition of Hindu temples as derived from the agency of grassroots Hindu minorities directly. My analysis includes ethnographic data related to their sentiments when the temple was demolished and 'relocated' – this is, their recounts of the process of negotiation with the authorities, and of the demolition and relocation day, as well as their sentiments about the temporary temple that the authorities helped to establish for housing the murtis. This case study suggests a deep understanding of the agential roles of Malaysian minorities, as the estate Hindus conform while indirectly demonstrating their objection and scepticism towards the authorities. Their responses demonstrate a subjective embrace of the attributes of being members of the religious minority. Understanding their agential roles complicates the mainstream discourse that presents Malaysian Indian Hindus as powerless to the dominance of the authorities. As I further demonstrate in the analysis, their subjective embrace had enabled them to make civic and political claims on the national community (Mahmood, 2012, p. 438).

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

I anchor my argument in a case study of a demolished Hindu temple in Penang, Malaysia. 'Demolition' in this article is defined as tearing down of a building structure. However, this case study demonstrates that the process of demolition is often

1 The coalition was dissolved officially on 16 June 2015 due to insurmountable friction, especially between PAS and DAP. Subsequently, DAP and PKR joined the Pakatan Harapan coalition with *Malaysian United Indigenous Party* (BERSATU) and *National Trust Party* (AMANAH) on 22 September 2015. During fieldwork for this study (between 2013 and 2014), the state government of Penang was led by the PR coalition with the chief minister from DAP.

complicated, intertwined with political rivalry between the ruling and opposition political parties at both the state and national levels and the specificity of Malaysian Hindus' reputation as a marginalized and discriminated minority. Due to the heavy politicking between the ruling and opposition political parties over this issue, the term demolition often entails a de facto necessity of relocating the temple, and it is often decided after a public negotiation between the management committee of the temple and the authorities, which could be national or state government agencies, or local municipalities. As the relocation is decided and agreed upon, the case of demolition is known as 'relocation' of the temple.

However, as I will demonstrate in this case study, the relocation does not proceed conventionally. Indeed, the relocation of Hindu temples is nothing new. In India, for example, the relocation of a Hindu temple is an auspicious event, which entails identification of a new location, followed by a ground-breaking ceremony, and then, after the completion of the new temple structure and the shifting of the murtis from the former temple building into the new one, by a consecration ceremony. The demolition of the estate Hindu temple in Penang demonstrates that the 'relocation' took place before authorities had identified a new location and constructed a new temple building. The murtis of the temple were instead housed in a temporary, simple-structured building.

This case study stems from a series of more extensive studies of Hindu temples in Penang, which I have conducted since 2011. My first direct encounter with the demolition of Hindu temples came through a mapping exercise commissioned by the *Penang Hindu Endowment Board*. During this mapping exercise, I visited over two hundred Hindu temples, wayside and family shrines, and demolished Hindu temples and shrines. Three years later, in 2014, I revisited some of these temples for my PhD dissertation. On my first day of revisiting, I was surprised to find that this estate temple had been demolished (see Figure 1), although data obtained from the previous mapping exercise clearly showed that the land on which the temple was located belonged to the Penang state government. I also recalled that the temple committee stressed that the authorities had allowed rebuilding the temple on the land.

Figure 1. The demolished estate temple. *This was my first sight of the demolished temple during the first day of revisiting*. (Photo taken during fieldwork).

I subsequently chose this temple as a case study after obtaining the consent of the management committee. This case study is derived from ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with members of the management committee and estate Hindus.[2] Throughout this study, pseudonyms are used in place of real names to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Ethnographic data is obtained from field observations and informal conversations with the estate Hindus when I visited their housing area located about three hundred meters away from the temple. I visited the estate and the housing areas continuously for a period of three months. The conversations took place outside and inside their homes, which attracted the curiosity of other neighbours, who often joined in the discussions.

At the outset of the fieldwork, there were tensions and contradictions in the temple committee and the estate Hindus' responses. On the one hand, the management committee explained the inevitability of complying with the state government for demolishing the temple. On the other hand, many members of the estate Hindu community expressed their disagreement and discontentment for their community temple to be destroyed before a new location was identified for rebuilding, as the state government had promised. Furthermore, the management committee and some members of the estate Hindus stressed that they did not protest and conformed to the arrangement by the state government. However, some other members of the estate Hindus were able to narrate the incident of their protest during the day when the officials bulldozed their community.

Besides the contradictory claims, a statement of 'What to do?' was often echoed in the interviews with the estate Hindus. I argue that the rhetorical question indicates an agential response that is embedded in the lived experience of patron-client relationships between the authorities and the estate Hindus. Literature discerning political transactionalism has shown how patron-client relationships between the authorities and the people are widely manifested in Southeast Asia (Scott, 1972; Simandjuntak, 2012; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014). In Malaysia, even the seemingly rigid and orthodox PAS is found to negotiate the party's moral compass to woo political support from the youth (Müller, 2015). This negotiation indicates the influence of informal power relations embedded in the dependencies within patron-client relationships. Scott (1972, p. 92) argues that informal patron-client relations are powerful enough to undermine the formal institution of authority. Such informal power relations are vividly narrated by the estate Hindus, as they compared the change of state government from the ruling BN to the opposition PR. This case study also illuminates the complex interconnections of patron-client power relations between politicians and grassroots and social structure, which contributes to the literature of how the concept of democracy is shaped from the bottom up (Simandjuntak, 2012; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014).

The fieldwork took place after the estate Hindus had waited for about 18 months. Since the demolition in June 2014, the estate Hindus had waited for the state government's arrangement of a new land for rebuilding the temple. A participant, Magesan (56 years old, retired; personal communication, 17 October 2016) said:

2 Members of the management committee consisted of residents living at the estate. They are distinguished from other estate Hindus by their position in the temple committee.

> He [the second deputy Chief Minister of Malaysia] said two years. In two years, the state government will rebuild for us . . . But now, we don't know where he is, if he wins the next general election, then we are probably fine. But what if he loses?

Such compliance imbued with scepticism was the general sentiment among research participants, both the management committee and the estate Hindus. However, I argue that their sentiments require a nuanced unpacking. Furthermore, the frictions between the management committee and estate Hindus who opposed their decision to comply with the state government indicate another layer of complexity to their responses. I further argue that their diverse responses and sentiments indicate their agency concerning the demolition of their community temple.

Many studies have been conducted focusing on the agency of minorities and subordinated groups. For instance, Scott (1990) insists that "the powerless have . . . a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce a hegemonic appearance" (p. xii). He argues that the conspiracy is to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful (Scott, 1990, p. xii). One possible strategic pose is the submission to a hegemonic relationship with the authorities. Mahmood (2012) argues that the agential submission of minorities and subordinate groups is institutionalized in the evolution of their political and social situations as contextually shaped strategies. The context includes national and international regulations that shape the notion of "freedom" and "unfreedom" of religious minorities (Mahmood, 2012, p. 412). As a religious minority, their social and political realities are indexical of the problematic space their identities occupy as distinct from the nation (Mahmood, 2012, p. 439). Fundamentally, these studies stress a notion of power as constructive and not repressive (Asad, 2009, p. 17). Participants in this study demonstrated their constructive creativity and pragmatism in manoeuvring their way through hegemonic relationships with the government and in their public transcript. Scott (1990, p. 2) conceptualized the term "public transcript" as "action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship", including non-speech acts and expressions. In the following, I will demonstrate how the management committee and estate Hindus both affirmed and naturalized the power of the dominant elites differently (cf. Scott, 1990, p. 18) and the difference in their self-interest in conspiring to reinforce a hegemonic appearance (cf. Scott, 1990, p. xii). I also structurally unpack the effectiveness of their agential submission as a manipulating instrument of their oppression and as a means to assert religious freedom collectively as a minority (cf. Mahmood, 2011, p. 7).

ITERATING THE PAST AND SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE OF THE TEMPLE

The demolition of Hindu temples in Malaysia cannot be explained through an overarching discourse; rather, one must consider historical, political, social, and personal orientations. Therefore, the arrival of Indian migrants to Malaya and the temple establishment during the colonial period remains relevant for the participants of this case study. However, the interpretation must also consider how participants narrate and highlight this history and how they make their discrimination legible in terms of the mainstream discourse on religious rights and freedom.

According to participants, the European planters built the temple at the estate in the 19th century. After independence, the estate changed hands, and the *Penang Development Corporation* (PDC) – an agency of the Penang state government – bought it over in 2001. PDC identified a new location closer to the quarters of the estate Hindus for constructing a new temple. Nevertheless, the land identified for the new site still belonged to the PDC. Such history of relocation demonstrates how a Hindu temple built for the Hindu labourers in the estate had been susceptible to demolition over time regardless of their century-old cultural legacy. Although it might be correct to state that the European planters built the temple for the labourers, the management committee did not have any documentation concerning the historical accuracy of the temple's construction. Instead, the legacy of the temple was inherited through oral history. For example, 58-year-old Muthu (a former member of the management committee for the temple) said:

> My father and I were born here. I got married and had my children here. I used to stay with my parents over there before we moved to this house. We have stayed in this house since 1978. I started going to the temple since I was five years old.

Such inherited oral history linking the temple to its colonial past has two crucial implications worth dissecting here. Firstly, the inherited legacy of the temple establishes a continuity of the colonial discourse that victimizes Malaysian Indians as a marginalized and powerless minority. Especially with racially-based politics taking shape in Malaysia after independence, and the nationalism and Islamization movements that caused a series of race-based conflicts, scholars have often found that the conditions of working-class Indians have barely improved. Indian Hindu leaders have claimed that "Indians in Malaysia, who have lived in Malaysia for up to five generations in many cases, find *ourselves* hemmed in and blocked by a racist and religious extremist Malaysian government" (Gill & Gopal, 2010, p. 137, emphasis by the author). Therefore, in order to fend for their culture and the sovereignty of their religion, "Malaysian Indians have become more introverted and, to some extent, paranoid about race-religious relations" (Gill & Gopal, 2010, p. 139).

Presumably, in the political context of Penang after 2008, such discourse of Malay Muslim dominance may not seem to apply, as the opposition alliance, the PR, had governed the state. Nevertheless, some participants claim to have experienced similar discrimination even from the PR-led state government. Mani, a 60-year-old born and bred on the estate, recalled:

> During the time of the BN, the *Datuk* [who is also a member of parliament] said, this is my place and my people cannot be evicted, not until we have found a new place for the people, then we will ask them to relocate. But now with these new people taking over, I don't know what will happen to us.[3] (personal communication, 14 September 2019)

3 *Datuk* is a honorary title conferred by Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (King of Malaysia) – a reward of recognition for an individual's great contribution to the nation.

Indeed, state governments in Malaysia have exclusive authority over land allocation to construct houses of worship and cemeteries. Mani compared the previous (BN) and current (PR) state governments to highlight that the PR-led state government is obliged to allocate a new place for them to rebuild their community temple and remain at the location permanently. Mani emphasized how the *Datuk* claimed the temple and the community as "his people" and "his place", indicating that the previous leadership had respected their religious needs and freedom, while the PR-led state government did not. During the interview, his wife Sita, a 60-year-old housewife, asked me:

> Sis, let me ask you, why they [the state government] don't disturb that new Malay village over there. They have all gotten a house from the government. The government constructed terrace houses with stories for the Malays. After they completed the construction, then they asked the people to move in. We, the Tamil. Why Ramasamy [the second deputy chief minister of Penang] gave them four thousand ringgits, but he never gave us that?[4] (Personal communication, 16 September 2019)

As a religious minority, Malaysian Hindus have often been discriminated against and marginalized by the development policy of the BN-led government that favors the Malay Muslim majority (Lee, 1988; Ramanathan, 1995; Willford, 2015). Hence, Sita's statement of being discriminated against as a non-Malay and non-Muslim by the PR-led state government of Penang falls outside this mainstream discourse. Considering the political rivalry between the PR and BN, both Sita's and Mani's responses show how they practically evaluated the political situation and exercised modalities of agency.

The second implication is that, in line with Sandhu (1969, p. 233), the old Tamil saying "*kovil illa uril kuti irrukka vendam*" (lit., "do not live in a town where there is no temple") appears to have been observed by the Indian Hindu laborers. For them, temples helped establish a sense of locality through the worship of their village deities (Prorok, 2015, p. 267). Within the temple realm, the laborers could feel at home and overcome their labor tedium (Arasaratnam, 1979, pp. 66-67; Khoo, 2009, p. 23 & 25; Sandhu, 1969, p. 233). European planters realized that they could use the significance of temples to encourage the influx of more Indian labourers to work in Malaya (Arasaratnam, 1993/2006; Kent, 2005, p. 30; Prorok, 2015; Sinha, 2011, p. 84). As a result, the numbers of Hindu temples increased in parallel to the increasing number of Indian Hindu migrants to Malaya. It is noteworthy that these Hindu laborers intended to return to their home countries upon fulfilling their labor contracts. As most of them were temporary residents, Hindu temples built for them were also temporary and unregistered (Kaur, 2012; Lal, 2006; Sandhu, 1969, p. 185).

Over time, even though many of the descendants of Indian laborers decided to reside in Malaya (Chanderbali, 2008, p. 34), most of them continued to work as estate and plantation workers. Concomitantly, Hindu temples, which were initially

4 P. Ramasamy has been the first Indian appointed for Penang's second deputy chief minister since 2008. By having two deputies – the first deputy being Mohammad Fairus Khairuddin – the then chief minister opined that Penangnites would be effectively represented in politics across three major races.

temporary, also became enrooted on the lands. It was financially impossible for these Hindu laborers to obtain land titles or grants (Lal, 2006), as most of them remained in poverty due to low salaries. Indian laborers were known as "cheap and reliable" (Polak, 1941, p. 88) and were amenable to low wages and better adjusted to the low standard of living (Sandhu, 1969, p. 57). As the landownerships changed hands after independence, these temples became illegal structures. Most estate Hindus are descendants of the Hindu migrants who have lived in the estate for at least three generations. Although they remained in the estate, occupations among the Hindus diversified. While some worked in the estates, many of them had elementary jobs or were unemployed, making it impossible for them to acquire the land for the temple. Nonetheless, given the chain of equivalences, participants suggested that the government redress the lack of land ownership with their history of living in the estate for two or more generations.

Besides the historical context, participants also stressed that the sacredness of the temple deities should be of primary concern because the deities had been with the estate Hindus for generations. The long-term *arcannai* relationship between the deity and the estate Hindus made the former location a strategic sacred ground. *Arcannai* is a reciprocal relationship initiated by the worshippers towards the deity to seek divine intervention for crises, move towards different levels of life-cycle, and express gratitude for divine blessings and interventions (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1976, p. 195). Through *arcannai*, worshippers establish a personal relationship with the deity, which further animates their belief that the deity is a living being. In this case, one of the participants claimed that, before the demolition, he had heard the sound of anklets at night, signifying that the deity was patrolling their quarter warding off evil spirits. He stopped hearing it after the demolition of the temple. He believed that the demolition had disturbed the manifestation of the divinity of the deities. Magesan (personal communication, 16 September 2019) explained:

> When the temple was at the corner, she protected all the people. During the mornings, before we go to work, and after work, we would pass by the temple, and she would cover (protect) us. Whatever ought to come, she would cover. Now the temple is no longer there. They took everything and put it there. They just transferred everything there, how could they simply transfer the temple like that?

The participants' narratives about the temple and its sacred place also suggested their insecurity about the temple's future. Their indication that the deities desired the temple to remain further indicated that the mundane ownership of the land was rendered secondary. Instead, estate Hindus believed that the demolition had agitated the deities. "She is not like any other deities . . . she would not be so forgiving anymore" (Magesan, personal communication, 16 September 2019). Or, as another participant exclaimed, "If you lie to her, she will cut off your tongue" (personal communication, 18 September 2019). Such threats further indicate a sense of insecurity among participants that the state government will not uphold the agreement to provide new land for rebuilding the temple.

Agential Submission and Objection of the Estate Hindus

Participants' responses revealed tensions between those who supported and those who opposed the conformity of the temple committee with the government in the demolition of their community temple. Their accounts of the demolition and relocation processes were contradicting and ambiguous. More importantly, since the demolition of the temple, the estate Hindus had not confronted the government. Instead, they chose to wait even though they had not received news about any proposal of a new land where they could rebuild the temple. This section demonstrates that their seemingly idle waiting was not the whole story. Their lack of confrontational approach is a necessary and pragmatic resignation, which, as Scott (2008, p. 329) argues, does not equate the inevitable with the just. Instead, similar to Scott (2008, p. 304), their docile appearance often underlies innumerable and anonymous acts of resistance. I further contend that they calibrated their responses to the rationality of the changed state government of Penang after the 2008 general election. Their rationality brought to surface the prevailing patron-client relationships that are fundamental for most Malaysian politicians to maintain their powerful positions. Scott (1972) and Simandjuntak (2012) have noted how general elections in Malaysia and Southeast Asia often improved the bargaining power of the clients (the voters) by giving them the capacity to choose their patron (the political party candidates). In this section, I demonstrate the rationality of the estate Hindus from their narrations of the negligence of the state government after demolishing their community temple.

Forty-eight-year-old Pavalan was a member of the management committee. He admitted that they had been aware that the discontentment of the estate Hindus grew with the approaching two-year deadline given by the state government. Nevertheless, he was adamant that the temple committee had made the right decision to conform to the state government's arrangement for demolishing the temple. Despite his obstinate belief in their decision, as he later revealed in the interview, their conformance did not necessarily translate into submission to the state government:

> You [the state government] want to do development? Never mind, you are the state [government], you want to acquire the land, and all, it is government land. Must acquire, this I agree. But you must fulfil whatever you said to the people. If this is not done, I will be the first person to face the state government and strike over here. (personal communication, 10 September 2019)

Pavalan had been thinking about a contingency plan if the state government did not keep its promise. The threat of organizing a strike indicated that he was aware of how the protest would attract media attention and public interest about the temple. This would then enable the BN coalition to allege that the PR was discriminating against grassroots Indian Hindus.

Nonetheless, other members of the estate Hindus claimed that they had indeed protested on the day the temple was demolished:

> The police came with the chairman and Ramasamy, and they demolished the temple. All . . . they pushed . . . pushed . . . pushed . . . all destroyed. All the heads

> of the statues [attached to the structure of the temple] were destroyed . . . the temple was destroyed . . . the Malay villagers came and asked us, 'Why they do this to your temple, they should give a place, build a temple, then you move'. (Magesan, personal communication, 14 September 2019)

Magesan's dramatic recount implied that the assumed conformance of the management committee with the state government was a sell-out of their community temple. Besides, his mention of the Malay villagers as witnesses to the demolition was significant in suggesting that even they, as outsiders, recognized the importance of the temple for the estate Hindus, but the state government did not. Such an account of the demolition was surprising, as Pavalan did not mention any dramatic protest by the community. Moreover, when I asked Muthu about the protest, he not only denied it but also opined that it was strategic and pragmatic to conform with the arrangement by the state government:

> Those who don't know politics, they talked and made noise about the issue, they don't know that is useless . . . The government has already taken over the land; we should not disturb. We ask that the government give us a place, and we will stay quiet. The government thinks that they can do anything. Don't interrupt. The government will give houses and temple. No need to protest. Politics are their business. They have a different intention. It is their problem. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

Muthu did not only think that protest or any form of confrontation was counterproductive. The tactic of conformance for Muthu was to let the state government demolish their community temple and gazette new land for the temple to be relocated permanently. Indeed, his response also implied that there was a possibility that the state government would not uphold the agreement of new land:

> I have my theory…if we want to know what would happen to us, we have to wait until the year 2017 for the next general election. When we are about to vote, only then we would know what kind of houses and where would they build these houses for us. Now, the state government will only tell us different stories. (personal communication, 1 October 2016)

Muthu's theory implied a prevailing patron-client relationship that underlies the power relations between local politicians and the grassroots. With the next general election around the corner, his logic of conformance indicated that it is still necessary for the performance of powerlessness in the seemingly hegemonic power relations with the state government. Staging a protest would backfire. Instead, submission and conformance would benefit their situation by not providing reasons for the state government to overturn the agreement with them. Nonetheless, this did not mean that Muthu equated the inevitable with the just: He emphasized that submissiveness did not equate to unwavering support for Ramasamy and the PR-led state government. Stressing that submission was an act of necessity to safeguard the temple from permanent destruction, Muthu recounted the day when the convoy of state government

representatives had made the announcement, and he had stood up and asked the deputy chief minister:

> "Professor [Ramasamy], now you have one more year to sit in the position [as the second deputy chief minister]. But when the next election comes, you might contest in another place, what will happen to this place?" He [Ramasamy] got mad and said, "You can't say such a thing." And left [the matter] just like that. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

There was a smile on Muthu's face as he recalled how Ramasamy was agitated by his rhetorical question. Muthu believed that, at that moment, Ramasamy understood his euphemistic question, which implied that Ramasamy's position as the second deputy chief minister might change during the next general election due to a lack of popularity and support. With the presence of government representatives and members of estate Hindus, Muthu's question implied a subtle and indirect warning that the PR needed to treat the relocation of their community temple with caution. Ramasamy needed grassroots support, such as the estate community, to secure his position in Penang's state government and his position as the second deputy chief minister. The possibility of not obtaining substantial electoral ballot supports may prompt the state government, as patron, to meet at least the minimum standard of exchange with its client, the estate Hindus (cf. Scott, 1972).

Nonetheless, not all estate Hindus showed such subtlety as in the counter-hegemonic tactics demonstrated by Muthu. Sita, who alleged that the PR-led state government was marginalizing them as an estate community, warned: "I speak the truth from my heart. I am not afraid. Ramasamy should be afraid of us" (personal communication, 16 September 2019). Sita's remark stresses the importance of their support for Ramasamy to maintain his political position. Her husband, Mani, followed: "They [DAP] will lose five hundred to one thousand voters here" (personal communication, 16 September 2019). By highlighting the votes that the PR would lose, he further demonstrated the valuable currency of their ballots for the next general election.

Besides Pavalan and Muthu, I met Bala (60 years old) – another member of the management committee – who responded: "What can we do? They [the state government] also don't like us [the managing committee]" (personal communication, 5 October 2019). He claimed that the demolition and subsequent delay in allocating a new piece of land were because of this dislike. The reason for the disapproval was the political affiliation of the management committee with the BN coalition: "Last time we were all JKKK for the BN government" (Bala, personal communication, 5 October 2019). After DAP's victory in Penang, members of the management committee left their positions and joined the *Federal Village Security and Development Committee* (JKKP), established by the BN federal government as a counterpart to the *Village Security and Development Committee* (JKKK) at the state level. After the general election in 2008, the federal minister of rural and regional development encouraged the JKKK members to resign from their positions, promising them that they would receive an allowance from the federal government after their resignations. As many of the previous JKKK members left, the PR state government appointed a new

village committee, resulting in two different sets of village committees (Loh, 2010, p. 134). Such a patron-client system has been prevalent in Malaysian politics since the colonial period (Hazis, 2015, p. 11). As Andrew C. Willford (2002, p. 256) points out, working-class Indians were often forced to turn to their elected representatives to seek guarantees for their cultural and social spaces. Bala further explained that the patronage relationship with the government was necessary as they were politically under-represented minorities. Nonetheless, by revealing his JKKP membership, Bala suggested that the patron-client relationship was mutually beneficial:

> Sometimes we are invited by UMNO people to attend the meetings of JKKP. If we go to their meetings, they will give us fifty ringgits. They will ask us what they can do to help the community. We will tell them what kind of help we want from them and what the DAP has done to help the community.[5] (personal communication, 18 September 2019)

Bala's affiliation with BN was a surprising discovery, especially knowing that Pavalan worked for the PR-led state government. This implies that the management committee was involved in a patron-client relationship with both political parties. Simultaneously, two forms of patron-client relationships, traditional and modern, as coined by Simandjuntak (2012), were ongoing between the management committee and the government (both federal and state). This explains their different attitudes. For Bala, his practical evaluative response was to show submission: "[Now] they [the state government] are all DAP people . . . That's why now we can't do anything" (personal communication, 18 September 2019). His portrayal of powerlessness implied that they were marginalized due to the lack of a patronage relationship with the new PR-led state government. As a result, Bala claimed that it was difficult for the management committee to protect the temple from demolition. Bala's expression of powerlessness was also to demonstrate that they could not prevent the discontentment of the local Hindus. When the local Hindus who opposed the demolition learned that I intended to interview the management committee, they discouraged me: "No need to interview them. You won't find them. They will run if they know that you interview them about the temple" (Mani, personal communication, 18 September 2019). It did take me several visits to meet with Bala and obtain his consent for a brief interview. His wife's remark accompanied his submission response: "They (the estate Hindus) all don't like us now".

The committee's affiliations with both PR and BN proved to be helpful during later developments of the case. Pavalan later revealed that he had obtained a message from the Ministry of Education, a federal government agency led by BN. The news said that the state government of Penang had proposed to close down the estate Tamil primary school that was located next to their demolished community temple. Their affiliation with BN had allowed the management committee to obtain the message before a decision was made. "I am not sure if the state government of Penang know about this", Pavalan exclaimed and was determined to get an answer:

5 The *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO) was the leading political party of the BN alliance until 2018. Many members of the party held key positions in the Malaysian government. Hence, as demonstrated by the participant, the party was often referred to as the Malaysian government, especially prior to 2018.

> Maybe next week I will make an appointment with Professor Ramasamy… because this means something is wrong… he promised everything… the land, and the temple also will have a temple, school, and housing project… Suddenly we heard this issue. This is very sad news. (personal communication, 1 October 2019)

The news of the demolition of the Tamil school was, indeed, alarming for the management committee. Pavalan appeared to have easier access to speak to Ramasamy directly. The effectiveness of their affiliations became more evident when the committee sought media attention on the matter of the school. A news report stated that the estate Hindus would not let the state government demolish the school without putting up a fight and also demanded proper compensation for a new location and the cost of rebuilding the school before demolition, and the report cited on the news that Ramasamy responded through a Tamil daily newspaper that the school was in no danger of destruction and relocation (The Star Online, 2016a). However, the mainstream media reported the possible relocation of the school again. The report focused on the First Deputy Education Minister, *Datuk* P. Kamalanathan, who was quoted saying that the PDC should identify a new location, one that is agreeable to the estate community before moving the school (The Star Online, 2016b). Kamalanathan was a member of the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC)[6] and a member of the parliament in Selangor. As it appeared, he delivered his speech in a ceremony to hand over the BN government's MYR 400,000 aid to the school (The Star Online,2016b). Kamalanathan's intervention on this matter reveals the constant political interest in the relocation of the estate community.

The discontentment of the estate Hindus who opposed the demolition of the community temple was felt and seen in their deserted temporary shelter for housing the murtis (see Figure 2). During my fieldwork, I had found the temporary temple to be closed most of the time. Only occasionally would a priest be seen at the temple conducting prayers alone at night. This priest was a volunteer as the previous one had resigned, and now he would only open the temple if he got off work early. Mani recalled that on the day when they had to transfer the murtis from the old temple to the new temporary shelter, no one from the community wanted to help: "I went to carry the statues (of the deities) to the new place. No one wanted to go. Only Siva and I were there" (personal communication, 14 September 2019). The volunteer priest was also aware of the refusal of the estate Hindus to visit the temporary temple: "After the temple has moved here, the community said it is too far. But their houses are just nearby; they refuse to come" (personal communication, 10 October 2019).

The refusal to use the site as a temporary replacement was an indirect act of insubordination, which was made clear by the estate Hindus: "Nobody wants to go to that temple. During prayer time, only a small number of people attends the prayers" (Sita, personal communication, 18 September 2019). Magesan also spoke of his refusal to visit the new temple: "I have not gone to the temple because my heart is burning with anger. They [the management committee and the state government] broke the

6 The *Malaysian Indian Congress* is a political party (established in 1946) that was supposed to represent Malaysian Indians and formed a coalition with the Alliance, and then with the BN, in establishing the Malaysian government (from 1957 until 2018).

Figure 2. Murtis housed in the temporary shelter. *These murtis were housed in this shelter for over 18 months and few had come for worship after the demolition.* (Photo taken during fieldwork).

temple and put it there" (personal communication, 14 September 2019). Although Mani had helped to relocate the murtis into the temporary temple, he described the place as *macam pondok lembu kandang* (lit., "just like a cattle barn"; see Figure 3). Such a description blatantly expressed his disgust with the arrangement of the temporary temple despite his devotion to the deities.

The desertion of the temporary temple was an expression of the estate Hindus' denial of the temporary temple. Their actions were practical in evaluating the ongoing uncertainty of the future of the temple. They were also aware that their discontent did not warrant outright confrontation with the state government and that the sight of the abandoned temple appeared as a longer-lasting momentum compared to ad hoc open protests. The state government and the temple's management committee could not prevent such a quiet act of routine practical resistance that occurred on a daily basis (cf. Scott, 2008, p. 322).

The responses of the estate Hindus, including the management committee, demonstrated how they safeguarded their community temple from permanent demolition in various ways and different contexts. Although their actions may appear subservient and docile on the surface, their actions reflected varying manoeuvrability, inventiveness, and reflective choices. More importantly, as the desertion of the temple by the estate Hindus suggests, they exercised full control over their beliefs and interpretations. The state government and the temple committee could not control their social lives entirely, even as the estate Hindus chose to maintain their subordiante roles (Scott, 2008, p. 329).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I analysed the agential responses of the estate Hindus and the management committee to a demolished estate Hindu temple in Penang. The fieldwork took place 18 months after the demolition, as the murtis of the deity were housed

Figure 3. The temporary shelter for the murtis. *This temporary shelter was built with help from the state government*. (Photo taken during fieldwork).

in a temporary, simple shelter while the estate Hindus waited for news concerning relocation. As demonstrated, participants' responses suggest their awareness of their longstanding representation as marginalised and discriminated minorities in Malaysia. They also responded based on the context of political rivalry between BN and PR and their realisation of how the demolition had positioned them between BN (which had governed the state previously) and PR (the current state government). Their responses demonstrated how they could interweave the past, when BN was governing Penang, with the future in which their community temple would be rebuilt and serve the community.

Indeed, the estate Hindus did not deny their minority status. They showed their subordination through submissive conforming and indirect protest by deserting the temple. However, their explanations, rationality, and justifications demonstrate diversity imbued with complexity and contradiction. It is also worth stressing that although they had expressed helplessness, discontent, grief, and a sense of betrayal, the estate Hindus had also made clear that their responses were not equal with subordination or disempowerment. Instead, they chose to comply on different levels, considering their current political and social realities.

This analysis of the agency of estate Hindus proposes a shift in the epistemological understanding of grassroots working-class Malaysian Indians. With this case study, I suggest that, as minorities, grassroots Malaysian Indians can contextualise their political and social realities as active respondents. Their agential responses are intertwined with their colonial past and presently-felt fears that their community temple might become permanently destroyed in the future. This case study underscores the paramount of contextualising agency and complicating the diverse political and social realities of Malaysian Hindu minorities by accounting for their thoughts, experiences, and actions. My analysis accentuates their agentic capacities in reconstructing the past, understanding the present, and defining the future by locating the responses of the estate Hindus in Penang within their different political and social contexts.

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Livelihood and Poverty: The Case of Poor Women in the Rural Areas of Ca Mau Province, Vietnam

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Poverty in rural areas remains a major concern for developing countries. In order to improve the lives of poor rural people, it is important to identify the key factors behind their poverty. Over the past two decades, rural development policy and research have focused on livelihood perspectives that help to explain intertwining factors affecting the way rural residents make a living. Yet, critics point out that the livelihood perspective focuses heavily on the livelihoods of households at the micro level and does not recognize the impact of wider socioeconomic contexts in the lives of rural people. The livelihood literature also gives little attention to power relationships, particularly gender issues. This paper seeks to address these knowledge gaps by investigating the livelihoods of poor women in Ca Mau province, a coastal region of Vietnam. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods with questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Research findings show that women in the area possess poor livelihood capitals, particularly in human capacity and financial capacity. Moreover, some rural development policies are still not accessible, and they do not provide sufficient inputs for farming. The findings presented here uncover the deep interlinkages between livelihood capitals and the impact of the wider socioeconomic contexts on household livelihood activities and outcomes.

Keywords: Livelihood; Poverty; Rural Development Policy; Vietnam; Women

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INTRODUCTION

Livelihood has become a key notion in rural development research and practice since the 1990s (Scoones, 2009). Although the concept is defined in a variety of ways, livelihood generally refers to "people's capacity to maintain a living" (Chambers & Conway, 1991). In 1992, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) introduced the sustainable livelihood framework, which provides a multi-faceted definition of livelihood: "A livelihood comprises of the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living" (Scoones, 1998). The five livelihood assets – human, physical, financial, natural, and social capital – together with a household's activities determine its standard of living (Ellis, 2000; Fanga et al., 2014). The livelihood perspective, which goes beyond material assets to recognize a set of interlinked factors that determine the standard of

living (Baumann, 2006), has shaped poverty reduction research and practice over the past two decades. Knowledge about livelihood capitals is considered crucial to understand the main causes of rural poverty (Lawal et al., 2011; Peter, 1999; Su & Shang, 2012), and international donors (Oxfam, Action Aid, and CARE) growingly support the livelihood perspective in poverty reduction programs (Batterbury, 2007; Khatiwada et al., 2017; Mdee, 2002; Okali, 2006).

Despite this enthusiasm, critics point out that the livelihood perspective focuses heavily on the micro level of households. Some authors try to quantify livelihood capitals and their relationships (Mdee, 2002), but ignore the broader socioeconomic contexts under which these livelihoods operate (Dorward et al., 2003). Furthermore, the livelihood literature does not provide enough insight into the linkages and trade-offs among livelihood capitals and the factors affecting these. The link between livelihood capitals and household strategies in livelihood activities is also under-researched (Fanga et al., 2014). In addition, little attention is given to power relations, especially gender issues (De Haan, 2012; Khatiwada et al., 2018). Though women's livelihoods vary from those of men in their control of income, resource use and production, and land rights (Flora, 2001; Radel, 2012), most frameworks used for poverty alleviation and community development are heavily based on capital assets, neglecting the "gendered nature of livelihoods" (Radel, 2012, p. 4).

A number of livelihood studies show women's lack of control over financial and natural resources (Fletschner & Kenney, 2014; Lovell et al., 2020). Women also have less access to knowledge required to develop their human and social capitals (Okali, 2006). Both previous and current research reveal that obstacles to women's livelihoods stem from the macro structural context and the bias of gender-based division of labor within the household. These obstacles have also been identified in studies on women's livelihood in Vietnam. Tuijnman et al. (2020) discover that the local authority's allocation of land to the head of the households (mainly men) for both commercial and agricultural purposes has given them the ability to choose how to use the land in production. Women thus earn little money from the house's land since it is recorded under the husband's name. Nguyen Nhat (1997) and Lovell et al. (2020) observe differential access to knowledge from extension trainings between men and women, as the majority of participants are male farmers and female-headed households do not have fair access to or show active participation in the trainings. Women in male-headed households, for example, are often refused enrollment in extension training courses because extension staff prefer to deal with household decision-makers, assuming that the information would be passed on to other household members (Ragasa, 2014). There are also different baseline conditions for women and girls, related to gender-based division of labor in the family, which bind women with family duties and childcare. For example, although migration is becoming an increasingly significant source of income for rural people (Nguyen & Locke, 2014), women's migration is often hampered by their reproductive roles, such as giving birth, raising children, and taking care of sick or frail family members (Thao, 2013). Educational disparities are perhaps the clearest and most significant cause of the unequal application of agricultural practices between men and women (Lovell et al., 2020). The gender disparity of labor impacts rural women in Vietnam in a variety of ways. As Ragasa (2014) shows, despite adequate preparation, women

often lack the time and energy needed to fully execute the activities derived from extension training.

This paper extends on these studies and investigates the livelihoods of poor women in the rural areas of Ca Mau province, Vietnam, with particular attention to the inter-linkages between livelihood capitals and the impact of the wider socioeconomic context on household livelihood activities and outcomes. Rural areas in Ca Mau province are poverty-stricken, and poor women have become the target of Vietnam's poverty reduction policies. Although poverty reduction research and practices in Vietnam have recently embraced the livelihood perspective, a number of livelihood studies in the Mekong Delta, the central highlands, and the northern uplands of Vietnam do not adequately address capital inter-linkages and the wider socioeconomic impact of the country's rural poverty (Bui & Schreinemachers, 2011; Ha et al., 2014; Hossain et al., 2006; Luttrell, 2001; Phuoc et al., 2001; Thulstrup, 2015). Using the method of the sociological survey via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with key informants from local communities and relevant actors, this study seeks to clarify the linkages between the livelihood capitals of poor women in the rural areas of Ca Mau provinces and the impact of rural poverty as well as other factors on these livelihood capitals. Much in line with previous studies, we found the factor of gender playing a central role on women's livelihoods. By combining the micro level of households' livelihoods and the impacts of the broader socioeconomic context of rural poverty at a macro level, this study contributes to attempts to expand the livelihood perspective, which have been particularly useful for studying rural poverty at the local level (Thulstrup, 2015).

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHOD

This paper focuses on the link between livelihood capitals, activities, and outcomes of poor women in rural areas, and the impact of the socioeconomic context including related, affecting factors. Its analytical framework builds on Ellis and Allison (2004) who describe livelihood as the combination of "what people do in order to make a living" (p. 10), the capitals they use to do so, the difficulties linked to these capitals, and the broader natural socioeconomic contexts in which they live. Ellis and Allison (2004) identify five livelihood capitals: human capital (skills, education, health), physical capital (houses, production equipment, household's appliances), financial capital (money, savings, loan access), natural capital (land, water, trees), and social capital (networks and associations). Socioeconomic contexts include policy and institutional settings but also less-clear circumstances, such as vulnerability. The livelihood framework is presented in Figure 1, while the analytical framework is summarized in Table 1.

Study Locations

Ca Mau is a coastal province at the southern end of Vietnam with an area of 5,221.2 km^2. In 2018, its population was 1,229,600 people (Tong cuc Thong ke, 2018). The province has one city and eight districts (Cai Nuoc, Nam Can, Dam Doi, Ngoc Hien, Phu Tan, Thoi Binh, Tran Van Thoi, and U Minh). As of April 2019, Ca Mau had 19 ethnic

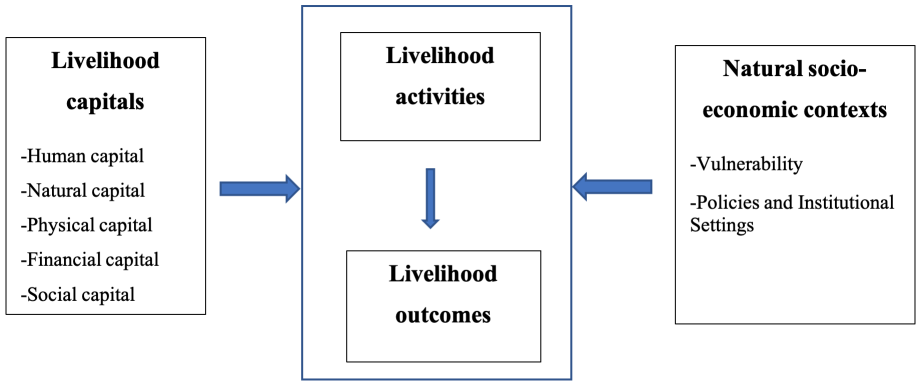

Figure 1. Basic livelihood framework. (adapted from Ellis & Allison, 2004).

VARIABLES	SUB-VARIABLES	CRITERIA
Livelihood Capitals	Human capital	Skills, education level, health
	Physical Capital	Houses, production equipment, roads, electricity, internet
	Financial Capital	Money, savings, loan access
	Natural Capital	Land, water, trees, ...
	Social Capital	Networks and associations
Natural socioeconomic contexts	Policies Institutional Settings	• Provincial/district development master plan • Rural development programs • Poverty reduction programs
	Vulnerability	• Natural disasters (droughts, floods) • Diseases
Livelihood activities		Jobs to obtain income
Livelihood outcomes		Incomes from livelihood activities

Table 1. Analytical framework. (own compilation).

groups, including the Kinh, the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam (1,167,765 people), Khmer (29,845 people), Hoa (8,911 people), and other minority groups (Tay, Thai, Cham, and Muong) (Tong cuc Thong ke, 2018). Ca Mau is the largest shrimp production area in the Mekong Delta. The main economic activities of its rural areas are agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, all of which contribute 29.2% of the province's GDP (Le Anh, 2017). Poverty rates decreased from 12.14% in 2011 to 7.96% in 2017.

Located in the southeastern part of Ca Mau province, 19 kilometers from Ca Mau City, Dam Doi district has an area of 823,2 km^2 accounting for 15.5% of the province with a population of 187,000 people (Tong cuc Thong ke, 2018). The district administration includes one town and 15 communes. Dam Doi has favorable natural conditions and great potential for an offshore fishing economy with a coastline of about 25 km. With more than 70,000 ha of aquaculture, Dam Doi is also the key shrimp farming zone in Ca Mau. The whole district has 38,300 ha of improved, extensive shrimp farming, and

2,800 ha of intensive and super-intensive shrimp farming (Duy Anh, 2018). With the goal of striving to become a dynamic economic region, Dam Doi is actively inviting and attracting investment in the strong economic fields of the district (Duy Anh, 2018).

Located in the northwestern part of Ca Mau province, about 72 kilometers from Ca Mau City, U Minh district has an area of 774.14 km^2 accounting for 14.62% of the province's natural area and a population of 104,800 (Tong cuc Thong ke, 2018), including 3 ethnic groups: Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa. The district includes U Minh town and seven communes (Khanh An, Khanh Hoa, Khanh Hoi, Khanh Lam, Khanh Thuan, Khanh Tien, and Nguyen Phich). Agriculture and aquaculture play a key role in the district's economy. The district's farming area is over 37,500 ha, of which 21,000 ha are shrimp farming, which contributes significantly to increasing the district's general income. Extensive shrimp farming has been developed from more than 10,000 ha of land comprised of contaminated salty alum and low-yield rice lands. Traffic in U Minh consists mainly of a waterway system through canals, which makes the development of industrial production and other non-farm activities difficult and negatively impacts people's lives (Tan Tai, 2019).

Data Collection and Analysis

Surveys, interviews, and group discussions are common methods for gathering data on livelihood capital. Surveys are used to obtain the demographic characteristics of the participants and their livelihood capital (Khatiwada et al., 2017). Some authors (Ghosh et al., 2012; Khatiwada et al., 2017; Mdee, 2002) have attempted to quantify these capitals using quantitative data collected from surveys and sophisticated statistical analysis. In addition, interviews are useful to gain more insights into participants' detailed experience in livelihood activities and into a number of other issues that surveys cannot go into in depth (Radel, 2012). Scholars also use group discussions to gain insight into the contexts under which livelihoods operate (Khatiwada et al., 2017).

This study combines both qualitative and quantitative methods, including document analysis, questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. For quantitative data collection, a survey of 362 women from poor households[1] was carried out in U Minh and Dam Doi in November 2019. In each district, two key villages were selected for the survey: Quach Pham and Tran Phan in Dam Doi, and Khanh Thuan and Khanh Tien in U Minh. The selection of 90 respondents from each village followed the method of stratified random sampling. The questionnaire contained 40 questions, including questions on the respondent's general data and attitude and perceptions on livelihoods. For qualitative data collection, 44 semi-structured interviews (11 interviews in each village) and 8 focus group discussions (4 discussions in each district) were conducted in the context of this study. Key informants included local authorities, villagers, the Association of Farmers, and the Association of Women. Other informants were selected by using the snowball sampling technique. The interviews focused on livelihood capitals and the issue of poverty.

1 In Vietnam, the government considers a rural household as poor when the monthly income per person is less than VND 700.000, equivalent to approximately USD 30 (Chinh phu Viet Nam, 2015).

For data analysis, the author used SPSS software to analyze the questionnaires and investigate the inter-linkages among the five livelihood capitals and the correlation between livelihood capitals and livelihood strategies. For qualitative analysis, the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and thematically analyzed with topics relating to livelihoods. Since previous studies found obstacles stemming from both the macro context and women's baseline conditions, data analysis paid particular attention to whether and why women in these areas have faced the same or different obstacles in their access to and control of resources. Paying further attention to the factor of gender, both data collection and analysis centered not only on livelihood capitals, but also on policy and social background as well as gender division in the household, all of which affect women's access to various livelihood capitals.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This section presents a detailed picture of the respondents and their livelihood activities and outcomes, as well as the factors affecting them, including livelihood capitals and the socioeconomic context. Interconnections among these three are discussed in the latter part of the article.

Livelihood Activities

Questionnaire surveys showed that 34.5% of respondents made a living from off-farm activities earning low and unstable incomes, mainly as wage laborers. Other respondents earned incomes as workers/handicraftswomen and small traders at local markets or sold groceries/fish in villages. Of the respondents, 30.1% carried out on-farm activities: 21.8% worked on farming, such as cultivating rice, vegetables, and fruit trees, and raising domestic animals (pigs, cattle); 7.2% worked in shrimp farming; and 1.1% had contracts with the forest management board to plant and protect mangrove forests (Table 2).

LIVELIHOOD ACTIVITIES	FREQUENCY	%
1. On-farm activities	**109**	**30.1**
• Crop farming + Domestic animal rearing	79	21.8
• Aquaculture	26	7.2
• Forestry contractors	04	1.1
2. Off-farm activities	**125**	**34.5**
• Workers, handcrafters	05	1.4
• Street vendors	16	4.4
• Wage labors	104	28.7
3. Unemployment	**128**	**35.4**
TOTAL	**362**	**100**

Table 2. Livelihood activities. (author's compilation).

Of the respondents that were engaged in agriculture and fisheries, 54.1% of their products were purchased through intermediaries and 11.3% were used in households. Only 32% of respondents had stable jobs and more than a third of the sample (primarily young women) reported being unemployed. They explained that they did not have a regular job, spending much of their time at home as housewives caring for their children (Figure 2). They sometimes worked as wage labor for other farmers or went to the local market to sell some fruit from their garden or shrimps from their ponds, but the revenues from these jobs were sporadic and low. Respondents' households that did not hold regular jobs accounted for 63.5%.

Interviews with key informants revealed that there were not enough off-farm jobs in the area. One of the causes of that problem was the inconvenient transportation to the areas, which consisted mainly of small boats and low-quality roads. There were some industrial companies in other districts, but the women lacked the skills required for the work. They also hesitated because they had to care for small children.

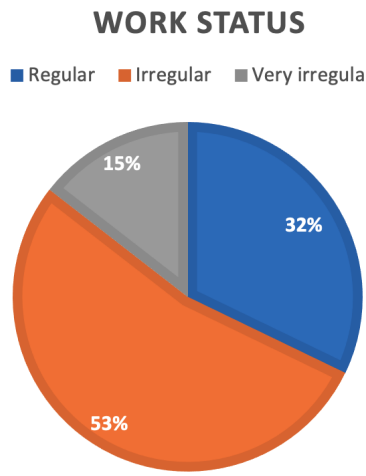

Figure 2. Respondents' work status. (author's compilation).

Livelihood Outcomes

Of the livelihood activities listed in Table 2, the average income of the respondents was VND 2,379,500 (USD 104.8) per month. However, 61% of respondents had no regular income and the remaining 39% had monthly incomes ranging from less than VND 1 million (USD 44) to more than VND 30 million (USD 1,321). Only 2% of respondents earned more than VND 10 million (USD 440.4) per month. The respondents' average household income was VND 3,496,084 (USD 154) and 66.6% earned less than VND 3 million (USD 132) per month. On average, women contributed 38% of the household's income. Most of the respondents identified themselves as housewives, and the family income was dependent on their husbands' jobs. These men worked as wage labors for other farmers, but these jobs were not regular. Many respondents (75%) blamed their poverty on the lack of money to invest in aquaculture and means of production. Some (22.5%) recognized that their low education and low

skill levels were causes of their unemployment and thus their poverty. A large number (42%) reported that they lost money in agricultural and aquaculture production, and 47% mentioned the unfavorable climate and weather. When asked what they need to improve their livelihood and get out of poverty, most respondents expressed a need for capital in order to develop agriculture production: 46.4% needed money to invest in agriculture and 30% required more land. Only 17% needed plant seeds and animals to breed, and 18.8% answered that they were in need of off-farm jobs. Some would have liked to have been forestry contractors but did not get the chance. When asked about migration to other cities for work in factories, 46% acknowledged they had used this strategy and 54% responded that they needed jobs in the district, or in Ca Mau province, so that they were able to take care of their young children and senior members in the family.

Factors Affecting Livelihood Activities and Outcomes

Factors affecting the respondents' livelihood activities and incomes pertained to natural socioeconomic contexts and livelihood capitals.

Natural Socioeconomic Contexts

The long coastal zone and suitable climatic conditions give Ca Mau natural advantages for aquaculture (Le Anh, 2017). The province ranks first in the country in terms of land area of brackish water shrimp farming (Vietnam Association of Sea Food Exporter and Producers, 2019), the main economic activity of Ca Mau's rural regions. Over the past years, the province's shrimp farming area has always been stable at about 280,000 ha, accounting for more than one third of the country's shrimp farming area (VSEP, 2019).

Implementing the government's Resolution No. 09/2000 / NQ-CP of 15 June 2000 on economic restructuring and agricultural product consumption, Decision No. 1116 / QĐ-CTUB of 19 November 2001 by The Provincial People's Committee approved a plan to develop fisheries-agriculture-forestry production in Ca Mau province for the years 2001-2010 (Dang Kim Oanh, 2010). Following the decision, rice-growing land of the province (169,875 ha) was reduced to 145,000 ha (in 2010) for shrimp farming. The decision also allowed farmers to combine shrimp farming with rice farming and forest cultivation (Dang Kim Oanh, 2010). In implementing the decision, the provincial government created favorable conditions (such as extension services, irrigation) to deploy and replicate the shrimp-rice production model, especially in the north region of Ca Mau.

With the province's Decision No. 1116, the two districts, Dam Doi and U Minh, have considered the development of shrimp farming as their economic development strategy and a key solution to poverty alleviation in the districts. In the period 2014-2016, farmers mainly utilized traditional extensive shrimp farming, which completely relied on natural food sources. This model suffered low productivity and resulted in shrimp diseases, causing losses for farmers. This method of shrimp farming also heavily polluted the farming environment. In 2006, an improved extensive model was developed with the addition of seeds and feed. Since 2016, farmers have

been introduced to the improved extensive shrimp farming (Male farmer, 36 years old, personal communication, Nguyen Buu San, 2020), and U Minh used this method across more than 20,000 ha.

High profitability is the reason behind the development of shrimp farming in Dam Doi and Ca Mau districts. Interviews demonstrated that shrimp farming yields high profits, depending on the model. The traditional extensive farming model yields about 200-300 kg per ha in a year, providing an annual income of VND 20-25 million per ha. The improved extensive model showed a stark improvement with yields of 500-700 kg per ha each year and an annual income of VND 120-150 million per ha. The intensive model made a further improvement with a yield of 60-70 tons per ha in one year, giving farmers annual earnings of VND 500-800 million. However, most villagers invested in extensive or improved extensive farming due to the high investment for the intensive model.

Though profitable, shrimp farming requires high inputs. Farmers had to invest nearly VND 50 million for a 1000 m^2 pond for extensive farming and VND 70 million for a 1000 m^2 pond utilizing improved extensive farming (Tran Thanh Hai, 2019). Further investments included VND 150-200 million for breeding, food, and veterinary expenses (Loan Phuong, 2020). The intensive model requires extremely high input (around VND 700 million per ha) and few villagers can afford it. Although agricultural development policies provide loans for shrimp farming, banks hesitate to lend for proposals with intensive and super-intensive shrimp farming. In addition, bank loans do not provide enough capital for intensive and super-intensive shrimp farming, so farmers are unable to invest in this method (VSEP, 2019). Respondents said that shrimp farming was risky, with high failure rates due to disease and unstable selling prices. If everything went smoothly, they could escape poverty and even become well-off after two or three successful harvests. Otherwise, they would become bankrupt.

Shrimp cultivation has affected the environment negatively, which in turn caused a backlash on the shrimp farming industry. In the early years, most shrimp farming produced relatively high yields because the land was rich in nutrients, the water source was not polluted, and the breeds generated high prices and were of good quality. However, over the years, the productivity and output of farmed shrimp have decreased due to land degradation and shrimp diseases (Male farmer, 36 years old, personal communication, Nguyen Buu San, 2020). Furthermore, since farmers have to bring seawater into the fields to set up shrimp ponds, large-scale saline intrusion has increased in the two districts (Huynh Anh, 2019). The transfer of rice-growing land to shrimp farming worsened the situation. Because of this environmental issue, other farmers have experienced poor productivity in both crop cultivation and livestock raising (Van Mach & Tran Trương, 2019).

Human Capital

The sample included 362 poor women between the ages of 16 and 60. The sample's average age was 41 years, and 80% were under 40 (Figure 3). Most of them live with a household (their own family or an extended family), whose size varied between 4-6 persons. The respondents' education level was low: 42.3% finished primary education,

32.3% attended lower secondary school, 4.1% went to high school, and 11.2% were illiterate (Figure 4). These numbers and interviews showed that, while the government has implemented national compulsory universal education programs for both girls and boys in the areas, the traditional perspectives of rural people in Vietnam that girls did not need to study and ought to get married as soon as possible (when they turn 18) still prevailed. Therefore, compared to their husbands, women's education was low. A young woman in Tran Phan village (Dam Doi district) confirmed this observation:

> My parents said, I only need to learn how to read and write. This is because girls will get married and their husbands will take care of them. The boys need to study because they will become the head of their own families later. (female respondent, 25 years old, personal communication)

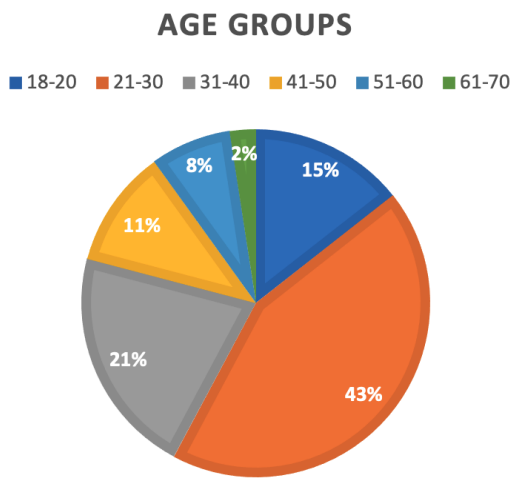

Figure 3. Respondents' ages. (author's compilation).

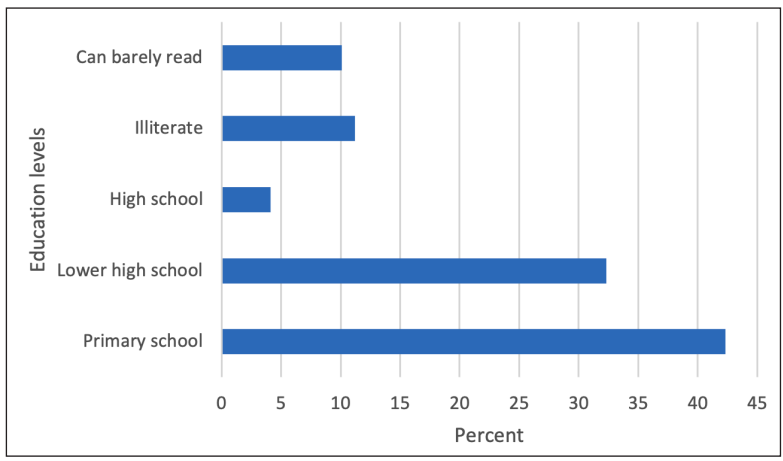

Figure 4. Respondents' education levels. (author's compilation).

Although shrimp farming is a household's activity for many farmers in the two districts, most of the poor farmers in these areas lacked the necessary skills in shrimp farming. Training on techniques for shrimp farming is mainly provided by local extension services. Farmers also get some guidance from experts on national television shows and local newspapers pages (41.7%). They also got information from relatives, friends (27.1%), and traders (12.7%).[2] Moreover, women also lacked skills in shrimp farming. As participant in the group discussion in Khanh Tien village (U Minh district) recalled:

> We worked as farmers because our parents were farming in the past. We only know how to sow the seed and how to take care of rice and vegetables in general. As for shrimp farming, we watched how our neighbors did and followed. We did not know how to treat the shrimp disease, we called the veterinarians, but they also could not solve the problem, so most shrimps in our ponds died and we lost money. (female respondent, 28 years old, personal communication)

The survey results showed that only 30.9% of the respondents said that they had access to knowledge about production, especially farming and shrimp farming (compared to 40.9% who said their husbands did have access to this knowledge). The other 69.1% had difficulties in acquiring knowledge because their husbands were considered heads of the households and would represent the households at training programs.

Regarding ethnicity, 93.7% of respondents were Kinh, the largest ethnic group in Vietnam, and 6.3% were Khmers. Of the respondents, 86% were married, 4% were single, and 10% were either widowed or divorced. The respondents were mostly healthy, although 34% reported mild symptoms of joint pain, fatigue, and ear, nose, and throat issues. In general, the respondents' ages and health status were favorable for joining the workforce. Despite this advantage, 86.7% of respondents were housewives without any specific skills for off-farm jobs. In particular, only 36.4% were applicable for being workers of industrial companies, which required candidates to have lower high school[3] certificates. There are no employment or human resource services to help respondents find well-paid, off-farm jobs at factories in Ca Mau or other provinces. They could only work as wage laborers, street vendors, or sellers in local markets – all of which delivered unstable incomes.

The surveys and interviews revealed three reasons why these women quit or did not go to work in factories. First, they lacked the requisite skills to work in these factories. Second, the factories were not located in the districts but in Ca Mau or in other provinces, and they were hesitant to relocate due to their precarious financial situations. Third, they had young children but the neighborhoods lacked kindergartens and the tuition fees of the ones near the factories were too high. Some even had to care for their aging parents/parents-in-law. As a result, they agreed with the family to remain at home.

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2 Only 1.1% of respondents said they got information from the internet and social media.

3 Lower high schools in Vietnam include classes from Grade 6 to Grade 9.

Financial Capital

The low capacities of the respondents, which led to unstable and low-income jobs, jeopardized the respondents' financial capital needed for their livelihoods. Nearly 80% of respondents reported having no savings because they could only make ends meet with unstable, off-farm jobs or because of the low productivity of agricultural crops and shrimp farming. One woman in Dam Doi confided in saying:

> Every day, my husband and I only tried to earn enough to buy rice and food for the 4 children. You know, there are not many jobs offers here, especially after the crop harvest. We work for the owners of shrimp farms in our village and also in other villages. (female respondent, 39 years old, personal communication).

Another woman living in U Minh complained:

> My husband works for the fishery boat and I am only at home taking care of the children. We do not earn enough to have a saving though we want to. (female respondent, 26 years old, personal communication).

Eleven percent of the surveyed women saved between VND 450,000 and 10,000,000, and only 1% had savings over VND 10,000,000.

A total of 54.4% of the women were able to obtain loans from local organizations such as the Veteran Association, the Women Association, the Poverty Reduction Fund, the Employment Fund, and the Policy Bank. More than one third of respondents (45.6%) received money from the Women Association and the Policy Bank (Table 3). The average loan amount was VND 10-30 million (USD 431.48-1.294.44; Figure 5), which was not enough to invest in shrimp farming, the lucrative livelihood of the districts. Besides, only 42.3% respondents said they could control and make decisions concerning the use of the loan. Others said their husbands, as the heads of the family, were the ones to take decisions. Married men can borrow money from the bank if they have a plan in production approved by the bank. They can also get a loan from a number of national/provincial rural development programs. In general, banks hesitate to lend to poor farmers who do not have some assets to deposit. Thus, poor farmers tend to get loans from rural development programs.

SOURCES	FREQUENCY	%	AMOUNT (VND)
Poverty Reduction Fund	20	5.5	1M-15M
Veteran Association	2	0.6	10M-12M
Women Association	71	19.6	1M-40M
The Policy Bank	94	26.0	1M-50M
Employment Fund	3	0.8	10M-30M
Other funds	7	1.9	1M-80M
Total	**197**	**54.4**	

Table 3. Respondents' access to loan. (author's compilation).

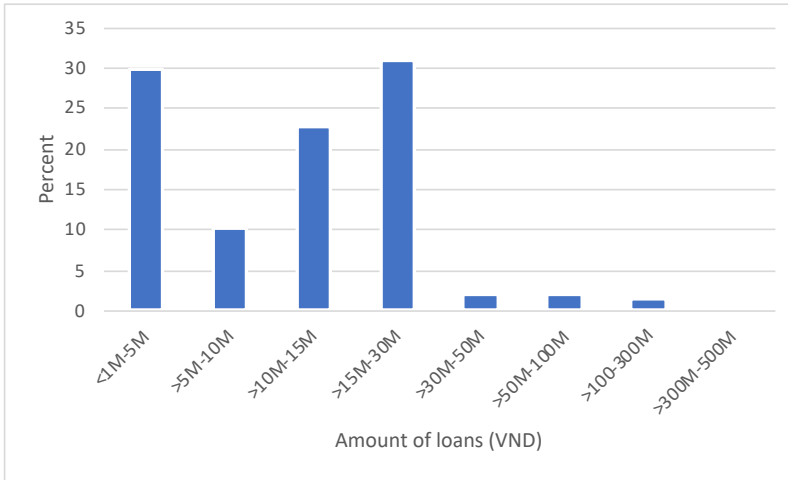

Figure 5. Amount of loans. (author's compilation).

Physical Capital

Among the respondents, 4.4% had no home but leased a place to stay. Among the other households, 46.1% had temporary houses made of wood with corrugated iron or thatched roofs. This type of housing is common in both districts. According to construction regulations in Vietnam, 22.1% had housing that was ranked fourth.[4] For home appliances, 81% of the respondents had a TV in the home, providing them with information and entertainment, but only 4.4% had access to the internet. Like other Vietnamese households, 58.8% owned one motorbike for travel, and 16.6% households had small boats utilized for transportation, not for fisheries. It should be noted that these assets were considered the household's property. Although both husband and wife contributed to these properties, 50% of respondents said their husbands were the ones to control them. Some respondents said that, in the past, they had had some personal assets, such as gold jewelry given to them by their parents when they got married, but they had to sell them eventually in order to make ends meet.

Rural infrastructure was still unfavorable, with poor-quality rural roads. The main transportation mode was by boat. More importantly, 100% of respondents' households did not own any production equipment for farming, such as water pumps or plows. The lack of physical capital was responsible for the low productivity and high costs of agricultural crops and shrimp farming.

Natural Capital

Nearly one-fifth of the sample (19%) owned no land. Some respondents (15.2%) owned a plot for growing rice (on average 4,506 m^2), and 44% of respondents had much larger plots for shrimp farming (an average of 74,883 m^2). Others had small

4 This is housing made of bricks and wood, with enclosed walls and partitions made of bricks, tile roofing, or fibrocement considered low-quality finishing materials and, thus, low living facilities.

plots of 300-600 m^2 for raising cattle (cows and oxen), poultry, vegetables, and fruit trees (Tables 4 & 5). A small percentage (4.4%) used land contracted with local forestry agencies for planting forest trees (on average 1-5 ha). Respondents with small rice plots said their products were primarily used within the household. The same held true for respondents with small plots of land for vegetables and fruit trees, though some of their produce was sold at the local market. Respondents with shrimp farms mostly sold their products to intermediate buyers.

Gender inequalities highly impacted the women's natural capital. Around 80% of cases involved respondents whose husbands were considered heads of the household. Only 5% of respondents were family heads because they were widowed or divorced. As a result, just 13.3% of respondents were able to access land and houses, and only 8.4% were involved in managing these resources. As a woman living in Dam Doi said:

> My husband keeps the documents of the land and house; he just gives me money for expenses. I do not know much about these properties because he is the head of the family. Every time we need to make a decision such as selling or buying something, he is the one who decides. (female respondent, 26 years old, personal communication).

TYPES OF LAND	FREQUENCY	%
Shrimp farming	159	43.9
Rice	55	15.2
Poultry	43	11.9
Fruit trees	18	5
Vegetables	16	4.4
Cattles (cow and oxen)	1	0.3
Total	**292**	**80.7**

Table 4. Types of land. (author's compilation).

TYPES OF LAND	AVERAGE AREA (m^2)
Shrimp farming	74,882.85
Rice	4,505.87
Poultry	398.04
Fruit trees	597.35
Vegetables	249.17
Cattles	0.0

Table 5. Area of land. (author's compilation).

Social Capital

Although 67% of respondents joined local groups and associations (mainly the Commune Women's Union), 60% said they often seek help from their families and relatives in case of need. Only 27% acknowledged that they received some support from local governments and other organizations (women's organizations, communist farmers' organizations). These networks mainly act as intermediaries between

villagers and poverty reduction programs to provide low-interest loans for farming. In both districts, the government had implemented some rural development and poverty reduction programs, such as Program 135, providing socioeconomic development for ethnic minorities and mountainous communities; and Program 134, supporting productive land, residential land, housing, and domestic water for poor ethnic minority households. Interestingly, a high proportion of the respondents were generally unfamiliar with rural development programs (Table 6).

	RESPONDENTS' AWARENESS		
	Have not heard	Know	No interest
Program 135	63.8	28.9	2.8
Program 134	84	14.4	1.6
Program to invest and upgrade commune' clinics	77.3	21	1.6
Program to develop rural roads	47.9	50.2	1.9
Program on clean water and environmental sanitation	63.5	35.9	0.6
Program giving loans for jobs	42.4	55.9	1.6
Training programs for exporting labor	21.6	75.4	3.0
Credit programs	28.7	68	3.3

Table 6. Respondents' awareness on rural programs in the two districts. (author's compilation).

Since most husbands of the families had to work in the areas of farming and wage labor, the majority of wives (more than 60%) attended village meetings and other community activities. Though representing their households in local meetings, the women still lacked knowledge of specific programs related to them. This is because these meetings addressed not only rural development programs, but also revolved on various other topics such as news concerning the socioeconomic situations of the districts, legislation, and other social issues. The women reported that they only paid attention to programs for which they were the beneficiaries. Furthermore, only programs' beneficiaries (mainly men as household heads) received special briefings on the programs' specifications and procedures. Women obtained information on agriculture and aquaculture products mainly from mass media. A majority of 40% acquired information from television and newspapers and 20% from friends and neighbors. Only 8% received information from local authorities. Poor social capital explains why female respondents lacked the ability to respond to and cope with vulnerabilities that occur in agriculture, such as shrimp disease and droughts.

DISCUSSION

Research on livelihoods emphasizes the important role of all five livelihood capitals to livelihood activities and outcomes (Erenstein, 2011; Kibria et al., 2018; Oumer & de Neergaard, 2011; Scoones, 2009; Shah, 2005; Sharifi & Nooripoor, 2017). However, the importance and contribution of each capital varies and remains a matter of debate.

Sharifi and Nooripoor (2017), for example, ranked physical capital above human, natural, and social capitals in their contribution to rural livelihoods. Other authors (Sadik & Rahman, 2009; Shah, 2005) have also highlighted the important role physical capital plays in supporting livelihoods. Kibria et al. (2018), however, underlined the significant role that financial capital played in resource extraction, and stressed that human capital and social capital helped rural residents gain access to resources. Sadik and Rahman (2009) further point at the importance of social capital for livelihood activities and outcomes.

In line with Kibria et al. (2018), findings from the case studies in Dam Doi and U Minh districts highlight the significant role of human capital in shaping respondents' choices in livelihood activities. Due to low education levels and the lack of skills to perform non-farm jobs, the respondents, although young and healthy, still worked in agriculture and shrimp farming, despite the limited land they had for such activities. In this choice of livelihood activities, human and financial capitals are crucial for livelihood outcomes. Although shrimp farming is highly lucrative, shrimp yields are susceptible to diseases, which can lead to low productivity. Respondents' poor knowledge and skills in shrimp farming and their lack of savings and poor access to loans rendered them unable to fully invest in shrimp breeding, feed, and needed veterinary services. As a result, women cannot get out of poverty. Their lack of natural and physical capitals worsens the situation. Having only small plots of land for growing rice, vegetables, and fruit trees, they mainly use the products for their families and sell some on local markets. Production costs increase because they lack production equipment (plows, water pumps, etc.) and had to rent these tools for production. Small land plots and temporary housing also served as disadvantages for securing loans from local banks that require borrowers to offer guarantees in the form of properties. For the ones who obtained loans from poverty reduction programs, the amount of the loan was not sufficient for shrimp farming. Findings also indicated that the weak social capital did not help respondents gain access to agricultural extension and loan services geared toward shrimp farming.

While most studies focus on livelihood capitals as the main factors shaping farmers' livelihood strategies (Kristjanson et al., 2005), this case study shows mixed impacts, including that of the wider, natural socioeconomic context, on livelihood activities and outcomes in the two districts. On the one hand, the province's policy to develop shrimp framing has made it a popular livelihood activity in Dam Doi and U Minh as well as in other rural areas in Ca Mau. This policy has directed governmental support in infrastructure (irrigation) and extension services. It has also allowed private actors to invest in intensive shrimp farming. Overall, the policy has created opportunities for farmers to get involved in this lucrative activity. On the other hand, there were trade-offs between rural development policies and livelihood capitals in performing shrimp farming – the main livelihood activity of the two districts. As the analysis shows, the five livelihood capitals of the respondents are minimal, rendering them incapable of participating in the popular and profitable livelihood activity of shrimp farming. The fact that 20-40% of respondents did not hear about or have access to rural development and poverty reduction policies shows the small degree to which impoverished rural women take advantage of these programs. For respondents who did access the loan programs, the money received was insufficient to carry out

profitable livelihood activities like shrimp farming. Some respondents did use the loan for shrimp farming but suffered losses due to shrimp disease. Also, training programs on shrimp cultivation and saline intrusion were generally lacking.

The research findings confirm the vital role of the factor of gender based on two central gender issues concerning poor women in the rural areas of Ca Mau when pursuing their livelihoods, namely, one related to the broader institutional contexts and one related to the gender division of labor within the households. The traditional view on men's role as heads of the family was not only confirmed by villagers but also promoted by government policies in rural development. Villagers give priority to the education of boys over girls. Male heads of households are the primary beneficiaries of rural development policies, reducing women's opportunities to improve their human, financial, natural, and social capital. More importantly, the gender-division in the household places the burden of childcare and elderly care on the shoulders of women, which poses an additional obstacle to them in improving their assets and thus their livelihood. Although employment is perceived as the key to lifting these women out of poverty, rural development policies and poverty reduction programs in the province focus on availing loans for shrimp farming and thus fail to create employment, especially off-farm jobs for women. Rural policies in the two districts are created for two different goals (roads and clinics), and there is a strong lack in synthesis of different policies in the area. Their effects are, therefore, scattered and do not combine to create an effective force for rural poverty reduction. Poverty reduction programs also fail to improve human capital (or skills) and social capital (or a minimal access to poverty reduction support).

CONCLUSIONS

Poverty reduction remains a core priority in Vietnam's rural development strategy. Studies on this subject pay great attention to livelihood approaches for identifying the causes of poverty, which are important so that policy makers can form poverty reduction solutions. This study explored the livelihoods of poor women in the coastal province of Ca Mau. Using questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews, the research findings revealed the essential and intertwined roles of human capital in influencing respondents' choice of livelihood activities: financial capital (money, savings, loans) in determining their livelihood outcomes in terms of limited human capital (educational levels, skills); physical capital (houses, means of production); and social capital (access to agricultural extension services and poverty alleviation loans).

The results highlighted the mixed impacts of livelihood capitals and the socio-economic context on rural livelihoods. In both districts, rural development policies followed different objectives and no integration was attempted to build up development capacity. Rural development policies have not yet been accessible to some villagers and have not provided enough input into shrimp farming as the main solution for poverty reduction. Therefore, there is a need to open up access to loans and training that are not gender-biased in order to increase human and financial capitals for shrimp farming. Poverty reduction programs also need to create employment, especially off-farm jobs for women. Two gender issues facing poor women in rural areas of Ca Mau include prevailing traditional views on men's role as heads of

the family and the responsibility to look after children and the elderly placed overwhelmingly upon women. Addressing these impacts and further including a gender perspective in policy and development programs is critical to improve women's livelihood in the rural areas of Ca Mau.

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Social Media in Research on a Marginalized Identity: The Case of Atheism in Indonesia

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Social media have played a major role as a place where one can meet and socialize with like-minded people, and this is especially important for marginalized groups. Atheists depict such a group in Indonesia where public expressions of atheism are punishable. Whereas social media often plays an important role in finding like-minded people, it is also potentially dangerous to reject religion on social media. In this research workshop, I argue that insights into the ways in which atheists use and engage in social media groups are crucial if one wants to know more about atheist ways of life in Indonesia. However, atheist groups are subject to internal fragmentation, as atheism in Indonesia is highly diverse, and, as a researcher, one can find oneself caught up in these internal struggles. Finally, I argue that social media research is an important addition to offline research, since it enables the researcher, especially when dealing with sensitive issues and identities, to directly enter and critically engage with the premises in which such identities are constituted and developed.

Keywords: Atheism; Indonesia; Online Participant Observation; Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Countless studies on identity and belonging in Southeast Asia deal with religion, as religious diversity is one of the crucial features of the area. Especially when a religious community has the status of a minority within a country in which religion plays a crucial role in general, researchers are used to consider and analyze it as an anchor of identity. Against this backdrop, atheism constitutes an interesting case. Atheism as an identity is especially important in countries where religion plays a crucial role in both politics and society, precisely because atheism is perceived as problematic by large parts of the population. Whereas in secular countries, atheism usually does not depict *the* departing point of one's identity, this is rather the case in religious societies where atheists have to deal with discrimination and prejudices.

Though the topic of atheism in religious societies in Asia has been neglected for a long time, there have been some publications on this issue in recent years (e.g., Al Hariri et al., 2019; Binder, 2020; Quack, 2012;), and even some regarding Southeast Asia specifically (Schäfer, 2016; Blechschmidt, 2018). These studies are

important contributions, as they enable us to observe these societies from a new, that is, explicitly non-religious, yet nonetheless emic, perspective. My research on atheism in Indonesia, where it is de-facto mandatory for citizens to subscribe to one of the officially acknowledged religions, contributes to this effort.

In 2015, I began my research on non-believers in Indonesia. My aim was – and still is, as this is designed to be a long-term project – to understand how atheist identities develop in an overwhelmingly religious society and how atheist subjects establish their ways of life within a country based upon the concept of a divine entity (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*) as the *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (Sinn, 2014, p. 231). Since 2005 especially, Indonesian society has generally become more religious and Islam has played an increasingly important role in politics (Bruinessen, 2013), which often leads to precarious circumstances for atheists, both in political/juridical and social terms.

When it comes to identity formation and political as well as social organizing of marginalized identities, social media have emerged as a crucial arena and tool. That holds true for many groups such as political dissidents in authoritarian states, LGBTIQ people in hostile social and political environments, or ethnic minority groups. The role of social media has been conceptualized as a powerful and empowering tool from the very beginning. Meanwhile, however, the view is more sophisticated. The role of social media as a tool for surveillance, state-sponsored troll armies, endemic problems of hate speech, and right-wing mobilization has changed our perception of social media as an empowering tool for minorities. Against this backdrop, from the very beginning of my research, I considered social media groups to be important as they give new opportunities to communicate more safely with like-minded people. However, there is also the risk of provoking hostile responses from religious people if the content critical of religion is spread to them (Hasani, 2016, pp. 197-198; Schäfer, 2016, pp. 255-258).

In this short essay, I explain my engagement with atheists in social media groups and argue why such engagement is crucial, especially when dealing with identities that are at odds with mainstream society. I also discuss how social media groups are subject to internal fragmentation and researchers can find themselves entangled within internal struggles when carrying out online participant observation. My example considers the case when my interlocutors actively responded to my activities and took their views on a publication into their social media groups. Finally, I relate this experience to insights into how atheist identities are expressed and negotiated in social media.

ENGAGING WITH ATHEISTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media became an important tool, especially during the first stage of the research when I was looking for interlocutors I wanted to interview. Social media, most of all Facebook, are home to several groups for atheists, agnostics, and free-thinkers in Indonesia. Some groups are open to the public, for instance the Facebook group *Anda Bertanya Atheis Menjawab* (lit., You Ask, Atheists Answer) which was set up as a tool to establish conversations between atheists and believers (Valbiant, 2020). The aim is to demonstrate that non-believers are, contrary to state propaganda, not

'dangerous communists without morals', but ordinary citizens one can have meaningful discussions with. On the other hand, there are groups exclusively for atheists. These groups are more difficult to find, and, due to potential threats and in order to protect the identity of the members, these groups are not open. Membership usually requires filling out a form where users, for instance, have to explain their reasons for joining the group. Schäfer (2016) emphasizes that atheist online groups aim to present atheism positively in public. This is certainly true for groups designed as open discussion groups, but most atheist groups on social media have no such aim; they are exclusively by atheists and for atheists. Other smaller social media groups derive from offline-meetings, and these are the most intimate, private groups since all members know each other in person. Atheist online groups are, so far, not subject to persecution by state authorities as long as they do not enter a larger public sphere where expression of atheism might be valued as a threat to religion. After a period of coming together as atheists and engaging in discussions with like-minded people in social media between 2008 and 2016, many non-believers refrained from further engagement in social media, and generally atheist online groups developed towards rather private groups. Atheist online groups, thus, do not represent a coherent atheist community; rather, different groups – both on- and offline communities – have emerged, sometimes loosely connected but sometimes at odds with each other.

In an interview conducted with a member of the Department of Religious Affairs in 2016, it turned out that the Ministry was aware of the existence of atheist groups – on- and offline – but it was not bothered by the fact that atheists meet, as long as they did not reach out to the public (Duile, 2018, p. 167). But it is not only the state with its laws that poses a potential threat (see Hasani, 2016, pp. 200-202): Vigilant religious extremists or even relatives might attack people for their atheist expressions. Due to these circumstances, I was careful in my research. My engagement raised some ethical questions about which information I got from atheists that I could also use for my research. On the one hand, participant observation within these groups helped me a lot in understanding the phenomenon of atheism in Indonesia, and it, therefore, had to be taken into account in my ethnography. On the other hand, I knew that the topic is sensitive, and peoples' identities had to be protected. In addition to the usual anonymization in my offline research, I refrained from taking any screenshots, and never mentioned what a specific person shared in a closed social media group. While I came to the conclusion that social media groups in general are important for non-believers, I did not mention the names of atheist groups if they were closed to the public. For my research, I was only interested in the general topics discussed in online groups as they showed what atheists considered important.

Becoming a Researcher and Becoming a Member

In social media groups designed for discussion between nonbelievers, I managed to find atheists who were willing to share their experiences and thoughts with me. Online groups became one entrance to my field research. One group was especially well known among non-believers and agnostics in Indonesia. In 2015, it had some 1,700 members, but the number of people actively participating in discussions was around a few dozen. For some of the atheists I met between 2015 and 2019, this group

was important as it made the somehow diffuse fact that they are not alone in their disbelief more concrete, and it, thus, helped them to cope with social stress resulting from their position as outsiders in the religious society of Indonesia. The majority of my interlocutors later left the group or refrained from regular engagement in online groups. Their reasons were manifold. Among others, an internal divide developed between 2016 and 2018, when some influential members argued for 'purification': Only active members should be tolerated, and members should be "real atheists" (*benar-benar ateis*), as a former member of the group said to me. Furthermore, some of the people who had been kicked out of the group told me that it was due to ideological issues. According to them, especially leftist atheists and non-believers who engaged in religious communities, were not perceived as 'real atheists' anymore. The group became more exclusive, and some members accused others of sharing content from the group with outsiders. Some argued that the group should be closed to the public completely, even though the existence of the group was hardly a secret. There was even an article on Wikipedia about it and several newspapers had mentioned it.

My engagement with that online group and some of their members became insightful for my research, but it also demonstrated how a researcher could become part of a group's internal struggles. One of my starting points was an atheist Facebook group. In 2015, I explained my research to the administrator and asked if I could approach atheists through the Facebook group. After the administrator declared that he had no objections, I posted a text in which I explained my research and that I was looking for interlocutors. Within only a few days, I got dozens of e-mails and messages, and later met many of these non-believers also in person. In 2017, in a contribution to a popular scientific online-magazine (Duile, 2017), I wrote about ideological divides that arose within online (though not exclusively online) groups. While many atheist interlocutors responded that I had made a good point, the piece also received some criticism from other atheists, who argued that the way I categorized atheists was inaccurate. Indeed, they persuaded me that the divisions within the atheist community are more complex. Their critique and the following discussions helped me to rethink my categories of atheists (for a preliminary refinement, see Duile, 2020) as I had conceived of them in the early stages of my research. From this point of view, ongoing discussions with non-believers about my findings helped a lot, as critical atheists expressed their objections to my findings openly.

Fragmentation and Positioning

In 2018, I talked to a journalist who then published a piece in the *Jakarta Post* (Pearl, 2018). The only part of the article mentioning my name was about atheists' strategies for being discreet and avoiding expressing atheism in public. A few weeks later, a vocal member of an online atheist group asked me whether I had talked about atheism with a journalist. I affirmed. I did not believe that I had talked about anything discrete or potentially endangering. However, similar to those members who had gotten into arguments with more influential parts of the group, I was removed from the group as well. Later, I found out that some had accused me of sharing information from within the group, although I had not talked with the journalist about specific social media groups. According to some informants, I was expelled because some

group members considered me too close to members who were expelled from the group. This happened even though I tried to occupy neutral positions within arguments and discussions. However, participant observation in such discussion groups – both on- and offline – requires engagement, and, within ideological splits, can lead to situations where a researcher does not appear neutral in the eyes of some members. The alternative would be to be a 'silent reader', but some atheist friends invited me to join the discussions. I was also confident that I could learn much more about atheist life if I engaged into sometimes quite controversial discussions with them. After considering the alternative approach of being just a silent reader, I found it less ethical. Joining discussions meant openly contributing. This engagement, however, was, and is, potentially dangerous when ideological conflicts occur, as it threatens the neutral position I, as do many researchers, wished to occupy.

Feeling safe in online space is a subjective issue; I reconsidered my participation in that group after some of the members did not feel safe as a result. After all, I understood that this group was not designed for use by researchers. Just like ethnographers in villages, we are only guests in social media groups. For my research, the consequences of no longer being a member of this particular online group were very limited. Interlocutors whom I had initially engaged within the online group still met with me in person. Relationships with atheists who were expelled from the group, in some cases, became stronger after they found out that I was excluded as well. This effect was, however, only temporary, as the 'cleaning' of the group became less an issue over time when atheists found alternative groups both on- and offline.

Lessons and Observations

What lessons can one learn from this experience? On the one hand, engagement in and with social media groups is crucial when dealing with identities or issues that are regarded as sensitive in the societies in which we are doing research. Online groups are a means to get in touch with interlocutors in the first place and provide first insights into which topics matter for the interlocutors. This approach has also been helpful in research on other identities that are perceived as controversial by mainstream society in Indonesia, for instance, research on LGBTIQ (Ridwan & Wu, 2018, p. 123). However, the researcher's (ethical) position in online groups is not different from offline research, and by engaging in a social media group one can quickly become a contributing part of that group. Whereas such status is desired in participant observation, it makes it difficult to appear as neutral when internal fractions occur. Although my approach of introducing myself, declaring my aims and background, and sharing my publication earned the trust of many atheists in these groups, some remained skeptical about my presence as a researcher. Just like offline settings, social media groups have their own social dynamics, and developing a sense of them requires constant (participant) observation and engagement with all factions within a group.

Another observation I made was that the notion of privacy changed over time. In the beginning, the group sought to attract as many members as possible, but eventually it became increasingly exclusive. Inactive members as well as members whose atheism became a subject of doubt (as they, for instance, engaged with religious groups) were expelled. This indicates a certain fragility in the concept of private

versus public. The online group was conceptualized as a group exclusively for atheists from the very beginning, but later, loyalties, ideologies, and personal connections became increasingly important. The online environment ultimately became more intimate for those who were still accepted.

Sometimes members in atheist social media groups shared content making fun of radical believers. Occasionally, there were discussions in which non-believers contrasted science with religion. For some atheists, science is an important reference for their atheist identity. This is particularly true for those atheists whom I have called *santri* atheists. Just as the Muslim *santri* (the term was originally introduced by Geertz to refer to pious Muslims in Java), the *santri* atheists usually interact with other atheists and develop a coherent atheist identity (an identity usually contrasted against religion) that they express within their community, both on- and offline (Duile, 2020, p. 11). Especially the *santri* atheists are more concerned with private groups where they are exclusively among each other. Being in such private groups can give a sense of safety, and it may also be a tool for coping with a society deeply at odds with atheism and a strategy to affirm atheist identity.

From my engagement with atheist social media groups, I have come to the (provisional) conclusion that atheist ways of life are not so much about constantly expressing their difference from mainstream religious society, but rather about finding like-minded individuals, which gives them a sense of belonging. This belonging is not only evoked through atheism in contrast to mainstream religious society, but by creating on- and offline groups in which people can discuss everyday topics, from political to culinary issues. The latter aspect often gains importance when atheists engage in smaller groups. The fact that the people in these groups are non-believers is not always made explicit. It is rather the underlying assumption that all members are atheists that creates a social bond, and it gets less important the more intimate a group is. In this sense, online atheist groups are not sites of subversive conspiracies, but mimic other social media groups not based upon controversial identities, with occasional hints of their difference, for instance, when inviting others to join dinner at a '*haram* restaurant' or ironically calling influential atheists 'prophet' (*nabi*). One group even organized a secret Santa at a gathering where participants gave each other gifts such as atheist books or 'unchristian' items such as sex toys. Humor is a strong indicator of group intimacy.

CONCLUSION

Social media matters for atheists, as the (perceived) anonymity helps them to get in touch with like-minded people. However, I do not want to overestimate the role social media has for them: The majority of my interlocutors only joined these groups for a limited amount of time and eventually shifted to offline relations with like-minded atheists, which were, however, often accompanied by smaller WhatsApp groups. In many cases, Facebook groups are often the first social media groups new de-converts engage with and, later, they move to rather smaller and private groups on other platforms. Other atheists never felt the desire to engage in online groups. Most importantly, online groups are not sites of atheist activism. They do not reach out to the public and, as I have demonstrated above, they even tend to become closed social

spaces as a response to both external threats and internal fragmentation. External threats can derive from organized, vigilant Muslims or, as in the case of Alexander Aan, an angry mob (Kovacs, 2012, p. 4), but also from state institutions that might conclude that atheist postings or comments disrupt social order. Internal fragmentation might be caused by different political ideologies or simply by distinct social habitus. Some interlocutors have chosen to declare their atheism publicly, but they did so as individuals. The tendency of atheist online groups to develop towards rather closed and private groups makes it unlikely that social media are used as a means to promote atheism publicly in Indonesia.

For my research, my engagement with atheists on social media showed that a large part of this fragmented community seeks rather private spaces, both on- and offline, and fragmentation within the community is a means to constitute smaller sub-communities that are more private in their nature. Within this process, it is not surprising that concerns over privacy have gained importance over the last years. For the further research process, my experiences have demonstrated that it is much easier to focus on open groups or entirely switch to 'traditional' methods of offline research. Finally, it is important to consider why one wants to take social media into account and to strictly limit the information processed in the research to that goal. In my case, it is sufficient to refer to social media groups only when giving insights into broader issues and topics to be discussed. Concrete discussions could be used to illuminate the cases in point, but due to concerns over privacy, it is sometimes better to refrain from using online discussions as ethnographic material in publications at all.

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"I Am not Here for Fun": The Satirical Facebook Group Royalists Marketplace, Queer TikToking, and the New Democracy Movement in Thailand: An Interview With Pavin Chachavalpongpun

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▸ Schaffar, W. (2020). "I am not here for fun": The satirical Facebook group Royalist Marketplace, queer TikToking, and the new democracy movement in Thailand: An interview with Pavin Chachavalpongpun. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *14*(1), 129-137.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun is an associate professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. He has published extensively on Thailand and Southeast Asian politics. He is also politically active and does not shy away from discussing and criticizing the monarchy, which for a long time was taboo – in academia as well as in political campaigns. In April 2020, Prof. Pavin Chachavalpongpun founded the Facebook group Royalists Marketplace (รอยัลลิสต์มาร์เก็ตเพลส). The name alludes to other Facebook groups, like the Chulalongkorn Marketplace or Thammasat Marketplace, which were set up by former students of those universities as platforms for selling and purchasing items, and socializing in times of the COVID-19 lockdown. Pavin's group, however, is a persiflage of these initiatives. He developed a unique style of political communication, with a distinct mixture of memes, TikTok and Youtube videos, together with serious academic debates, which made his Facebook group the leading platform for criticism of the monarchy. This interview took place via Zoom between Kyoto and Cologne at the end of August 2020. Information on the dynamic developments that have unfolded since then has been added.

Keywords: Facebook; Queer/LGBTIQ; Students' Movement; Thai Monarchy; TikTok

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BACKGROUND

The success of the Royalists Marketplace[1] was unprecedented: The group became the fastest growing Facebook group in Thailand ever, and within only a few months attracted more than two million members, making it one of the largest Facebook groups in the world by the end of October 2020. When the new round of pro-democracy protests, organized by a students' movement, started across Thailand mid-July 2020, banners with the logo of the Royalists Marketplace were seen in Bangkok, Chiangmai, Ubon Ratchathani, and other places.

1 See Royalists Marketplace Facebook group site at https://www.facebook.com/groups/634791290746287. For an early account on the project by its founder see Pavin (2020a).

On 24 August 2020, however, Facebook bowed to the order of the Thai government and switched off access to the group within Thailand. As a reaction to the international outcry that followed, Facebook announced that they would take legal action against the censorship order of the Thai government (Beech, 2020; Pavin, 2020b). Pavin reacted by founding a new group, which attracted even more members within a few days.

The spectacular success of the Royalists Marketplace, its ban in Thailand, and the reaction of Facebook are watershed events in the development of social media in Southeast Asia, and globally. These incidents also mark a turning point in the power relation between the de-facto social media monopolist of Facebook, the new authoritarian governments that have spread around the world (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018), and social movements contesting these regimes in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

Figure 1 (left). A banner with logo of the Royalists Marketplace at a democracy demonstration in Ubon Ratchathani on 19 July 2020. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

Figure 2 (right). A photo of Pavin Chachavalpongpun on his personal Facebook account. The banner on the T-Shirt reads: Royalists Marketplace. The line in the post says: I am not here for fun! (Photo by Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

INTERVIEW

Wolfram Schaffar: *Professor Pavin, in Thailand, the majority of the people do not have a university degree, they come from rural areas in the north or the north-east, and many are farmers or workers. A highly sophisticated academic vocabulary is often being used by the elite to exclude these people from the political discourse. I have the impression that, with your communication style on Facebook, you are reaching both ends of the social hierarchy.*

Pavin Chachavalpongpun: I think I was born with this ability to communicate with different types of people. And you are right: The other day, the Japanese police came in order to update the situation about my security. They also asked about the Royalists Marketplace: "We checked this Facebook group and we were told that there is not a lot of substance in it – basically you just make fun and joke around." I got a bit angry because there actually is a lot of substance in there, and the entertaining side of it is very intentional. We have over one million members,[2] and not everyone is educated and understands politics like academics do. For that reason, I have to cater for different appetites, and I think I'm the person who can do it. Sometimes I pick up a political conversation and I turn it into a TikTok clip – something that might be too difficult in isolation, but once it has been digested through TikTok in this mode of entertainment, everyone can understand it better.

Schaffar: *Since Facebook took ground in Thailand in 2006/2007, it has been dominated by royalist and conservative groups and movements – among others by private vigilante groups like the Rubbish Collector Organization[3]. With your group of more than 1,5 million members, you have effectively shifted the balance of power on Facebook. How do you explain this success?*

Pavin: I don't know whether I would conclude that Facebook has been a domain for royalists like the Rubbish Collector Organization and three or four other groups of this kind. It was more a constant contest between each other. Maybe, the nasty tactics used by Rienthong Nanna, the founder of the Rubbish Collector Organization, like organizing violent mobs that bullied and attacked people, and the fact that Facebook did not want to do anything about it, made those groups prominent. But I want to be fair with Facebook. There has always been some space for us as well. For example, my personal Facebook account had long been there, and I have been very vocal. Yet, there has not been any attempt from anyone to close it down.

Moving on to your question on the reasons for the success of the Royalists Marketplace. I think it's the combination of many factors. COVID-19 might be one reason and maybe the most important one. People stayed home and got bored, and actually that's exactly how I got the idea to set up the group. I surfed around and looked at Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Marketplaces and I thought: "Why can't I just do another marketplace – a Royalists Marketplace?"

The first week was most hilarious. We saw someone offering the teak bed where King Ananda was shot.[4] This is something I would not have forecast. I just laughed out loud. Then someone wanted to sell a blue diamond; there is a rumor that the Queen

2 At the time of the interview, the Royalists Marketplace counted roughly 1,4 million members. By the end of October, the number passed two million.

3 The Rubbish Collector Organization (องค์กรเก็บขยะแผ่นดิน) is a right-wing, royalist vigilante group on Facebook, founded by Rienthong Nanna, who defined the aim of the group as to clean Thailand from social rubbish. The strategy is to screen social media, especially Facebook, and report cases of lèse-majesté to the police (Schaffar, 2016).

4 In June 1946, King Ananda Mahidol was found shot dead in his bed in the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The circumstances surrounding his death stayed mysterious and have been the subject of much controversy.

has it.[5] This story is a big issue among royalists. I offered a haircut for a dog.[6] And someone offered a mansion dismantling service. You know, because after Koi, the mistress of the present King, fell from grace, she was put in jail and her mansion was dismantled.[7]

First, I did not pay much attention, but as time went by, I saw a good number of people coming in. Maybe people were bored or curious, and they might have found it entertaining at the beginning. But when the number was growing, I brought in very serious discussions.

Schaffar: *But you still published TikTok videos in between, no?*

Pavin: In between, yes. Again, first of all, I became part of that stupid trend that everyone had to do TikTok. So, the first of my TikTok videos was just about dancing and being camp.[8] Then people liked it every time I did it and that's when I turned it into politics. I called it political TikToking, and this became an element of the Royalists Marketplace, too.

Schaffar: *But with that you are part of a wider trend, as we saw at the occasion of Donald Trump's electoral campaign in Tulsa. He boasted about the high number of participants who registered despite of Covid-19 warnings, but then large parts of the upper ranks in the hall stayed empty. Analysts later claimed that Trump was tricked by TikTokers and K-pop fans, who reserved tickets for his rally with no intention of going. The parallelism between your and the US-American political TikToking is in the style. The US TikTokers, too, did not so much publish serious appeals to mobilize people, but used the Macarena dance to spread the word of their campaign in an indirect, funny, and very ironic way.*[9]

Pavin: I have to admit, I did not know about this incident. On my part, the political TikToking developed very organically and the parallel is unintentional and maybe coincidental. But concerning the style, TikTok basically compels you to be camp. You have only one minute. If I want to open TikTok and talk to people about militarization of Thai politics? No, this doesn't work. TikTok encourages you to be queer, and it worked perfectly with my personality, too.

Let me illustrate a little bit my writing skills and communication strategy on the

5 The blue diamond affair refers to a stunning case of theft and a chain of killings, which developed into a still unresolved diplomatic conflict between Thailand and Saudi Arabia. A Thai servant to the Palace in Saudi Arabia stole a large amount of jewelry, including a blue diamond, and brought it to Thailand. Although he was caught, most of the precious gems seem to have gone lost, and several special investigators from Saudi Arabia, who were sent to Thailand, were killed under mysterious circumstances.

6 This refers to FooFoo, the poodle of King Vajiralongkorn. The fact that the pet was bestowed the military rank of Air Chief Marshal was commented on in serious newspapers and left political analysts bewildered.

7 The bestowal of the rank and title as Royal Consort to Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, called Koi, her fall from grace and the most recent reinstatement, attracted worldwide attention and led to incredulous amazement.

8 Camp is an aesthetic style, related to kitsch, which regards something as appealing because of its ironic value and bad taste. The way Pavin uses the term here draws on the American writer Susan Sontag's essay, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), where she discussed the relation to homosexuality and emphasized its key elements as artifice, frivolity, naïve middle-class pretentiousness, and shocking excess.

9 Some examples of this campaign are published on Youtube, see, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utERTzrLD2Y&feature=youtu.be.

Royalists Marketplace. In the morning, I write something serious, always about one page, as part of a longer series. In the past, I came up with four different series. I wrote a series about the collapse of the Russian absolute monarchy, and then I wrote about how Queen Victoria of England ruined her family. The third one was on Thai politics and the monarchy, of which I wrote about 30 parts.

In the evening, I write another chapter of what I called *likay luang* (ลิเกหลวง) or royal *likay*. *Likay* is a Thai popular folk theater, where they dress up all over the top, with gold and diamonds and loud kitsch music, which goes like "chingchingchingching". So, the term *likay* also carries a connotation of being over the top, being surreal, being just not like in the real world. I take real stories, but rewrite them in a *likay* style, and I have already written about 50 episodes. For example, I wrote one episode on how king Rama X locked up his previous wife. In the episode, I pretend to be the wife and start like this:

Oh my God, I cannot believe it! Even though I love him so much, this is what he's doing to me! He has another wife and I got so angry. That's why I went to Munich, and when I saw them, I slapped her in the face and that's why my husband got mad at me and put me in jail.

It goes on like this, and I even use the real names.

These days, I do TikTok less, because I think it started to get a little bit out of fashion and I don't want to be the one to hang on to it. That's also another tactic: Don't hang on to things that are going to be obsolete. But yesterday, I did one more TikTok: Koi, the mistress of king Rama X, who fell from grace, was released from prison and is now being reinstalled in Munich. So, I picked an old camp song in Thai with the line "I am returning", in order to accompany the *likay luang* of "Koi, Returning as Mistress". And as usual, I performed with an inch of eyelashes as I sing, "I'm returning to you, please baby . . ." (see Figure 3). I actually invest a lot of time in the Royalists Marketplace.

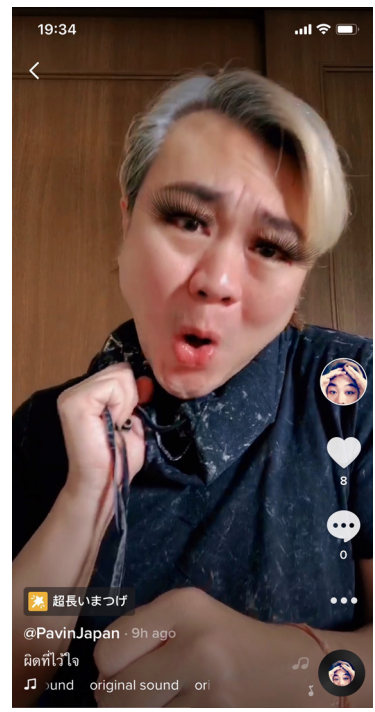

Figure 3. Screenshot taken from the TikTok "I Return", performed by Pavin Chachavalpongpun. (Photo by Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

Schaffar: *Let us briefly touch upon the social base of the Royalists Marketplace. In the case of the new students' movement, there has been the criticism that they are mainly from urban, higher-middle-class families, who grew up with a specific pop culture – Harry Potter and Ham-taro*[10] *– which they are now using as repertoire for the demonstrations.*

10 *Ham-taro* is a character of a children's manga series from Japan, which is highly popular in Thailand, albeit mostly in urban, middle-class families. Ham-taro depicts a little hamster. For the demonstrations, the students danced around the Democracy Monument in Bangkok adopted Ham-taro's song, singing: "The most delicious food is taxpayers' money", and "Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament!".

Pavin: I would say that this is a mis-analysis. I have a good oversight, because I'm the only administrator, so everything has to go through me. That's why I know exactly that, first, the majority are young people. Second, they come from all across the nation, not just urban areas. Many think that it is cool to become a member of the Royalists Marketplace – and they want to show that they are cool by posting photos of their activities. As admin, I have to approve them – which I am doing mostly, even though sometimes they are doing something silly, like posting a photo taken by the Mekong River. I am getting these photos from everywhere. I am approving it, because I want to give them a sense of belonging.

But I don't just approve; I also go to see the profiles. Quite a lot of times, these people surprise me: They are sending me very intelligent statements, and then I find out that they come from rural places, like Nong Khai, and on their profile I find pictures of their families living in poor conditions. I'm so touched, and this is something I have to encourage.

The students' movement, though, has its own dynamics. They took up the issue of the monarchy independently. They did not discuss it with me; they just informed me. However, the Royalists Marketplace did play a part, because it came before the student protests. In many ways, the Royalists Marketplace set up a stage for the young to reinterpret the information and the idea about the monarchy. It has set up a new environment of like-minded people, which is very important, when you think about taboo issues. If you work on them on your own, it is scary. But if you walk into the room and you look around and see: "Wow, there's one million people who think like that", then people get what I call an immunity. That's why they are brave, and that's why the students want to push forward.

Schaffar: *Talking about being brave on the streets: At the first demonstrations on 19 July 2020, some people proclaimed you "Queen of Thailand" – they were holding up a picture of you with your dog in a golden frame, and then prostrating in front of it (see Figure 4). First, I thought that this might trigger a direct violent answer by the police or the military. I also heard from people watching it from abroad that this might endanger the entire movement. A couple of weeks later, the development seems to prove that your strategy was right, though.*

Pavin: Maybe because I myself am quite radical, and maybe because I have been in this business for quite some time, I tell you: When talking about social movements, you can't expect everyone to agree with you. When those overseas ask whether the students have gone too far, holding up a picture like that, I take it as a different idea. To say, "I don't care", might be a bit too strong, but if you cannot propose or suggest anything better, darling, maybe you should just stay home and watch *Absolutely Fabulous*.[11]

The next point is the incident at Thammasat University: I was asked to give a speech for a gathering at Thammasat via video telephony, but I was not aware that it would turn out that big. That's why I recorded on my handphone only for five minutes, in which I didn't really say anything. This time, I just went around the bush,

11 British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* is an iconic example of camp and highly popular among queer and LGBT people worldwide. In allusion to it, Pavin uses "Absolutely Fabulous" as subtitle of his personal Facebook page.

because I did not want to take the attention away from the substance of what the students wanted to say. It is important to let the students say something substantial. As for this "Queen of Thailand" image – it was not my intention at all. But then it happened, and they started the projection.[12]

Finally, to put up the photo at the demonstration in July was someone's individual decision. It was not from the movement – I can guarantee that. Certainly, they think that I am camp and that I could be an icon. But more importantly, what they wanted was basically to bring down the level of reverence of the monarchy, and this is such a right way to do so – by parody, by sarcasm.

Schaffar: *Is there more about this aspect of being camp and queer? I'm asking because the current democracy demonstrations were preceded mid-April by a campaign on Twitter – a so-called memes' war (see Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021, this issue). A young crowd from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan used memes to discuss about authoritarianism and the monarchy, and the central hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance trended globally with billions of clicks. The interesting thing is that this started in the fandom of a Thai homoerotic Boy Love TV series "2gether – the series"* (เพราะเราคู่กัน).

Figure 4 (left). Demonstration in Chiangmai on 19 July 2020. Demonstrators holding up the photo of Pavin Chachavalpongpun. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

Figure 5 (right). Projection of Somsak Jeamteerasakul, and Pavin Chachavalpongpun at a demonstration at Thammasat University on 10 August 2020. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

Pavin: Yes, there are commonalities with the MilkTeaAlliance. It was led by young people more or less with the same agenda. Young people are trying to bring down conservative, traditional elites. In Hong Kong, it was against the *ancien regime* in

12 During a demonstration at Thammasat University, protestors projected pictures of the exiled historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul, and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, with a banner mockingly saying: "To your highest majesty with rice, BBQ pork, and soup. Long live the king." (see Figure 5; Patpicha & Johnson, 2020)

Beijing. In Thailand, it is about bringing down the political elites and challenging the monarchy. But when it comes to concrete action, it takes a national form, in the sense that the Hong Kong movement has Hong Kong ways to do it, and the Thai have Thai ways to do it.

That's why in Bangkok, we see this LGBT fashion show. We see drag on the streets. Last week, at the Democracy Monument, they even had a mini fashion show on the street during the protest, performed by LGBTIQ people, with an LGBT queen with no hair but dressed in an evening gown. So glamorous. Using the rainbow flag and using the Democracy Monument as a catwalk. We also see other pop culture elements, like Harry Potter or the Ham-taro.

The younger generation is bringing new color and a fresh sensation to political activism, but at the same time, they are being very serious. They have done a brilliant job keeping the connection with other young people, networking, and mobilizing by using the element of pop culture. And they teach each other best practices, in exchange with people in Hong Kong and people in Taipei.

Schaffar: *Let us talk about this transnational networking, taking the example of the MilkTeaAlliance. In June 2020, the democracy activist Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal delivered milktea flavored cookies in front of the Chinese embassy at the day of the commemoration of the Tiananmen massacre. Home-baked cookies, which came in the shape of the Beijing Gate of Heavenly Peace and also in shape of the Bangkok Democracy Monument. The MilkTeaAlliance seemed to develop into a new kind of transnational or internationalist solidarity network. But recently, the hashtag MilkTeaAlliance is not being used much. Do you think that there is a real and substantial transnational solidarity network, or was the MilkTeaAlliance a single and isolated event?*

Pavin: The question is whether you really want to use a hashtag to give an answer to everything. Right now, other, equally interesting hashtags are trending. Not necessarily #MilkTeaAlliance. Hashtags are an indication of what is important for the day. But it doesn't mean that the MilkTeaAlliance has gone down.

I believe that the partnership is still there, but it happens that things in Hong Kong have become really quiet. You can't force these things. But in Taipei, Thais living in Taiwan already organized two big events. I got involved because the students asked me to send a message to the protesters there. When I followed this event, I realized that there is a large number of Thai students in Taipei and they are well connected with the Hong Kong movement and also with the Students' Association of Taipei. Even certain MPs of the Taiwan parliament participated when they occupied the place in front of the townhall.

Schaffar: *As a final question, how can people from Europe, from Germany or Austria, support the democracy movement?*

Pavin: When I gave a talk in the Foreign Correspondent Club here in Japan, NHK, the national broadcasting company, covered it. Among the ten topics that I discussed, NHK only took one topic and made it headline, and it happened to be so good and exactly the right thing. They wrote: "Pavin calls for international support for Thai students."

Western governments have to give support to the students, at least for two reasons. First, to set a sign that their requests are legitimate. Secondly, and equally important: international support builds up protection for the students. The Thai government must know that they can't simply use force. The Thai government needs to know that whatever they do, there are eyes out there watching them.

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Malaysia-News - eine Facebook-Gruppe: Ein Erfahrungsbericht in Social Media Nutzung

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This paper deals with a Facebook-group named Malaysia-News. This group was founded in August 2019 and saw a rapid increase in members, especially in Southeast Asia. The analysis of the development of this group is based on data from Facebook and concerns the expansion of membership and the motivation to join. It shows that membership increased significantly after incisive events took place in Malaysia in early 2020 and that users are primarily looking for trustworthy information.

Keywords: Facebook; Malaysia; Movement Control Order; Online-Forschung; Social Media

creative commons

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FRAGESTELLUNG UND METHODIK

Am 10. August 2019 entschloss sich der Autor dieses Berichts im Rahmen der Internet-Plattform Facebook eine Gruppe unter den Namen Malaysia-News zu gründen.[1] Die News-Gruppe sollte Informationen über Malaysia an interessierte Österreicherinnen und Österreicher vermitteln und war als Service der österreichisch-malaysischen Gesellschaft gedacht. Tatsächlich entwickelte sie sich zu einer der führenden Facebook-Gruppen über Malaysia und erreichte am 1. Juni 2020 den Stand von 22.000 Mitgliedern. Diese Untersuchung stellt eine explorative Studie dar und beabsichtigt, mögliche Ursachen für das Wachstum dieser Facebook-Gruppe zu finden. Methodisch beruht diese Untersuchung auf die zugänglichen Daten von Facebook und dem Vergleich mit parallel stattgefundenen Online-Studien (Chin, 2020; Ika & Nuurianti, 2020). Diese Studie ist kein geplantes Forschungsprojekt, sondern entstand aus der laufenden Beobachtung der Gruppe. Die Methode beruht auf der Idee des „bastelnden Denkens" (Humer, 2020).

STRUKTUR UND DYNAMIK VON MALAYSIA-NEWS

Die Malaysia-News-Gruppe startete am 10. August 2019 mit 7 Mitgliedern und erreichte mit 1. Juni 2020 22.000 Mitglieder. Das ist ungewöhnlich, denn es wurde vom Administrator keine Werbung betrieben. Der Mitgliederzuwachs entwickelte sich wie folgt:

1 Die Gruppe ist für jede Person offen.

Figure 1. Mitgliederentwicklung. (own compilation).

Vom Gründungsdatum der Gruppe im August 2019 bis Mitte März 2020 zeigt sich ein gleichmäßiger, sanfter Anstieg. Mit dem Beginn der Movement Control Order (MCO)[2] am 18. März bis zu den ersten Lockerungen Ende April ist ein starker Anstieg der Beitritte zu sehen. Ab diesem Zeitpunkt beginnt die Kurve weiter abzuflachen. Die Entwicklung in der ersten Phase bis zum Erlass der MCO lässt sich durch die Empfehlungspolitik von Facebook erklären, das heißt, Facebook schlägt regelmäßig jedem Nutzer Gruppen vor, die für ihn oder sie von Interesse sein könnten. Dabei wird ein spezieller Algorithmus verwendet.

Des Weiteren verfügen die Nutzerinnen und Nutzer selbst über die Option, Freunde aus ihrer Liste in eine Gruppe einzuladen. Diese beiden Funktionen führten dazu, dass durch das Schlagwort „Malaysia" im Algorithmus eine Gewichtung der Mitglieder in Richtung Asien durchgeführt wurde. Da die ursprüngliche Zielgruppe – interessierte Österreicherinnen und Österreicher – für den Facebook-Algorithmus nur geringe Vernetzungsaktivitäten im Sinne des Gruppenthemas zeigten, wurden sie vom Algorithmus nicht bemerkt. Dies konterkarierte die ursprüngliche Intention einer Informationsgruppe für europäische Nutzerinnen und Nutzer und verschob bildlich gesprochen mitgliedermäßig die Gruppe von Europa nach Asien.

Mit dem Ausbruch der Corona-Krise Mitte März 2020 stieg das Informationsinteresse in Südostasien massiv an, wodurch die Beitrittsrate stark anstieg. Es ist anzunehmen, dass in dieser Phase die NutzerInnen aktiv die Suchfunktion von Facebook nutzten und diese Gruppe fanden. Ebenso wurde die Gruppe von Mitgliedern intensiv weiterempfohlen. Erst mit den ersten Lockerungen der MCO beginnt die Beitrittskurve langsam wieder abzuflachen.

Bezüglich der Aktivitäten zeigt es sich, dass im Schnitt bis zum Beginn des MCO am 19. März nur ein Viertel bis zu einem Drittel der Mitglieder pro Tag die Gruppenseite abriefen. Ab dem MCO stieg dieser Wert auf die Hälfte der Mitglieder an. Mit Ende März stabilisierte sich der Aktivitätsanteil wieder auf rund 25% (siehe Figure 2).

Im Vergleich kam es nach einer Studie von The Centre vom April 2020 im März 2020 zu drei signifikanten Spitzen im malaysischen Internet-Traffic, nämlich am 29. Februar (vor der Angelobung vom neuen Ministerpräsidenten Tan Sri Muhyddin Yasin), am 12. März (die Bekanntgabe des Tabligh-CoViD-Clusters) und am 19. März (Tag nach

2 Am 18. März 2020 von der malaysischen Regierung erlassenen Ausgangsbeschränkungen.

Figure 2. Mitgliederaktivität. (own compilation).

der Einführung der Movement Control Order) (Chin, 2020). Die Stichwortsuche in der Suchmaschine Google entspricht diesen Spitzen. Die Suche mit den Stichworten „Muhyddin Yassin" und ähnliche erreichte am 29. Februar einen Spitzenwert, ebenso die Stichwortsuche „Tabligh" am 12. März. Einzig die Stichwortsuche „MCO" stieg ab dem 18. März kontinuierlich an, um am 24. März einen Höhepunkt zu erreichen.

Tatsächlich zeigt sich in der Aktivitätskurve von Malaysia-News einige kleine zeitliche Verzögerungen. Während es um den 29. Februar zur einen Spitze mit 1.194 aktiven Mitgliedern kam, ereignete sich diese beim Tabligh-Cluster erst zwei Tage später mit 1.374 Nachfragen. Den großen Sprung gab es nach dem 19. März. Die Informationszugriffe stiegen in den nachfolgenden Tagen um das Dreifache. Hier zeigt sich eine Übereinstimmung mit den Ergebnissen in der Google-Stichwort-Auswertung. Während man die ersten beiden Ereignisse als Momentereignisse bezeichnen kann, nach denen die Aufmerksamkeit rasch abflachte, entstand zum Thema MCO stetig und dauerhaft ein Informationsinteresse, welches sich im raschen Wachstum des Mitgliederstandes von Malaysia-News äußerte.

Neben dem Lesen der Postings halten sich die sonstigen Aktivitäten der User in der Gruppe im Rahmen. Nur 10 bis 20% der User, die auf Postings zugreifen, reagieren mit einem Like, Kommentar oder teilen das Posting (siehe Figure 3).

Konkret verfügt man in Facebook über die Möglichkeit des simplen Lesens, des Liken eines Postings (eventuell unter Verwendung von Emojis), des Hinzufügens eines Kommentars sowie das Teilen des Postings in anderen Seiten oder Gruppen. Anhand dieser Möglichkeiten wurden sechs Spitzenpostings im Beobachtungszeitraum April 2020, in die Gruppen „Information" und „kontroversiell" geteilt und verglichen.[3] Gemessen an den Reaktionen ergibt sich folgendes Bild (jeweilige Durchschnittswerte):

	GESEHEN	LIKES	COMMENTS	SHARES
Informationspostings	4,900	158	21	78.3
Kontroverse Postings	3,300	55.3	35	11

Table 1. Spitzenpostings und Aktivität. (own compilation).

3 Die drei Informationspostings betreffen AirAsia und MCO-Regelungen. Die drei kontroversiellen Postings betreffen Rohingya-Flüchtlinge.

Figure 2. Reaktionen der User. (own compilation).

Informationspostings werden öfters gelesen, dreimal mehr geliked und siebenmal mehr geteilt. Einzig bei der Anzahl der Kommentare liegen die kontroversen Postings vorne. Es ist daraus zu schließen, dass sich die User von der Malaysia-News-Gruppe Informationen erwarten, die sie auch weiterleiten können. Die Diskussion wird hingegen nicht aktiv gesucht.

DISKUSSION

Bisherige Studien zu Facebook und Twitter beruhen auf Inhaltsanalyse und Netzwerkanalyse (Esau et al., 2019, Kneidinger, 2010), ähnliches ist in der Online-Forschung in Südostasien zu beobachten (Rahman et al., 2017). Für diese spontane Studie wurden nur quantitative Facebook-Daten herangezogen. Vergleicht man die Ergebnisse aus dieser Studie mit Forschungsergebnissen von Studien, die Twitter als Datenbasis nutzten (Chin, 2020; Ika & Nuurianti, 2020), zeigt sich ein differenziertes Bild. Während Twitter eher als Diskussionsmedium gesehen wird, tritt bei Facebook der Informationsaspekt in den Vordergrund. Das erinnert daran, dass Facebook in Südostasien nach wie vor dazu genutzt wird, Nachrichten abzurufen und zu lesen, und dass dieses soziale Medium für viele als ein vertrauenswürdiges Nachrichtenmedium zur Verwendung kommt (vgl. Einzenberger, 2016; Tapsell, 2020).

Man kann die Hypothese formulieren, das in Südostasien ein signifikantes Informationsbedürfnis aus vertrauenswürdigen Quellen besteht. Das Vertrauen bildet ein Bewertungsfaktor für Social Media Gruppen in Anbetracht der bestehenden Kontrollgesetzgebung in Malaysia (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2011). Die Gruppenmitglieder zeigen ein hohes Vertrauen in die Facebook-Gruppe auf, indem sie die Beiträge lesen (liken und teilen) und die Gruppe weiterempfehlen. Worauf dieses Vertrauen basiert kann hingegen nicht allein aus der Analyse quantitativer Daten ergründet werden.

Der Faktor Vertrauen ("Trust") findet in der Social-Media-Forschung zu Südostasien noch wenig Aufmerksamkeit. Jon Chamberlain (2020) betont beispielsweise die Notwendigkeit von Aufbau von Vertrauen in Plattformen sozialer Medien, es fehlt allerdings entsprechende Forschung. Hier bietet sich für die Medienwirkungsforschung für Südostasien ein weites Forschungsfeld.

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In the first chapter of their edited book *Appropriating Kartini*, Paul Bijl, a Dutch historian based in Utrecht, and Grace V. S. Chin, a feminist historian at University Sains Malaysia, introduce the national, regional, and transnational appropriations of Kartini – a young Javanese woman who lived in Jepara, Central Java, between 1879 and 1904. As they indicate, today Kartini is recognised internationally as an iconic feminist and nationalist Indonesian figure and is, after Anne Frank, the most widely-read and influential, (originally) Dutch-language author worldwide in the 20th and 21st centuries. Since 1911, her letters, first published in Dutch as *Door Duisternis tot Licht* (lit. *Through Darkness to Light*), have been translated into numerous languages including French, Russian, Japanese, Javanese, Sundanese, and Arabic. Several versions of Indonesian and English translations also exist. In the 1960s, a republication of the first 1920 English-language translation of a selection of her writings was included in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works.

This book discusses a diversity of appropriative acts and examines the significance of the roles played by a variety of actors and institutions who produced and claimed their versions and interpretations of the Kartini persona (Mohamad, 2004). All eight chapters of the book are written by non-Indonesian scholars and are, thus, strongly oriented towards Western contexts and appropriations, drawing on classical theories of modernity or European Enlightenment. The chapters are arranged along a colonial-postcolonial trajectory, providing a good overview of the different settings of a continuing contestation, appropriation, and debate over Kartini's biography, memory, and legacy.

The second chapter, written by Joost Coté, a Dutch-Australian historian, is entitled "Crafting Reform: Kartini and the Imperial Imagination, 1898-1911". This chapter points to how contemporary imperial interests silenced Kartini's other voice, including her criticism of European racism, sexism, and exoticism, as well as her ridicule of Dutch paternalism. Coté investigates how Kartini had already been imagined by Dutch colonials in the colonial capital and abroad at the time her name and writings began circulating in the media in the Netherlands and its East Indies colony while she was alive, and increasingly after her edited letters were published

in 1911, to conjure up a new vision of an imperial mission (p.17). In her 1903 memorandum to the colonial government "Give the Javanese Education", Kartini had pointed to an emerging reformist imperial discourse advocating "Native education" – a discourse which then referenced her in a critique of the colonial moral order and of the rationalization for the conquest of "backward" feudal states and for the reform of "primitive" Native societies. This position was appropriated by Jacques Abendanon, the colonial director of native education (1900-1905), in the pursuit of his progressive agenda for a greater access to (Dutch) education for the Javanese people and an ethical policy (p.19), which later motivated his publication of Kartini's correspondence (Abendanon, 1911).

In the third chapter, entitled "Hierarchies of Humanity: Kartini in America and UNESCO", Bijl reflectively examines how Kartini has been presented and used by many of her Western appropriators as a rare historical figure. Placing Kartini on a global stage, Bijl argues, thereby reproduces structural inequalities – a double hierarchy, namely, between "provincials" and "cosmopolitans" – despite the fact that Kartini was aware of the colonial discourse and very often uses irony as a strong weapon to criticize the way Westerners maintain European racialized discourse/scientific racism, sexism, exoticism, paternalism, or Eurocentrism at large. In the US, where Kartini appears in the prestigious *Atlantic* magazine, she is presented as a lonely voice in an "unknown" land, "a saint of the lower order" who strived for "a city upon the hill" (p. 66). Here, as Bijl shows, Kartini's own appropriation of Western, liberal conceptions of human equality and inequality were in turn appropriated to offer readers a dose of cosmopolitanism as well as to bolster a US sense of exceptionalism (p. 56). This was clearly the case with regard to the original 1920 English translation, "Letters of a Javanese Princess", designed to advance a cosmopolitan feminism. Bijl provides here a very reflective and grounded piece on the trajectories of Western cosmopolitan discourse.

The fourth chapter, written by Grace V. S. Chin, is entitled "Ambivalent Narration: Kartini's Silence and the Other Woman". This section problematizes the way Kartini presented herself and her status as a female *priyayi* through her use of (eloquent) Dutch language to her Dutch friends. Here, Chin asserts that Kartini's performativity is characterized by ambivalence, as she lived within a Javanese social world with its complex feudal system and its male-centric discourses of Javanese nobility (p. 77). She points out how Kartini's narration underlines the continued dominance of the Javanese elite in Indonesian political life (cf. Rutherford, p. 119, for a different view, where Kartini is said to have had no need to choose between *rakyat*, ordinary citizen or the people, and *ningrat,* the Javanese royal nobility).

The fifth chapter is a republication of Danilyn Rutherford's 1993 article, entitled "Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People". Rutherford – a cultural anthropologist who has written extensively on West Papua – emphasizes how *Door duisternis tot licht* was a bestselling book produced within the net of Dutch scholarship and colonial frames, and compares this with the post-colonial Indonesian reading and translations by Pramoedya Ananta Toer[1] and Siti Soemandari Soeroto[2].

1 Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) is Indonesia's greatest political author. He spent most of his lifetime incarcerated by the colonial powers and, later, by different Indonesian governments. His works have been translated into 20 languages and distributed worldwide.

2 Siti Soemandari Soeroto (1909-1994) is an Indonesian feminist and journalist. She published a book on Kartini's biography in 1979.

She further explains how Kartini occupies a position in discourse as well as in history. She argues that Kartini's ambiguity presents a source of challenge that reflects both modern contradictions as well as colonial ones.

Chapter Six is written by Kathryn Robinson, an Australian feminist, and is entitled "Call Me Kartini? Kartini as a Floating Signifier in Indonesian History". In line with the title, Robinson argues that Kartini's ideas have become a floating signifier that has been shifted and developed politically, culturally, and as part of a system of meaning-making, not limited to gender relations and women's social roles in Indonesia.

Chapter Seven is also a republication of an earlier chapter by Paul Bijl, entitled "Kartini and the Politics of European Multiculturalism", in which readers are invited to reflect on the way "sound" and "silence" are always unevenly distributed. Here, Bijl shows how Kartini uses her voice and meaningful silence in criticizing Javanese feudalism as well as Dutch scientific racism.

In the reflective and critical afterword of Chapter Eight, Jean Gelman Taylor – an Australian historian of Indonesia – emphasises again that Kartini has become attached to the specific interest of commentators, politicians, and scholars over the past years. She further appreciates what Coté (2014) has brought to the fore in his more recent compilation of Kartini's writings, namely, activities of Kartini that have been neglected or unknown by most critics, translators, and academics. Taylor also suggests that the many different views contributors have offered in this study of the appropriations of Kartini should encourage readers to reflect on themselves as creators of words and to consider more deeply how they (we) write histories.

Notwithstanding the discourse these scholars evoke, the word 'appropriation' in the book's title also deserves mention. The term adequately represents the ambiguous nature of the readings of each author as well as of Kartini the person. On the one side, appropriation can be understood negatively, as an act likened to stealing, while, on the other, appropriation can be seen as a positive and an unavoidable act of making something proper to one's self (cf. Young, 2010). We believe that the book encourages the readers to understand appropriation in the latter sense. Overall, to read and re-read Kartini, who died at the young age of 24, and to read and re-read the appropriations of her, continues to provoke emotional and postcolonial sensitivities, as well as incite intellectual introspection. This book is a valuable contribution to what has already become a century-long national and international reflection on the person of Kartini and on what she has come to symbolize over time. It will be of interest not only to those concerned with the continuing appropriation and transnational representations of Kartini, but also to a wider readership, including young scholars of modern history and social sciences in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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