

The politics of sanitization: Pandemic crisis, migration and development in Asia-Pacific

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Yuk Wah Chan 

City University of Hong Kong

Pei-Chia Lan 

National Taiwan University

Abstract

COVID-19 has resulted in new anxieties about the risks and dangers involved in human mobility and forced governments to simultaneously re-engineer policies for temporary health control and longer-term border-crossing and migration policies; characterized by the sanitization of space and mobility. This special issue considers the policies, including health and non-health measures, that have impacts on migrant workers and migration. While COVID control measures are often phrased in medical language and policy discourses, they often serve multiple goals including political and social control. The papers in this issue cover different places in Asia and the Pacific. We propose the "politics of sanitization" as a conceptual framework to examine the multiple dimensions of state governance and the variegated impacts upon migrants, including: (1) sanitizing space and borders, (2) stigmatization and sanitizing migrants' bodies, (3) sanitizing ethnic borders and the national body, and (4) reorganizing the borders of sanitization and membership of society.

Keywords

politics of sanitization, COVID-19, migration, migrant workers, development

Corresponding author:

Yuk Wah Chan, Department of Public and International Affairs, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR.

Email: yukchan@cityu.edu.hk

Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted global mobility and connections and upended the field of migration studies. Migrant workers, in particular, have been affected by all sorts of closures, immigration bans and *sanitization policies and politics* (Karim et al., 2020; Newland, 2020; Roy, 2021). The pandemic has necessitated government measures to ensure that spaces are clean, people are not carrying the virus, and flows are sanitized. Sanitization policies do not only entail various government efforts in instructing people how to wash their hands, clean surfaces and sanitize home and work environments;¹ they are also about orders that forbid visiting friends and family, shaking hands and traveling. The sharpened awareness of sanitization in policy-making and public health governance has thus led to different sorts of divides, closing and separating, which in turn have infringed upon migrants' rights, welfare and life opportunities in many ways. There have been quite a number of relevant discussions (Baruah et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022a). However, the crucial questions are in what temporal-spatial planes this process has happened and whether there are any countervailing opportunities opening up for migrants.

For this special issue, the concept of "politics of sanitization" provides an overall conceptual framework for examining the greatly transformed reality of migration and migrants' lives due to the pandemic. The concept does not apply only to the medical sense of the word, but also relates to a general encroachment of "social sanitizing" politics induced by the pandemic itself and its lingering after-effects. There has long been a tradition in applying this term in the social sciences to imply removing details or covering up unpleasant content, as well as making something less controversial and political. Indeed, while sanitization in the medical sense is a way to eliminate dirt and active germs and viruses, sanitization in social analysis implies reducing controversies, justifying restrictions and placating opposition.² Some typical examples include how the controversial parts of history are airbrushed and violence in politics and wars are euphemized by some sanitization rhetoric and (re)presented by assemblages of "clean" virtual images (Der Derian, 2009; Eken, 2017; Wong, 2013). In the name of containing the pandemic and protecting public health, sanitization policy-making has raised huge issues about state power, the state-society relationship and the infringement of individual rights and freedoms. The papers in this special issue will highlight the following subthemes under the conceptual

¹For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US has constantly provided updates on its website on ways of cleaning and disinfecting buildings. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>); see also Khan and Yadav (2020).

²References can be found at Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sanitize>) and Longman Dictionary (<https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/sanitize>).

framework of the “politics of sanitization,” namely, sanitization of space and borders, stigmatization and stigmatizing migrants’ bodies, sanitizing and protecting the national body from virus-carrying outsiders, and reorganizing the borders of sanitization and memberships of society.

Ever since the outbreak of the pandemic, most governments in the world have vastly increased their law-making power in issuing new rules and imposing regulations that bar access to spaces and encroach on people’s daily activities and freedom. In addition, many of these new rules were formed and implemented in an ad hoc or abrupt manner, omitting those processes for public discussion that obtain in normal times, either leaving affected people no time to respond or leading to frenzied responses, such as the kind of “shock mobilities” described by Xiang (2021). While sanitization policies have evolved throughout the development of the COVID pandemic seemingly in the sacred mission of saving people from the coronavirus infection, sanitization politics, often masked by health securitization, involved heightened efforts by governments to limit mobility, delimit borders, track movements and enclose spaces, regardless of whether these efforts were justified. Such sanitization politics have been heavily embedded in a coalescence of the securitization of health and mobilities and the blending of science and politicized discourses. The overall effect is enhanced state control over movement, use of space and border demarcation, along with augmented governmental surveillance.

Foreign nationals, especially low-skilled migrant workers, are particularly vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19, including the increased likelihood of contracting the virus, lacking access to appropriate care, showing severe symptoms and experiencing job and income insecurity (Guadagno, 2020). While there has been obvious disruption of mobility due to the pandemic, much is still unknown about the micro processes by which migrants’ lives and life plans were seriously affected and suspended. We will explore how people’s movements were delayed or banned, how migrant family economies were shattered, and how host–migrant relationships were reshaped. Much is also still unknown about how immobilization at one point of a migration circuit has opened up opportunities for mobility at another point on that circuit. This too requires further interrogation. Examining micro processes as such will allow researchers to identify how migrants exercise their agency in times of crisis, and the temporal–spatial spaces in which their structural precariousness is deepened or lightened.

Furthermore, the pandemic has not only disrupted people’s plans, it also shattered those of governments. The well-established global labor market and the neoliberal exploitation of resources has relied on open borders and globalization. COVID-19 has challenged the assumption that cross-border global flows and exchanges will continue to grow. Insufficient labor supply during COVID-19 was one of the ruptures in the global system. Academic discussions about the migration–development nexus have often shed light on the integral

tension between two sets of policies: security (that guards against unwelcome entries and immigration) and economics (that concerns the demand for low-cost labor resources to promote local production in the receiving countries and the thirst for migrants' investments and remittances in the sending countries) (Bastia, 2013; Brønden, 2012; Faist et al., 2011; Glick Schiller and Faist, 2010; Nyberg-Sorensen et al., 2002). Sanitization policies have shattered state plans on regular worker recruitment and required governments to come up with emergency plans, such as the relaxation of visa extension policies, regularizing irregular entries and reconsidering a long-term labor recruitment strategy (Corrado and Palumbo, 2022; Gahwi and Walton-Roberts, 2022). Sending countries which rely on overseas workers' remittances to boost the local economy also face challenges over their nebulous labor export policy as well as the overall governance challenge in handling the pandemic, reviving local economies and assisting returning workers. The pandemic has encouraged all governments to review their development strategies, especially with regards to those concerning transborder labor import and export. Indeed, the pandemic has given rise to huge issues in governance in general and labor migration governance in particular, and will further result in various dilemmas in post-pandemic governance and development.

The state, pandemic management and guest worker systems

This special issue looks at six Asian-Pacific cases. The papers will consider the policies, including health and non-health measures, that have been adopted in different destination countries in response to the outbreak and to the shifting phases in the evolution of the virus itself and the responses to it. The focus is on the impacts on migrants' lives, mobility and migration rights, and the differential treatments of foreigners and nationals. Authors will engage rigorously in the debates about how the politics of sanitizing and sanitization has bred new areas of deprivation and discrimination, and revealed the various flaws and weaknesses of today's guest worker systems. We will also look at the new changes resulting from this sanitization politics, which has extended far beyond public health governance (Heller, 2021).

We stress that although the pandemic has impacted on all migrant workers alike, migrants in Asia are subject to different guest worker systems as well as different forms of COVID management. A number of East Asian and Pacific countries are considered to have managed the pandemic quite successfully: they have suppressed the COVID spread much more effectively than most European and North American countries and have lower death rates (Chorzempa and Huang, 2021; Ma et al. 2021). Yet, it is also said that Asian countries have adopted authoritarian measures to contain the contagion, and COVID management has discredited democracy and encouraged authoritarianism in developing countries where there are weak democratic traditions

(Ailoaiei, 2021; Hutt, 2021; Powers-Riggs, 2020). For example, China has implemented early intense contact-tracing by utilizing its advanced surveillance technology and government-controlled big data. Most western countries, however, were unwilling to do contact tracing as they are more concerned with privacy and individual rights. However, when COVID vaccines became available in spring 2021, the United States (USA) and some European governments adopted draconian measures for vaccination. The Biden government's vaccine mandate requires all workers at large companies to be vaccinated. Non-compliance will result in loss of the job. This state order has been challenged subsequently in the US Supreme Court (Sherman, 2022). In Europe, French President Macron was condemned by politicians of all sides and accused of scorning those who oppose the use of vaccines or regulations mandating vaccination (the so-called anti-vaxxers) and using vulgar language to denounce their social rights (BBC, 2022). As vaccination has become the main strategy for fighting the coronavirus in the West, many western governments have been promoting the discourse of "living with the coronavirus," while some Asian governments still pursue the so-called dynamic zero-COVID policy, supported by blocking, separating, intense testing and contact-tracing, constituting a global divide between those "living with the coronavirus" and those "living against the coronavirus."

Asian migrant workers have been subject to relatively stricter border-crossing control and more severe COVID protocols. Proof of vaccination and negative COVID tests were basic requirements for entering the destination country. On top of that, migrant workers have to go through two to three weeks of quarantine in specified hotels or centers.³ Moreover, their plans might be disrupted by the frequent stoppage of international flights due to sporadic outbreaks. This very matter may have deterred many from venturing to seek new job opportunities abroad. On the other hand, those already working in destination countries were discouraged from leaving, as the process of returning involved risks and increased cost and time.

In Asia, guest worker systems have in general imposed greater restrictions on low-skilled migrant workers' rights and mobility and disregarded their wellbeing (Asis et al., 2019; Kaur, 2010, 2014; Mackie, 2010; Shrestha and Yeoh, 2018). Firstly, workers are generally denied citizenship (Lu, 2013), regardless of how many years they have stayed in the receiving countries. Their residence status depends upon their work contract. An end to their work contract implies an end to their lawful residence in the country; employers enjoy all the power to

³The Hong Kong government, for example, has designated a specific facility and two hotels to accommodate inbound domestic workers. Due to the limited number of rooms, employment agencies and employers have encountered huge difficulties in obtaining quarantine rooms for their workers. The number of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong had dwindled from 400,000 at its peak to 350,000 amid the COVID-19 pandemic (see Tsang 2022).

end workers' contracts and thereby their right to stay. By keeping workers permanently temporary, Asian labor policies on unskilled workers first serve state interests and then benefit employers before attending to the needs of the workers (Devasahayam, 2010). Governments also benefit from the labor system that systemically produces unauthorized workers (Kim, 2003). Secondly, migrant workers are often subject to surveillance and control in their work and living places. While domestic workers are watched by the CCTV cameras set up by employers at home, low-waged migrant workers at industrial and agricultural plants are placed in dormitories monitored by an amalgam of digitalized surveillance tools (Lee et al., 2018; Hierofani 2021; Haines et al., 2020). Thirdly, migrant workers are usually subject to the public gaze as outcasts, unfit for normal social life and integration, and have been differently treated and perennially kept as a separated part of the host societies (Yeoh et al., 2020; Silvey, 2007). During the pandemic outbreak, control and surveillance of migrant workers have been exacerbated in different ways (Wahab, 2020).

As such, some have argued that COVID-induced measures on migrant (im)mobilities are not independent from the guest worker control regimes that existed before COVID-19. Border closures, travel bubbles, lockdowns and quarantines should not be taken as "new-fangled phenomena." Rather, such controlling measures are "a continuation of existing regimes, and must be read as responses to emerging misalignments between previous estimations of risk among certain (im)mobile groups, and the actualization of that risk" (Lin and Yeoh, 2021: 108). We hesitate to come to this conclusion. As we have stressed, different cases in this issue will examine the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic on migrants' work conditions and everyday living, as well as their mobility plans. Despite the structural vulnerability of migrant workers in the politics of sanitization, they may also win recognition for their role as essential workers in maintaining the everyday functions and the economic progress of the host country and gain increased opportunities in the labor market in a time of labor shortage. For example, some migrant workers might have a chance to be granted permanent residency and others found new possibilities to change employers and request a pay rise in the market (as discussed further in the following sections). We will explore the temporal/spatial spaces in which changes have occurred and in what ways such changes diminish migrants' rights or enhance their opportunities.

Politics of sanitizing and sanitization

We propose the "politics of sanitization" as a conceptual framework to examine the multiple dimensions of state governance and the pandemic's variegated impacts upon migrants. The pandemic is not merely a health crisis: it has triggered sanitization on multiple fronts, including border control and

management, migrant governance and stigmatization in everyday life. Although the pandemic tends to reinforce an imaginary divide between a clean “national body” and potentially contaminating ethnic others, it also pressures the host state and society to include all residents, regardless of citizenship, within the bounds of sanitization and to reposition migrants in the hierarchy of social membership. The papers in the issue will explore the following four sub-themes.

Sanitizing space and borders

Sanitizing state borders, stopping international flights, cutting connections with people from high-risk countries and removing “suspicious” border crossers have become core strategies for cleaning up space and borders – both in the hygienic and social sense. As discussed by other scholars, COVID-19 has brought a countervailing force to globalization as well as a disruptor for migration and development (Benton et al., 2021; Cook, 2020), not only because mobility was reduced, but also because it has created a huge divide in the global system. Most countries were guided by an inward-looking and self-protecting mentality focused on taking care of their own interest rather than adopting a multilateral approach in the face of a global crisis.

Although many have pointed out that the pandemic is a migration disruptor, the reality is more complex than this. In the early stage of the pandemic, many countries indiscriminately guarded against the entry of foreigners and only allowed its own people to return home. Later on, when borders gradually reopened, many adopted a graduated scale in classifying countries according to the perceived risks they might pose. Countries with high numbers of infected cases, such as the Philippines and Indonesia (two of the most important migrant-sending countries in Asia), had been blocked by Hong Kong, Malaysia and others from sending workers. On 15 September 2020, Hong Kong adopted the so-called fuse mechanism, banning international flights from entering Hong Kong.⁴ Since then (up to early 2022), Hong Kong has utilized this place-specific flight suspension mechanism many times, prohibiting all passenger flights at different times from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, Canada, France, India, Pakistan, the United Kingdom (UK) and USA (Aljazeera, 2022). Policies such as working from home rules delayed many applications for foreign domestic workers and workers in other sectors. Many Hong Kong families thus suffered from the lack of care workers that they

⁴The Hong Kong “fuse mechanism” aims to ban international flights from places from which there are five or more passengers on a flight who are diagnosed after arriving in Hong Kong, or if two consecutive passenger planes arrive at Hong Kong from the same location with three infected passengers on each flight. Such a ban will continue for at least 14 days (see [The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2021](#); [Dimsumdaily Hong Kong, 2020](#)).

usually rely on. Meanwhile, many migrant workers were stuck in destination countries with no chance to visit their homes due to stoppage of flights, more costly and risky travel and uncertainty over visa renewal. A number of destination governments, such as the Hong Kong and New Zealand cases in this special issue and South Korea (Seo et al., 2021), adopted a visa extension policy to allow workers to stay legally after their work visa expired during the pandemic. However, how long governments will continue this interim policy is uncertain.

In some cases, irregular migrants were also allowed to stay as governments chose not to carry out or to perform fewer “stop and search” or crackdown operations. The treatment of irregular migration and unauthorized migrants has long been a gray area in migration governance (Andersson et al., 2019). While governments often claim that irregular migration has led to security issues, many sectors in the destination countries have actually taken advantage of the extra resources provided by irregular migrants. The pandemic crisis has magnified this uneasy situation and revealed the infrastructural deficiency of the global system on migrant labor governance. On the one hand, unregistered migrants were portrayed as a “breach” or “hole” in the public health campaigns against COVID. Yet, those who got caught by or surrendered to the police were often trapped, because repatriation was difficult to operate in a time of strict border closures and the option of “returning home” for safety was not easily available to them (Içduygu, 2020). On the other hand, the host society was in dire need of undocumented migrants as relief workers to solve the immanent labor shortage in care work and agriculture. For instance, the South Korean government had no choice but to relax the control on irregular migrants. At times, South Korean citizens were under stringent mobility restrictions while irregular migrant workers were “free” to move and work (Seo et al., 2021).

Stigmatization and sanitizing migrants' bodies

In pre-pandemic times, migrant labor schemes and regulations often required stringent medical documentation. The pandemic increased the requirements even more. As many scholars have pointed out, migrant bodies are targeted sites of control and discipline (e.g. Lan, 2007; Constable, 1997). They are also subject to various health checks before and after migration (Cheng, 2020; Topp, 2014; Jang et al., 2011). The pandemic has added to the pile of health certificates required at border entry points. New COVID protocols and requirements not only increase the cost of migration, but they also require more time during the preparation for migration and at the time of migration. Until after the first quarter of 2022, quarantine measures were removed in a number of Asian countries. Before that, quarantine hotels and centers, for example, have become a temporal-spatial locus of confinement for migrants, as well as a potential site of extra risks involved in every migration. Often, both the workers and their

employers have to bear the extra costs. Some papers in this special issue focus in more detail on how migrants have become “stigmatized body and soul” during the pandemic. Their increased immobility and bodily confinement were augmented by the scrutinizing gazes exerted by state authorities, employers and the general public. Indeed, even after their successful entry—i.e., after passing all the physical tests and health examinations—they are still subject to various forms of “stigmatization” and the hosts’ discriminatory gaze.

The stigmatization of migrants and minorities has long existed. Rural migrants in China who work in cities, for example, have been subject to discrimination by urbanites, who consider migrants culturally and socially unfit, less healthy and probably prone to carrying viruses and illnesses (Li and Rose, 2017; Jian, 2010; Li et al., 2007). Social exclusion, discrimination, stigmatization and unequal treatment are daily experiences of rural migrants. In the same vein, asylum seekers, refugees and some minority groups also face stigmatization, and are often perceived as outcasts and potential criminals (Wilson, 2015; Shuman and Bohmer, 2012). To cite Mary Douglas’ (1984) seminal work on purity and danger, we may apply her concept of dirt here. Dirt is things misplaced. Minorities mentioned above are often seen as outcast – dirt that does not fit into what is considered normal and well-placed. The boundary-making processes between citizens and non-citizens, developed world and developing world, and the legal and the non-legal easily incubate biases against migrants, including migrant workers and refugees alike.

During the pandemic, foreign domestic workers are often singled out as a “high-risk” social group prone to the coronavirus infection. For instance, in December 2020 and May 2021, the Hong Kong government ordered a compulsory coronavirus test for all foreign domestic workers in the city (Chau, 2021). This has been the only occupation to have been subjected to such a compulsory test. On the other hand, there have been policemen, accountants, body trainers, athletes, housewives, doctors who have tested positive, but none of these groups were ordered to take compulsory tests. In addition to intensified bodily surveillance, migrant domestic workers also face increased workload and heightened immobility because their employers work from home during the pandemic. In Singapore, foreign domestic workers were discouraged to take days off or to leave their employers’ homes. During the circuit-breaker period, the government carried out inspections in key sites where migrants are gathered to ensure the practice of social distancing. Migrant workers who were caught violating the rules could have their work permits revoked and lose the opportunity to work in Singapore again (Antona, 2022).

The international community has repeatedly called for an end to the stigmatization of migrant workers during this difficult time (Douglas et al., 2020). While many migrants are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic, instead of receiving extra support and protection, they were subject to all sorts of harassment and suffered from extra risks due to their usually cramped living

conditions and lack of access to medical support (including personal protective equipment or PPE) and appropriate advice. They were also often short of information about the pandemic situation in the country they were in. In some cases, coronavirus outbreaks in migrant workers' dormitories had devastating consequences. Many have found that migrant workers, who are often essential workers, were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic crisis and were exposed to higher risks of infection (Jaljaa et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021; ILO, 2021; United Nations, 2020). Among the 152,000 migrant workers in Singapore, almost half have tested positive in 2020.⁵ As of September 2021, migrant workers accounted for over 70 percent of all recorded positive cases there. To handle this crisis, the government further locked down plants that were inhabited by migrant workers, who were thus treated as prisoners while many of them were sick with a deadly disease. Even they received medical treatment after a while, most workers were denied freedom of movement for more than 18 months after their recovery (Marsh, 2021; Illmer, 2020; Phua, 2020).

Part of the politics of sanitization has been guided by habitual biases and stereotypes affecting foreign migrants, which also feed into cases of exclusionary policies against foreigners and minorities. Policy-makers and state leaders often claim to adhere to international standards pertaining to diversity and human rights, in reality, many of them have held onto such social stereotypes and discriminatory views. New protocols and rules developed during the pandemic often amplified such social biases against ethnic "others" and deepened the ethnic divide in many societies. Below we will elaborate on this theme of the special issue.

Sanitizing ethnic borders and the national body

Summing up the above discussion, we find that the politics of sanitization triggered by the pandemic has consolidated the binary imagery of a clean "national body" versus the unclean or potentially contaminating "other." This sanitization has been centrally built upon a mentality of cleaning up one's own nation and fending off contaminating elements from the outside as well as guarding against the dubious others. The imagination of a clean/sanitized self versus unclean outsiders/foreigners can be a kind of "nationalistic logic" utilized by many governments to summon internal solidarity and to justify discrimination and inequality in policies. The Japanese government, for example, has endorsed this kind of nationalistic logic and state ideology throughout the pandemic crisis, and lauded its own people over "foreigners"

⁵Many were told to stay in their dormitories and were in contact with their roommates who were positive cases. On the other hand, while the case numbers dropped significantly in the third quarter of 2021, workers were still subject to dormitory confinement, experiencing the longest COVID confinement period in the world (see Marsh, 2021 and Illmer, 2020).

for the nationals' ability to follow sanitizing protocols (see Vogt and Qin in this issue).

Not only were suspicious foreigners fended off at the border, those who do not belong to the national self were also guarded against from within. In general, migrant groups, asylum seekers and minority communities were the imagined unclean outsiders, or were perceived as the source and location of the coronavirus' spread (Chan and Piper in this issue). During the early COVID outbreaks, ethnic others, such as Asians in the West, were often targets of violent attacks and scapegoats for the global misfortune. COVID-related hate crimes against Asians were commonly reported in Europe, the USA and Australia. On the other hand, the COVID pandemic also revealed and aggravated the structural disparities in the USA and the UK, manifested by the disproportionate number of COVID infection and deaths among minority communities (Gamlin et al., 2021; Garth 2021).

This, in turn, raises more specific questions about how differently foreigners (including high-skilled, semi-skilled and low-skilled migrant workers as well as international students) and ethnic minorities might have experienced the COVID pandemic. Their varied responses to COVID regulations, protocols and vaccination orders may also be a point of departure for investigating the medico-ethnic divide in public health governance and pandemic control.

Reorganizing the borders of sanitization and membership of society

The COVID crisis has also reorganized the borders of sanitization and the boundaries of membership of society. Since the virus makes no distinction between citizens and migrants, effective public health governance must include all residents within the territory by offering universal access to vaccines and medical treatment. Different Asian countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, supply free PCR tests and vaccines for undocumented migrants or asylum seekers, with the promise of no penalty or repatriation. Viewing social membership as a set of concentric circles, Triandafyllidou (2022b) argues that the pandemic has reorganized the boundaries of these different layers, blurring and redrawing their contours. To some extent, temporary migrants in residence are pulled towards the inner circle to maintain a sanitary whole. They are granted an "effective membership" or *jus domicile* (the right to abode) but are still excluded from access to emergency unemployment benefits or relief packages. We will explore these issues further in the concluding chapter.

In addition, many migrants are recognized for their roles as essential or frontline workers whose labor and service are critical to the normal function of social infrastructure. Filipino migrants, who constitute a significant proportion of health and social care workers globally, face double challenges: While the host societies eagerly accept their service to sustain the highly burdened hospital system, their home country also requested these "healthcare warriors"

to save the country from the medical disaster. In April 2020, the Philippine government halted the deployment of health care workers abroad; the ban was later replaced with an annual cap of 5,000 health workers sent overseas (Humi, 2022). Similar labor shortages are happening across different sectors, including senior care homes, assembly lines in the ICT industry (see Lan in this issue), farms and food-processing plants. Some countries thus exempted farmworkers from the restrictions of COVID-related border control and even brought in migrants on chartered flights. For example, state-organized flights have helped send workers from Mexico to Canada and from Romania to Germany (Triandafyllidou, 2022b). Because it is difficult for new hires to enter, migrant workers who are already in destination countries have gained increased bargaining power and opportunities for labor market mobility. These countervailing opportunities constitute some silver lining to the pandemic and bring possibilities for changes in the post-pandemic era. For instance, both Japan and Taiwan recently announced forthcoming policy reforms to grant low-skilled migrant workers permanent residency in response to the ever-increasing problem of labor shortage. Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere gained more opportunities to request for a pay raise (Lan in this issue; Su, 2022). Different papers in this issue will interrogate the various approaches Asian governments employed to handle labor shortages and how migrants and refugees might have gained new opportunities in this crisis.

Organization of the papers

Taiwan has been considered one of the “successful” models in controlling the COVID outbreak in Asia. In her paper, Pei-Chia Lan examines the construction of multi-layered borders in the new configurations of labor migrant regulation. Such regulation was not static during the COVID period but shifted according to changing perceived internal and external risks. Taiwan’s migration and border regulation policies have resulted in new mobility and immobility for migrant workers that limit the choices and movement of some but open up those of others. By analyzing migrants’ daily encounters and narratives in different sectors, Lan explores how pandemic-induced sanitization politics has reshuffled internal (hierarchical access to civil rights and risk management within the country) and external borders (visa regulation and quarantine requirement) in ways that will have long-term impacts on Taiwan’s migrant worker importing strategies.

Gabriele Vogt and Sian Qin take a different approach to examine how the government of Japan has adopted a stringent border control strategy since the outbreak of the pandemic that aims to provide general protection of the people in Japan. To some extent, this sanitizing policy mirrors Japan’s historic *sakoku* (“closed country”) policy and exclusive traditional culture that aimed to keep out “bad” Western influences. Contrasting the strict border control policy,

internally, Japanese were quite free in terms of everyday movement and mobility. By calling upon Japanese citizens to unite against the coronavirus and any foreign pollutants, the Japanese state effectively build upon limits that delimit ethnic and national borders. A disciplined population, Japanese often pride themselves on their ability to follow rules and observe good manners. State promotion of COVID-related social manners and protocols actively differentiate between the national and the foreign, stressing the differences between disciplined Japanese subjects and unruly foreign migrants. Vogt and Qin advance that crisis management in Japan often leads Japanese policy-makers to segregate the foreign from the Japanese to fend off real or perceived dangers, and the politics of sanitization there has been imbued with the imagery of a sanitized national body, which has implications for Japan's development path.

In another paper, Yuk Wah Chan and Nicola Piper examine the specific kind of precariousness encountered by migrant domestic workers during the Omicron outbreaks in Hong Kong in early 2022. While there have long been debates about workers' structural vulnerability and precarity, the paper explores how workers suffered from sporadic risks and precarity in times of crises. In this particular case, the authors have identified the "sanitized divide" between local families and domestic workers that exacerbated the unfair and unequal treatment of workers.

Isabelle Cheng examines how the guest worker system has all along been subjecting migrant workers to all sorts of "health examinations" that check their freedom of movements, rights at work and entitlement to equality. Seen as a source of contagious diseases, migrant workers are often required by receiving countries to submit health examination certificates before and after they arrive in the host country, and to continue to do so even after they start working. Failing to fulfil these requirements may abruptly result in the termination of migration and employment. Beginning the paper with the usual sanitizing practices in the guest worker system in Taiwan, the author advances the discussion on the "unusual" sanitizing measures driven by the state's deliberate efforts to guard against COVID. She highlights how guest worker migration has long constrained workers' occupational and spatial immobility. Yet, COVID-led sanitization politics has brought some changes. On the one hand, health securitization policies have contributed to further erode migrant rights and subjected migrant workers to more severe sanitization processes. On the other hand, the micro processes of policy change reflect new possibilities, new opportunities and mobility for migrant workers.

The paper of Liangni Sally Liu, Guanyu Jason Ran, and Xiaoyun Jia draws our attention further afield to New Zealand. After almost two years of national lockdown, the New Zealand government is well aware of the challenges facing the country regarding immigration policies, border measures, ethnic and migrant minorities and labor shortages within the country. Having one of the

lowest coronavirus infection rates in the West during the pandemic, New Zealand surely should take pride in its sanitization policies and measures. Yet, perennial lockdowns and closure of public spaces will not be sustainable as the country has long been in need of foreign workers to provide essential services and labor. This research note provides an overall review of New Zealand's immigration policy in response to the pandemic outbreak, and how the prolonged crisis has forced the government to relax immigration regulations, grant residency to migrants, and review its weaknesses in migration governance.

The last paper by Yuk Wah Chan and Pei-Chia Lan serves as a conclusion to this special issue. It addresses the intertwined paradoxes of migration, pandemic crisis and Asian development. The authors interrogate the various long-existing issues in Asian migration, with specific reference to low-wage labor migration, and how migration has acted as camouflage for the lack of well-conceived development strategies both on the part of sending and receiving countries. They raise the questions of how the pandemic actually serves as a point of departure urging policy makers to review migration and labor policies in an age of sanitization and how sanitization politics has set a new research agenda for migration scholars.

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ORCID iDs

Yuk Wah Chan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8689-9536>

Pei-Chia Lan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4641-2006>

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