

BOOK REVIEW

## Global Disruption and Societal Shifts in the Early Days of COVID-19

*Reconfiguring Global Societies in the Pre-Vaccination Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Edited by Jack Fong. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024. 424 pp. Paper Back: US\$52.95  
doi:10.1017/als.2024.34

Edited by Professor Jack Fong, *Reconfiguring Global Societies in the Pre-Vaccination Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic* examines the global social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic before vaccines became widely available. This scholarly work brings together 19 authors from countries in the European Union, the United States, Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific, and examines how governments, public officials, health systems, and citizens responded to the social, political, and economic challenges of the pandemic. Professor Fong's edited book, which took over four years to complete, explores how urban environments, workplaces, legal systems, and everyday life have changed under the pressure of pandemic restrictions. The book also examines the impact of these changes on social relations, particularly in relation to issues such as race, gender, politics, and crime. This interdisciplinary study illuminates the successes and failures of state apparatuses in protecting citizens in times of intense crisis and raises questions about social contracts and governance under pressure.

COVID-19 has severely impacted people's lives. Numerous studies indicate that early intervention must comprehensively consider not only political and economic factors, but also social, cultural, and psychological elements (Dubey et al., 2020; McNeely, Schintler, and Stabile, 2020; Friedler, 2021). Key chapters in Professor Fong's edited book on this include analysis of South Korea's social distancing practices, Thailand's early containment strategies, and the psychological impact of the pandemic on the United States. The chapter, entitled "*Reconsidering the Third Place: Social Distancing and Inequality in South Korea during the Era of Coronavirus*," written by Professor Kelly Huh and Professor Hyejin Yoon, examines how the concept of "third places" (a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to describe social spaces outside of home and work) has been used to describe social spaces that are affected by COVID-19 and South Korea's social distancing measures. "Third places" include places where people gather, such as cafes, parks, and community centres, to form social bonds essential to social cohesion and community life. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these spaces have been severely restricted, exacerbating social inequalities. Professor Huh and Professor Yoon's chapter also discusses how certain populations, particularly marginalised groups, have been disproportionately affected by these restrictions on social spaces. This reflects the diverse impacts of social distancing measures on different social classes, and how these restrictions have exacerbated existing inequalities in public spaces and social opportunities in South Korea.

Additionally, Professor Piya Pangsapa's chapter, entitled "*Social distancing? 'No problem!': Explaining Thailand's Successful Containment of COVID-19*," examines Thailand's early and apparently effective response to the COVID-19 outbreak, focusing on the structural, political, and cultural factors that enabled Thailand to control the virus. As Professor Pangsapa's chapter highlights, Thailand's pre-existing robust healthcare system and

experience with public health crises, such as the SARS outbreak, provided the foundation for a swift and coordinated response. Thailand also implemented early intervention measures, such as strict lockdowns, extensive contact tracing, and clear communication from public health officials. Moreover, Thailand's strong communal and collectivist culture also played a key role in the willingness of citizens to comply with social distancing measures. Professor Pangsapa's chapter title, which includes the phrase "No Problem!," suggests that a combination of cultural and structural factors in Thailand has made the country better prepared to meet the challenges of social distancing, resulting in high levels of compliance and successful overall control strategies.

Professor Fong's edited book, which consists of four chapters focused on the American experience, examines in detail how the pandemic has not only affected physical health but has also left deep psychological scars on American society, highlighting the long-term consequences of the crisis. Firstly, the psychological crisis stems from the widespread increase in anxiety, depression, and stress among Americans during the pandemic. As lockdowns and social distancing were enforced, people faced significant challenges such as isolation, job loss, and uncertainty about the future, all of which worsened their mental health. Secondly, the pandemic has exacerbated existing social inequalities, particularly in terms of economic insecurity. Many people have faced unemployment or have been forced to work in essential jobs, leading to increased psychological stress. Economic insecurity has eventually exacerbated feelings of insecurity and fear. Another key issue raised was the psychological impact on healthcare workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Many are experiencing burnout, psychological scarring, and trauma due to the overwhelming number of patients and limited resources. The stress of life-and-death decisions, coupled with the fear of contracting the virus, has taken a toll on their mental health. Last but not least, the United States has experienced heightened social and political divisions during the pandemic, which has led to increased levels of mass anxiety. Misinformation, conspiracy theories, and conflicting messages from government agencies have eroded trust in public health measures, leaving many Americans feeling more stressed.

In the pre-vaccine phase, countries adopted varied strategies to combat COVID-19. Some countries took a strict approach, some were more flexible, while some sought a balance between the two (Anttiroiko, 2021; Thananithichot and Kongdech, 2021; Rossouw and Greyling, 2024). Several chapters in Professor Fong's book analyse these diverse strategies and their social impacts. As Professor Ann-Christine Petersson Hjelm's chapter, entitled "*Trust between Citizens and State as a Strategy to Battle the Pandemic: Were Senior Citizens Merely Collateral Damage in the Swedish Government's Plan to Flatten the Curve?*," confirms, Sweden, unlike many other countries, has opted not to implement strict lockdown measures, instead relying on voluntary measures and a high level of public trust in government advice. This strategy is based on the idea that people will act responsibly without imposing restrictions, trusting government guidelines on social distancing and personal responsibility. However, as Professor Hjelm points out, the Swedish approach has come under scrutiny, particularly regarding its impact on vulnerable populations, particularly the elderly. In other words, it has failed to adequately protect these vulnerable populations, raising ethical questions about whether they are being treated as unintended casualties in the broader goal of achieving herd immunity.

In contrast to Sweden, Professor Maria Armoudian's and Professor Bernard Duncan's chapter, entitled "*The Benefits and Drawbacks of Social Distancing: Lessons from New Zealand*," reveals that New Zealand's "go hard, go early" strategy, which included one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, effectively reduced infections and prevented its healthcare system from being overwhelmed. These benefits, combined with one of the world's lowest per capita COVID-19 infection rates, allowed the country to return to near-normal life faster than other countries. Although the lockdown effectively controlled the virus, it caused significant social isolation, particularly among vulnerable groups such as the elderly and

those living in remote areas. Economically, small businesses and the tourism sector have been hit hard by prolonged border restrictions and closures. Finally, Professor Armoudian's and Professor Duncan's chapter suggests considering the balance between the public health successes and the economic and psychological impacts of such stringent measures.

Another country that had taken a strict approach to COVID-19 is Vietnam. As Professor Amy Dao's chapter, "*Trust in Numbers? The Politics of Zero Deaths and Vietnam's Response to COVID-19*," highlights, the key to keeping COVID-19 cases and deaths remarkably low in Vietnam's early days of the pandemic was the government's strategy, which included rapid lockdowns, mass testing, intensive contact tracing, and strict quarantines. Drawing on past experiences with diseases such as SARS, Vietnam mobilised health workers, the military, and social organisations to ensure effective disease control measures. However, a key success factor, as explored in Professor Dao's chapter, is the role of state and citizen trust. More specifically, Vietnam's one-party government effectively enforced its measures through a combination of state power and public cooperation.

Unlike most countries that may opt for a flexible or restrictive approach, Professor Albert Scherr's chapter, "*German Reaction to the Corona: Interactions between Care, Control and Personal Responsibility within the Welfare State*," demonstrates how Germany has managed the COVID-19 crisis with a balanced approach between government control, public care, and personal responsibility. On the one hand, Germany has implemented strict measures such as contact tracing, mass testing, and the use of health data apps such as the Corona-Warn-App. These technological tools help track the spread of the virus, but they are voluntary, relying heavily on public cooperation and trust in public institutions. On the other hand, the role of *care* within the system, particularly in Germany's healthcare sector, which is focused on protecting vulnerable populations and ensuring hospital capacity, has not been overshadowed. However, as Professor Scherr's chapter highlights, challenges remain, such as a shortage of staff for contact tracing during subsequent waves and increasing difficulties in enforcing stricter measures across Germany's federal system.

Moving beyond considering COVID-19 response as a problem that governments are trying to solve, the volume also discusses domestic violence as a "shadow pandemic" and the anthropogenic roots of zoonotic diseases, offering a rich discussion on the interface between public health, society, and policy. The chapter, entitled "*An 'Unseen Enemy' and the 'Shadow Pandemic': Examining the Interface of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Context of Domestic Violence*," written by Professor Shweta Adur and Professor Anjana Narayan, for example, adds to the broader analysis of the social impacts of COVID-19, focusing on how lockdowns, isolation, and economic stress have exacerbated domestic violence across the world, making it harder for victims to escape their abusers or seek help. More precisely, Professor Adur's and Professor Narayan's chapter explores how the pandemic has created a major crisis, with overlapping public health and domestic violence crises leaving many victims trapped in unsafe environments without appropriate support. The chapter also identifies structural weaknesses arising from the pandemic and government responses that have often failed to address underlying domestic crises.

Moreover, the use of various measures to deal with COVID-19, although helping to control the spread of the disease, has had a negative impact on some populations, especially vulnerable groups (Daoust, 2020; Lauvrak and Juvet, 2020). The chapter, "*Witnessing Amidst Distancing: Structural Vulnerabilities and the Researcher's Gaze in Pandemic Times in Relation to Migrant Workers of India and Singapore*," by Professor Amritrupa Sen and Professor Junbin Tan, illustrates how the pandemic has exposed the precarious nature of their livelihoods, as lockdowns and travel restrictions have left many workers stranded without income, food, or shelter. In Singapore, for example, the cramped living conditions of migrant workers in dormitories have contributed to the rapid spread of COVID-19, highlighting the need for better housing and health measures. Similarly, migrant workers

in India, particularly those living in cramped conditions in urban slums or factory dormitories, are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to lack of social distancing and inadequate sanitation. Their fragile living conditions make them more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. As such, Professor Sen's and Professor Tan's chapter calls for greater social protection and reforms to address the deep-rooted inequalities that have disproportionately left migrant workers vulnerable during the pandemic.

Lessons from the COVID-19 response in many countries show that international cooperation is one of the key success factors (Brown and Susskind, 2020; Davies and Wenham, 2020). The chapter "*The Anthropocene, Zoonotic Diseases, and the State-Japan's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Criminal Negligence or Crimes Against Humanity?*" by Professor Hiroshi Fukurai examines the Japanese government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting public health crises. Professor Fukurai's chapter describes how the Japanese government has addressed public health measures, transparency, and overall preparedness during the pandemic, and then compares those actions with the successful approaches of its neighbours, particularly the collaboration between China and Cuba, which has resulted in increased distribution of Cuban antiretroviral drugs to developing countries around the world. Alongside the successful examples of Taiwan, New Zealand, and Venezuela, this chapter reveals the scale-up of the global pandemic mitigation strategy in a way that provides insights into how the Japanese government can improve its response to the pandemic.

In conclusion, Professor Fong's edited book provides valuable lessons on the complexities of managing a global health crisis across diverse social contexts, emphasising that an effective pandemic response requires a thorough understanding of social trust, government capacity, economic resilience, and the protection of vulnerable populations. By comparing different national strategies, Professor Fong's edited book provides insights into best practices and cautionary tales that can serve as references for future public health policies and crisis management strategies. Finally, Professor Fong's *Reconfiguring Global Societies in the Pre-Vaccination Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic* emphasises the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic, calling for increased global cooperation, a robust public health infrastructure, and policies that balance health, economics, and social well-being to better prepare for future global health emergencies. This pioneering examination of the links between national politics and public health may inform future policymaking in the fields of public health, social equity, and governance.

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