



YOUTH POLITICS IN URBAN ASIA

Edited by
Yi'En Cheng and Sonia Lam-Knott



Youth Politics in Urban Asia

Youth Politics in Urban Asia examines how young people's political actions in Asia are the product of their urban realities, and at the same time, appreciates that young people are striving to remake these urban spaces in a myriad of tangible and intangible ways. The book explores the ways in which urban development and urban governance in Asia enable or constrain young people's citizenship, aspirations, and responses to a variety of socioeconomic and political issues in the region.

Informed by qualitative and ethnographic approaches, featuring locales ranging from Pune to Shanghai, the chapters broadly address three themes: the variegated ways in which youth politics is constituted and has manifested in Asian cities; the role of cities in shaping and mediating youth politics in Asia; and whether it is possible to conceive of youth politics across urban Asia as diverse and specific, but also structurally entangled. In examining how young people's political performances and social actions are shaped by, and conversely, shape, Asian urban spaces, this collection advances a deeper understanding of the interplay of youth politics and urban environments. It will be an essential text for scholars and students interested in young people's politics, urban studies, and social change in Asia.

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Politicizing youth in South Korea – the role of Seoul's educational institutions

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Political triangulations: urban Asian youth politics amidst geopolitical, geoeconomic and geosocial tensions

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio

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Preface: youth, politics, and the city during the pandemic

Yi'En Cheng and Sonia Lam-Knott

Introduction

Since the 2000s, there has emerged an array of scholarship examining contemporary youth political responses towards the socio-economic and political injustices within American, European, and Middle Eastern cities. But from engaging in our respective intellectual fields of human geography (Cheng) and anthropology (Lam-Knott), we observed a paucity of scholarship directed towards Asian youth politics. More specifically, what has yet to be articulated is how the region's urban development and governing practices enable and/or constrain political spaces *and* young people's citizenship, actions, and aspirations.

During our postdoctoral training in Singapore, where Cheng was exploring how higher education changes are shifting youth conceptions of citizenship at the Yale-National University of Singapore (NUS) College, whilst Lam-Knott was investigating the interplay between nostalgia and the urban experiences of youth activists at the Asia Research Institute in NUS, we began discussing the possibility of convening a workshop addressing young people's politics in Asian cities. From our conversations, we recognised the need for a more in-depth analysis of the interlink between how contemporary Asian youths conceptualise citizenship, how they engage with politics, and how these processes are defined in and through urban spaces and urban governance in Asia. We subsequently took this conversation from the coffee spaces of Singapore to the 2018 Royal Geographical Society - Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) Annual International Conference held at Cardiff University, United Kingdom. Our panel featured a collection of interdisciplinary research insights from international scholars specialising in different parts of Asia, which were eventually published as the 'Youth Politics in Urban Asia' Special Issue for *Space and Polity*.

But shortly after the Special Issue was published in April 2020, the global outbreak of COVID-19 sent societies across the world into a period of disarray and standstill, as they struggle to adapt to their new realities. Cities have been particularly affected by the pandemic, with citizens forced to vacate the streets and other public spaces and to become compliant subjects of new technologies of control and surveillance initiated by their governing bodies. At the same time as tensions and contestations continue to manifest, COVID-19 is prompting an abrupt renegotiation of state-society relationships, resulting in the emergence of new socio-political dynamics and spatialities in cities. Such

developments reinforce the need for critical reflection and attention to be applied towards youth politics in urban Asia, and to recognise how youth politics itself is rapidly evolving with emergent socio-political, economic, and health considerations.

Youth politics in urban Asia: pandemic impacts

Asian governments have experienced differing levels of successes and failures in managing the COVID-19 outbreak within their borders (Abuza, 2020), but all of them share common ground from witnessing how the pandemic has reconfigured the economic and political realities of youths. For example, the temporary closure of university campuses denied students access to ostensibly ideological safe spaces that are conducive for student deliberations of alternative worldviews, such as their experiments with different civic efforts to enact social change (Cheng & Jacobs, 2020), and their attempts to challenge gender norms and patriarchal dominance (Zahan, 2020). On a more pragmatic level, the inability of youths to resume and complete their education delays their entry into the job market, thereby hindering their search for stable transitions into employment and financial productivity. But at the structural level, the pandemic has reduced employment opportunities for Asian youths. For example, the International Labour Organisation found that young people in the Asia-Pacific region have lost twice as many working hours than the global average (Robinson, 2020), with India seeing a 41 per cent unemployment rate for individuals aged 15–29 in May 2020 (Sanghera, 2020), and Indonesia's pre-pandemic unemployment rate of 17 per cent for those aged 15–24 forecasted to skyrocket (Dzulfikar, 2020). The dearth of employment opportunities, combined with the inability of government relief programmes to alleviate these bleak prospects, evoked fears that this 'lost generation' of disenfranchised and precarious youth will lead to future political instability (Koh & Silvam, 2020).

The pandemic has also prompted young people to re-examine their relationship to their governments and their role as citizens. For example, the Chinese government censored media coverage on COVID-19 to silence dissenting voices, which fuelled Chinese youths' feelings of mistrust and resentment towards the state and have encouraged these youths to launch online fundraising campaigns for medical workers (Wang & Hernández, 2020). In the Philippines, responding to the national government's delayed efforts to close urban and national borders to control the spread of COVID-19, its unwillingness to provide aid and necessities to residents of major urban areas, and its dissemination of misleading information (Beltran, 2020), youth-led enterprises are working with local-level governments to stymie the spread of disinformation and provide services to help communities cope with the pandemic (UNDP, 2020). Similarly, widespread public dissatisfaction towards the Hong Kong government's refusal to close the city's border, and the inability to furnish frontline health and sanitation workers with protective equipment (Cheung & Wong, 2020), drove young people to mobilise and procure face masks for the urban poor.

Yet such youth actions are foregrounded by a climate where quasi-democratic regimes in Asia are using the pandemic to secure more power and curtail citizen rights (Ratcliffe, 2020). In Thailand, the government arrested protesters for supposedly breaching an emergency decree designed to control the spread of COVID-19, prompting civil society actors to describe the decree as a ploy to suppress dissenting voices (*Aljazeera*, 2020b). Likewise, under the pretext of enforcing quarantine measures, the Philippine government

arrested urban activists and the urban poor in Manila, who have long been critical of the state's ineffective governance and lack of accountability (Aspinwall, 2020). The Hong Kong government has similarly made use of the pandemic to ban pro-democracy activities, arrest pro-democracy activists, and implement the National Security Law (NSL) which criminalises dissent against Hong Kong and Chinese authorities (Barron, 2020; Richardson, 2020). Faced with governments that refuse to redress - but instead suppresses - citizen concerns, young people in Asia have found a need to compensate for the perceived unresponsiveness and shortcomings of their governments, but do so within the increasingly physically and ideologically constrictive political spaces of their cities.

The economic and political developments induced by COVID-19 present new uncertainties regarding how young people are to be positioned within and beyond Asian cities, which in turn, creates new conditions of inertia and movement. The pandemic has not only inhibited the ability of youths to move towards greater economic and political participation within their urban locales, disrupted young people's aspirational and actual ability to pursue overseas education and employment, but also forced numerous activist youths to participate in illicit forms of mobility to avoid government persecution. COVID-19 has added new complexities to the existing landscape of borders and migratory trajectories, which young people in Asia and beyond must now negotiate and navigate through.

Borders and migrations: fresh insights

Young people's bodies connect cities and urban sites to multiple scales of belonging, adaptation, and resistance. It is therefore pertinent to be cognisant of how youth citizenship and political projects are made in, and through, their mobile practices. For example, the proliferation of regulatory mechanisms to prevent 'excessive' movement during the pandemic has restricted individual and collective mobilities, while creating new opportunities for digital technologies to be employed in disciplining mobile bodies, thereby challenging the extent to which young people can digitally reformulate subjectivities as a means to claim their place in the city (Advani, 2019). Similarly, ethno-nationalistic sentiments leading to systemic racialisation and discrimination continues to haunt the experiences of migrant youths who, as the foreign Other, already occupy a vulnerable position in the political and welfare regimes of a locality (Gergan & Smith, 2020), and their vulnerability has now been exacerbated under pandemic-driven fears and indictments. Such re-scripting of bodies, mobilities, and borders intersect with emerging political-economic rationalities and digital affordances to bring new forms of strategically cooperative and divisive configurations, to the global maps of youth politics in urban Asia.

One group of youths that has been especially impacted by COVID-19 are international students, many of who originate from Asia (Leung & Sharma, 2020), and who are now experiencing displacement in multiple ways. First, this displacement can involve sudden cross-border relocations. International students have been recalled by their home governments to return to their respective countries, and at the same time, host governments have compelled international students to return in order to alleviate pressure on local healthcare resources (Ross, 2020). Secondly, the pandemic has highlighted the localised

feelings of displacement experienced by international students, who are perceived as the foreign Others. Students who have chosen to stay or lack the means to return to their home countries have been subjected to racially provoked name-calling and physical attacks (Iau, 2020). They also face financial precarity in their host countries, with many international students losing their part-time jobs during the lockdown and unable to qualify for aid from the local government. As such, many international students end up homeless and needing assistance from food charities (Boyd, 2020). Such developments bring to light the vulnerable tangible and intangible positionings of international students within the international education markets (Tran & Tan, 2020; Ye, 2020). Although some international students have recently solicited the services of education and migration brokers to re-enter host countries that have barred their re-entry (Haugen & Lehmann, 2020), others who cannot access such resources remain stranded in their home countries and are unable to resume their studies in their host universities.

The pandemic not only reveals the fragmented nature of ‘youth’ by local-foreign divisions but also introduced new logics of valuation which further differentiate and hierarchise international students. For instance, the Japanese government’s scheme to provide monetary relief for university students during the pandemic has been criticised by student advocates, lawyers, and academics for being discriminatory, since the scheme’s stringent measures mean that only the highest-performing 25 to 30 per cent of Japan’s 300,000 international students are eligible for financial aid. Japan’s education ministry explained that such measures are an attempt to “limit the handout to promising talent most likely to contribute to Japan in the future”, reflecting the government’s categorisation of foreign students according to their potential value to local societies (Kakuchi, 2020). In turn, Taiwan lifted travel restrictions for students from a list of ‘low-risk’ countries which included most Southeast Asian countries but excluded Indonesia (the second-largest source of international students in the country), due to the Indonesian state’s inability to control the pandemic within its borders. Concerned with their inability to maintain the same pace of learning as their international peers, Indonesian students launched online petitions decrying the Taiwanese government’s decision to exclude them, which they have claimed is discriminatory (*Taiwan News*, 2020a). Such negotiations at the border spaces reveal a “governmental differentiation of returnees” (Xiang, 2013, p. 14), which accentuates the economistic and racialised biopolitical valuation of human bodies.

In response to such developments, international students have mobilised to ameliorate the difficulties they face. For example, internationally mobile youths have galvanised to challenge anti-Asian sentiments on their campuses. Chinese students who cannot re-enter Australia due to travel restrictions have worked together to launch online petitions, successfully prompting Australian universities to make alternative study arrangements for them (Bungard & Ward, 2020). In Cheng’s extended research conversations with Asian international students, he learned that those who returned home continue to support those who have chosen (for various reasons) to stay in study destinations, by forming transnational communities and networks maintained over social media platforms (e.g. Weibo and Line). For example, Chinese students in Malaysia and Thailand have worked with the Chinese Students’ Associations at their host universities, and with the Chinese embassies in these locales, to help distribute face masks and medication to Chinese international students, who in turn redistributed these supplies to their

international peers. Chinese university students across Thailand, Malaysia, and farther afield have also turned to social media to express their discontent with the stringent pandemic control measures adopted by many universities in these ‘low-risk’ locales with low infection rates, which has prevented students from accessing campus spaces, facilities, and services essential for their studies and mental health. These students engage in online activism using the hashtag #拒绝封校 (which translates literally to Refuse School Closure) on Weibo, in an attempt to urge university administrators to embrace COVID-19 measures that are people-oriented and based on scientific evidence. Such diasporic camaraderie serves as an important transnational social resource in a time of extreme uncertainty and works to mobilise civic sensibilities aimed at addressing a common set of cross-border issues faced by young people in education.

The pandemic has fostered emergent diasporic youth solidarities, networks, and mobilisations - across both physical and digital spaces - that offer a glimpse of how care and mutuality can drive a new politics of hope. Yet the pandemic has also escalated geopolitical tensions in ways that are creating a generation of disenchanted youths who imagine their futures in their current locales to be lost. In stark contrast to the hopeful spaces that arise from active mobilisations, these youths are instead driven towards disquieting forms of ‘escape mobilities’, by going elsewhere to seek out new lives and/or to circumvent persecution from their home governments. We turn our gaze back to Hong Kong’s ongoing urban unrest to trace some of these developments.

In the years leading up to the current pandemic, Hong Kong youths have already conveyed their desire to emigrate, in response to their frustrations towards the rising cost of living, urban inequalities, contentious political environment, and the city’s loss of autonomy and civic freedoms throughout the 2000s (CUHK, 2017; Leung, 2019). Bleak opinions about Hong Kong’s socio-political realities are compounded by changing values and priorities amongst young people, who now aver Hong Kong’s capitalistic urban landscapes and have ‘lost hope’ for the city’s future (Leung & Vetter, 2018). But these migratory desires assumed a sense of urgency during the Anti-Extradition Movement that began in June 2019. The escalation of protest clashes in November 2019 led to police raids on university campuses and caused universities to cancel classes, driving a cohort of young people to seek educational refuge outside of the city. For example, the National Taiwan University reportedly received around 100 applications from Hong Kong university students who wished to resume their studies away from Hong Kong’s political turmoil (Lo & Chung, 2020). A handful of Hong Kong students have since abandoned their studies in the city and are now seeking asylum in Australia and Canada (Evlin, 2020; Lee, 2020). Under these circumstances, emigration has been reframed as a response to mediate the trauma of political contentions in the locality. It also necessitates that these students suspend their prospects for the future originally attached to Hong Kong, and instead position themselves as semi-temporary migrants with uncertain statuses in foreign places. Such disrupted mobilities around education present a radical departure from conventional interpretations of education-related migration as a means for young people to attain socioeconomic security (Naafs & Skelton, 2018; Robertson, Cheng, & Yeoh, 2018).

Other Hong Kong youths are also seeking emigration to avoid state persecution under the aforementioned NSL. When the NSL was enacted in June 2020, student-led political groups such as Student Localism and Demosisto immediately disbanded, citing concerns