A NORDIC JOURNAL ON ASIA BY EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

ASIA IN FOCUS

ISSUE 10

2024

ISSUE 10 · 2024

ASIA IN FOCUS

Asia in Focus is a peer-reviewed journal published online by the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies, Lund University. Asia in Focus was initiated by the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies at Copenhagen University to provide Master and Ph.D. students affiliated to a Nordic institution a widely accessible and transnational forum to publish their findings. The focal point of the journal is modern Asian societies viewed from the standpoints of the social science and the humanities. The geographical focus is the Asian countries from Central Asia to Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand.

Publisher Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies

Graphic Design Dennis Müller

Typesetting Tommaso Facchin

Journal Website https://journals.lub.lu.se/asiainfocus

ISSN 2446-0001

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Editorial Note

Welcome to the second issue of *Asia in Focus* published by the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies at Lund University. The transition has not always been straightforward, but we are proud to present once again some excellent work by early-career scholars. We remain indebted to Inga-Lill Blomqvist for all her help, and to Julia Olsson, our managing editor, for her tireless work and enthusiasm. If it were not for Julia, this issue would not have seen the light of day.

Asia in Focus is dedicated to the fundamental collegiality and altruism of academia, and we are most grateful to the senior reviewers for generously sharing their time and advice for their junior colleagues in shaping the published articles. At the heart of this academic collegiality is a commitment to truly Open Access publication. The extortionate fees charged by commercial publishers do not match the quality control of the journals they are charged with supporting. The increasing presence of obviously AI-generated text in expensive journals highlights not only the deficiency of their reviewing processes (and copy-editing), but also the real aim of these publishers. The goal is not academic quality, but rather naked profit-seeking.

Thanks to the support of Lund University, there are no fees to submit or to publish, and we can make these important new contributions to scholarship accessible to all. We hope that *Asia in Focus* will continue to provide early-career scholars with a quality venue for their research while also making a contribution to Asian Studies scholarship through novel and exciting articles and essays that highlight new directions and ideas.

Karin, Paul, and Nicholas
Lund University
October 2024

Evolving Military Service and Social Inclusion in South Korea

THOMAS ARTAIZ

This paper explores changing patterns of inclusion and exclusion in South Korea, using military service as a tool of measurement. Two central assertions guide this study. First, military service as a gatekeeper to Korean society. Second, an investigation of conscription policies offers insights into broader patterns of societal inclusion. The research explores the reciprocal relationship between cultural values, formal institutions, and societal shifts. Analyzing historical context, legal reforms, and social attitudes, the study argues that the changes in military service reflect broader shifts in society. The decoupling of military service from economic benefits signifies a weakening of patriarchal norms, enabling increased female workforce participation. Acceptance of mixed-race individuals and conscientious objectors reflects a growing societal openness. However, military service remains a symbol of social acceptance, highlighting its enduring cultural significance. As South Korea embraces multiculturalism and ideological diversity, military service serves as a dynamic barometer, capturing the nation's evolving identity, and enduring values.

Keywords: South Korea, Conscription, Military Service

From South Korea's inception in the postwar period, concerns of national security have made the militarization of its society a necessity in the eyes of political leaders. The country therefore invested heavily in the development and maintenance of a large standing army. One of the most demanding elements of the strategy was and continues to be national military service, which requires all eligible South Korean men to serve under arms. While the length of service has fluctuated over the decades, it has remained a cornerstone of the South Korean experience and has deeply affected conceptions of citizenship and belonging. This achieves objectives well beyond national preservation, and has served as a means of ideological training, rite of passage, and a central duty in a citizen's entrance to the body politic.

This paper makes two central assertions about military service. First, due to its centrality in political, social, and economic life, military service acts as a gatekeeper to South Korean society for young men. This first assertion is not novel to this paper and rests on a significant body of scholarly literature. Second, by examining the change of legal parameters of military service we may garner insights into the evolving landscape of inclusion and exclusion in South Korean society. That is, by observing *who* is allowed to participate in the institution and the benefits it confers, we may gain understanding of how the South Korean government, and by extension, South Korean society grants legitimacy and belonging to different social groups. These two assertions underpin the methodology of this research.

The paper begins with a section on the background of military service and a survey of relevant scholarship on the topic. It then proceeds to explain the theoretical context and methodological approach. These sections are followed by a presentation of findings and concludes with a discussion thereof.

Background

The Republic of Korea (ROK) emerged from World War II as an independent nation, estranged from its northern half, and given only minor consideration by the major powers except as a front line in the nascent Cold War (Cummings, 1997). Simmering tensions between North and South would eventually erupt into a war that devastated the peninsula and highlighted the need for continued mass participation in national defense (Kwon, 2018; Moon, 1991). Even after armistice, South Korean society continued to be characterized by heightened levels of militarism, including military service (Moon, 2005).

The obligation of military service stems from the 1948 Military Service Act. Article 39 reads, "All citizens shall have the duty of national defense under the conditions as prescribed by an Act." All South Korean men, with few exceptions due to mental or physical disability, were required to serve a term of three years in the military (Kim, 2020). The Military Manpower Administration spearheaded the training of conscripts, fired civil servants who failed to serve, limited foreign travel, and even implemented collective punishment on the families of draft dodgers (Tikhonov, 2009, Moon, 2005). While initially evasion rates were high (17% in 1957), strict

enforcement and punishment increased participation until, by 1974, evaders only represented .1% of eligible males (Tikhonov, 2009, Mun, 2007).

The Park Chun Hee administration's determination to enforce service yielded one of the distinguishing features of South Korean conscription – its near total adherence among the eligible male population, with no accommodation for conscientious objectors and limited dispensations for avoiding service. While other nations with mandatory military service created space for higher education or conscientious objector status, state in South Korea demanded near ubiquitous participation (Choi & Kim, 2015). Yet even though conscription reached most of the male population, it was by no means the majority of the citizenry. Women were not obligated to serve, and those deemed physically or mentally unfit for service were excluded (Choi & Kim, 2015).

Those conscripted undergo ideological training. Whereas volunteer forces ostensibly select for patriotic and motivated soldiers, conscript forces recruit all citizens, regardless of nationalistic political persuasion (Burk, 1992, Choi & Kim, 2016, Poutaara & Wagener, 2011). Given the ideological struggle with the North and paranoia about communist sympathizers within its ranks, the ROK military invested both time and resources to ensure the loyalty of their troops (Joo, 2015). This ideological training appears to be effective, as military service is highly correlated with a number of political beliefs including sympathetic views towards the United States, support for the Government, and awareness of the threat posed by North Korea (Joo, 2015).

Military service was also gateway to the labor market. Beginning in the 1970s, the completion of military service was a precondition for employment in the civil service (Moon, 2002; 2005). The "extra points" system, instituted with the Employment Support Act and subsequent Honorable Treatment Act gave bonuses to veterans when applying to public service exams and universities (Moon, 2005). The act gave veterans an additional five percent of total points on exams. The effects were significant. The Honorable Treatment Act extended these benefits to qualitative and nonwritten examinations. Many non-state corporations followed suit, though not legally obligated to do so. Males, and specifically veterans, were significantly more likely to hold positions in both private and public sectors (Moon, 2002; 2005). Those five percentage points was often the difference between pass and failure among the highly competitive applicants (Moon, 2002; Moon 2005).

Researchers have identified the extra points system as having significant downstream effects on South Korean business and corporate culture. By giving disproportionate representation to those who completed military service, companies imbued themselves with a pseudo-military culture. Hierarchical, patriarchal, and highly regimented, this militarized corporate culture reproduced military experiences in microcosm well beyond the years of service for veterans (Ramirez, 2010; Choo & Yoon, 2021; Moon, 2002). Some companies required regular physical training alongside regular business obligations. (Moon, 2005). This militarized working culture further bled in politics. Male politicians often use photographs of their days in the military as a signal of masculinity and strength to the voting public (Moon, 2005; 2018).

The ubiquity of service, ideological training, and economic benefits garnered by completion have produced a culture in which military service is a significant event in the lives of veterans. Seongsook Moon's 2005 book *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* asserts that citizenship itself is a tacit exchange with the government, wherein men exchange military service for citizenship, belonging, and economic participation in wider society. Researchers have noted the tacit acceptance of military service among political activists during the period of democratization of the 1980s and 90s. Despite strong rejection of authoritarian rule, advocacy of civil liberties, gender equality, and demands for peace on the peninsula, the end of military service never emerged

as a significant demand of protesters (Cho, 2007). Those who served accepted the bargain.

The converse is equally true. Those who do not serve in the military have seen political, social, and economic ostracization from the body politic. While young men saw their career and social prospects improved from service, women, minorities, and dissidents have been likewise marginalized (Moon, 2002; Kwon, 2013). Moon notes that the use of military service not only contributed to a militarized society, but exacerbated patterns of gender inequality through hypermasculine workspaces and the extra point system (Kwon, 2013; Moon, 2002). Through their exclusion from mandatory military service, so too were they excluded from the benefits (Moon, 2005). Yet military service has changed significantly in the last 25 years. Reforms to service have fundamentally altered the exclusionary role of conscription. Thus, we turn to the central question of this paper: How do the changing parameters of national military service reflect broader patterns of inclusion in South Korean society? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to institutions, and examine how theories of institutional change have conceptualized the interplay between culture, society, and legal structures.

Theoretical Framework

Broadly conceived, Economist Douglass North defined institutions as the "rules of the game" (North, 1991). Institutions constrain action through both formal means such as laws, regulations, and the enforcement mechanisms thereof as well as informal structures, through norms, values, and culture, which also regulate the behavior of individuals, albeit in different ways. How formal and informal institutions evolve and influence one another has been the subject of interest to economists and political scientists.

Williamson (2000) proposed a framework for understanding different levels of institutional analysis. Williamson conceives institutions as a nested hierarchy, with largest level one being the deep traditional, cultural, and normative informal institutions. Level two is comprised of the formal institutional environment, with the constitutional organization of executive, judiciary, and legislative functions and their relative distribution among political entities. How these organizations and institutional responsibilities are carried sits on the third level, as bureaucracies implement higher order formal rules. Williamson's final level is the distribution of resources within the institutional system. Williamson argues that each level has a recursive relationship with the others, as culture and tradition shapes how actors design their political and economic institutions which in turn influence how those macro-level institutions are enforced at lower levels. Other researchers have further described how changes cascade through the institutional environment, with changes to one having downstream effects on the function of others (Lewis & Steinmo, 2012).

As an economist, Williamson is primarily concerned with how formal constitutional rules constrain and shape governance, and thus focuses on the design and implementation of rules on levels two and three. However, this paper is principally interested in the relationship between level one informal institutions, that is, the cultural values and traditions surrounding belonging and inclusion, and the lower levels as represented by the statuary regulations of military service. Williamson's framework describes the causal relationship between social conceptions, traditions, and values and formal institutions.

Methods

This paper utilizes a longitudinal case study approach to examine how a specific South Korean institution, Military Service, carries evidence of the evolution of conceptions of belonging and participation within ROK society. To this end, it applies thematic analysis of relevant statutes in the Military Service Act, its interpretation by the judiciary with broader trends in the South Korean economy,

society, and politics (Bryman, 2016, Dawson, 2020).

Data collection was performed though publicly-available government databases. The South Korean Ministry of Government Legislation maintains an online archive of legal statutes currently in place as well as previous iterations of laws. This archive includes annotated copies of statutes accompanied by relevant jurisprudence, court rulings, commentaries, and information on their implementation and interpretation over time. This paper also draws upon relevant Supreme Court and Constitutional Court publications, testimony, and decisions, also publicly available on government sites. Finally, historical and legal research has offered significant secondary documentary evidence for the claims made here.

Data analysis was performed through a thematic analysis of both the evolution of the Military Service Act and associated statutes as well as the jurisprudential interpretation of these laws over time. Thematic coding identified relevant subpopulations within South Korea affected by the laws, what constraints and exclusions were applied, what benefits were offered for service, and how those delimitations have evolved over time. These codes underwent thematic analysis to identify relevant implementation trends in the Military Service Act.

Changes to Military Service

Since democratization in the late 1980s, Military Service has undergone a series of reforms that has increased the scope of inclusion. This reflects an ideological loosening and greater respect to ethnic and ideological minorities as well as a decrease in the advantages given to those who complete their service. These reforms reflect first a weakening of the ties between economic participation and service, increased participation from multiethnic population, and finally, ideological dissidents.

The first pillar of the Military Service Act to be weakened was the conflation of service with economic participation. The extra points system, which made completion of service a significant advantage in the labor market, came under scrutiny in the 1990s. Activist groups and civil society organizations especially feminist organizations, derided the system as discriminatory, sexist, and reflective of a bygone era of military rule (Moon, 2002). This resistance was in part response to a political gambit to expand the system by the Blue House to include accelerated promotion and pay increases for veterans. The case was brought before the Constitutional Court in 1999, with the court ruling the practice unconstitutional and a violation of employment equality among citizens (Moon, 2002, 19Hun-Ma363). The courts further ruled that due to the low rates of female participation in the military, the law unconstitutionally discriminated on the basis of gender (19Hun-Ma363). Through loosening the economic benefits conferred to veterans, the courts invited increased female participation in the workforce by lowering barriers. This ruling also had implications for others who were excluded for other reasons.

Other changes have occurred in the realm of inclusion and exclusion. A 1972 edict barred those who were "Clearly and externally identifiabl[y]" of mixed race from serving in the South Korean military (Iwabuchi et al., 2017; Korean Law Information Center). Ostensibly, this provision was to protect mixed-race individuals from discrimination and ostracization in the military community. This discrimination, it was argued, would undermine military cohesion and discipline, ultimately neutering effectiveness and compromising national security. In 2006, the courts ruled that mixed race citizens, while not obligated to serve, could volunteer for service. In 2009, they were granted full equality in the military service system. By 2012, mixed race South Koreans were serving as officers in the military (Kim, 2012). Later in 2012, the oath taken by new recruits changed its language from "The Korean people" to "citizens," reflecting a broadened conception of citizenship beyond ethnicity (Iwabuchi & Kim, 2016). These policy developments herald shifting conceptions of belonging and understanding

in South Korea. As immigration to Korea has increased, the nation has faced issues with racism, discrimination, and multicultural integration. Indeed, beginning in 2019, military training included multicultural awareness training, a tacit recognition of increased diversity within the ranks as well as demands to respect the cultures of multicultural conscripts (Korean Law Information Center).

In addition to expanding the scope of participation in military service, the ROK government has expanded its conception of what constitutes legitimate service. Until 2018, South Korea remained unique among liberal democracies in its demand that all eligible candidates for military service participate in the military, regardless of moral and religious objection. Whereas the majority of her peer countries have provided avenues for alternative service or entirely opting out of participation, South Korea rejected the efforts of activists for decades. As of 2017, South Korea had imprisoned 19,000 objectors, representing over 90% of global objector convicts (Hwang, 2018). The legal basis for these imprisonments was article 88 of the Military Service Law, which states "any person who has received a notice of enlistment for active-duty service or a notice of call for non-active-duty service can be penalized if he fails to enlist in the military or fails to comply with the call within a given period without "justifiable cause" (Kim, 2020). In 2018 Supreme Court ruled that the lack of alternative service violated the South Korean constitution and demanded that the National Assembly take steps to provide nonmilitary avenues of service. In 2019, the National Assembly passed a law that allowed conscientious objectors to apply to the Military Manpower Association for alternative service (Gibson, 2020). While the numbers of participants in alternative service remain low, conscientious objectors are currently performing their military service in hospitals, prisons, homeless shelters, and as firefighters (Oh, 2021).

Discussion

Military service in South Korea has undergone significant changes since democratization which have reflected broader changes within South Korean society. This section postulates that the changing parameters of service act as a barometer of broader shifts in South Korean society. This assertion rests on the theoretical framework of Williamson (2000), who argues that formal and informal institutional change reflects upstream changes to broader cultural conceptions that affect constitutional and statutory institutions. That is, evolving cultural values cascade "downwards" through the system, affecting how formal institutions of government operate.

The first sign of change within military service came from the 1999 constitutional court ruling that the extra points system was unconstitutional. The policy has been widely cited as instrumental of both reinforcing strong gender bias in society and the workforce, as women were excluded from work spaces through artificially depressed test scores and excluded from the hypermasculine corporate culture (2005 Choo & Yoon, 2021; Moon, 2005). Yet this patriarchal hold has steadily weakened. Governmental efforts as well as economic realities have steadily increased female workforce participation in South Korea, although it remains lower than many Western nations (Kang, 2017). The decoupling of service and employment has partially enabled these changes.

The 1972 policy of banning mixed-race Koreans from service betrays a deeper pathology of belonging and race in South Korea. South Korea has long held a self-conception as "one nation, one blood, one people," and this understanding of the nation a sort of homogenous extended family has drawn stark dividing lines between who is a part of the nation and who is not. Polling shows a significant majority of Koreans (87%) believe in the critical importance of blood in South Korea (Yoo, 2017). The presence of foreign troops on South Korean soil brought with it an inevitable mixing of the populations, yielding

mixed race children. These individuals fell outside the imagined community.

This discrimination and ostracization is evident in the exclusion of mixed-race men from serving in the armed forces. By denying them the privilege of serving, the government by extension denied access to many of the formal and informal benefits of inclusion. Formally, the lack of service denied mixed-race individuals access to employment and other benefits through the "bonus points" system. Mixed-race Koreans also suffered informal cultural exclusion by being denied the rite of passage available to others (Iwabuchi et al., 2017). For decades, many among the South Korean body politic failed to see the problem with this policy, assuming that being relieved of the intrusive obligation of service would be a benefit rather than a burden. Those of mixed-race did not see the issue this way. Li and Jung (2017) wrote of one citizen's struggle with this denial. "For [him]... that exclusion was symbolic of South Koreans' discrimination against bi-racial citizens... He could never get a full-time job, not only because of his looks but also because of his lack of military experience, and that he has rarely been financially stable as a result" (Yi & Jung, 2017). Allowing mixed race individuals into such a central institution signals a growing acceptance and willingness to accommodate diverse populations into the greater Korean society.

Finally, the 2018 judicial ruling to provide alternative service for conscientious objectors demonstrates a growing acceptance of ideological diversity in line with global norms. The ruling represents a significant shift in South Korean policy for two principal reasons. First, the previous legal justification of prosecuting objectors was predicated on the significant security challenges posed to South Korea. These challenges necessitated a state of constant military preparedness. The court has deemed this to no longer be the case, signaling a transition from the militarism that dominated the 20th century towards a society focused on nonmilitary issues (Hwang, 2018) . Furthermore, it signals a shift towards a more pluralistic society, wherein those of varying ideologies, religions, and values are welcomed to participate in state institutions.

Data on public opinion surrounding the military remains difficult to find and parse. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies on public opinion by non-biased sources. The resulting polling data is often mismatched and difficult to compare, though several macrotrends are identifiable. Faith in the military's ability to protect the nation has steadily declined, as has the perception of equity of the military service system. Furthermore, there are growing perceptions that the system is unfair, that it is an onerous burden on the population, and that conscientious objection is a legitimate position vis a vis conscription (Choi & Kim, 2017; Hwang, 2018). These trends in public opinion are evinced in a growing tendency among South Korean families of means to avoid the draft, whether through medical exemptions or avoidance through immigration and dual citizenship (Choi & Kim, 2017).

Yet the inclusion of ethnic minorities and conscientious objectors also demonstrates the deep attachment to service as a signal of inclusion. It is notable that the institution itself remained in place during this period of expansion. That is, ethnic minorities were able to earn their place alongside ethnic Koreans *through the same avenues of acceptance* (military and civil service). Service remains, at least for the moment, a central symbol of social acceptance, even if the parameters of this acceptance have expanded. The case of multicultural conscripts and conscientious objectors demonstrates both a growing acceptance of multicultural Korea in the context of national service.

Conclusion

National military service in South Korea functions not only as a policy of national defense. It is also a deeply personal sacrifice young men make, willing or not, in service to their country. This experience may be seen as a burden, but for many young men

it signals entrance to adulthood. As South Korean society negotiates an increasingly multicultural, interconnected, and ideologically diverse 21st century, its institutions will inevitably reflect the broader environment. As a longstanding policy that affects, directly or indirectly, the entire population, conscription offers a useful barometer of the evolving nature of South Korean society.

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Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in Rural Thailand 1997-2017

SUPHALAK BUMROONGKIT

This research provides a contemporary study of intergenerational occupational mobility in Thailand. Using data from the Townsend Thai Project Household Survey from 1997 to 2017, mobility rates across three generations are analyzed for the first time. Employing EGP class schema, I divide the sample into seven social classes, and cross tabulate the results in standard mobility table and outflow mobility table, to calculate the total upward/downward mobility rates. To solve the constraint of changing occupational structure overtime, I calculate the odd ratios to measure relative chances of individuals in attaining a certain class. The results show that 29.5% of individuals in Thailand experience upward absolute mobility in comparison with their parents. However, individuals from higher socioeconomic background have significantly higher chances to remain in their current social strata. Following the top class, the petty bourgeoise (class IV) has the second highest mobility rate upwards. Surprisingly, in contrast with other developing countries women in Thailand exhibit higher mobility rate than men, and women also move upwards to a higher degree than men.

Keywords: Intergenerational mobility, social mobility, occupational mobility, Thailand

This study is adapted from student thesis of the Master's programme in Economic Growth, Population & Development at Lund University.

Parents in Thailand generally teach their children the value of hard work, which they believe will eventually lead them to success, social mobility, and bring fame to their families. Children are introduced to intensive competitions at a very young age, and these competitions continue throughout their lives. In fact, numerous empirical studies highlight the significant challenges faced by children from lower socio-economic backgrounds in their quest to climb the social ladder and reach the top. In high-inequality countries like Colombia, it could take as long as 11 generations for children from the bottom to reach the mean income (OECD, 2018), while children from higher origins have significantly higher chances of remaining at the top (Roine & Waldenström, 2012).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that inequality and social mobility are associated (Clarke et al., 2022; Carneiro, 2020; Blanden, 2013; Corak, 2013). High-inequality countries experience lower social mobility, whereas low-inequality countries experience higher social mobility. This phenomenon is referred to as the 'Great Gatsby' curve (Corak, 2013). In Thailand, the wealthiest 10% held 48.8% of the nation's income, while the bottom 50% held a mere 13.9% in 2021 (World Inequality Database, 2023). Moreover, the possession of land, which is crucial in developing countries where the agricultural sector is still prominent, is drastically unequal. The bottom 50% of Thais own only 2.27% of the country's land (Laovakul, 2013, p. 17). From this, it can be inferred that social mobility in Thailand is likely to be low. However, it is not conclusive, as inequality is not the sole determinant of social mobility, and a study aiming to investigate this is still lacking. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by providing an analysis of contemporary occupational mobility.

Social mobility extends to moral concerns and has captured the attention of young people, leading to demonstrations around the globe. The number of Google searches related to welfare state, inequality, emigration, and demonstrations in Thailand has skyrocketed since 2017 (Nuttapattanun, Thammaboosadee & Bumroongkit, 2022, p.53). This information implies dissatisfaction among Thai citizens. If the most hardworking people do not receive the rewards they strive for, but instead, it is the already wealthy individuals who do not need to work hard to achieve success, the concept of "wrong rewards for wrong people" could erode social cohesion and trigger social unrest (Therborn, 2013). By providing a concise mobility rate, this study challenges the myth that hard work inevitably leads to success. It is also crucial for policymakers to understand this when addressing inequality in Thailand.

The existing studies on occupational mobility conducted in Thailand offer limited perspectives based on short periods of dataset. The studies were conducted as far back as 40 years ago, and they focus on occupational mobility within a short timeframe rather than intergenerational mobility. Moreover, the previous studies did not employ a comparative and contemporary methodology for social mobility studies, making it difficult to

compare Thailand's social mobility rate with studies conducted in other countries. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a contemporary intergenerational occupational mobility study in Thailand, using a new source of panel data – The Townsend Thai Project (2009, 2018). Ultimately, this study presents the first social mobility analysis spanning three generations.

Theory and Previous Research

Intergenerational Transmission

The standard theory of social transmission, initiated in 1979 by Becker & Tomes (1979), presents a two-period utility framework for a family composed of one parent and one child. During the first period, the parent must balance their disposable income between personal consumption and investing in the child's human capital, such as education or health. In the second period, the child's income is determined by the human capital acquired from the parent's investment and any other heritable endowments. The first channel mechanism indicates that higher income parents have higher resources to invest in children's human capital, and the second mechanism is high-income parents have greater income-enhancing endowments. These investments and endowments, in turn, increase the income of the children in the next generation. On the contrary, children born in poorer families experience lower investments in human capital, which is the first mechanism of the model (Case et al., 2005). These factors are also transmitted to the next generation through cultural influences and genetics (Piraino, 2021, p.38), continuing the pattern of social immobility.

Adopting standard theory to analyze developing countries poses some problems, as developing countries tend to have lower returns on human capital due to a large proportion of the informal economy. Parents in developing countries tend not to acknowledge the benefits of investing in children's education due to information friction (Piraino, 2021, p.39-48). The second channel of the main theory can also alter the returns of human capital investment. Certain traits are transmitted through genetics and family culture, which have a multiplying effect on upward mobility. For example, parental networks increase the number of prospective jobs the child is offered for a given education level (Piraino, 2022, p.39). Children absorb the way their parents do things; if parents like to read, children tend to imitate the behavior. Children who love to read often come from families that love to read, compared to families that do not. Empirical evidence shows that Parents can directly transmit their socio-economic status to their children through various channels; education (Hertz et al., 2007), mother's height and health (Bhalotra & Rawlings, 2011 & 2013), and socio-economic status (Case et al., 2005). This is the reason why intergenerational persistence is prevalent.

Previous research in Thailand

This section provides an overview and summary of limited existed studies on occupational mobility in Thailand.

Urbanization and occupational mobility from 1970-1980 changed in the same direction in middle to highly urbanized areas. In rural areas where the urbanization rate was low, increased urbanization resulted in lower mobility among individuals with high socioeconomic status due to a change in occupational structure from agriculture to industry. The beneficiaries of this change were non-local people who invested in the industrial transformation of land uses. Former landlords in rural areas faced a decrease in income from land rent. Their status changed from "landowners" to "wage earners," (Wongbuddha, 1988, p.v). Conversely, individuals with lower socioeconomic status enjoyed greater opportunities to transition from wage-earning farmers to wage-earning industrial workers. Individuals with high socioeconomic status live in

highly urbanized communities, while those with middle and low social status live in lower-urbanized areas (Wongbuddha, 1988, p.iv).

Occupational transitions mainly involve moves into farm self-employment and non-farm employee positions rather than into farm laborer, non-farm self-employment, or farm or non-farm employer positions. The earnings of farm laborers are consistently lower than those of self-employed farmers, and the earnings of self-employed farmers are, in turn, lower than those of farm employers each year. In Thailand, Chawanote and Barrett has shown that the "earnings distribution of non-farm employers and non-farm employees stochastically dominate those of non-farm self-employed individuals (without employee) and of all the farm sector earnings distributions" (sChawanote & Barrett, 2014). It is therefore important to differentiate between non-farm self-employment without hired workers and those household enterprises that hire non-family members, which we term entrepreneurs. Different employment relations possess different levels of income and other characteristics.

For this reason, individuals who engage in high-productivity rural non-farm economy (RNFE) enjoy the most upward earnings mobility, which is a group of a small number of individuals with higher initial wealth and human capital, reflecting the difficulty of establishing and maintaining a business with employees (Chawanote, 2013). During the period of 2005-2010, less than one percent of household-owned enterprises in rural Thailand employed more than ten employees. Only a minority of these enterprises demonstrated significant employment growth over the period (Chawanote, 2013, p. 11). Therefore, we can imply that the transition from farm employment to non-farm employment was rare in Thailand during 2005-2010. Moreover, most of the newly self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs transitioned from wage employment rather than from unemployment. However, they found extremely low transitions from self-employment to entrepreneurship, and vice versa (Chawanote, 2013). Thus, we can confirm that self-employment is a lower class than real entrepreneurship in rural Thailand.

Empirical evidence points out intergenerational transmission of occupation in Thailand. There are five factors influencing the chances that children of agricultural families remain in agriculture: children's experience in agricultural work, attitude towards agriculture as an occupation, the number of agricultural laborers within a household, problems with agricultural resources in the past, and marital status (Rayasawath, 2018). The first four factors are intergenerationally transmitted. The first, third, and fourth factors can only be experienced if children live in an agricultural household.

Data source and management

I employed the Townsend Thai Project, a household panel data covering the period of 1997–2017. The data covers villages in four rural provinces (Townsend, 2009 & 2018). The relevant sections for the studies included household composition, primary and secondary occupation, employment status, children living outside the house, parent's characteristics, inheritance, income, and household business. The number of observations from the initial survey in 1997 was 2,870 households, while it decreased to 1,201 households in 2017.

I limited the age of the samples to individuals aged 30–60 years old. At the age of 30, individuals typically reach a stage where their occupational choices tend to become more stable and settled. This age marks a lower threshold for what is considered "occupational maturity", individuals are less likely to frequently change jobs or careers. The upper bound, 60, represents the legal retirement age. Examples of studies that limited age are Zhou (2019, p.18) at 31-64, Erikson, Goldthorpe & Porcatero (2010) & Wongbuddha (1988, p. iii) at 35 and older, Chawanote (2014) at 15-70. From the dataset, individuals older than 60 accounted for

1,379 observations out of the total 18,746 observations in the 1997 dataset, constituting only 7% of the total.

After removing unusable observations, the number of households that can be intergenerationally linked amounted to 1,632 observations of the parent generation, 933 observations of the children generation, and 352 observations of grandfathers. The statistics are summarized in *Table 1*.

Methodology

I chose to measure occupational mobility rather than income and education. Occupation is a summary indicator of a person's wealth, human capital, risks, and societal influence – what income cannot capture alone (Blanden, 2013, p.41). Ultimately, occupation is easier to measure in developing countries where long-term income data is lacking, and a high number of individuals work in non-standard conditions. I employ a comparative EGP (Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero) class schema, as an occupational classification system. In EGP schema, occupational hierarchy is assigned by human capital, skills, and socioeconomic status.

EGP schema also provides three mechanisms that generate mobility: direct inheritance, sectoral barriers, and occupational affinity (Heath & Zhao, 2021, p.181). I adjusted the schema to the sevenfold version, as *Table 2* shows.

I employ standard mobility table as the primary methodology. The cells in the table represent the frequency of class distributions (Hout, 1983, p.8). For relative mobility, I employ outflow mobility table to examine the movement in each class. Finally, I employ odd ratios to assess the likelihood of individuals from two distinct social classes attaining a specific class status and avoiding a different one (Heath & Zhao, 2021; Breen, 2004: Fachelli et al., 2021).

$$Odd\ ratio = \frac{\left(\frac{Number\ in\ Class\ A\ who\ originated\ in\ Class\ C}{Number\ in\ Class\ B\ who\ originated\ in\ Class\ C}\right)}{\left(\frac{Number\ in\ Class\ A\ who\ originated\ in\ Class\ D}{Number\ in\ Class\ B\ who\ originated\ in\ Class\ D}\right)}$$

Table 1 Summary of Statistics

	Total	Grandfather	Father	Mother	Son	Daughter
Parent 1997 combined with children 2017, age 30-60	2955		518	584	896	955
After removing families that cannot be measured	1632		324	373	444	489
Three generations	1230	352			413	460

Source: Townsend (2009 & 2018)

The limitation of this methodology is that it only examines the individuals and the starting point (parent), and destination point (children) at the time the surveys were collected. Meaning other factors that can influence the outcome of mobility are omitted, such as changing to better or worse occupations, temporary shocks, and migration to work in urban area. The methodology also ignores the secondary or more occupations of individuals. This is particularly important where people in developing countries tend to engage in more than one informal job. Furthermore, the data is limited to only 4 provinces of rural areas in Thailand. Urban area theoretically tends to have higher rates of upward mobility due to higher prospective of high-paid jobs, number of jobs, and higher economic development, making it complex to compare with results from other studies in developing countries where data is collectively collected.

Table 2 Erikson, Goldthorpe, Porcatero (EGP) Class Schema comparison

Class	Original	Sevenfold	Fivefold	Threefold
I	Higher-grade professionals, administrators and officials; managers in large industrial establishments; large proprietors	I + II 'service class'	I + II + III 'white-collar'	I + II + III + IVa + IVb 'nonmanual'
II	Lower-grade professionals, administrators and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small business and industrial establishment; supervisors of non-manual employees			
III	Routine non-manual employees in administration and commerce; sales personnel; other rank-and-file service workers	III 'routine non-manual class'		
IVa	Small proprietors; artisans, with employees	IVa + b 'petty bourgeoise'	IVa+ Ivb 'petty bourgeoise'	
IVb	Small proprietors; artisans, without employees			
IVc	Farmers and smallholders; self-employed	IVc	IVc + VIIb ' farm'	IVc + VIIb 'farm'
V/VI	Lower-grade technicians; supervisors of manual workers; skilled manual workers	V/VI	V/VI	V/VI + VIIa 'manual'
VIIa	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	VIIa	VIIa	
VIIb	Agricultural workers	VIIb		

Source: Author's reconstruction from Erikson, R., Goldthorpe, J. H., & Portocarero, L. (2010, p.189)

Table 3 Standard mobility table of total sample (male+female), N = 898

Father's Class	Children's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	1.9%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	2.9%
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
IV	1.9%	0.1%	0.8%	1.1%	0.6%	4.3%	1.0%	9.8%
IVc	2.3%	0.7%	3.2%	3.2%	1.0%	11.7%	5.9%	28.1%
V	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	1.0%	0.3%	1.6%
VII	2.8%	1.8%	5.5%	4.9%	1.3%	18.6%	5.9%	40.8%
VIIb	2.4%	1.2%	1.2%	2.7%	0.7%	6.5%	2.0%	16.7%
Total	11.4%	4.1%	10.8%	12.1%	3.7%	42.8%	15.1%	100.0%

Source: Author's calculations

Results & Discussion

Table 3 represents a standard mobility table for total respondents. To interpret the table, for example, 18.6% of respondents originated from Class VII and remained in the same class. Another 2.4% of respondents came from Class VIIb and experienced upward mobility to Class I+II. The main diagonal line (the darkest shade) running straight through the table from the top-left to bottom-right, represents respondents who are intergenerationally immobile. Summing these cells provides the total immobility rate of the table, which is 26.5%. Total upward mobility can be calculated by summing the light grey cells in the bottom-left of the table, amounting to 29.5%. Conversely, the downward mobility rate can be computed from the dark grey cells in the top-right of the table, totaling 25.5%. The unshaded cells represent horizontal mobility, or individuals who moved into adjacent Classes but not perceived to be of higher hierarchy. Classes VII and VIIb are in the same hierarchy, as are Classes IV, IVc, and V, which are higher than Classes VII and VIIb. From the table, the horizontal mobility rate is 18.5%. Lastly, the bottom row demonstrates the total percentage of a certain Class for the whole society.

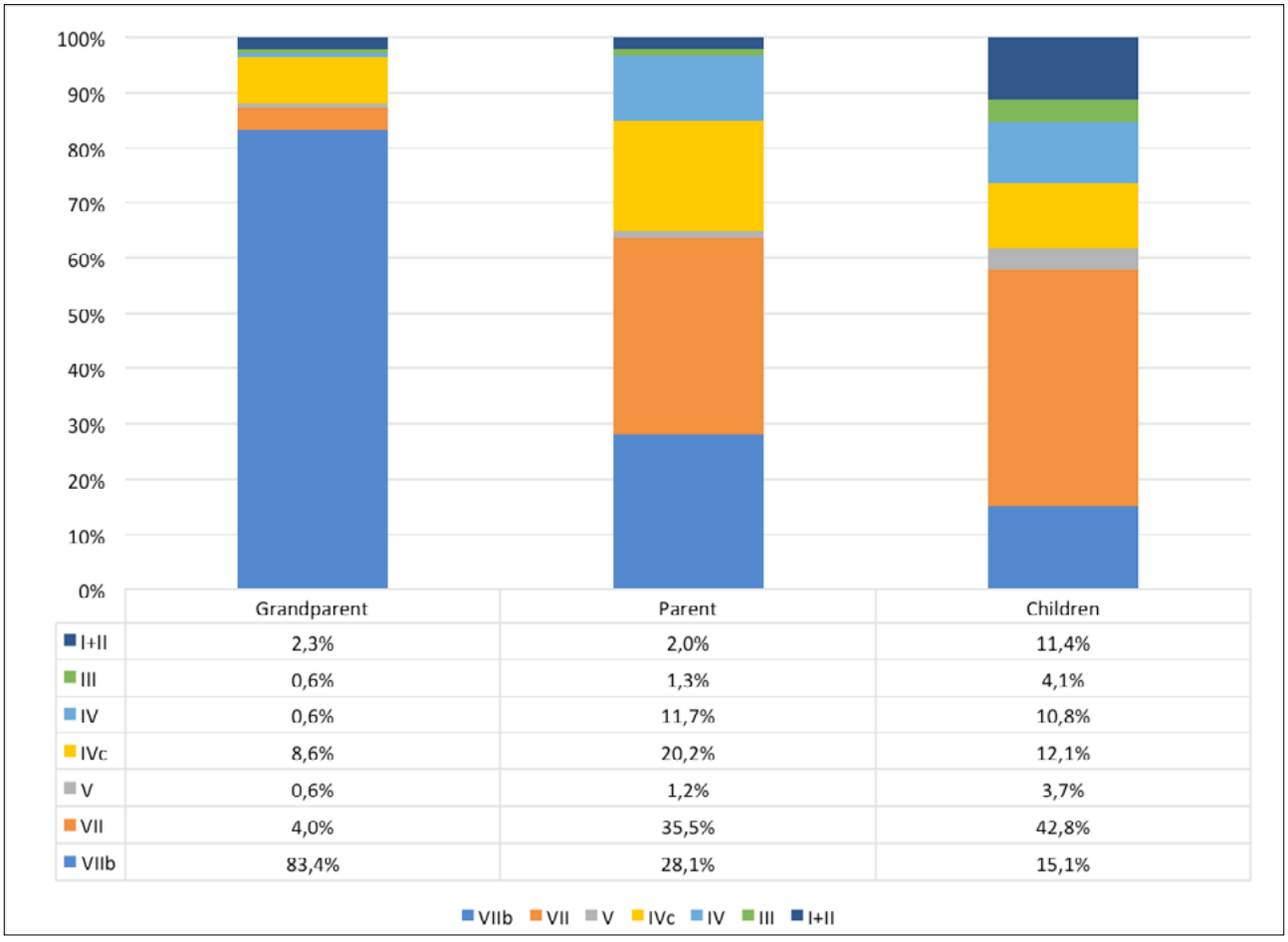
As the economy has developed, absolute mobility rates might appear better from class structural transformations. Relative mobility could have stayed the same as individuals from advantaged backgrounds may remain at the forefront of upward mobility. When comparing the absolute mobility rate to the total class structure in *Figure 1* & *Figure 2*, the surplus of upward mobility results from the changing total class structure. For instance, 2% of parents were in Class I+II, but this expanded almost sixfold to 11.4% for children. Both Class III and Class V expanded approximately threefold. Moreover, the agricultural workers' class contracted from 28.1% to 15.1%. The expansion of occupational opportunities within higher classes, coupled with the contraction of opportunities in lower social strata, contribute to upward absolute mobility.

The trends of movement in developing countries, particularly the shift from agriculture to the informal service sector, contrast with the patterns observed in developed countries at the beginning of the industrialization processes, where the movement was towards the manufacturing sector (Iversen, 2021, p.18-19). From the figures, it is evident that the agricultural class, including self-employed farmers, has indeed contracted, while Class VII, mainly related to the manufacturing sector, has

expanded. The professional Class I+II has also expanded and Class III, the service class, has slightly grown. The expansion from, 1997 to 2017, can be attributed to workers transitioning to casual service jobs in hotels, restaurants, retails, or gig work. These trends – that Thailand experience an expansion in the service class, the wage-earner class, and the professional class –contrast with those observed in other developing countries.

Despite the decrease in the agricultural class (IVc & VIIb), the unskilled Class VII has become larger. This stands in contrast to European countries, where lower-grade occupations are declining (Fachelli, 2021, p.215). Individuals in Thailand might have lost their lands due to changes in the relative returns from land as result of industrial expansion and investments (Wongbuddha, 1988). Consequently, these individuals have moved to Class VII, and while this could explain why Class VII has grown larger, they have not moved upward from this class. Hence, the sectoral barrier to the intermediate class remains strong.

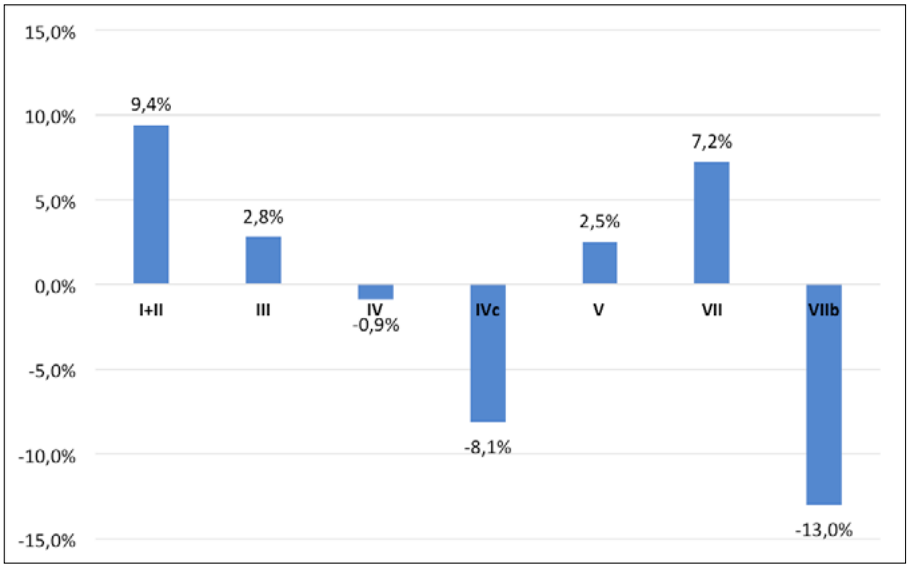
Figure 1 Structural change of Class of occupations in three generations



	Grandparent	Parent	Children
I+II	2,3%	2,0%	11,4%
III	0,6%	1,3%	4,1%
IV	0,6%	11,7%	10,8%
IVc	8,6%	20,2%	12,1%
V	0,6%	1,2%	3,7%
VII	4,0%	35,5%	42,8%
VIIb	83,4%	28,1%	15,1%

Source: Author's calculations

Figure 2 Structural change between parents and children, 1997 & 2017



Source: Author's calculations

Table 4 & *Table 5* present the standard mobility table of male and female samples, and *Table 6* provides a summary of mobility rates calculated from each table. When examining the results by gender, it is surprising to find that women experience higher rates of upward mobility. This contrasts both with the findings in other developing countries like China, Chile, and India, where men have higher rate, and with developed countries where men and women have equal rates (Heath & Zhao, 2021, p.185). Further analysis reveals that women have moved into the salariat and intermediate class. The combined mobility rate to Class I - IV is 22.5% for women, whereas it is 17.1% for men. Movements to Class I - IV account for over one-third of the upward mobility. Moreover, the percentage of women in Class I – IV is higher than that of men, with 30.6% for women and 21.5% for men. In contrast, the agricultural class (Class IVc and VIIb) is significantly larger for men, constituting 31.4% compared to 23.6% for women. Typically, people believe that skilled technician positions are occupied by men, making it a noteworthy point that the size of Class V is larger among women (4.5%) than men (2.8%).

Table 4 Standard mobility table of male sample, N = 427

Father's Class	Son's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	1.6%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	2.3%
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.5%
IV	0.7%	0.2%	0.9%	1.4%	0.2%	4.9%	0.9%	9.4%
IVc	1.9%	0.9%	1.6%	4.4%	0.7%	10.3%	7.7%	27.6%
V	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	2.1%	0.5%	2.8%
VII	2.8%	0.9%	4.0%	6.1%	0.9%	20.1%	5.6%	40.5%
VIIb	3.0%	1.2%	1.4%	3.0%	0.7%	6.1%	1.4%	16.9%
Total	10.1%	3.5%	8.0%	15.2%	2.8%	44.3%	16.2%	100.0%

Source: Author's calculations

Table 5 Standard mobility table of female sample, N = 471

Father's Class	Daughter's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	2.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	3.4%
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
IV	3.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.8%	0.8%	3.8%	1.1%	10.2%
IVc	2.8%	0.4%	4.7%	2.1%	1.3%	13.0%	4.2%	28.5%
V	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%
VII	2.8%	2.5%	6.8%	3.8%	1.7%	17.2%	6.2%	41.0%
VIIb	1.9%	1.3%	1.1%	2.3%	0.6%	6.8%	2.5%	16.6%
Total	12.5%	4.7%	13.4%	9.3%	4.5%	41.4%	14.2%	100.0%

Source: Author's calculations

Table 6 Summary statistics of absolute rates of mobility

	Immobility	Upward Mobility	Downward Mobility	Horizontal Mobility	Observations
All	26.5%	29.5%	25.5%	18.5%	898
Male	28.6%	27.9%	27.6%	15.9%	427
Female	24.6%	31.0%	23.6%	20.8%	471
Three generations	15.3%	39.9%	8.0%	36.8%	873

Source: Author's calculations

Focusing on relative mobility, *Table 7* displays the outflow mobility table. It shows where individuals from a certain class have ended up, and the table is constrained to class structural shifts (Blanden, 2013, p.42). For instance, 65.4% of individuals originating in Class I+II remain in that class, whereas only 14.7% of individuals from Class VIIb can attain Class I+II. Conversely, no individuals from Class I+II end up in VIIb, but 12% of Class VIIb individuals remain in the same class. The odds of individuals from Class I+II and Class VIIb attaining Class I+II are 4.4 times higher (65% and 14.7%). Similarly, the odds of individuals from Class I+II and Class VIIb attaining Class VIIb are 12 times higher (0% and 12%). These odd ratios are summarized in *Table 8*.

The class with the highest mobility to Class I+II, besides the owner class, is Class IV. This finding supports my assumption and the results of Chawanote & Barrett (2014) that Class IV is the most promising class for upward mobility due to their assets and human capital. Additionally, factors such as affinity, which lower information friction, influence the first channel of Becker & Tomes (1979) main theory. Furthermore, the transmission of entrepreneurial traits, the second channel of the main theory, explain this trend. However, these theories only partially explain why Class VIIb has higher mobility to Class I+II than the adjacent Class VII, even though Class VII and VIIb are at the same level in the hierarchy. Their affinity should be relatively similar.

Additionally, *Table 7* shows that only 12% of Class VIIb individuals remain in their origin, a rate lower than that of other classes moving down to Class VIIb. This contrasts with Xie's (2022) results in China, and Rayasawath (2018) in Thailand where occupational inheritance is particularly strong for

agricultural workers. A possible reason is the minimal differences between the two classes agriculturalists and unskilled manual laborers. These work in factories during the off-agricultural season and in agriculture during the peak agricultural season (Sonsaneeyarart, 1998).

Table 9 & *Table 10* demonstrate the outflow mobility of men and women. Three-quarters of the individuals from Class IV who moved into Class I+II are women. For men in Class VII, 49.7% remain in the same class, and 15% move to Class IVc. In contrast, only 42% of women from Class VII remain immobile, and 9.3% move to Class IVc. Women also have a higher rate of Class IVc individuals moving to Class I+II.

Table 7 Outflow Mobility Table of the total samples, N = 898

Father's Class	Children's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	65.4%	11.5%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%	19.2%	0.0%	26
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	2
IV	19.3%	1.1%	8.0%	11.4%	5.7%	44.3%	10.2%	88
IVc	8.3%	2.4%	11.5%	11.5%	3.6%	41.7%	21.0%	252
V	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	7.1%	0.0%	64.3%	21.4%	14
VII	6.8%	4.4%	13.4%	12.0%	3.3%	45.6%	14.5%	366
VIIb	14.7%	7.3%	7.3%	16.0%	4.0%	38.7%	12.0%	150
Total	11.4%	4.1%	10.8%	12.1%	3.7%	42.8%	15.1%	898

Source: Author's calculations

Table 8 Relative Mobility: Odd ratios

	I+II/VII	I+II/VIIb	IVc/VII	IVc/VIIb	VII/VIIb
All	22.66	79.8	13.9	1.0	10.1
Son	25	31.1	1.4	3.9	12.9
Daughter	20.75	83.0	29.5	2.2	7.6

Source: Author's calculations

Table 9 Outflow Mobility Table of sons, N = 427

Father's Class	Son's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	70.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%	10
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	2
IV	7.5%	2.5%	10.0%	15.0%	2.5%	52.5%	10.0%	40
IVc	6.8%	3.4%	5.9%	16.1%	2.5%	37.3%	28.0%	118
V	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%	0.0%	75.0%	16.7%	12
VII	6.9%	2.3%	9.8%	15.0%	2.3%	49.7%	13.9%	173
VIIb	18.1%	6.9%	8.3%	18.1%	4.2%	36.1%	8.3%	72
Total	10.1%	3.5%	8.0%	15.2%	2.8%	44.3%	16.2%	427

Source: Author's calculations

Table 10 Outflow Mobility Table of daughters, N = 471

Father's Class	Daughter's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIb	Total
I+II	62.5%	12.5%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%	18.8%	0.0%	16
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0
IV	29.2%	0.0%	6.3%	8.3%	8.3%	37.5%	10.4%	48
IVc	9.7%	1.5%	16.4%	7.5%	4.5%	45.5%	14.9%	134
V	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	2
VII	6.7%	6.2%	16.6%	9.3%	4.1%	42.0%	15.0%	193
VIIb	11.5%	7.7%	6.4%	14.1%	3.8%	41.0%	15.4%	78
Total	12.5%	4.7%	13.4%	9.3%	4.5%	41.4%	14.2%	471

Source: Author's calculations

Table 11 represents a standard mobility table for three generations. From *Table 6*, the total upward mobility in the table is 39.9%, compared to the upward mobility from father to son at 29.5%. This implies that the absolute mobility of the grandfather's generation to the father's generation is quite low. The downward mobility over three generations is 8%. However, the rate of horizontal mobility, where individuals remain in the original hierarchy, is remarkably high at 36.8%. Most of this is accounted for by Class VIIb individuals moving to Class VII but being unable to progress further.

I also present a condensed version of the standard mobility table in *Tables 13* and *14*, combining the class categories into three broader groups: farm, manual, and non-manual occupations. This simplified version provides an overview of the mobility rates across three generations.

Table 11 Standard mobility table for three generations, N = 873

Grandfather's Class	Grandchildren's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIB	Total
I+II	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.9%	0.7%	2.6%
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.3%	0.7%
IV	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
IVc	0.8%	0.1%	0.6%	0.6%	0.2%	3.6%	1.4%	7.2%
V	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%	0.2%	0.7%
VII	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	1.7%	0.5%	3.0%
VIIB	8.9%	3.9%	9.9%	11.7%	3.4%	35.3%	12.4%	85.5%
Total	10.9%	4.2%	10.9%	12.8%	3.8%	41.9%	15.5%	100.0%

Source: Author's calculations

Table 12 Outflow Mobility Table of three generations, N = 873

Grandfather's Class	Grandchildren's Class							
	I+II	III	IV	IVc	V	VII	VIIB	Total
I+II	26.1%	4.3%	4.3%	4.3%	0.0%	34.8%	26.1%	23
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6
IV	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3
IVc	11.1%	1.6%	7.9%	7.9%	3.2%	49.2%	19.0%	63
V	0.0%	0.0%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	6
VII	3.8%	3.8%	7.7%	7.7%	3.8%	57.7%	15.4%	26
VIIB	10.5%	4.6%	11.5%	13.7%	4.0%	41.3%	14.5%	746
Total	10.9%	4.2%	10.9%	12.8%	3.8%	41.9%	15.5%	873

Source: Author's calculations

Table 13 Standard Mobility Table threefold version, N = 894

Father's Class	Children's Class		
	Non-Manual	Manual	Farm
Non-Manual (I+II+III+IV)	4.7%	5.7%	2.2%
Manual (V+VII)	10.2%	21.0%	11.3%
Farm (IVc+VIIb)	11.2%	19.8%	13.9%
Total	26.1%	46.5%	27.4%

Source: Author's calculations

Table 14 Outflow Mobility Table threefold version, N = 894

Father's Class	Children's Class		
	Non-Manual	Manual	Farm
Non-Manual (I+II+III+IV)	37.2%	45.1%	17.7%
Manual (V+VII)	23.9%	49.5%	26.6%
Farm (IVc+VIIb)	24.9%	44.1%	30.9%
Total	26.1%	46.5%	27.4%

Source: Author's calculations

Sensitivity Check

Since the odd ratios between Class IVc and Class VIIb is exactly equal 1, and Class VIIb has a higher upward mobility rate to Class I+II than Class VII. Sensitivity check is required to examine whether Class IVc, Class VII, and Class VIIb are the same class, and whether each class is distinct based on wage levels. Following studies by Long (2013) and Chawanote & Barrett (2014) that show the usefulness of including earnings in social mobility data, I demonstrate the earning distribution of each Class in table 15. However, only a few numbers of observations contain wage data.

Table 15 Average wages of each Class of occupations

Class	Wage(THB)	Observations
I+II	32,642	7
III	-	0
IV	9,533	23
IVc	5,706	23
V	300	1
VII	9,465	21
VIIb	8,479	9
Total	10,340	76

Source: Author's calculations from the dataset

From Table 15, Class I+II has the highest wage, as it is supposed to be. However, Class VIIb has a higher wage than Class IVc. This implies that they are not different in terms of human capital, and individuals in Class IVc probably choose to be free from unfavorable employment relations than taking a higher wage. Otherwise, there are barriers to moving back to Class VIIb.

Moreover, Class IV, the small business owners, and Class VII, the unskilled workers have almost identical wages. Possibly, because most of the individuals in Class IV are not rural non-farm enterprises (RNFE), as Chawanote and Barrett (2013) suggest. This denies the higher investment in human capital. The possible reason left is Class IV parents transmit entrepreneurial traits to their children.

Another method to check is to combine Class IVc and VIIb together (Long, 2013). Class IVc and VIIb possess the same skills, the same affinity but differ by inheritance effects from owning lands. *Table 16* shows a standard mobility table of the combined agricultural class version. *Table 17* shows an outflow mobility table. According to *Table 17,* Class IVc+VIIb still has a higher mobility of moving into Class I+II than Class VII (10.7% & 6.8%). The combined agricultural class also has the highest rate of moving into Class VII. As the odd ratio of moving between Class VII and Class IVc+VIIb is low at 2.2, according to *Table 18*, a summary of odd ratios of the combined agricultural class version. In sum, the results demonstrate the same hierarchy of Class VII and Class IVc+VIIb, in terms of skills, and affinity. The barrier between the two classes is low. However, it is unclear why Class IVc+VIIb have slightly higher chances of moving into Class I+II.

Table 16 Standard mobility table combined Class IVc & VIIb, N = 894

Father's Class	Children's Class						
	I+II	III	IV	V	VII	IVc+VIIb	Total
I+II	1.57%	0.34%	0.00%	0.00%	0.56%	0.11%	2.57%
III	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.11%	0.11%	0.00%	0.22%
IV	1.90%	0.11%	0.78%	0.56%	4.36%	2.13%	9.84%
V	0.00%	0.00%	0.11%	0.00%	1.01%	0.45%	1.57%
VII	2.80%	1.79%	5.48%	1.34%	18.68%	10.85%	40.94%
IVc+VIIb	4.81%	1.90%	4.47%	1.68%	18.12%	13.87%	44.85%
Total	11.07%	4.14%	10.85%	3.69%	42.84%	27.40%	100.00%

Source: Author's calculations

Table 17 Outflow mobility table combined Class IVc & VIIb, N = 894

Father's Class	Children's Class						
	I+II	III	IV	V	VII	IVc+VIIb	Total
I+II	60.9%	13.0%	0.0%	0.0%	21.7%	4.3%	23
III	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	2
IV	19.3%	1.1%	8.0%	5.7%	44.3%	21.6%	88
V	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	64.3%	28.6%	14
VII	6.8%	4.4%	13.4%	3.3%	45.6%	26.5%	366
IVc+VIIb	10.7%	4.2%	10.0%	3.7%	40.4%	30.9%	401
Total	11.07%	4.14%	10.85%	3.69%	42.84%	27.40%	894

Source: Author's calculations

Table 18 Odd ratios of combined agricultural class (IVc+VIIb)

	I+II/VII	I+II/IVc+VIIb	VII/IVc+VIIb
All	11.2	40.3	2.2

Source: Author's calculations

Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to provide a contemporary measurement of intergenerational mobility in Thailand. I have answered the question by providing absolute and relative mobility rate, and odd ratios of father-children and grandfather-grandchildren during 1997 and 2017, using comparative EGP class schema.

The results suggest that the absolute mobility rate is surplus, but the rate might become better from the expansion of the higher-class occupations due to structural transformation. The results show that Thailand contrasts with other countries at the beginning of industrialization process: workers move into casual service jobs, industrial jobs, and professional jobs. In Western countries, workers moved from agriculture to industry, and in

developing countries, workers moved from agriculture to casual service sector.

The relative mobility rate is low and opportunities for children to attain a higher class are conditioned by the origins of parents. The findings thus align with other social mobility studies, which indicate that if an individual is born rich, he/she possesses higher chances to remain rich (Clarke et al., 2022; Carneiro, 2020; Blanden, 2013; Corak, 2013).

Surprisingly, women in Thailand exhibit higher mobility rates than men, given that men typically have higher mobility rates than women in other developing countries, whereas men and women tend to have nearly equal mobility rates in developed countries. Furthermore, women demonstrate higher rates of transitioning to Class I – IV.

Class IV, the petty bourgeoisie, exhibits the second highest rate of mobility into Class I+II besides the owner class. However, sensitivity check shows that the wages of Class IV are not different from Class VII. A possible reason is that most of Class IV are not in the non-farm sector where the highest incomes are generated. A possible explanation is that the transmission of entrepreneurial traits, coupled with Class IV's affinity to the higher Class, influences parents in Class IV to invest in human capital and thereby facilitate mobility.

In the future, more theoretical approaches should be reviewed to analyze the unexplained phenomenon found in this study: Why women have higher rates of upward mobility than men, why Class IV is the second most prospective class to the top even their income is not higher, and why Class IVc+VIIb have higher chances of moving into Class I+II compared to Class VII. Moreover, this study only shows the frequency of moving into each class, and does not measure the distances between social classes. Finally, this study uses the father's occupation as a proxy for individual's origin. Future studies could contribute to increased understanding of gender dimensions by applying the mother's occupation as a proxy so to distinguish the effects of social transmission from different parent gender.

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Beyond Coolness
Unravelling Euro-American Perceptions of Contemporary Japan

LUKE FARRELLY-SPAIN

Japan has enthralled the world with its impressive manufacturing capacities and rich culture for many years, leading it to become somewhat of a fixation within Euro-American nations. Throughout its transition from Postwar ruin to industrial powerhouse, the nation has been the subject of a range of flattering and offensive orientalist depictions which have significantly shaped foreign perceptions. With its contemporary re-invention as an international trendsetter in the wake of devastating economic collapse, Japan has become a purveyor of all things cool and trendy, eliciting an unequivocal attraction to its more quirky and uniquely different cultural attributes. However, this latest obsession with coolness represents an attraction which grossly simplifies the complex realities of modern Japanese culture and society, while exemplifying a superficial depiction fundamentally detached from the daily workings of the nation itself. What are the implications behind the promotion and consumption of a "cool Japan"? Is it an effective means to promote enduring and more meaningful connections with Japan's culture, or does it merely further contribute to the perpetuation of warped narratives and stereotypical orientalist depictions?

Keywords: Orientalism, Nihonjinron, popular culture, cool, othering

With its post-war economic miracle firmly in the past, Japan has become best known since the 1990s for its vibrant and decidedly cool cultural output. The immense popularity of Japanese media and aesthetics in Euro-American countries represents the latest evolution in a longstanding fascination with Japan's perceived differences (Abel, 2011). However, in recent years perceptions have shifted more towards highlighting the cool and overtly unusual aspects of Japanese culture (Wagenaar, 2016). This comes at a time when Japan has attempted to reaffirm its national identity amidst growing economic and demographic challenges by emphasising its uniqueness and placing its cultural assets at the forefront. As a result, Japan's perceived "coolness" has become a notable point of fixation, being seen as validation of the broad appeal of its culture and being enthusiastically embraced by the country as part of its national branding efforts (Hijiya-Kirschnereit, 2013; Tamaki, 2019). However, it could be argued that the emphasis on these superficial perceptions has reinforced the notion of Japan as an object of desire, reminiscent of Orientalist views from the late nineteenth century. The enduring appeal of Japanese pop culture, coupled with the increasing number of foreign visitors each year, raises questions about what aspects of Japanese culture or perceptions of the country individuals find intriguing.

This study examines the motivations behind individuals' interest in Japan, exploring the connection between the perceived coolness of aspects of its culture and the lived experiences of Euro-American international students. Through interviews conducted with native and non-natively English-speaking international students in Tokyo, the research questions the often-generalised notion of "coolness" and analyses the connection between individual interests and wider cultural perceptions. This exploration traces evolving perceptions since the Meiji period, their interactions with Orientalism, and the history of Japanese Popular Culture's wider appeal, underscoring their potential influence on individuals' motivations to move to Japan.

What is "Cool"?

Despite its widespread contemporary usage, cool does not have a universally accepted definition, which makes it difficult to identify how phenomena come to be regarded as such. The term can be loosely traced to the Afro-American Jazz scene in the 1930s, where it described a relaxed and mysterious style of music or performance which deviated from established social norms (Abel, 2011). This association with subversion became more pronounced in the 1960s, as its usage became more prevalent within youth subcultures and anti-establishment movements. The term represented a form of escapism where alternative interests and lifestyles could develop away from the harsh judgements of wider society (Raz, 2013). Cool's largely disinterested attitude towards external influences significantly heightened its mainstream desirability, and its gradual commercialisation subsequently allowed more individuals to shape their identities around these once elusive phenomena (Valaskivi, 2013). However, this broader accessibility underscores the precarious nature of cool phenomena, given that their allure stems from their enigmatic and unpredictable nature, making them highly susceptible to interference, mainstream acknowledgement, or widespread dissemination. Cool phenomena must therefore straddle a line between being countercultural

and broadly self-sustaining. Therefore, since their attractiveness depends on the perceptions of individuals within specific cultural and temporal contexts, predicting or manufacturing a genuine sense of coolness becomes effectively impossible.

Orientalism, Othering, and Japan

Orientalism is a process centred around maintaining the constructed superiority of a dominant culture, establishing a sense of normalcy based on its own norms which other "inferior" cultures are judged against. These comparisons are often contextualised within the timeline of colonial pursuits by Euro-American nations, with the "modernity" of the colonised Orient being gauged by its receptiveness to the imposition of foreign customs and culture (Robins & Morley, 1995; Said, 1979). While initially associated with interactions between former colonial European nations and the Middle East, Orientalism has evolved to encompass broader interactions, including those with nations in East Asia (Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2005). Through a process known as othering, Orientalist ideas seek to justify a perceived sense of supremacy and fundamentally shape the narrative of the Orient and its culture. This is often achieved by invoking excessively romanticised imagery, which occasionally manifests as a projection of sexual desires onto a culture considered unconstrained by the more conservative conventions of Euro-American nations (Hinton, 2014; Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2005; Miller, 2018).

Japan has been the subject of various forms of Orientalism since the Meiji restoration, the earliest of which being the "Japonisme" movement in Europe at the turn of the 20th century, which portrayed a beautified version of Japanese lifestyle through art and literature (Koníček, 2019). The perpetuation of this "mysterious Orient" imagery cemented the notion that Japan was a desirable entity beyond the conventional understanding of Euro-American culture, while also being distinct from other Asian countries (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005, p. 166). Japan's later imperialist endeavours and rapid post-war industrialisation subsequently challenged its positioning within the Orientalist hierarchy, sparking debates about whether it was following a more Euro-American development path or beginning to influence the rest of the world with its own autonomous progress (Iwabuchi, 2002; Robins & Morley, 1995). Efforts were made, particularly within the Anglosphere, to quantify a consolidated "Japanese character", where ascribed perceptions of Japanese culture could then be used to understand broader societal behaviours and actions (Hammond, 1999; Hinton, 2014).

Foreign perspectives became a dominant force in shaping and defining Japan's characteristics, serving as a form of self-validation that further emphasised the perceived differences of Japanese culture. This contributed to the later emergence of techno-orientalism, which departed from traditional exoticized portrayals to focus more on the nation's rapid advancement and its increasing integration of technology into society, at the expense of what were considered intrinsic human values (Robins & Morley, 1995; Roh et al., 2015; Wagenaar, 2016). Although techno-orientalism became less prevalent as Japan's economy declined throughout the 1990s, it remains prevalent in contemporary perspectives of Japan, through pop culture and depictions in Euro-American media (Hinton, 2014).

Evolving Perceptions

Perceptions of Japan have been influenced significantly by a combination of both domestic and foreign processes. Domestically, a form of exceptionalist nationalism known as Nihonjinron has sought to base Japan's cultural heritage on a perceived sense of cultural superiority, rooted its history and cultural homogeny (Hijiya-Kirschnereit, 2013; Robins & Morley, 1995). Through its emphasis on cultural distinctiveness and the selective acceptance or rejection of foreign influences, Nihonjinron indicates a fundamental desire to preserve an inherent sense of

"Japaneseness" through a process of self-othering away from both Asian and Euro-American cultures (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005; Iwabuchi, 1998). While flattering, Nihonjinron's portrayal of Japan is not an accurate representation as it presents an idealised image rooted in self-ascribed essentialism, further perpetuating Orientalist perceptions of Japan as being beyond conventional Euro-American understanding (Tamaki, 2019). The promotion of these emblematic aspects of its culture provided the country with an opportunity for self-promotion to foreign observers, capitalising on its self-ascribed uniqueness and perpetuating Orientalist depictions of the "Exotic East" (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005; Iyer, 1988; Wagenaar, 2016).

Perspectives underwent a dramatic shift as Japan evolved into a symbol of technological progressiveness and commercial success during the post-war era. (Hinton, 2014; Wagenaar, 2016). The country's rapid industrialisation provoked widespread concerns about Japan's potential impact on the global order, leading to a resurgence in anti-Japanese sentiment throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Raz, 2013; Robins & Morley, 1995). However, on a less political level, Japan continued to be highly regarded for its ingenuity and design, particularly in the emerging entertainment and video game industries. Increasing global interest in its popular culture further cemented the notion of Japaneseness to creativity and innovative aesthetics (Iwabuchi, 2002; McLelland, 2018). Perceptions once again shifted towards a more selective exemplification of Japan's apparent deviations from Euro-American conventions, with elements of its popular culture being considered indicative of the country's broader culture and mindset (Hinton, 2014). Perceptions of Japan as "weird" became increasingly prevalent into the 21st century, primarily fuelled by Anglophone media and wider access to Japanese content online (Kelts, 2006; Wagenaar, 2016). The omission of cultural context, intentional or not, further heightens these perceptions by emphasising cultural elements unfamiliar to Euro-American culture. This underscores the interchangeability between perceptions of Japan as "weird" or "unusual" and "different" or "unique", all of which play into Japan's assertion of its own uniqueness (Inokuchi & Nozaki, 2005).

The Appeal of Japanese Popular Culture

Japanese pop culture primarily remained within the confines of a domestic audience for much of the post-war era, only spreading further afield in recent decades. Even as the country gained prominence as a dominant exporter of low-cost consumer electronics in the 1970s and 1980s, it remained in what Kelts (2006) describes as the "cultural backwater" of the mainstream international consciousness. The rise in "Japan bashing" and resistance against Japanese economic and cultural influences in the 1980s, particularly in the United States, further hindered the wider expansion of Japanese popular culture (McLelland, 2018). The growing number of localised anime series which started appearing on children's television throughout the 1990s marked the beginning of a significant underground fascination with Japan's emerging cultural potential (Ito, 2012; Koníček, 2019). In the absence of official distribution, devoted fan communities began translating and sharing anime and manga on online forums, significantly boosting the accessibility of this media within youth subcultures. (Eng, 2012; McLelland, 2018). The largely unrestricted and explicit nature of this content further strengthened the link between Japanese popular culture and the prevailing perception of perversion at the time (Galbraith, 2019)games, and comics-- conducted in Akihabara, the electronics-turned-pop-culture neighborhood of Tokyo, author Patrick Galbraith traces the evolving relationships of mostly male-fans with imagined female characters. The term otaku, he argues, is frequently pathologized, to mean alienated or introverted persons - usually male - who have difficulty having real relationships and thus retreat into a

world of their own imagination and control. Galbraith wonders why the form of a relationship that focuses on an animated character is more problematic than other kinds of fan attachments - crushes on pop music stars or a deep investment in Star Wars or Harry Potter. Through his engaged ethnography at the height of the interest in maid cafés and animated female characters in the early 2000s, he is able to historicize this fandom in an empathetic and detailed way, showing that what many have taken to be a single and peculiar psychological phenomenon was actually a complex, quickly evolving pop culture phenomenon. The affective relationships of the fans (seen as 3D Japanese pop culture remained popular within youth subcultures and crossed the threshold into wider global awareness by the end of the 1990s, through the immense success of shows like Pokémon and video games from companies like Nintendo (Kelts, 2006). This interest continued to evolve into the 21st century, fuelled by the proliferation of fan communities that amplified the prominence of Japanese pop cultural exports, evoking a strong emotional response among Euro-American consumers (McLelland, 2018).

Since McGray's (2002) seminal piece outlining Japan's "gross national cool", there has been a growing association between the popularity of Japanese pop culture and its perceived coolness. However, this association, while recognised as a key driver of its widespread appeal, is often not fully articulated. One suggestion is that the Euro-American mainstream's rejection and framing of content like anime and manga as being radically different indicates a degree of higher disapproval, underscoring its subversive nature and thus boosting its cool appeal (McLelland, 2018; Valaskivi, 2013). The strong community involvement and distribution of edgier content further indicate a desire to seek out content not deemed morally acceptable for mainstream consumption, while also solidifying the perception of Japan as the originator of inherently cool cultural products. This association between coolness and Japaneseness becomes so profound that it can be perceived without the need to explicitly evoke Japanese imagery or depictions, or even without an active acknowledgment that such content originated from Japan (Allison, 2008). Another suggestion is that Japan's essentialised projection of its culture abroad further reinforces the perception of its popular culture as subversive and inherently attractive, often without a conscious examination of the underlying processes contributing to its appeal (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005). This can result in individuals solely interested in Japan's pop culture being attracted to highly fetishised depictions of the nation, without the desire to engage with the culture beyond their chosen media (Abel, 2011). The ambiguous positioning of Japan as an almost imaginary entity further reinforces inaccurate representations of its culture, and makes it easier downplay problematic aspects which could make it lose its coolness (Miller, 2018; Robins & Morley, 1995).

Japan's attempt to capitalise on this unwavering attraction to its pop culture has yielded mixed results. In 2010, the government launched the Cool Japan initiative, a national branding strategy aimed at consolidating the most popular elements of Japanese popular culture into a single, marketable entity. However, its effectiveness has been repeatedly questioned, with Japanese critics arguing that the initiative's vague objectives and lack of vision have made it a poor attempt at public diplomacy and a waste of public money (Tamaki, 2019). Given the inherent attractiveness of cool phenomena lies in their subversion of mainstream conventions and rebellious stance towards higher authority, the active promotion of Japan's coolness would always be a fruitless endeavour. This is further complicated by the subversive, and often problematic nature of the pop cultural products which initially spurred this association, making them fundamentally impossible to promote in a dignified manner (Valaskivi, 2013). The initiative also had the misfortune of coinciding with period of general decline in interest in Japanese culture, worsened by the mainstream saturation of Japanese pop cultural products and increased

competition from neighbouring countries, such as South Korea (Alt in Kelts, 2006; Koníček, 2019).

Discussion

Tsutomu (2004) describes a surge of interest in Japanese pop culture among those who grew up through the late 1980s into the early 2000s, with Alt (in Kelts, 2006) further stating that this phenomenon appeared to have run its course by the end of the 2000s. This provides a demographic aged between 20 and 35, which may have been more exposed to cool perceptions of Japan that could have influenced their decision to subsequently relocate to the country. This demographic framework sets the contextual backdrop for subsequent interviews, conducted over the course of a month, with seven international students from the United States, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and the Netherlands while studying in Japan. These interviews were supported by a guide that included several broad topics which were expanded into a wider selection of points for further elaboration. While efforts were made to achieve a balanced group for interviews, constraints in the selection and interviewing process, primarily due to timing, resulted in a predominantly male participant group.

The respondents noted that their initial interest in Japan stemmed from exposure to pop culture, primarily anime, music, and film, but stated this early influence didn't significantly shape later interests. For most, Japanese culture was a latent presence until a defining moment brought it to the forefront, prompted by specific events or interests. Regarding their lives in Japan, the participants held a mostly positive and balanced perception, finding similarities with their home countries that normalised their views, which were further enhanced by regular interactions with Japanese peers. The interviews underscored the substantial impact of anglophone perceptions in perpetuating the notion of Japan as weird or unusual, reaching beyond natively English-speaking countries. Despite only three participants having native anglophone backgrounds, all described negative perceptions of Japan portrayed in English language media and online. These depictions often omitted context and highlighted stereotypically unusual aspects of the country, which the respondents perceived as a dismissal based on a preconceived sense of weirdness justified by perceived cultural and linguistic distinctions from Euro-American norms.

Nevertheless, the respondents admitted to being susceptible to these perceptions, with one participant acknowledging that their image of Japan had been shaped by stereotypical views, while others admitted being more receptive to negative perspectives before their initial arrival as a means of tempering expectations. Despite this, the interviewees largely dismissed prevalent stereotypical depictions, opting instead for more meaningful and personal encounters with the nation and its culture.

Participants' perceptions of Japan

The respondents outlined various aspects of Japan as a country or its culture that they either personally considered cool or were more widely recognised as such. Several participants found the perceived divergence of Japan from Euro-American culture and daily life cool, particularly its convenience culture, urban nightlife, and the absence of a Euro-American presence in mainstream media. They also felt that Japan was more socially accepting of individuals openly expressing hobbies or interests in public when compared to their home countries. Other participants considered Japan's perceived technological advancement and the integration of technology into daily life cool, citing examples such as the rapid development of consumer electronics, the Shinkansen, and Japan's advanced manufacturing capabilities. While acknowledging technological gaps, such as the prevalence of cash and slow adoption of digital services, and recognising these perceptions were slightly outdated, they believed progress has quietly continued behind the scenes,

despite not being overtly present in daily life.

Japan's enigmatic and relatively secluded nature, both culturally and geographically, was also considered cool by some interviewees. They highlighted that the country's self-imposed distance from Euro-American culture, coupled with the limited accessibility of Japanese content abroad, reinforced its cool appeal. One respondent had observed that individuals with a deep interest in Japanese pop culture often came from lower income backgrounds and suggested that the perceived unattainability of visiting Japan due to its high cost likely made the country more appealing. Two participants additionally noted that the more weird and overtly sexualised aspects of Japanese culture were often seen as cool. They emphasised how a focus on the sexually explicit aspects of Japanese culture and media within stereotypical perceptions not only reinforces the fetishisation of the country, but also leads to implicit assumptions that these elements are more widespread than they truly are. One respondent proposed that these cultural outliers might be intentionally emphasised to attract foreigners who specifically seek out these more unusual elements.

Japaneseness and cool

The interviews overwhelmingly highlighted the strong association between coolness and the inherent Japanese properties of the country's cultural exports. The respondents stated they were attracted to the Japaneseness of certain cultural products and the way the country adapted foreign cultural elements, but struggled to articulate why these processes were cool. They suggested that the close link between Japan's cultural output and national identity reinforced the perception that the country and its culture are inherently cool, encompassing non-native Japanese cultural outputs such as cars, technology, animation, and food. They emphasised that the strong presence of Japanese values was a key factor in in both their recognition and quality, further strengthening the link between Japaneseness and desirability. The respondents strongly criticised Iwabuchi's (2002) claim that the "cultural odour" of Japanese products and media is intentionally removed for international appeal, noting the negative connotations of the term "odour", and arguing that it portrayed Japaneseness as something detrimental that required removal. These sentiments indicate that the exclusivity and distinctiveness of Japanese cultural exports reinforces a sense of coolness which sets Japan apart from the rest of the world.

Despite these convictions, the interviewees expressed strong criticism towards the Japanese government's promotion of "Cool Japan". They described negative associations in their home countries regarding an intense attraction to Japanese pop culture and questioned whether this amounted to a "genuine interest" in Japanese culture. While some asserted that pop culture is a valid aspect of contemporary Japan on par with its traditional culture, others viewed the fixation on pop culture as a superficial interest in an idealised version of the country which lacked deeper understanding. The participants largely felt that the Japanese government's attempt to broaden the appeal of its pop culture resulted in a shift from niche and desirable to commercialised and decidedly uncool. They criticised the government's approach, particularly in response to the Korean Wave, as sluggish and focused excessively on promoting a superficial image, rather than actively supporting the export and distribution of Japanese pop culture. Instead, they argued the government should have encouraged the organic growth of the pop culture industry through increased funding, distribution, and accessibility, prompting more meaningful engagements with the country through its pop culture.

Motivations for moving to Japan

The participants were passionate about many diverse aspects of Japanese culture but emphasised

that their motivation to move to the country driven by a desire to engage comprehensively with its culture. Learning or perfecting the Japanese language was a key motivator, with the respondents viewing proficiency as essential for adapting to daily life in Japan and a means of deepening their existing interests in Japanese culture, such as history, politics, and literature. Some interviewees admitted they were initially attracted to Japan's perceived differences, considering it an escape from their usual environments, but later recognised the inaccuracy of these perceptions and did not consider them motivating factors.

While popular culture played a role in their initial exposure to Japanese culture, the respondents did not feel it affected their later decisions to move to Japan, nor did it remain prominent in their continued interest in the country. Rather, they appeared more interested in experiencing the lived reality of Japan through what they personally considered cool about the country, rather than being influenced by prevailing perceptions in their home countries or pop culture.

Their deeper understanding of daily life in Japan was most evident while discussing their future intentions to live and work in the country, expressing a hesitant interest in moving only if they were confident it aligned with their long-term career goals. The participants saw no value in pursuing jobs aimed at foreigners, such as English teaching, or which were unrelated to their skill set, solely to stay in Japan. They also found Japan's strict work culture highly discouraging, preferring instead to either work in a foreign company operating in Japan, or be based in their home countries with the ability to travel regularly for business.

Conclusion

Despite the continued dissemination of Orientalist depictions, through the recent focus on cool and unusual aspects of Japanese culture, this study suggests that prevailing notions of Japan's coolness had minimal effect on the participants' perceptions, which were more shaped by personal interests and experiences in Japan. It should be noted that this attraction is not entirely free from the historical influences of Orientalism and othering that have traditionally shaped Euro-American perceptions of the country. Individuals with a deeper understanding and more practical exposure to Japanese culture still linked its perceived coolness and broader appeal to these perspectives but refrained from actively embracing or perpetuating them. However, their primary motivation stemmed from a desire to enrich their experiences, particularly through language learning, enabling more meaningful engagement with Japan's culture and people, which played a pivotal role in their decision to live and study in the country. Popular culture, including anime, manga, and other cool aspects of Japanese culture, might have spurred the participants' initial interest in Japan, but did not have a significant impact on their desires to move to the country. Indeed, they strongly criticised the constructed concept of "Cool Japan" and the focus placed on superficial aspects of its culture, which they believed deepened the disconnect between the imagined and lived realities of the country.

This study has attempted to navigate challenges presented by orientalist perceptions, by paying attention to personal motivations, biases, and avoiding terminology that oversimplified cultural nuances. Its scope and limitations, including the preference for a more balanced gender distribution and a deeper exploration of individuals immersed in Japanese pop culture, present opportunities for future research to further explore the relationship between perceptions, motivations, and the evolving perceptions of Japanese culture.

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Perception of Hierarchy Among Student Activists in the Thai Youth Movement 2020-2022

LARA AINA FRANKEN

The 2020-2022 youth driven protests marked a significant upheaval in Thai society. Sparked initially by the dissolution of the oppositional party Future Forward and the disappearance of political exile Wanchalearm Satsaksit, they quickly expanded to demand far broader political reforms – including reforming the monarchy. This paper explores the societal implications of the protests, in particularly in challenging hierarchical structures. While previous research has focused on the political and economic factors and drivers, this paper argues that the demands by the youth movement aim at deeper societal reform. Despite some success, the movement's internal dynamics reveal the persistence of hierarchical structures, highlighting the challenges in dismantling long existing and ingrained social norms and structures.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Meaning-making, Social movement

The protest that rattled the streets of Bangkok in 2020 marked a significant disruption in Thai society, despite street demonstrations not being a novel phenomenon. While students had led the anti-dictatorship protests in the 1970s, contemporary Thai politics had also been shaped by the broadly middle-class democracy movement of the 1990s, and the early 2000s had seen massive street clashes between royalists [yellow-] and supporters of Pheu Thai [red shirts]. The resurgence of student protests after a four-decade long hiatus was remarkable. Spearheaded by university and high school students, the protests were rooted in a multitude of grievances raging from political disenfranchisement to economic hardships. Initially sparked by the forced disbandment of the popular Future Forward Party and later fuelled by the disappearance of activist and political exile Wanchalearm Satsaksit, these protests rapidly evolved to encompass broader demands, including calls for the resignation of then Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and even more radical monarchical reforms – a drastic departure from all previous protest movements. It is already clear that these protests exerted profound influence in Thai society. As of 2024, we no longer see large protests as activist fatigue spread.

This paper sets out to shed light on an aspect of the protests yet to be discussed in the scholarly literature. It examines the societal implications of protests, particularly in challenging hierarchical structures, as well as attempts to understand how student activists have perceived these structures to impact them in their everyday life and their protest activties. Prior research has focused on the role of social media, drivers and aims of the young protestors, high schoolers participation, the movement in the larger political picture, as well as some of the economic drivers of the protests.

Sawaros and Panarat (2023), Kanokrat (2021) and Bollotta (2023) focus on high school pupils' participation within the movement. Sawaros and Panarat (2023) find that high schoolers' motivation and justification to participate was driven by their own lived experience, yet they were often hindered by adults in their lives, be it parents or teachers, often chastised or even punished. Kanokrat (2021) writes about members of the Bad Student Group, who she argues were driven by the authoritarianism found in their education system. Bolotta (2023) perceives the movement as a struggle against age-patriarchy, arguing that engaged siblinghood is used by activists to counter traditional father-child citizen relations. While this article agrees with seeing the movement as an anti-hierarchical struggle, based in seniority, it will find that breaking through long and deeply engrained structures may take more time. Similarly to Bolotta (2023), McCargo (2021) describes the student protest as having created a generation divide in the understanding of power and legitimacy. Aim (2021) and Janjira (2021) focus on the role of social media in the protests, with Aim (2021) finding that Twitter played a pivotal role in creating collective narratives, as well as a tool for mobilisation (Janjira, 2021). Wichuta (2023) adds that outside the digital realm, protests, and rallies became places of education, where the participants could inform themselves about problems within Thai society.

As main drivers of the protests, the literature

has identified economic reasons and well as dissatisfaction with the political leadership. While Sawaros and Panarat (2022) identify economic inequality, social injustice, and a flawed democratic system as drivers of politicization among students, Chyatat (2023) defines the movement as a primarily politico-economic force, where the youth and students have been advocating for a more egalitarian version of Thai capitalism. Despite the economic grievances playing a large role within the youth movement, this article finds and argues that the demands go much deeper, asking for reforms of structures inherent in society. This article aims to understand how student activists perceive hierarchy in their daily lives and how they challenge perceived hierarchical societal structures through their actions. The Thai youth tried to change more than politics through their protests and rather redefine the societal structure. However, the article also finds that these structures are not easily dismantled and remained within the movement itself.

Methodology

The article is based on the research and data collected for my master's dissertation. At the core this article tries to understand the perceptions and active meaning-making of young political activists. Hence, qualitative semi-structed interviews were deemed as the most appropriate approach, as this places the perceptions of the interviewees at the core of the analytical process (Bryman 2016 470-472). Seven in-depth interviews were conducted during January – March 2022 with student activists from the following Universities and groups: Thammasat, Chulalongkorn and Mahidol Universities and the organisations Free Youth, Bad Student, Dome Revolution, Salaya for Democracy, United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, and Mahidol Coalition. All students interviewed were chosen based on their active role within the protests, as they contributed to the output of these protest organizations and actively shaped the demands posed by the leadership. The students were between the ages 20 – 25. The interviewees were anonymised and provided alternative nicknames due to the sensitive nature of their comments and work, namely: Tawan and Kla from Dome Revolution, Namtan from Salaya for Democracy, Bow from Bad Student, Kratai from Mahidol Coalition, Phut from United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, and Tangmo from Free Youth. In addition, the analysis has been updated with observations made after my return to Bangkok in August 2023 to work at Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts. While more interviews would have benefited the research, time constraints and the rise of Covid19 cases and the ongoing trials of many activists during the fieldwork period, made that impossible.

Thai Youth Movement as Social Movement

This article positions itself in the nexus of social movement theory. It follows the proposal of Weiss and Aspinall (2012) who see all student protests inherently as a social movement. They argue that since mobilisation of students through their identity as students does not happen automatically, they are fundamentally a social movement. Student movements, they argue are not born in a vacuum, but rather their identity as between childhood and adulthood makes them uniquely perceptive for mobilisation (Weiss & Aspinall, 2012, 5). A social movement hereby should be understood according to the definition by Snow (2004, 11) as "collective challenges to systems or structures of authority." Undoubtably, the Thai youth movement can be defined as such, as it has challenged political as well as social authority, in forms of mass protests, flash mobs, and online protests. In the case of the Thai youth movement, their experience of political oppression and lack of freedom of expression under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) [2014-2019] were the breeding ground for their politicisation.

Social movements, when viewed from a constructivist and culturalist perspective, as proposed by Kurzman (2008), are active agents in challenging dominant meaning structures. This approach aligns with broader sociological theory that sees humans as agents who actively construct categories of meaning to make sense of the world (Durkheim 1912). Kurzman (2008) understands social movements as "arenas of collective contestation over interpretation". This happens in the process of defining and contesting societal issues (Lehrner and Allen 2008). Events and activities do not inherently carry meaning but acquire it through collaborative processes of interpretation by humans. As meaning is shaped by how right and wrong is conceptualised collectively, social movements can challenge established hegemonic values. This article investigates how student activists have imbued their activities in challenging hierarchy with meaning and how they understand and value their actions.

Through the lens of Thai social order

Since this paper is interested in hierarchical relations within Thai society, a brief investigation of the former is necessary. Sirima, Rehbein & Supang (2020) propose that today's structure is informed by both pre-capitalist and capitalist hierarchies. Modern social hierarchies are rooted in the traditional *sakdina* system (comparable to feudalism) and Thai religious philosophy as well as a capitalist class system. They propose that there are five distinct social classes in Thai society: "the marginalized, the labouring class, the lower middle class, upper middle class and the upper class" (Sirima et al., 2020, p. 511, pp. 493-94). Yet it should be noted that financial means are not the only indicator for class belonging, but rather social standing of professions and one's personal background have defining characteristics (Sophorntavy, 2017, pp. 21-35). *Sakdina,* the service nobility which ruled Siam from 17th century onwards, laid out clear rules for social interactions between individuals (Baker and Pasuk, 2014, p.15; Sirima et al. 2020, p. 495). One's place within the very strict hierarchical order was pre-determined by one's birth and resulting access to land. Even though the system was abolished in 1935, remnants are still seen and felt today (Somsamai 1987, p. 56; Sophorntavy, 2017, p. 8). Jackson (2020, p. 18) explains that all Thais learn how to behave and speak in particular settings according to the notion of kala-thesa (time-space). This notion dictates how one ought to behave and speak (Sophornthavy, 2017, pp. 52-53, 683-684). According to Klausner (2000, pp. 315-18), the way a Thai individual stands, walks, sits, and sleeps is influenced by their proximity or social distance to others. Bolotta (2021) describes it as the constant sorting in *phu yaai* (big people) and *phu noi* (small people), in which *phu noi* should be respectful and grateful towards *phu yaai*. It should also be acknowledged that in Thailand the social order and sorting is not confined to the private and work sphere but expands to the state. It is the Thai monarch who spearheads the societal order (Paribatra 2003, p. 293).

According to the Hofstede Model this strict hierarchical order is accepted by Thai society at large (Hofstede Insights, 2022). It should further be noted that conformity, order and hierarchy are highly valued ideals in Thai society (Prajak, 2012, p. 241). Young (2021, p. 20) argues that this is rooted in Thai Buddhism which teaches obedience and a greater acceptance of a given societal role. Sophorntavy (2017, p. 83) underlines this by arguing that a person's social standing and value is determined by their perceived possession of *bun* [good merit] and *khwaamdii* [good virtue]. It might be this widely perceived acceptance of the social order that caused the public outcry over the taboo-breaking by youth activists.

Perception of hierarchy and the activists

As Weiss and Aspinall (2012) put forward, social movements cannot happen in a vacuum, hence

understanding the activists' backgrounds is necessary. The protestors fell largely in the age group born between 1997 to 2007. Hence, their childhood was shaped by rapid urbanisation and globalisation. The proliferation of the internet, as well as the advent of social media, severely changed the control of the Thai state over information consumption. According to Baker and Pasuk (2022) Thai youth has some of the highest social media penetration in the world. In addition, their childhood had been shaped by a highly volatile political landscape, conflicts between red-shirts and yellow-shirts shaped the early 2000s, and two military coups resulted in constrained democratic spaces (2006, 2014). The older badge of the activist's cohort came of age during the years of the NCPO (2014-2019) regime. Meaning that many of them grew up in an environment that was highly politicised. It should be noted that the worsening of the economic situation most surely influenced in how the ruling competency and societal situation has been viewed by the youth protestors (Chyatat, 2023). While the socio-economic background of the protestors is generally diverse, as for example the Thalu Gas group members coming from lower-class backgrounds (Anusorn, 2021), the interviewees in this article are mainly from upper-middle to lower upper-class backgrounds, that have lived abroad or had exposure to foreign media. Notably, student activists involved in academic and operational aspects of the movement demonstrate a strong awareness of academic political literature and external perspectives on their political situation. It should however be noted that not only university students are aware of the political situation, but high school students were radicalised through research on the monarchy and the government for classroom essays (Kanokrat, 2021). Many of the interviewees voiced that they were politicised upon returning to Thailand from abroad and contrasted their home country with their firsthand and bodily experience of both freedom of expression and freedom from strict hierarchical societal order.

For the interviewees hierarchy influenced and impacted every aspect of their lives, spanning from the private sphere to the public, making it inseparable from personal and political relations. Phut articulated: "*Hierarchy is at every place, from the beginning of our lives, in the family, in our education system*." Tawan concentrated more on the social relations: "*relationships like family, even institutions, the places we go, the office, the university, they [institutions] have a hierarchy, that can separate one by power relations*." All interactions between people are mediated through hierarchical awareness and social distance is measured through indicators such as age, seniority, or class. For most interviewees the social distance this created was perceived as harmful or negative. The only exception was Kla, who voiced that it could also be a useful tool for navigating interactions:

> *"Some of its impacts are not too bad, for example in our organisation [...], the younger refers to the older one using pii. We know that it's a legacy of a traditional society, but we don't perceive it as something hurtful. It's a way of paying respect to your friends."*

Despite his interpretation of hierarchical siblings' relations with his peers as more positive, he strongly opposed having to show deference when it came to his teachers. His denial to use honorifics with his teachers, either *khruu* (school) or *ajarn* (university), made him unpopular with the staff. Tawan shared this experience, refusing these honorifics and asking critical questions about the monarchy and government got him in trouble. While hierarchy is not uniquely Thai, the activists perceived the expectation of "blind obedience" as harmful.

Several of the interviewees shared how they felt that hierarchy had shaped the way they thought and expressed themselves. They voiced that the strict hierarchical system had hindered their development of critical thinking. It had kept them from making independent choices critically engaging with their surroundings. Namtan directly connected

the lack of freedom of expression to the hierarchical structure. On the other hand, Kratai related it to being taught how to ask questions:

> "We *were taught to not ask questions and to question people who are older than us, and so we don't really get to be critical of things.*"

For her, the differences between US American students and Thai students that she experienced during exchange studies illustrated this point. US American students were much freer to pose questions whereas her upbringing had made her hesitant, hindering her from asking any herself. Traditionally in Thai classrooms asking questions is not part of the lesson plan, let alone questioning what is being said or taught. Through the societal structure, students are taught to respect their teachers and refrain from talking back. This creates learning environments in which asking questions is not common (Raktham, 2008, pp. 18-19). However, new generations of student and teachers are slowly changing this practice. In my experience teaching at the Department of Western Languages at Chulalongkorn University, it takes students about three months to start asking questions freely.

It is important to note that noncompliance to hierarchical structures can lead to physical punishment. For Bow, this threat of violence creates unsafe learning spaces and takes away the freedom of choice. Everything, she proclaimed is decided for her. "*It limits our choices and they [elders and teachers] think for us*" and "*when we say something against what the authority wants, they may get violently punished*." As the Thailand Development Research Institute reports about 60 percent of students have experienced physical violence during their education (Thunhavich, 2020). To avoid harm, adhering to norms both in speech and body language have long been a means to keep safe. However, physical violence is not the only harm that students may experience in educational settings. A study from 2021 shows that 85% of nearly 400 students experienced sexual harassment from their seniors during orientation (Piyathida & Rhein, 2022). The higher social standing of seniors and teachers fosters an environment in which sexual harassment and victim blaming is normalised. It is no wonder that ending physical violence and sexual harassment in educational settings became a main driver and recurring theme in the protests. Verita Sriratana (2022) laments that feminist and LGBTQ matters have long been pushed back by male protestors by reasoning that democracy had to come first, neglecting that equality and democracy go hand in hand. It should also be noted that when it comes to hierarchy, the private and the public cannot be separated, neither can hierarchy be separated from power.

Contestation of hierarchy

The scholarly debate has largely focused on the political and economic demands directed towards the government and the monarchy. While the voices of the movement have been quite diverse, the opposition against the societal structure is an overarching theme.

Phut explained it as: "*the current movement is not just the movement about the king, they [speaking about other youth protestors] are challenging authority and hierarchy, the structure of Thailand, the big picture is the opposition to hierarchy.*" All the interviewees had a shared this desire for far reaching and fundamental change. Kla depicted it as: "*They [speaking about other youth protestors] even try to change the meaning of the nation, they want to it to mean the people, to mean themselves, their lives, they want to replace the position of the people.*" He hereby placed the challenge of hierarchy within a larger struggle over who gets to define what it means to be Thai – the notion of Thainess. Hence, Kla saw the movement as a struggle over hegemony. For both Phut and Kla, this had already been partial successful. Through the protest the youth reclaimed the power of defining Thainess: They explained that what it means to be Thai was

now in their hands. Furthermore, through breaking the proverbial glass and pulling the monarchy in the spotlight, the protestors brought the unsayable to the centre stage. At the moment it seems to have sparked an irreversible change in society. Unlike other protest movements, such as the 1973 student protests, or the 1992 Bloody May which both ended in the removal of an authoritarian Prime Minister, this movement has had little direct political impact. However, their success might be measured by the societal norms that they have shattered. Furthermore, it should be noted that Move Forward party, the incarnation of Future Forward (which dissolution sparked the first protests in 2020), came out as winner of the general election in 2023. This indicates that the youth have strongly influenced the voting behaviour of their parents. Prajak (2023) proposes that a new time has dawned for Thai politics. McCargo (2023) even divides Thai politics into a before and after these protests.

The challenge to social habit and societal order can also be observed is the defiance of hierarchy through language. If *kala-thesa* is the rule book that identifies which speech is appropriate in different contexts (Jackson, 2020), then this has been openly defied by activists. Using rude speech and dropping honorifics, has been a method wildly used. A change of register and language may seem insignificant at first, especially in comparison to big requests that have been made by the activists. Language is however a powerful instrument and in terms of meaning-making it is a crucial signifier. It is culture and language, both together and separately that influences how humans imbue meaning on their surrounding and their actions (Geertz, 1973; Mead 1934; Parsons, 1951; Rabiah, 2019). In the movement, changing how to address someone has become a low-key and low-stake method of disruption and defiance. Changing the use of language was the method mostly used by the interviewees to describe how they would challenge hierarchy. For most of them using crude, informal speech, or denying honorifics was a form of rebellion to the system. In a society where polite and appropriate language is regarded as fundamental, this is a radical move. For Namtam, it also had to do a lot with the question of who deserves respect. In her eyes, the Prime Minister and the King had lost all respect, therefore they had lost the right to be referred or referenced to in a certain manner. As a form of protests, the youth used crude or rude language to talk about and to them. The discourse of paying and earning respect was an overarching theme. Deference, most of them found, is not a birthright but must be earned.

Hierarchy in the movement

Despite this movement outwardly challenging hierarchy, several of the interviewees observed that protest groups were stuck in the very structures they were trying to challenge. Namtam described that when they would meet, seniority was of utmost importance. Those who were older or had been activists longer demanded to be paid respect and to be followed by younger or newer activists. She stated that it was never directly voiced but through engrained social patterns implicitly expected. "*The older protestors, they would not directly say it, but for how Thai people have been taught, since they were young, they automatically assume that this person knows more than me.*" She experienced that when they met in their spaces, they would fall back into taught behaviour structures based in hierarchy and seniority, despite the movement trying to undermine these structures. Kratai shared the experience. She described that when different groups of the movement came together, those who had the larger social media following or those who had been in existence for a longer period could wield more power over the decision-making process. She was left with the feeling that her opinion mattered less than that of others, that the opinion of smaller groups was less valuable than that of larger groups. This means that despite the movement trying to contest hierarchy within the larger society, within

their own structures it was still highly present. No matter the context, *phu yai* and p*hu noi* remain a presence. Bolotta (2023), however observes that traditional hierarchy structures have been reworked, and it's the activists experience over age or gender that matter mostly. He declares the youth struggle as engaged siblinghood against the paternally structured state.

Conclusion

Despite the movement trying to disrupt and dismantle the social order, changing a societal structure is a slow process. Hierarchy and seniority remain a defining factor of the everyday lived experiences in Thailand. It dictates ways of thinking, behaving and acting. To conform to ideals of *kala-thesa* is to keep mentally and physically safe. This movement should not only be seen as a movement with demands directed towards the government, monarchy and the economy, but one that wants to change the structural inequalities and social norms – a radical challenge to Thailand's moral code. Without a doubt some of the demands and activists in this movement don't stop short from demanding and hoping for a revolution (in the context of the hierarchical order – a cultural revolution) that changes the relations youth experience in their everyday life. While the big flashmob protest have vanished and exhaustion has spread among the activists, their political frustration is no smaller than it was in 2020. That Move Forward was hindered from forming a government in 2023 left many with a bitter taste. Nonetheless, smaller protests were held, and youth activists voiced their frustration with the flaws of the election system. Social change is slow, so while the movement itself conflicts with social hierarchies, small changes can already be felt. While some changes pre-date the movement, it can be argued that the mass protests accelerated the change. In its most radical interpretation, the movement can also be seen as challenging the meaning of Thainess. As hierarchy and deference have been fundamental to Thainess, how exactly the young generation perceives or imagines Thainess however, is yet to be explored.

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Human Rights Expectations for an EU-Thailand Free Trade Agreement

SIMON KAACK

There are an increasing number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) established between the European Union (EU) and single member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With the EU's growing emphasis on human rights within supply chains, the analysis of recent and emerging agreements is a valuable indicator for the implementation of the EU's value-based foreign trade policy and which obstacles to this exist. This study examines the case of a potential EU-Thailand FTA through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from ministries, civil society organisations (CSOs), trade unions, and academia. The article argues that EU FTAs prioritise and highlight various types of human rights, of which health, labour and environmental standards are the most important for an agreement with Thailand. Additionally, the EU appears to be seen as a credible advocate for human rights by Thai stakeholders; however, the extent of its impact and willingness to adapt depend on the official function the respective parties hold and the interests of the institutions they represent. Therefore, this article contributes to research on social and environmental perspectives in Thailand, and sheds light on value-driven EU policies and the implications of norms within global trade structures.

Keywords: ASEAN, environmental rights, health rights, labour rights

Southeast Asia and Differing Values in the Spotlight

In recent decades, the significance of international supply chains has experienced a notable increase, with many countries in the Global South that have made the manufacturing of goods and their export a central pillar of their economies. However, this globalisation of production also risks the transfer of negative impacts from importing to producing countries. These risks encompass human rights and environmental concerns such as insufficient health measures, labour issues, and environmental deterioration. Growing inequalities within and between nations and the increasingly international nature of national economies act as both drivers and obstacles for human rights efforts (Moore, 2004).

Free trade agreements (FTAs), in this regard, encompass significant implications that extend beyond economic and technical matters, by involving fundamental value questions. Some observers argue that human rights are often treated as a bargaining tool in FTA negotiations, primarily influenced by Western states (Franca-Filho, Lixinski, and Giupponi, 2014; Katsumata, 2009). A notable illustration can be found within the European Union (EU), where the connection between trade and investment policies and human rights is growing stronger (Micara, 2019). The discussion often revolves around the concepts of universalism and relativism, in which human rights are perceived to be shaped by specific cultural, religious, or historical contexts (Ignatieff, 2001; Langford, 2018).

Ongoing debates within the EU have prompted a closer examination of the practical implementation of the EU's value-based foreign trade policy. Given the increasing number of FTAs between the EU and ASEAN countries and the EU's heightened focus on human rights in supply chains, the analysis of recent and emerging agreements between the two regions becomes a valuable indicator.

The EU has, thus far, established FTAs with two ASEAN member states, namely Singapore and Vietnam. Both are focusing on comprehensive trade in goods and services, government procurement, dispute resolution, and intellectual property protection. The EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (EUSFTA) became operational on November 21, 2019, while the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) took effect on August 1, 2020. Environmental standards are integral to both FTAs, with a specific focus on implementing International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions to be ratified in the on the side of Vietnam in the EVFTA.

Similarly, ongoing negotiations for an EU-Indonesia FTA have been underway since 2016, while talks for an EU-Malaysia FTA, initiated in 2010, were put on hold in 2012. Small-scale discussions for a relaunch have occurred since Malaysia's new government took office in December 2022. Additionally, negotiations between the EU and the Philippines began in 2015 to establish an agreement comparable to those with Singapore and Vietnam. After the second round in February 2017, negotiations were temporarily suspended. However, in July 2023, both

parties expressed intent to resume talks, marking progress in scoping discussions by the end of the same year.

Thailand instead is aiming to conclude an FTA deal within two years. The initial negotiation round took place in September of 2023 in Brussels, with Thailand hosting the second round in January 2024 in Bangkok, targeting completion in 2025. The negotiations span 19 subcommittees, covering various areas such as trade in goods, rules of origin, customs procedures, trade facilitation, trade remedies, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures. According to some of the interviewees, informal meetings were held with civil society representatives on potential issues of concern relating to an FTA with the EU in the run-up to the negotiations.

This article aims to provide an initial overview of the human rights challenges within the EU's FTA negotiations with Thailand, by investigating potential focus areas in an EU–Thailand FTA. Further, it gathers perceptions among Thai stakeholders on these focus areas and the EU as a human rights actor. The article is based on eight semi-structured interviews with varying lengths, conducted both in-person and online with various stakeholders, including Thai government officials involved in the FTA negotiations, academics, trade unionists, and representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs).

This broad participation is crucial since, to develop a multi-faceted picture of the research aim, the inclusion of actors in the process is necessary. Merry (2017, p. 141) points out that 'human rights reports rely on individual narratives'. The interview questionnaire consists of three parts. First, the introductory part, which provides background information on the participant. The second part, with condition- and outcome- oriented questions regarding human right types and their supposed inclusion in FTA negotiations target standardised answers, which allow for a general analysis. Third, further individual information can be added by the interviewee in an open-ended question part. Simultaneously, the design aims to represent the mix of global intentions and indicators for global governance, such as human rights guidelines in trade relations, and their local implementation.

However, the selected interviewees determine the research design as power-centred, examining voices of those already receiving public attention, regardless of its limits. In the context of the selected topic, elite interviews emerge as a valuable and appropriate methodology due to the constrained nature of participation in negotiations and decision-making processes in Thailand. Notably, this study incorporates perspectives from civil society leaders who actively engaged in campaigns during previous FTA negotiations with the EU. The chosen civil society interviewees primarily focus on health and environmental rights, a deliberate selection reflecting the distinct concerns of this subset, as opposed to union leaders who are more attuned to labour rights and working conditions. In addition, the inclusion of two representatives from different ministries provides a comprehensive view of the negotiation landscape, as both are actively working with their EU counterparts surrounding a potential FTA.

The concerns articulated by the stakeholders in relation to a FTA encompass a spectrum of issues such as health, environment, migrant workers, and the welfare of women and children. These concerns are derived not only from a quantitative ranking obtained through interviews but also from the nuanced insights provided in open-ended responses and the specific working priorities of the stakeholders. Consequently, the article is strategically organised to prioritise and delve into these dimensions, offering a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted implications of the FTA on health, environmental sustainability, migrant labour, and the well-being of women and children. The study thus aims taking a perspective from below but falls short of the provision of real-life examples by those affected, for example factory workers and their needs.

Human Rights in Trade and the EU's Approach

This article defines social and environmental standards as practical implementations of specific human rights. For instance, social standards commonly encompass aspects such as minimum wages, while the right to a living wage is enshrined in multiple ILO Conventions (Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020). Recently, the recognition of a clean and healthy environment as a human right has garnered increased international attention, for instance within a UN resolution that emphasises the importance of a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (UN, 2023). Additionally, the significance of the right to health enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in shaping global standards has been steadily growing as well (OHCHR & WHO, 2008). Equally, this has been raised in connection to intellectual property rights and access to medicines on highest levels, including the special rapporteur on the right to health (Grover, 2009).

Nevertheless, given the absence of comprehensive global regulations on trade and human rights, the focus is increasingly shifting towards bilateral forums, with the EU and the US in the lead (Nessel & Orbie, 2022). Hereby, Cole observes a transformation in the EU's approach, with a shift from a regulatory stance to a conditional human rights approach that links all economic activities to improvements in human rights (Cole, 2022). This conditionality extends across various economic areas, including development cooperation, aid (Cole, 2022); trade preferences for less developed countries within the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) (Garcia, 2022); and FTAs (McKenzie, 2018).

This strategy becomes particularly intriguing as Southeast Asia gains prominence and attracts the attention not only of great power China but also Western industrialised nations (Adriaensen & Postnikov, 2022). The region is experiencing significant economic growth and ASEAN officials are courted for cooperation and support in international organisations (Bhasin & Kumar, 2022). Many ASEAN officials consider the EU a model for their own institutional development (Chen & Yang, 2022). For instance, the EU's efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices in Thailand have caused institutional improvements and are hence considered a success of "Normative Power Europe" (Kadfak & Linke, 2021). This success is also attributed to the EU's market power and leverage in pressuring supplier states (Kunnamas, 2020).

However, Western normative credibility appears fragile, especially when considering discriminatory structures within their own territories (Regilme, 2019). Further, the EU faces heightened competition from trade rivals such as China, which has established itself as a global power with different normative value sets (Brown and Winter, 2021). Moreover, the EU faces additional value challenges as many ASEAN states consistently rank poorly in global human rights assessments (Hutt, 2023). Thailand for instance is ranked 106 out of 180 countries according to the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2023). The Prayut government that served until September 2023 has also implemented crackdown measures on protests and is associated with various human rights violations, as documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2023). V-Dem ranks Thailand at 124 and cites a "surge in autocratization" (V-Dem, 2023, p.11) that has led to the country's regression into a closed autocracy. Instances of physical attacks by police and security forces are reported regularly (Freedom House, 2023).

Abuses are also evident within the business sector. While trade union independence and the right to bargain collectively theoretically exist, many workers remain non-unionised. Employers use anti-union practices, such as lockouts against union members, and non-Thai nationals and migrant workers are prohibited from forming trade unions (Freedom House, 2023).

Based on these preconditions, the article aims to analyse the extent to which stakeholder perceptions in Thailand align with the EU's human rights approach. It draws upon a theoretical framework that explores the interests of free trade and human rights, identifies potential contradictions between the two, and aims to address these contradictions through argumentation. In the pursuit of comprehensive insights, the methodological approach employed encompassed both structured comparative scaling questions, delineated by pre-defined literature-based categories, and open-ended sections, fostering a nuanced exploration of participants' perspectives. The study involves eight semi-structured expert interviews with relevant stakeholders from Thai ministries, trade unions, civil society organisations (CSOs), and academia. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the interviewees. Further, the interviews were exclusively conducted in English without translation, enhancing the reliability of the data obtained. However, this approach may pose barriers for non-English speakers, disabling their participation in the interview process.

Human Rights Interests Along Domestic Political Divides

The Right to Health as a Thai- specific FTA case

One aspect that has received limited attention in the literature but is highly relevant in the context of Thailand is intellectual property rights (IPR), particularly regarding medicines. In the Thai case, the focus is on medications for HIV and AIDS patients, with an estimated 520,000 people that live with HIV (UNAIDS, 2022). In relation to the Doha Declaration negotiated in the World Trade Organization (WTO), a clash of interests arises from the need for affordable generic drugs among the Thai population on one hand, and the business interests of European pharmaceutical companies and their IPR on the other. The Thai status quo refers to the government's support of local drug manufacturers, which allows state hospitals to bypass expensive purchases from Western companies. There are concerns that such arrangements could be undermined:

> "At present we have, a universal health coverage scheme, a 100% from the government. And it allows the poor or even the middle class with assisted treatment at low cost. So it's very crucial as it's why every time 10 years ago people don't have to get them up when they go to hospital or even you know the poor can go to hospital and get the treatment for free. This never happened in the past" (Interview 3, 2022).[1]

This fear is mainly fed by experience with other FTAs, but also the feeling that health concerns are not considered a relevant issue for the EU. The interviewee complains about a one-sided EU focus on civil and political rights, or what he refers to as "conservative human rights violations" (Interview 3, 2022). In this context, health concerns related to IPR enforcement would not be treated with the relevance they have, especially in Thailand. Rather, he feels that IPR issues are perceived as a trade-off matter. Regarding mediated agency, which can cover the issue in the negotiations, civil society fears do not seem to focus on the Thai side, but rather the EU. This is confirmed by the MOC official, who considers the issue the most important for civil society:

> "In Thailand when you have stakeholder consultations, we have CSOs, but their focus is mainly on IPR, the drops accessions to medicine, or consumer protection (…)" (Interview 1, 2022).

1 In 2002, Thailand achieved universal health coverage through the implementation of the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS), which rapidly extended coverage to 75% of the population within a year, including 18 million previously uninsured individuals. The interviewee refers to this introduction and the subsequent possibility of receiving HIV treatment without facing immense financial pressures. See also: https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/Media.action;jsessionid=YRk-2tX-gYx_X6ZQhYnNkoTbUo4seL11KaiD1jdiDuDGp1qBEa3eo!1393577045?id=11841

The relationship between the Thai state and civil society representation is characterised by ambivalence. On the one hand, there are instances where medical benefits are provided in response to pressure from civil society. However, on the other hand, criticism often goes unnoticed or is suppressed, as seen in situations such as the sudden legalisation of cannabis in 2022 or the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Campbell, 2023).

Consideration of worker diversity for accurate labour rights

Another focal point for negotiations is labour rights. Thailand has significant export segments with human rights challenges. Hence, unionists and CSO representatives primarily argue for potential improvements in standards and empowerment facilitated by the EU. According to one unionist, European buyers should prioritise Thai suppliers who adhere to core labour standards promoted by the EU. Nevertheless, related international standards may at times clash with what many perceive as Thai cultural practices. For example, one commerce ministry official cites child labour regarding potential ignorance of local circumstances:

> "But looking at other aspects like social structure, for example in Thailand or even in Asia, you have a culture of having a lot of children helping in the farms or planting plants. They don't get paid because this is a family business" (Interview 1, 2022).

The perceived cultural inflexibility only partially applies, the ILO distinguishes on the fine line between child labour and light work in agriculture, a complexity equally mirrored by exceptions in the United States (ILO, 2024). In contrast, the EU maintains comparatively stringent regulations on child labour, with no special exemptions afforded to the agricultural sector (Council of the European Union, 1994).

Here, a divide between stakeholders' views on Thailand and hence accurate measures for rights protection becomes apparent. CSO representative, whose work primarily focuses on female home workers[2], hopes that EU certification would have a trickle-down effect on secondary and tertiary labour sectors that otherwise remain marginalised:

> "In our cultures, especially for women, they are flexible and convenient to work at home, because they have to take care of their family. So, they want to work. But treat them in a better way and consider about labour rights standards" (Interview 7, 2023).

A significant aspect to consider in Thailand is the presence of migrant workers from neighbouring countries, who are not permitted to form trade unions. Balancing interests is especially important in FTA negotiations where economic interests are represented vis-à-vis another party. The MOC official describes this supposed confrontation of interests:

> "If you are an entrepreneur and you have a lot of alien labourers working in your company, would you be happy to let them form associations? It's a basic human right but if you put on the hats of the private sector, they would be reluctant. Because they would be afraid of (...) meeting the timeline to deliver the goods" (Interview 1, 2022).

2 Home work in Thailand refers to subcontracted tasks conducted at home, oftentimes by women. Employed by businesses to lower production costs and enhance competitiveness, home workers typically utilise their residences as workplaces, assembling or producing items and delivering them to mediators, brokers, or employers, distinguishing it from direct sale production methods.

The green EU as a beacon of hope for the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment

The third relevant human rights issue touches upon concerns about negative environmental impacts. CSO representative 1, for example, reports negative consequences from Thailand's FTA with Japan and states that "they're dumping all this kind of waste", because "Thailand doesn't have the proper mechanism or regulation to prevent" (Interview 3, 2022). Concerning protection schemes, unionist 1 detects a different mindset on human and environmental rights in EU countries, which he hopes will be transferred to Thailand:

> "Free trade should take considerations of environmental problems more seriously; it should not destroy the environment more and more. But for the environment and human rights, the EU has much more of that than Thailand. (...) I think the Western countries more seriously take care about the environment (...). In Thailand people still destroy the environment" (Interview 5, 2023).

Thai negotiators are aware of this perception, as well as the EU's strong focus on sustainable development and green transition. The MOC official states that the EU is known for demanding unique environment provisions, even compared to other Western countries:

> "So many unique characters which fit in the EU model. Others have some, for example EFTA, but not as much as the EU" (Interview 1, 2022).

Given the strong EU advocacy on the issue and related needs in Thailand, interviewees assess more room for manoeuvre in negotiations on environmental provisions than, for example, political rights. Academic 2 argues in favour of framing overbroad targets environmentally for legal FTA obligations: "When it comes to the right of clean, healthy and sustainable environment, that's a very viable point of entry in negotiation" (Interview 8, 2023). Correspondingly, CSO representative 2 notices a much more credible position compared to other major powers such as the US and China. One signifier is, for example, the displeasure of Thai business representatives:

> "I sometimes even hear from the business sector that they don't like the EU much because the EU forces on human rights issues (...) and I appreciate this. I believe in EU principles, in terms of human rights and climate change. (...) I talk to you based on this belief (...) The EU is better than China and the US" (Interview 7, 2023).

Internal political conflicts as a yardstick for FTA views

Regarding the concrete inclusion of human rights in FTAs, views vary more according to the respective stakeholder roles. Thus, the MFA official regards human rights as one aspect of FTAs, but a rather marginal one:

> "Human rights are important, don't get me wrong. At the moment, I have been involved in a lot of FTA negotiations and I think, at least at this point in time, human rights are not the most important part. And I know that the EU is trying to streamline human rights issues into FTA negotiations, and I understand that and I'm not against. It's just that you can have a chapter or provisions on human rights in an FTA, but that should be secondary" (Interview 2, 2022).

Contrastingly, unionist 2 refers to the often-discussed EU role model character for ASEAN's institutionalisation in human rights:

> "We see the EU as a model because ASEAN as a region cannot be underestimated at this time. And when we talk to ASEAN when it comes to human rights and labour standards, we particularly refer to the standards or what the EU has been doing. So, it has a direct influence on the way that we do our work" (Interview 6, 2023).

However, partial doubts remain about the EU's rights credibility. These particular concern a (lack of) belief in assertiveness and double standards in exchange for economic power. Academic 1, in this regard, focuses on the legal enforcement of potential provisions, while simultaneously also praises the EU's stance on rights violations in China:

> "In practice, it's going to be in the appendix and not really enforced. But at least we can see some developments like the CAI with China. This was the first time the EU decide to suspend an agreement because of those labour slavery trade in Xinjiang, so this is a good sign in terms of protecting labour rights" (Interview 4, 2022).

In the context of EU-Thailand FTA negotiations, many dividing lines within the Thai political economy become clear. Especially, reference was made to the political situation and the weighting of different rights:

> "On both sides, the one who pushed very hard to have this kind of FTA soon is the business or the private sector rather than the general people. (...) And it's what the government wants to hear, so they prefer to gain from the business sector rather than the people in general. That's quite a similarity between Thailand and the EU countries" (Interview 3, 2022).

Another aspect regarding access to FTA negotiations is that of education. Illustratively, this work is based on the ability of interviewees to speak English. Similarly, many of those involved in FTA talks, negotiate in English. This creates massive imbalances in access to information about the status and content of such, as trade unionist 1 describes:

> "We think that it is only accessible by people who understand English or have graduated from university. But workers in Thailand mostly are professionals, they don't speak English and they don't think about free trade policy. This is very far away from them" (Interview 5, 2023).

Evenly, it is an expression of how fragmented Thailand is in terms of educational backgrounds, regional accessibility, capital, and cultural participation. In a society whose political system is primarily divided into an old powerful establishment and working classes deprived of agency, social mobility to the negotiating table is not guaranteed (Kongkirati, 2019).

Unionist 1, when asked if human rights are a Western concept, does not speak from his own perspective, but from those of "Thai people":

> "Thai people, they would agree that they believe human right is Western. Because Thai people don't pay too much attention to human rights. And sometimes the government violates human rights and people feel OK about doing that. So yeah, many people believe that (...) it's not our culture, it's Western culture, a Western belief" (Interview 5, 2023).

Another example for this division is provided by Academic 1, who normatively argues for a separation between human rights and political rights in negotiations:

> "Human rights are moderately important; labour rights are important. But the other rights,

for example political rights should be separated" (Interview 4, 2022).

Referring to sovereignty claims on these issues, the MFA official illustrates such narrow spaces and highlights Thailand's independent path. Besides the expectation of being treated equally in negotiations, he sets out fundamental differences between Thailand and the EU that supposedly will remain, regardless of a potential FTA's design:

> "Overall, we probably want the same thing you want, better living standards for your people and for our people. We want equality, but in a Thai way if you like. (...) We can see that European people have higher standards and live better lives. We want that for our own people as well, so we can see the destination. But how to get there? We have to figure out the best way for our people, our government, our system to reach that destination. Maybe we are making a mistake, but I think it's necessary mistakes" (Interview 2, 2022).

Reasonable Credibility, Limited Traction

In summary, the most unique factor for a potential EU-Thailand FTA is its potential impact on the right to health rights. Stakeholders thus call for a thorough investigation of potential FTA effects on Thai medical provision and subsequent adjustments. Similar demands surround labour standards, with stakeholders that target the prioritisation of sustainable consumer choices. One best practice example often cited for Thailand is the EU's approach on illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices. It is important to build on this success and focus on other vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers and women. Further, environmental rights and related legislation seem to be the most promising arena for cooperation between the EU and Thailand. Issue-linking potential exists in several areas, for example in addressing health or labour aspects in environmentally destructive industries.

Finally, the EU is considered a global norm pioneer, when compared with other major players, and enjoys large value credibility. However, willingness to adopt EU values in Thailand highly depends on the respective stakeholder position. Their roles equally highlight internal Thai political conflicts, which also influence views on the EU and human rights in general. CSO representatives and unionists in Thailand, championing the cause for a more equitable society, find resonance with several EU values, in stark contrast to ministry officials who, as integral parts of power elites, often prioritise business and royalist interests, thereby creating a divergence from EU values. Consequently, the combination of core interests from political and economic elites in Thailand and a certain room for manoeuvre in EU enforcement issues leaves a question mark on the extent to which human rights, particularly civil and political rights, can be addressed accurately by a future FTA.

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Hong Kong Students' Perspective on Educational Inequalities in the Context of the New Educational Reforms

GIOVANNI MAURI

The structural reforms of the curriculum implemented by the Hong Kong administration in the field of education at the beginning of the 2000s had profound implications for the future perspectives and ambitions of students and graduates. This article tries to investigate the key constraints posed by the reforms and their direct influence on the perception of Hong Kongese local students on their future careers. The employment of a qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews allowed the study to reveal how the majority of the students internalised the theoretical basis of the reforms as a given, accepting the hyper-competitive system created as a stimulus for their improvement. Their concerns mainly focus on the precarious nature of their future prospects, but they generally do not question the underlying structure of the reforms themselves. Students exhibit acceptance of the challenging circumstances they face, seemingly involved in the new idea of the social environment brought about by the new administration.

Keywords: Educational reforms, Inequality, Competitivity, Precariousness, Student perceptions

Modern governments promote higher education privatisation to boost economic growth and competitiveness, with East Asian governments leading this trend since the late 1990s (Ng and Galbraith, 2020). Hong Kong's transition from British Administration to Special Administrative Region status aimed to shift from an industrial to a service-oriented society, expanding access to educational facilities but inadvertently bolstering private education, expanding the disparity in quality between public and private degrees, favouring the former and deepening the class-based hierarchical divisions within society (Jin et al., 2022; Lo and Ng, 2018).

Liberalisation and privatisation have reduced social mobility and increased precarity, causing job market diversity stagnation and a focus on a few dominant sectors (Chan, 2018). The diminished value of degrees from private educational institutions has led to increased competition and limited employment opportunities, trapping individuals in precarious, temporary positions (Lam and Tang, 2021).

Academic attention has largely focused on the political dimensions, specifically the 2014–2019 protests, while scholars like Bray et al. (2013) underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how students perceive growing social and educational inequalities. Social stratification, especially when institutionally enforced at an early stage—as it is in Hong Kongese primary school—is well-documented in English literature, with a focus on individual expectations, heightened competition, and associated health implications (Pekkala et al., 2002; Kieselbach, 2000). However, there is less focus on the Asian context. Another critical aspect that demands examination is the influence of studying abroad on the increasing disparities in job prospects for students in Hong Kong, a subject addressed by a limited number of scholars, such as Cheng (2014), prior to the visible outcomes of implemented reforms.

This research aims to collect the perspectives and emotions of higher education students in Hong Kong regarding the evolving social landscape and their future prospects, encompassing apprehensions and aspirations. Its objective is to identify prevalent patterns and contribute to the relevant literature, laying the groundwork for future mixed-methods or quantitative research, thus advancing knowledge in the field of educational inequality.

The primary research inquiry aims to gauge the extent of student perspectives regarding the shift in competitiveness and inequality resulting from the reforms:

A. How do Hong Kong students and graduates perceive the social environment and their future ambitions after the changes introduced by the systemic education reforms in Hong Kong, and the consequent reorganisation of society?

A secondary research question aims to evaluate the perception of students regarding the impact of studying abroad on the unequal opportunities offered to Hong Kong students under the new education system:

B. How does studying abroad shape the lifelong opportunities and ambitions of Hong Kong's students?

History, Ratio, and Implications of the Reforms

At the beginning of 2000, an educational commission led extensive consultations based on the idea that education reform was vital to enhancing Hong Kong's economic attractiveness (James, 2021; Burns, 2020). As scholars such as James (2021) and Ng et al. (2020) point out, these reforms introduced the New Academic Structure (NAS) and the New Secondary School (NSS) curriculum, altering promotion systems, education duration, and instituting the unique final high school exams: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) (James, 2021). Policymakers prioritised education to create an "education hub" (UGC, 2010: 13) for economic growth and city development (Monash University, 2021). However, other job markets were neglected, leading to bottlenecks and precarity (Population-by-Census, 2016). Lee and Law (2014) suggest this aligns with the "selective incorporation" strategy in Glocalisation Theory to enhance national financial performance.

"Anchoring globalization," as described by Ng (2018), Postiglione (2013), and Oleksiyenko et al. (2013), has transformed youth job-seeking. Despite a highly competitive and precarious job market, students often maintain unrealistic expectations about securing ideal positions (Lam and Tang, 2021). Reforms significantly increased post-secondary enrolment from 19.4% in 1990 to 73.1% in 2020 (Li, 2021), intensifying the distinction in degree value between public and private universities. Public institutions are perceived as offering superior degrees, while private institutions are seen as providing lower-level qualifications, leading to difficulties in finding employment. This shift results from the massification of private, market-driven higher education, with 67% of high school graduates ending up in self-financing institutes (Chan and Lo, 2007).

Two key factors have significantly shaped Hong Kong's education system: the "Banding System" and the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), as outlined by Chow (2013) and Poon and Wong (2008).

The "Banding System" categorises schools from primary to high school based on a point system, creating significant disparities between schools (from 1 to 3, 1A higher, 3C lower), with higher band institutions being more prestigious and providing better university admissions outcomes, as confirmed by Sieh (1993), Bray (2013), and Lee (2023). Access to English education is primarily limited to "high band" institutions, exacerbating educational inequalities.

Another influential factor perpetuating societal imbalances is the HKDSE, as noted by Tsang and Isaacs (2022). Intended as a standardised meritocratic evaluation, it closely links outcomes to the "banding level" of students' schools of origin, undermining the meritocratic system. Pupils invest time and families invest money to enhance their HKDSE results, with private tutoring having enormous importance among Hong Kong students, as highlighted by Bray et al. (2013), Coniam (2014), and Spires (2017). The HKDSE significantly determines young people's post-education career prospects, yet it proves divisive for society, as students from "lower band" schools face substantial barriers to being admitted to prestigious publicly funded universities.

This transformation has intensified competition for publicly funded universities, widening the quality gap between public and private institutions. According to Wong (2015), the average return on degree education in Hong Kong has decreased, predominantly affecting private university students. This division negatively impacted their job aspirations (Lam and Tang, 2021) due to the unequal distribution of educational quality (Poon and Wong, 2008). Between 2000 and 2015, the rising competition pushed many young graduates into lower-skilled, precarious, lower-paying jobs, leaving them highly vulnerable and with limited protections (Lo, 2018; LegCo Secretariat, 2016: 1). The widening income and education gap between social classes contributed to frustration and stress among the

City's youth about their prospects (Global Times, 2021).

Lastly, studying abroad is considered an invaluable opportunity for students to enhance their competitiveness, both educationally and professionally (South China Morning Post, 2022). Yang et al. (2011) and Zhou et al. (2008) established the theoretical foundation for the significance and outcomes of studying abroad, with Cheng (2014) conducting a study to gauge its value among students, suggesting the need for more research in this area.

Theorising Educational Reforms

The Educational Stratification theory underscores how inequalities between privileged and less privileged classes are exacerbated by unequal access to education, with social status as a key determinant (Bilecen, 2020: 1). This connection strongly intertwines education with occupational outcomes (Allmendinger, 1989). The state's role in shaping this social differentiation is particularly pronounced in economies transitioning between two systems, as seen in Hong Kong (Buchmann et al., 2001). The significance of family background is amplified in systems with early-stage selection, like Hong Kong, resulting in an overrepresentation of students from affluent families in higher academic tracks (Traini, 2022). This educational model shift has markedly reduced social mobility in the city (Poon and Wong, 2008), establishing a highly stratified system where a student's socioeconomic status is a potent predictor of their occupational and career prospects (Buchmann and Park, 2009).

Glocalisation Theory explores how global ideas adapt to local customs, potentially fostering societal conservatism (Robertson, 2012); governments play a pivotal role by introducing bureaucratic barriers and legal exclusions, leading to the creation of urban enclaves (He and Wang, 2019; Turner, 2017). In Hong Kong, policymakers used foreign concepts, employing selective incorporation and adaptation to shape education reforms, ultimately leading to a more hierarchical and elitist society (Lanford, 2016).

In contrast to the neo-classical approach, the Segmented Labour Market (SLM) theory better represents Hong Kong's current labour market, where institutions, labour laws, technology, industrial organisations, and social factors significantly influence wages, employment, and working conditions (Leontaridi, 1998).

Atkinson (1984) advocates for a flexible labour market, but Dettmers (2003) warns that employer dominance can lead to inequality without social protections. The SLM theory highlights how privilege-based barriers create occupational disparities, often tracing back to factors like education and social class, making it suitable for describing Hong Kong's labour market complexities.

Hong Kong exhibits a multi-tiered labour market with distinct inequalities; the top tier offers skilled jobs and promising careers, while lower tiers face less favourable conditions (Ashton and Maguire, 1984); this division widens class disparities and limits inter-segment mobility (Chan, 2021). Despite overall economic growth, labour market segmentation in Hong Kong creates few sectors with stable employment but also elevates insecurity, precarity, and substantial income inequality in others, mainly with regard to future generations (Chan, 2021; Wong et al., 2019).

Methodology

In order to explore how Hong Kong students perceive and respond to changing socio-economic and local community transformations (Luker, 2010) this qualitative study employs a constructivist ontology; the research considers institutions and students as central actors in these educational shifts, aiming to understand how youth perceive and respond to the evolving scenario (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were the primary research method, allowing for a detailed exploration of students' interpretations (Clark et al., 2021). The data collected were treated as subjective (Behar, 1990) and were

complemented with non-participant observations of Hong Kong universities.

This research aims to understand participants' inner experiences and to explore a phenomenon related to the human experience (Creswell, 2007: 252). The interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes among the interviewees (Van Manen, 1990), using the Nvivo software package for coding and data analysis.

The study included 23 participants, aged 19 to 35, who recently completed their higher education (within the previous three years). A combination of random sampling and snowball sampling was used for recruitment, with efforts to maintain a gender balance (13 male, 10 female). Diversity in educational background was also considered, but participants from private institutions were challenging to approach due to restricted access for non-students; the banding system was employed to address individuals from less wealthy backgrounds since lower banding usually corresponded also to lower social class.

Conducting interviews in an authoritarian environment with a history of repression poses limitations (Morgenbesser, 2018). Challenges for this study included university accessibility, participant willingness, and the risk of government surveillance. Other considerations involved language-related challenges due to interviews being conducted in English and efforts to minimise personal biases and Western perspectives (Sultana, 2015). Ensuring trustworthiness is crucial, so the study rigorously adhered to precise ethical guidelines (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). Consent was obtained verbally twice, at the first meeting and just before the interview, and anonymity and data protection measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and security.

The Hierarchy of Universities

Interviewees confirmed the hierarchical stratification of universities (Poon and Wong, 2008; Oleksiyenko, 2013), with a further subdivision among public universities: Hong Kong University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology were perceived as higher tier institutions. Respondent 12 emphasised that accessing these universities is not solely based on academic performance but reflects societal constructs, particularly for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often associated with lower school "banding", aligning with observations by Hanushek et al. (2010).

Connected to the university hierarchy, the "banding system" division of primary and secondary schools plays a critical role in shaping the educational and career trajectories of Hong Kong students, as described by Traini (2022). While only a few students from higher banded institutions criticised its implementation in Hong Kong, most interviewees highlighted the inferior quality of education provided by Band 3 schools. However, this issue was often presented by interviewees as a normal dynamic of their society. In contrast, all respondents from Band 3 schools recognised the high degree of unfairness within this system and the long-term impact it has on their careers. Respondent 6, for instance, pointed out the disparity in English teaching, considered advantageous by employers for job-seeking but lacking in Band 3 schools. Two interviewees from Band 1 schools also acknowledged and criticised the deep-seated unfairness of this system. For instance, Respondent 19 said:

> I would say that dividing the schools in band is trying to instil into child minds that some children are built differently; I know people from Band 2, they are still very intelligent, but in high school or middle school we are told by the parents that child from Band 2 or 3 are bad, not to mess with them. To go to Band 1, you need a lot of resources. When I was in primary school my mom spent a lot of money to make me learn piano, ballet and other basically, if they are in Band 1 school and they have been trained to

be very competitive, the study environment will be better and they will have more success.

Respondent 19

All interviewees recognised the significant influence of the school band assignment on students' prospects. Despite the fact that study's small sample size is not representative of the whole population, it highlights the importance of inherited capital, as described by Bourdieu (1984), in terms of capital accumulation.

The "banding system", and the closely linked HKDSE standardised exam, has been scrutinised by researchers such as Sieh (1993), Bray et al. (2013), and Lee (2023), revealing its potential to exacerbate inequality and foster social stratification among students. As suggested by Tsang and Isaacs (2022), it perpetuates societal inequalities, where Band 1 students often outperform Band 2 and 3 students in the HKDSE exam, significantly impacting their future prospects. Respondent 16 emphasised the connection between school band and HKDSE outcomes, highlighting the competitive pressure students face, echoing Respondent 12's sentiments on the exam's pivotal role in shaping their lives and careers. These insights align with the findings of Buchmann and Hannum (2001) concerning the HKDSE's contribution to socioeconomic stratification in Hong Kong.

From the interviews it emerged that the significance of English proficiency for passing the HKDSE is even higher than expected. Band 1 and top Band 2 schools, along with private and international high schools, predominantly use English in their teaching to enhance students' chances of success. In contrast, Band 3 and low Band 2 schools primarily employ Chinese for instruction, putting their students at a disadvantage, as observed by Respondent 22. The research reveals that schools leverage the quality of English instruction to attract students, emphasising its role as an advantage during their educational journey.

The role of private tutoring and schooling in enhancing HKDSE results and university access is also important. According to Respondent 19, private tutoring is widely used in Hong Kong, beginning as early as age three, and parents are willing to invest substantial sums in these services, which can cost up to 300 Hong Kong Dollars per hour. Meanwhile, Respondent 4 highlighted the exclusivity of private and international schools, noting that they offer better results but remain financially inaccessible to many students. This underscores how a student's family background significantly influences their prospects in Hong Kong. Private educational options and tutoring provide avenues for improving academic abilities and present an alternative path to higher education, as underlined by respondents 4 and 19.

After the HKDSE exam, fierce competition ensues as all universities demand high grades for admission, particularly the top 3 (HKU, CUHK, HKUST). Failure necessitates a year's wait for a retake or consideration of less prestigious self-financed institutions, posing financial challenges and limited job prospects, as Respondent 1 highlights. Even Band 1 students face tough admission odds and may end up in their second or third-choice programmes. Findings reveal that students from lower band schools are underrepresented in top-tier public universities; none of the Band 3 interviewees attended a top 3 University, and only one out of 20 who secured a place in a public university was from that Band.

The perpetual competition faced by students throughout their education journey, as observed by Högberg (2019) in the context of pressure, competition, and social comparison, and Chun's (2022) findings on competitiveness and high-pressure environments, places them under immense stress and anxiety. These pressures stemming from institutions, employers, peers, and family members in Hong Kong often lead to severe health and psychological issues. All respondents experienced extreme stress at various points during their education, prompting some to change courses, switch

majors, or even discontinue their studies due to the high-pressure environment and its health implications. More than 75 per cent of the respondents encountered stress-related health problems, and some suffered significant psychological traumas due to the competitiveness of Hong Kong's educational landscape:

> Actually in Secondary 4 I attempted suicide for how much pressure I was getting, obviously also for family reasons but main one is academics, cause I think for most of secondary school you don't get a sense of where you are going in your life, and at a certain point you just get tired of it, and everything lose meaning, you just get lost, and you start losing hope and faith, you end up in a dark spiral and I think is a very common problem in Hong Kong.
>
> I think something like 80 per cent of students have mental issues which is pretty insane, that is definitely too much.
>
> *Respondent 20*

The inclusion of psychological analysis is a significant advancement in East Asian research, addressing a noted gap in comprehensive studies, as highlighted by Chan (2019).

In this context of competitiveness, an important factor is frequently forgotten: studying abroad is often overlooked in the realm of Hong Kong academia, as indicated by Cheng's research (2014). the possibility of studying abroad carries substantial significance for families, students, and employers in the region. According to Respondent 1, employers value international experience and improved English proficiency, recognising the advantages it brings to candidates' resumes. For students, embarking on an overseas academic journey represents a personally transformative experience, coupled with notable professional advantages. This includes the enrichment of career prospects, enhanced language skills, and a bolstered position in the global job market. In summary, studying abroad offers crucial benefits for career advancement, personal growth, and expanding students' worldviews.

The disparities in educational opportunities, career paths, and objectives have led to profound social class divisions, in line with the enclave society concept by Turner (2017) and He and Wang (2019), as confirmed by Respondent 16. Living outside the "elite school network geography," as noted by Respondent 23, necessitates greater effort to access quality education.

Neoliberal policies have rapidly transformed Hong Kong's society while exacerbating pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, aligning with the findings of Robertson (2012) and Roudometof (2016). Leontaridi (1998) identified significant variations in career aspirations across different socioeconomic strata, a perspective validated by Respondent 20's observation that "Band 3 students typically pursue manual labour". The intensification of competition can be attributed also to international specialised migration. However, the brunt of this competition falls upon the lower classes due to the city's shift towards a service-oriented economy, rising living costs, and limited access to international job markets, primarily due to English proficiency barriers.

These conditions have created job markets with minimal employee protections, especially impacting young individuals, aligning with Dettmers' findings (2013). Labour market segmentation and the proliferation of temporary or unpaid positions have added to the challenges faced by students. Salary concerns are prominent, along with the escalating cost of living. Many students grapple with the uncertainty of their future, accepting the idea of not securing permanent employment and opting for a series of temporary positions; stability is a universal concern among the interviewees. Despite their apprehensions about the fiercely competitive system, a deep-seated fear of financial insecurity has taken root in many. While some contemplate leaving the country in search of better opportunities and security, most feel bound to Hong Kong due to family,

friends, and a profound connection to the city, even though they acknowledge the heightened market difficulties they may confront.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has aimed to explore how the social and cultural environment in which Hong Kong students are immersed, shaped by their concerns, aspirations, and uncertainties, has led them to common patterns of thinking. Over the past two decades, Hong Kong has witnessed significant influence from policymakers' strong neo-classical orientation and increased integration into international markets, resulting in substantial societal changes (Postiglione, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2013). The long-term consequences of unregulated liberalisation have created significant inequalities in the labour market, fostering an enclave society and urbanism (Turner, 2017; He and Wang, 2019). Despite some rejection of aspects of the education system, such as standardised public examinations, most interviewees do not contest the fundamental principles of the reforms but rather specific outcomes. They have internalised the idea of a competitive, market-driven environment as a prevailing assumption, and mostly do not see any alternative to it.

Key themes such as socioeconomic stratification, the HKDSE examination, the school banding system, and the prominence of private education support are critical for understanding the new educational goals set by the government. The government's neoliberal approach led to an educational reform that further emphasises the role of capital accumulation in society. In this research, the findings suggest that students and families recognise the mechanisms of social stratification, such as the HKDSE exam. They also imply that the perceived "realism" of the situation generally leads them to accept it as a natural aspect of their system. Symptoms of this system, English proficiency and studying abroad notably enhance future careers, opening doors to enhanced professional opportunities. However, these privileges are predominantly accessible to a smaller segment of the city's population due to financial constraints.

Young people in Hong Kong share common concerns about intense competition in education and the job market. Precarious job prospects, unstable contracts, and the struggle for salary stability compound their anxieties. The pressure from family, peers, and educators intensifies as they enter the challenging job market. Some students find relief in religion or athletic success, while others grapple with mental health issues. While some consider leaving their hometown, most are deeply attached to their family, friends, and the city, determined to secure their futures despite the numerous challenges they face.

In conclusion, the 1997 educational reforms in Hong Kong reshaped students' and graduates' outlook on their futures. While their general attitude remains optimistic, concerns about job competition, societal pressures, and precarity play a more prominent role in their life plans. In this interconnected global society, students focus on gaining marginal advantages to enhance their competitiveness. They see studying abroad as a crucial aspect of personal development, a perspective undervalued in recent literature on education in Hong Kong. This shift aligns with the evolving educational landscape in Hong Kong, with employers highly valuing international exposure and strong English skills, reflecting students' adaptation to changing circumstances (Postiglione, 2013; Cheng, 2014).

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The *Akiya* Phenomenon, Revitalisation, and Resistance: Investigating Vacant Houses as a Tool for Repopulation in Rural Japan

JULIA OLSSON

Vacant houses will save Kochi. Of course, they will not save Kochi if they are left as they are. The generation of children and grandchildren will continue to live in their furusato (hometown). New families will be welcomed and the number of people in the community will increase. It will become a place where local people gather and smile. Your home's second story. Why don't you think about taking that first step now? That vacant house might become tied to Kochi's genki *(good health or in this case, revitalisation).*[1]

- Written at the top of the Kochi prefecture akiya portal site. https://akiya-kochi.jp/. (Accessed: 2023-10-06)

There is no doubt abandoned houses capture the imagination. We all have memories of them from some point in our childhood, whether as a spooky mansion in a cartoon, or the house with the rusty fence you walk past just a little bit faster on your way home. They tend to have an eerie quality. Empty dwellings, once capable of hosting the warmth and life of a family become nothing more than deteriorating structures, serving as silent reminders of a time gone by. A time which, in the case of Japan, held greater economic opportunity.

In Japan, a country struggling with a continuously shrinking population combined with widespread rural depopulation, the phenomenon of *akiya* (vacant houses) has recently received much media attention in the international press (Cozier, 2023; Hornyak, 2023; McElhinney, 2023; Petersson & Härdelin, 2024). While the exclusion of millennials

1 All translations in this essay were made by the author.

from the housing market is a common complaint in the West, Japan seems to be giving houses away for practically nothing. According to the latest figures from the Housing and Land Survey conducted in 2018, an incredible 13.6 % of all houses in Japan were vacant (Housing and Land Survey, 2018), and researchers have estimated that number might climb to as high as 30.2% by 2033 (Oda et al., 2018: 1074). Bleak numbers for owners of *akiya* and people living in depopulated neighbourhoods alike, but as seen in the quote above it might be possible to see them as an asset in the fight against depopulation. Kochi prefecture, a place where the *akiya* problem is particularly pronounced, is trying to do just that.

Kochi prefecture is located on Shikoku Island, far from the administrative and economic centres of Japan. While the national average of *akiya* is 13.6%, Kochi has already reached 18.6%, making it one of the most heavily affected. Unfortunately, a majority of these *akiya* are not listed for sale nor rent, it is often uncertain who actually owns the property, and many houses are in a too derelict state to be lived in. This leads to an interesting contradiction. Even as houses are increasingly left vacant, the prefectural office claims there is actually a shortage of available housing. According to the Kochi *akiya* portal site, every year over 200 households looking to relocate to the prefecture end up giving up due to a lack of suitable housing.[2] Therefore, the *akiya* countermeasure team in Kochi want to change the narrative around *akiya*. They propose to reframe them from expensive burden to a potentially powerful tool in the fight against depopulation. This stance is perhaps illustrated best in the quote at the beginning of this essay, placed on the homepage of the portal site. The houses, a clear consequence of depopulation, are colourfully described as potential saviours of Kochi prefecture, but as I will show, there might be opposition from an unexpected place. That is from the community itself, the very people deemed in need of saving.

In this essay, I build on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Kochi prefecture from February to April 2023, during which I conducted interviews with people working with the *akiya* problem, and with local residents living in areas with *akiya*. The majority of the local residents were elderly people who had lived in the area all their lives. By using the *akiya* problem as a lens, I discovered a tension between official and local perceptions of *akiya*, and more importantly, tensions in the interplay between local residents and prospective migrants. I begin this essay by outlining Kochi's official narrative that focuses on transforming the debates around *akiya*, while facing challenges with identifying the houses, not to mention making them available for sale or rent. Secondly, I turn to the attitude of local residents towards efforts to repopulate their region and discuss perceptions of a generational gap exacerbating already existing cultural differences between urban and rural populations. Thirdly, I focus on processes of resistance against repopulation at any cost, where local residents are shown to be hesitant to accept newcomers purely for the sake of repopulation. Finally, I argue that even though the solution to a depopulated countryside

2 https://akiyakochi.jp/

naturally seems to be encouraging migration, this might not be as clear-cut as it seems. Sometimes, it might even be against the wishes of the local population. This study has shown that by studying the efforts to repopulate rural Japan we can unveil a rich and complex web of belonging, tradition, and self-preservation, revealing that there are things of more value to residents than the uncompromising repopulation of their neighbourhoods.

Shifting the Narrative

There are many factors that make solving the *akiya* problem a complicated endeavour. *Akiya* owners, who often reside far from the actual property, face high costs due to property taxes, and must struggle with inheritance laws and bureaucratic hurdles, regardless of if they want to keep or sell the house. The houses can also constitute a danger to their environment if they become structurally unsound and are often an eyesore to neighbours, but demolition is discouraged not only by the mere cost of demolition, but by the fact that unbuilt land is taxed at a higher rate than built land.

Additionally, as the prices of *akiya* are incredibly low, few real estate agents are willing to work with them, a fact that has spurred the creation of several websites aiming to connect sellers with buyers. Municipalities usually have so-called *akiya* banks, websites where sellers can post their property without cost, and some prefectures have created websites pooling information from municipal websites to create larger databases. On the website *Minna no 0 yen bukken* (everyone's 0 yen property) houses are even listed for free. It is easy to understand that *akiya* are considered a burden on society.

As stated above, the prefectural government in Kochi is trying to reshape the discussion on *akiya* to consider them in a more positive light—as an aid in fighting depopulation. The catch phrase *"Akiya* will save Kochi" is used frequently in promotional videos and other promotional materials. However, it became clear in my interviews that even with this influx of online tools, many municipalities struggle with identifying available properties and locating owners, and often end up working on a case-by-case basis. Meaning that it is only when a prospective migrant has been identified that the search for a suitable house begins, rendering the process ineffective and time-consuming.

In 2022, as part of a renewed effort to tackle the *akiya* problem, the prefectural office took over an already existing *akiya* support hotline (*akiya sōdan madoguchi*) in Kochi city. It is currently run by two people, an expert in restoration of old houses and his apprentice daughter. It functions as a direct line for owners of *akiya* to call or email to get help in evaluating, renovating, and finally selling or renting their house. In an interview they told me that in two years they received around 500 requests to help with *akiya*, but due to the long process from initial contact to finished house, and there only being the two of them, they had only been able to help with 70 cases. In relation to this they highlighted how problematic the time constraints were as houses that are left to deteriorate might turn from DIY renovation object to unliveable in only one year, mainly due to the humid climate, and many of the *akiya* in Kochi are unsuitable for immediate use. Unfortunately, the process of giving an *akiya* its "second story", as it is painted in the quote, is both highly time-sensitive and labour-intensive.

Despite these difficulties the two hotline workers, as well as their prefectural partners at the *akiya* countermeasure team, were optimistic about the future of *akiya* in Kochi. During my fieldwork I spoke to city hall employees in six other municipalities around Kochi prefecture as well, and although they all admit to fighting an uphill battle, they also remained firmly optimistic about the prospects of *akiya* and repopulation, true to the narrative. They told me they believe that if houses, schools, and jobs are available, people will come back. Only one official confessed that she sometimes feared that her town, in the mountainous northeastern part of Kochi, one day would disappear. Her town is one of

the most heavily affected by depopulation and population aging, and her confession reflects the focal point of the coming sections, the sentiments of local residents.

Clashing Ideas and Ideals in Local Communities

During my fieldwork I asked my interviewees to draw me maps of their communities in order to visualise the physical reality of living in *akiya*-heavy areas. It was clear that they had intimate knowledge of each and every structure in their neighbourhood. They could tell me not only which houses were vacant, but when and why it had become that way. Most of the time they also knew who stood to inherit, or had already inherited the house, and if they thought they would return to their home village. Most of the time, they did not think the inheritor would return. The story was a common one, due to job availability the family had established themselves in the Tokyo greater metropolitan area and would not be returning. The underlying message is that there is not enough to incentivise a return to the home village. They have resigned themselves to the fact that their region cannot offer enough desirable opportunities for the younger generation to stay, nor come back.

This sentiment is understandable, especially considering that Kochi's population peaked as early as the late 1950s (Kochi prefectural office, 2023), and some of these regions have struggled for over three decades to maintain essential social services, or attractive job opportunities (*Otoyochō no...*, 1994). But, regardless of this pessimistic view of their own region, all residents I spoke to were clearly happy living there and exhibited no wish to relocate even to the prefectural capital. They were simply resigned to the fact that to others, their hometown was not an attractive place to live. With this in mind, I wanted to understand how the region had changed over time and what it meant for the people living there.

As such, I asked my interviewees about the changes they had witnessed in their region over the course of their life, particularly in relation to the *akiya* problem, as well as the reasons for those changes. Most of them were born and raised in the area. Some attributed changes to the reasons listed above, while others pointed to cultural and lifestyle changes in Japanese society. In one particularly frank interview, a resident even went so far as to suggest that Japanese people were becoming less "Japanese" (*nihonjinrashī*). He considered the start of this change to be the 1990s, during the so-called "lost decade" after the bubble era, a period during which outmigration by youth from Kochi accelerated (Nishikawa et al., 2016). Having witnessed both Japan's rise as an economic powerhouse and its subsequent decline, this resident perceived a generational gap resulting from differences in core values. He claimed that youth nowadays were becoming more individualistic, and that in order for Japan to recover from economic collapse, Japanese people needed to go back to the old "starting line" (*sutātorain*) of collectivism. In essence, he was facing a two-pronged dilemma. In his mind, not only had his generation failed at keeping his community alive, but the new generation was failing him in terms of upholding the values he considered crucial to being Japanese.

His sentiments in part reflect a common discussion. After the Covid-19 pandemic brought a heightened interest in teleworking from the countryside, discussions about migration failures (*ijū shippai*) and village society (*murashakai*), often associated with closed-mindedness and hostility towards outsiders, popped up on internet forums, YouTube, and even in mainstream media (Ota, 2020-11-30; *Chīsana mura de kurasu YouTube channel,* 2022-12-16; Kato, 2023-01-26). The YouTube video cited paints a horrifying picture of social exclusion and close-minded locals that harass the newcomers until they become physically ill, currently with 5.1 million views (accessed 2024-01-25). Many comments under the video are of sympathy for the videographer, and many express extremely negative views on rural life, as well as rural residents.

Viewing the rural as diametrically opposed to the urban, is a common trope, which may be unsurprising since the term "rural" originally meant simply "space outside of the city" (Woods, 2011:17). In Japan there are several terms that illustrate similar connotations, such as *inaka*, and *chihō*, and more emotionally charged *satoyama* and *furusato*. Discussing these terms scholars Akagawa (2015), Ivy (1995), and Robertson (1988) have argued that the perceptions of rural life and cultural differences between the countryside and urban areas have deep historical roots, where the rural often comes to represent tradition, harmony, and stagnation, and the urban comes to represent modernity and progress. It is a definition that serves to solidify rural living and urban living as core identity markers for residents of either, which sometimes lead to a perception of insurmountable difference between the two in turn. Perhaps the department for encouraging migration at Kochi city office illustrated this point best, by releasing a promotional video where the two actors, one representative of the local population, one representing a migrant from Tokyo, sporting literal alien masks to demonstrate how they view their counterpart "like an alien" (*uchūjinmitai*) (Kochi city website, n.d.).

In conclusion, local residents are more hesitant about the likelihood of repopulation success than official workers, experiencing not only a disinterest in their region, but a cultural gap between themselves and younger urbanites, a gap that seems to be growing. Despite their intimate knowledge of vacant homes and inheritance patterns in *akiya*-heavy areas, residents see little incentive for younger generations to return to their hometowns, especially considering the lack of desirable opportunities. This sentiment reflects long-standing demographic challenges faced by regions like Kochi, exacerbated by societal and economic changes over decades. Interviews reveal a perception among some residents that Japanese society has shifted away from traditional values, contributing to a cultural mismatch between generations. This sentiment is echoed in discussions about rural life, often framed in opposition to urban living, perpetuating stereotypes and solidifying identities. Overall, the narrative highlights the complex economic, social, and cultural factors that shape rural communities in Japan.

Interpreting Connection, Values, and Belonging

As mentioned earlier, the local residents are often the best source of information regarding the location and status of vacant houses, as well as information on how to contact property owners. In some instances, they even collaborate to maintain the exterior of these vacant properties to deter squatters and other illicit activities. However, they are less prone to the optimism of the official narrative. Despite efforts by the state, prefecture, and municipality to repopulate, they have seen very few results, and as success and happiness is increasingly becoming synonymous with a high-paying job, rural areas are unable to compete with their urban counterparts, at least within that definition. And they simply may not want to. In the stories of my interviewees a prevailing theme emerges beside the fear of the community disappearing. The strongly held belief that prospective migrants should be prepared to adapt to the local way of life, a lifestyle centred around communal responsibility.

Finally, and of most import, in interviews residents emphasised their strong belief in community, local traditions, and shared responsibilities as a way of life. In their minds, if newcomers are not willing to adapt to the community and its traditions, their migration will not help to save the community. These findings challenge the notion held by officials that housing, jobs, and schools alone can solve the depopulation issue and instead highlight the immense importance of connection to local residents, as well as their reluctance to invite new people into their midst purely for the sake of repopulation. The *akiya* problem is a multi-faceted and complex issue which Japan in coming years will have to face in earnest.

To return to the title of this essay, while *akiya* may well be used as a tool in the fight against depopulation, there are still many obstacles in the way. As few are willing to relocate, and local residents are hesitant to allow for the change an influx of newcomers potentially means, it is likely the depopulation of rural areas will continue regardless of the fate of the houses. Japan stands at a crossroads: it must either intensify efforts to repopulate the countryside, which will require more comprehensive integration strategies, or accept depopulation as an ongoing reality rather than a problem to be solved. There are many things that could become of a depopulated neighbourhood, many kinds of second stories to tell, and maybe they need not include repopulation. For now, it might be of more import focusing on ensuring quality of life of those who remain and consider what future lies beyond depopulation.

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