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# SUVANNABHUMI

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**KIAS**

Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies

# **SUVANNABHUMI:**

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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SUVANNABHUMI means “The Land of Gold” in Pali, which location implies Southeast Asia.

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**Prof. Dr. Yekti Maunati\***  
(28 September 1959 – 1 November 2023)

By KIM, Dong-Yeob\*\*

It is with profound sadness that we announce the passing of a distinguished scholar and cherished friend, Prof. Dr. Yekti Maunati, on 1 November 2023. Dr. Yekti was a prominent Research Professor at the National Research and Innovation Agency in Indonesia, where her contributions to academia and her commitment to fostering international collaboration have left an indelible mark.

Born on 28 September 1959, Dr. Yekti's academic journey was marked by a relentless pursuit of knowledge and a passion for understanding complex social issues. Her research focused on border concerns, the Indonesian diaspora, and the lives of indigenous people and minorities in Southeast Asian countries, shedding light on crucial aspects of these communities often overlooked.

Dr. Yekti was a prolific writer and researcher. Her recent article, "The Emerging Diasporic Connections in Southeast Asia and the Constitution of Ethnic Network," published in *Suvannabhumi: Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* in 2019, is a testament to her intellectual depth and insight. Her commitment extended beyond articles to include several important books, such as *Women at Work: A Study of Migrant Women in a Melbourne Auto-Parts Factory* (2002), *The Cham Diaspora in Southeast Asia*:

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\* A member of *Suvannabhumi* Editorial Board (June 2014- November 2023)

\*\* Associate Professor, Busan University of Foreign Studies; Publisher of *Suvannabhumi: Multidisciplinary Journal of ASEAN Studies* and Director of Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies, Busan University of Foreign Studies (KIAS-BUFS). dykim@bufs.ac.kr

*Social Integration and Transnational Networks: The Case of Cambodia* (2013, as co-author), and *Identitas Dayak: Komodifikasi dan Politik Kebudayaan* (2004).

Dr. Yekti obtained her PhD from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia in 2001, and her master's from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia in 1993. She earned her bachelor's degree from the Department of Sociology at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

In addition to her significant contributions to academia, Dr. Yekti was a valued colleague and friend of the Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies at Busan University of Foreign Studies (KIAS-BUFS). She played a crucial role as a bridge between Indonesian and Korean academia, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. Dr. Yekti faithfully participated in annual international conferences organized by KIAS-BUFS, where she presented and discussed her outstanding scholarship. Her commitment extended to serving as member of the editorial board of *Suwarnabhumi*, where she dedicated over a decade to help develop and sustain the journal. She never missed the annual board meetings, demonstrating her unwavering commitment.

Dr. Yekti breathed her last as she was scheduled to attend the 2023 KIAS-BUFS International Conference and editorial board meeting on 9-11 November 2023. Her absence left a void deeply felt by colleagues, friends, and the academic community at large. Her legacy as a scholar, mentor, and bridge-builder between nations and cultures will endure, inspiring future generations to continue the pursuit of knowledge and cross-cultural understanding.

Our thoughts and condolences go to her family, friends, and all who have had the privilege of knowing and working with her.

May she rest in peace.



# Special Topic



## Introduction

# Korea-Philippines as Method: Interfaces in Literatures and Popular Cultures

Louie Jon A. Sánchez\*

This special *Suvannabhumi* issue is a product of an eventually expanded collaboration among Filipino colleagues which emerged from the Philippine panel delivered virtually at the 2022 International Conference of the Korea Institute of ASEAN Studies and the Busan University of Foreign Studies. Taking to heart the theme “ASEAN Subregionalism and Korea-ASEAN Relations: Towards Complementary Cooperative Relationship,” the authors explored and explicated Korean and Philippine cultural relations through the following fields of inquiry—television, film, literary studies, culinary studies, and urban studies. These relations were foregrounded by the following contexts: the ASEAN regional integration; the vigorous socioeconomic relations between the Republic of Korea and the Republic of the Philippines; and the ever-growing global phenomenon of Hallyu or the Korean wave. Some of the panel’s questions were as follows: How has Philippine culture been receiving Korea, as a whole? What ideas have already been formulated to explain this cultural interface? How can this encounter be used as a means to critically account for a “complementary cooperative relationship”?

Certainly, the issue contributes to the currently burgeoning

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Korean Studies in the Philippines, which academically began at the University of the Philippines Diliman (UP Diliman) when its Korean Studies program was developed in the 1980s (Palumbarit 2018: 51). Initially devoted to Korean language courses and "overshadowed by the popularity of China and Japan studies" (ibid.) in the 1990s, it soon began flourishing in the 2000s, as soon as the Hallyu wave reached Philippine shores and increased Korean investments particularly in culture and education intensified scholarly interest in everything Korean (ibid: 51-53). The many initiatives, conversations, and research produced from that moment of flourishing up to the present may be said to have evolved a distinctly Filipino-inflected Korean Studies, a sensibility we also imbibed in this pursuit of exploring the "complementary cooperative relationship" of Korea and the Philippines. Clearly, the interventions presented here emerged from this intellectual history of revaluing shared histories, economic engagements, and cultural ties, as the authors answered the abovementioned questions, among others. Of course, the issue offers more.

As the authors continued to work on the papers based on conference commentary and blind refereeing, some important insights became clearer, particularly on the fascinating comparative analysis of Korean and Philippine relations, with culture as a matrix of study. The methods deployed by each of the authors, all trained in Literary and Cultural Studies, ventured to provide comparisons that departed from conventional dualistic and often differential thinking to display in their variousness similitude, correlations, parity—indeed, a "complementary cooperative relationship" between Korea and the Philippines. Drawing from the disciplines available to them, the authors endeavored to formulate what might be called "Korea-Philippines as method," a mode of comparativity, in progress as we speak, that emphasizes an interest in the very interface of cultures [Korean on the one hand, Filipino on the other] that generates new texts or ideas. It expands on current modes of Hallyu studies in the country as it offers exploratory comparisons in order to properly appraise the discourses that took place between Korea and the Philippines. Chen Kuan-hsing (2010) and his work on "Asia as method" obviously animate the earlier conception and final

production of this issue. Thus, the issue's set of intersecting inquiries may be seen as considering "Korea-Philippines" as an "imaginary anchoring point" (Chen 2010: xv) that allows for both countries involved to be "one another's reference points" (ibid.), at least in the critical practices of the individual authors. It turned out to be a productive exercise as the issue in effect carried out "decolonized, deimperialized, and de - cold war" articulations, as Chen posited (ibid). In hindsight, the issue also brought about a "(transformed)···understanding of the self··· (and also a rebuilding of) subjectivity" (ibid).

As a "critical proposition" (ibid.), "Korea-Philippines as method" was used by the authors in their own ways to attend to an enduring cultural dialogue, teasing out the "transnational dynamics" (ibid: xii) of both countries in their objects of studies. Louie Jon A. Sánchez, a media studies scholar from UP Diliman whose specialization is television, revisits his work from a decade ago which postulated a "Korean turn" in the production of local TV drama series or teleseryes. Simply put, this means that Philippine producers were slowly but surely patterning their televisual products after K-Drama, commonly known then as "Koreanovela," in order to maintain their viability in the local and international markets. In this issue, he expands his observations on other Philippine popular cultures and phenomena and refines his formulation through the prism of cultural appropriation. Meanwhile, Jose Mari B. Cuartero, a UP Diliman comparative literature scholar with an interest in anthropology and folklore, explores what he calls the "modular imagined community" of downtown Manila's Koreatown. His springboard for the project were conversations with a Manila-based Korean who seemed skeptical about the phenomenon. It led to an adventurous exploration of the significations of Korea's placemaking in Manila at a highly globalizing time, which ended with a thoughtful rumination on the samgyupsal, the Korean barbecue currently popular in the country. Meanwhile, Asian film studies scholar Miguel Antonio N. Lizada of the Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, in his paper on Boys Love (BL) narratives, triangulates his discussions by including another Southeast Asian nation, Thailand. He examines the complex and creative opportunities of

the transnational circulation of BL in Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, and reveals the geopolitical and domestic influences in the representations of gender and sexuality through the aforementioned genre popular among young televisual audiences across the region.

On the other hand, approaching literary texts from Korea and the Philippines through the lens of trauma studies is literary scholar Raymon D. Ritumban of Ateneo de Manila University. He takes up the cases of Hyun-Kil Un's short story "Dead Silence" and Annette A. Ferrer's "Pablo and the Zebra" to talk about mnemocide. He offers a critique of historical forgetting usually facilitated by regimes of atrocities and tyranny. In the end, he suggests that Filipinos have a lot to learn from Koreans who have mustered the courage to institutionalize remembrance and regret, particularly in relation to the so-called "Jeju April 3 incident." Lastly, Ralph Edward P. Sekito, an emerging media studies scholar from the University of Santo Tomas, investigates the traversals of transnational adaptations. His paper looks into the Korean and Philippine reboots of a popular British TV drama and demonstrates how adaptation caters to cultural contexts amidst a clearly economic imperative.

The prominence in the issue of popular cultural texts—the teleserye, the Korean and Philippine culture industries at large, Manila urban landscapes, BL—asserts that signifying practices are not only to be confined to literary texts. This leveling of the playing field of inquiry, as deployed in the entire issue, shows the necessity for an open and encompassing exploration of the Korea-Philippines interface, where everything becomes text and may be submitted to various modes of reading, a lasting legacy of Cultural Studies. This is also the authors' way of re-evoking Raymond Williams' critical recognition of the culture concept's very complexity, much needed to create more nuanced and responsive engagements on "complementary cooperative relationships," which are complex to begin with. By doing this, the authors intervened "in local spaces without losing one's commitment to be in dialogue with general theoretical arguments" (ibid: xi). In the end, what the authors hoped to achieve in this issue was the surfacing of the "object of dialogue" (ibid) that both empowers and informs, that "grounds ourselves in

the cultures of our own" (ibid). This way, pace Chen, we are able "to address the issues arising out of our own puzzling environments."

In light of "Korea-Philippines as method," and as this issue finally opens its pages to readers, some answers to the questions posed by the panel are in order. While requiring a longer and more sustained discussion, it may be said that Philippine culture has been receiving Korea very cordially, but not passively as some "soft power" scholars seem to submit. In many instances, Philippine culture may be seen as absorbing hallyu not simply to consume it, but much so to reinvent it, particularly for the purposes of local reception and culture industries. Soft power, as regarded in the sphere of international relations, aims to persuade through culture and/or investments. A country from the global south like the Philippines tends to be on the receiving end of these soft power impositions in the time of globalization. What does the Philippines do? The texts and ideas featured in this issue illustrate some of the more clever evasions of being totally, albeit softly, conquered, as the country produces its very own iterations and interpretations of Korean products and practices. "Resistance" may be a key idea to this, especially as we continue critically accounting for what *Suvannabhumi* has been projecting as "complementary cooperative relationships." The papers here swerved from the local scholarly norm as each looked closely at the "complementary cooperative relationship" of Korea and the Philippines in texts and ideas, and derived from comparativity a more methodical approach that further clarifies both the mystifying effects of hallyu to the Philippines, and the country's own ventures and adventures into making it its own.

On behalf of the authors, I wish to acknowledge, with much gratitude, the following for making this issue possible: *Suvannabhumi*, under the leadership of the esteemed Victor T. King and the international board of editors; my co-editor, Miguel Antonio N. Lizada, for leaving no stone unturned; the reactors of the papers during the 2022 conference; and the indefatigable set of peer reviewers who provided advice and insight that helped shape the individual papers and the entire issue.

The authors also wish to thank their respective institutions for

the support they have received as this issue was being put together.

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# The "Korean Turn" in Philippine Popular Culture: The Story So Far\*

Louie Jon A. Sánchez\*\*



## [ *Abstract* ]

In this paper, I will pursue initial ideas I formulated in 2012 about the permeation of Korean influences in Philippine popular culture, particularly in the production of serialized TV drama/soap operas or the “teleserye” [tele for television + “serye” or series; thus, TV drama series]. I called the phenomenon the “Korean Turn” as I observed the emulation of Korean televisual drama (nowadays called K-Drama) modes and practices by local production through various means of cultural appropriation. This time, I will expand my exploration to other aspects of Philippine entertainment and other cultural practices. I will also update my observations on the continuing “Korean turn” in the teleserye. I will argue, on the one hand, about the success and soft power of hallyu or the “Korean wave” in the Philippines; and on the other, about Philippine culture’s enduring ingenuity in its reception and repurposing of hallyu. Ideas to be yielded here will form part of a potential framework in understanding the dynamics of the interface between Korean and Philippine cultures, in the context of globalization. I

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\* Keynote Lecture at the Philippine-Korean Youth Forum, May 27, 2022, spearheaded by the University of the Philippines, Diliman Arirang organization.

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assert that popular culture remains to be an undervalued field of inquiry, as far as these contexts are concerned.

**Keywords:** hallyu, K-Drama, K-Pop, Korean turn, Philippines, South Korea, popular culture

## I . Introduction

In 2012, I formally began to engage what was back then an emerging field of studies on *hallyu* or the Korean wave in the Philippines. There were already interesting discussions taking place that involved both the broadcasting and academic sectors. There was even talk about where the phenomenon was headed, aside from what it was all about (Jimenez-David 2012). There were analyses about reception coming from broadcast networks' marketing research departments, as well as interventions offered by scholars, many of which were presented in "Hallyu sa Pinas" (Hallyu in the Philippines) fora by the Korean Cultural Center (KCC) in Manila. Some of the more formative discourses were by Fanny Garcia (2012), who conducted an audience study on a hit Korean TV drama and applied an assortment of approaches to reading her selected text; Ma. Crisanta Flores (2012), who assessed the Korean wave's "great splash on Philippine popular culture and life"; Florinda Mateo (2012), who explored the "magnet" of Korean TV dramas among local culture industry practitioners; and Michelle Camille Correa (2012), who also presented a reception study of strong women in Korean TV dramas. In the regional front, the latter study of Mary Ainsle, Sarah Lipura, and Joanne Lim (2017) on the hallyu backlash in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines is also notable. By that time, it had already been almost a decade since hallyu and its many forms had permeated Philippine society in general, and popular culture in particular. Its most familiar and fondest form is the Korean TV drama popularly labelled by Filipino broadcast giant Global Media Arts (GMA) Network as "Koreanovela" (Korean Culture and Information Service 2011). The concept is a neologistic compounding of "Korea," after the serial drama's country of origin; and "telenovela," after the massive form of serialized TV drama

comparable to the novel, and of Latin American origin. Like Latin American telenovelas, these Koreanovelas were dubbed into the Filipino language, and since 2003, have been staple in broadcasting during that time. Upon the invitation of the KCC in Manila, I delivered a panel paper which sketched my initial ideas on the phenomenal popularity of Koreanovelas in the country. Trained in Literary and Cultural Studies, I was mostly interested in how it reshaped local soap opera productions. I also inquired about why Filipinos could not get enough of these global drama products. Looking back, I consider both paper and occasion as having propelled my eventual writing of a cultural history of the TV serial drama or soap operas locally called "teleserye" [another neologism, this time of "tele" or television and "serye" or series], spanning eight decades, which also covered, of course, the rise of Koreanovelas. The cultural history has an altogether different story, though, in a way, it was the logic of my earlier forays into Koreanovelas. Koreanovelas started me out with the gargantuan task. The paper I delivered, "After Hallyu: A Critico-Personal Explication of Philippine Soap Opera Culture," remains unpublished, but it brought about the writing of the essay "Koreanovelas, Teleseryes, and the "Diasporization" of the Filipino/the Philippines" (Sánchez 2014). The said work saw the light of print in 2014 through the Media and Diaspora issue of *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* of the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman. This time, I will contemplate further on my interventions 10 years ago and offer expansions to the critical narrative of what I called the "Korean turn" in local teleseryes. As I do this, and consequently also explore the other manifestations of the "Korean turn" in the larger Philippine media and society, I will assert the importance of popular culture as a site of complementarity or cultural reciprocity between the Philippines and South Korea. Popular culture, often discursively unexplored and untapped, has so much to elucidate on "cooperative relationships" that take place in contemporary times. In the end, I will use the "Korean turn" as both illustration and framework of the productive discourse and dynamics between two cultures in the past two decades with hallyu as platform and intermediary.

## II. “Koreanovelas”/“K-Drama” and the “Korean Turn”

“After Hallyu” was my attempt to explicate, in a “critico-personal” manner, the phenomenon of Koreanovelas. I problematized my own act of viewing as a meaning-making exercise and contextualized it with the then on-going popular viewership of TV serial drama from Korea. It was very clear to me from the beginning that any vigorous discussion of Koreanovelas must consider the contentiousness of popular culture, easily dismissed in elitist conversations and discourses. Its denigration as a televisual product warranted a critical inquiry. From my perspective, popular Koreanovela viewership was symptomatic of what was then a “national desire, a national fantasy, not only for [Korea] but to be [Korea],” on the part of Philippine viewers. It was also another high point in what was in my head a working timeline of a cultural history of teleserye and viewership. From this articulation, I started to distinguish the teleserye, outlining its form and traditions, as well as its contemporary evolution, another high point of which is the popularization of Latin American telenovelas in the mid-1990s. It is important to mention telenovelas as far as this history is concerned, because it preceded the wave of Koreanovelas in the Philippines. The undercurrent of my discussions was that the emergence of these local global dramas was vital in the recent developments and innovations of the teleserye. If a history of the teleserye were to be written at all, both Latin American telenovelas and Koreanovelas should be prominently mentioned as key to its contemporary formation. From this argument, I offered speculations on the process of Koreanovela concept and cultural adaptation carried out in local productions. I pointed out what then appeared to be two important phases of the adaptation process that took place after the initial purchase, dubbing, and distribution of Koreanovelas—the transformative and acculturative. The transformative process refers to the purchase of Koreanovela franchises for local adaptation [either partially in concept or in its entirety—story and brand bible of the format], which led to a closer study of the Koreanovela form and aesthetic by producers. Meanwhile, the acculturative process refers to local productions’ conscious deployment of Korenovela influences into the local format of the teleserye. Obviously, this was carried out to maintain the

viability of teleseryes in the local market saturated by Koreanovelas. It must also be mentioned that aside from locating the Koreanovela phenomenon in the cultural history of the teleserye, I was also responding to the observable non-inclusion of the Philippines in then on-going hallyu scholarship in Southeast Asia carried out by Chua Being Huat and his colleagues (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Chua 2012). I found it curious that most of their work were silent about the Philippines, even if hallyu was burgeoning in the country. It was as if the Philippines was never part of Southeast Asia and couldn't possibly be located in the map of hallyu network these scholars have drawn, stretching up from Singapore to the Indochinese Peninsula, and farther up to the Asian mainland of China, Japan and Korea. I wanted to make a point by offering a Filipino perspective, by attempting to include the Filipino experience of hallyu in that incomplete Southeast Asian picture in regional Cultural Studies.

That point was more thoroughly articulated in "Koreanovelas, Teleseryes," where I sampled on three teleseryes I considered to be largely shaped by the Koreanovela—*Princess and I* (2012); *A Beautiful Affair* (2012), and *Kailangan Ko'y Ikaw* [I Need You] (2012). I observed three hallyu influences, one in each of the series, as I illustrated what for me was the "diasporization of the Filipino/the Philippines" brought about by the Korean TV serial form: "the "spectacularization" of the first world imaginary in foreign dramatic/fictional spaces as new "spectre of comparisons" alluding to Benedict Anderson"; "the crafting of the Filipino character as postcolonially/neocolonially dispossessed"; and "the continued perpetuation of the imagination of the Filipino location as archipelagically—and consequently, nationally—incoherent" (Sánchez 2014: 66). Before closely reading the teleserye texts, I wrote a more comprehensive accounting of the history of the teleserye. Clarifying further the process of dubbing/translation, transformation, and acculturation, I was eventually led to lay down arguments for an observable "Korean turn" in the local teleseryes. That there was a "Korean turn" or a reshaping of the local soap opera form in the likeness of the Koreanovelas was exhaustively shown in the teleseryes I mentioned—both adapted from Koreanovelas and locally

conceptualized—was something evident, and the time has come for it to be productively examined and explained. That the “Korean turn” had a defamiliarizing effect on serial Filipino stories and viewership also had to be explicated, for it to be critically reflected upon and explored beyond entertainment and fantasies for mobility. There was however more to that “Korean turn,” since in hindsight, it was not only occurring in teleseryes but in the wider Philippine—and even global—popular culture. Back in 2012, as mentioned, some lamented the waning of hallyu, the ebbing of the Korean wave that is, and this was also what motivated me to intervene, by way of Koreanovelas. Fast forward to the pandemic era, hallyu is still very much around the globe in its many forms and has quite “institutionalized” itself even as far as Hollywood. Perhaps, the framers of discussions a decade ago were aware of that to keep it alive, it was imperative to announce, prematurely and preemptively, its death. And they were right. It never died. We all witnessed BTS, perhaps the most popular K-Pop group in the world, dancing their hit single “Permission to Dance” in the august but empty halls of the United Nations in New York, during the global lockdowns of 2021. Before them, there was acclaimed South Korean director Bong Joon-ho and his scathing social critique *Parasite*, the 2019 Palme d’Or winner at the Cannes Film Festival, bagging major awards at the Oscars, including Best Picture, the first that is not in English.

My formulation of the "Korean Turn" is by no means complete. It certainly needs an expansion after a decade. This is especially warranted by the continuing popularity of many other forms of hallyu, not only in the Philippines but also around the world. I will explore the reception of these forms in the succeeding sections. Meanwhile, Koreanovelas are still patronized in Philippine television's mainstream free TV, as well as emerging digital platforms, like the subscription-based streaming service Netflix. Koreanovelas are referred to nowadays as “K-Drama,” perhaps globally aligning with the form’s branding as it is circulated and distributed around the world. Pre-COVID 19 pandemic, broadcast networks GMA and its archival Alto Broadcasting System-Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN) offered at least three to five K-Dramas daily and featured at least two local adaptations each in

a year. In the local front, producers continued to explore certain themes and stories usually reminiscent of K-Drama hits. This meant the complication of, or at times, turning away from conventional romance and melodrama of maudlin tears and happy endings familiar to Filipino audiences. Thus, the past 10 years found local producers offering a merry mix of formats—romance-comedy, scandal, action, science fiction, magic realism, fantasy, gothic, period drama, and dystopia, among others, in daily teleserye fare—and oftentimes in a manner that appears to be kitschy yet edgy.

It may be said that K-Drama and the “Korean turn” that it brought were very crucial in preparing audiences for these novel serial ideas to be popularized. It appears now that viewers had to experience and see these concepts first in Korean form before local productions ventured into innovating the teleserye. Patronage proved to be helpful in convincing producers to invest in these types of K-Drama-inspired drama serials. Their ventures led to the production of many TV series, among them two exemplary cases: ABS-CBN’s *Wildflower* (2017-2018) and GMA’s *The Lost Recipe* (2021). *Wildflower* follows the story of a young woman named Lily Cruz (Maja Salvador) who returns to a corruption-ridden provincial town to avenge the dissolution of her family brought about by the political Ardiente family dynasty. She single-handedly brings down. Her characterization and story are noticeably shaped by K-Drama vengeance tropes, often found in excessive and scandalous South Korean *makjang* or drama plots, which literally took stories and scenes to the hilt (Asia Society 2021). In hindsight, it provided a parallel narrative to the country’s distressful political climate of impunity and repression, where many of the outspoken critics and opposition leaders fighting the Rodrigo Duterte regime were women. Meanwhile, *The Lost Recipe*, which aired during the pandemic, and followed by audiences on both free television and YouTube streaming, recounts the adventure of Harvey Napoleon (Kelvin Miranda), a young male chef inspired to create the best version of *adobo*, a popular pork and chicken sour stew which is arguably the country’s representative national cuisine. In the process, he finds himself time traveling to the Spanish colonial period to steal the written recipe from a culinary master. Reminiscent of many

speculative Korean [and even Japanese] series where past meets the present, as well as culinary dramas that pulled at the heartstrings as they transported men into the kitchen, often considered a female space, *The Lost Recipe* afforded audiences with an unconventional concept that attempted to reinvent the Filipino hero's journey.

Also, in these two texts, the qualities of the "Korean turn" in teleseryes became more pronounced: (1) a much more compact serial storytelling that need not run for years [*The Lost Recipe* only ran daily for three months, more or less; *Wildflower*, which lorded over the afternoon timeslot, ran for over a year]; (2) a coalescence of various formats [*The Lost Recipe* is clearly magic realist; while *Wildflower* is allegorical in its socio-political commentary; however, both were still very much structured in typical romance and melodrama]; (3) and a highly-improved production value that oftentimes deployed technology to enhance the look and packaging of the show. These also represent teleserye formation currently exported globally and consumed both by Filipinos in the diaspora and other international audiences around the world. This is very important to mention as the Philippines is about to mark its 25th year in the contemporary global TV drama market in 2025. In 2000, ABS-CBN's benchmarking teleserye *Pangako Sa 'Yo* (The Promise), a two-generation story of star-crossed lovers, paved the way for Filipino serial TV drama to be followed by audiences from around the Southeast Asian and Asian regions to as far as the African continent. Today, many Filipino soaps have been either dubbed or subtitled in various languages, with a good number even adapted in other countries by local producers. During the pandemic, some of them have also dropped into Netflix streaming which serves a subscription market. The teleserye has reached a significant stage of development, thanks to K-Drama. It continues to innovate in both form and content as it also looks out for potential global reception and even collaboration with leading players in the international televisual arena. After all, it maintains a sure market advantage with Filipino migrant audiences around the world seeking in television, both in paid as well as internet-reliant platforms, a means to touch base with the culture and their families back in the mainland. All producers need to do is expand viewership. Admittedly, a decade



after, there are already many things to account for as regards the innovations in local production after the "Korean turn" and considering the teleserye's participation in the global market. However, this must be done more comprehensively in another paper.

### III. From the Perspective of Cultural Appropriation and Transnational Media Flows

The processes of dubbing/translation, transformation, and acculturation that characterize the "Korean turn" in the Philippines through K-Drama may all be typified as instances of cultural appropriation. Richard Rogers (2006) broadly defines cultural appropriation "as the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture," and is in fact, "inescapable when cultures come into contact, including virtual or representational contact" (474). What Philippine local production had been carrying out for the past two decades, as far as K-Drama is concerned, has been transporting its qualities onto the local format of the teleserye, to make it new and enduring to Filipino audiences. What has been bridged first through dubbing/translation into Filipino were not only sound and sense but an entire ethos of a culture that has been conquering the world through soft power. And in this sense, the cultural appropriation taking place in the "Korean turn" makes for an interesting case as it is the culture at the receiving end, Philippine culture, that is aggressively undertaking the reproduction of Korean drama in various formats and forms. Considering this, whatever "degree(s) and relevance of (in)voluntariness, (in)equality, (im)balance, and (im)purity" (Rogers 2006: 499) are consequently reconfigured. What we see in this case is Philippine broadcasting, and Philippine culture in general, asserting adeptness in responding to the Korean soft power approach. While there is no forcefulness but only strategic global inculcation of Korean cultural forms such as K-Drama, the cultural politics involved is subverted to favor the Philippines. The supposed "marginalized" and "colonized" party has been belaboring to study and internalize the foreign cultural form to master it, and in a way possess its distinctive qualities to be used

“for its own purposes,” to borrow from the Filipino critic Lucilla Hosillos (1984: 137). There is assimilation in the experience indeed, but not much of the presumed exploitation of the “dominated.” The culture at the receiving end asserts its agency and potential in creating not simply a copy of the cultural form but instead a re-innovated form of the teleserye. The re-innovation embodies what may be said to be the two-fold purposes of cultural appropriation: the localization of useful characteristics of K-Drama to serve Filipino audiences [some use the term “glocalization,” which I am not very keen to use]; and persistent product improvement of the teleserye as it participates in the global drama market since the early 2000s. Compact storytelling, the effective coalescence of various formats, and the elevation of production value all establish the teleserye’s readiness to compete in the world stage, following its Latin American and Korean counterparts. The teleserye has learned—and continues to learn—from K-Drama to this day, and the Korean dramatic form continues to expand the horizons of possibilities of the local form with surprising, yet to be explored ideas.

One notable aspect I wish to focus on, as far as teleserye cultural appropriation of K-Drama is concerned, is on story settings. Conventionally speaking, the Filipino TV soap opera has never been particular with setting since most shows were shot within studios and were really confined by limited production budgets. That was until Filipinos were able to view the more realistic and most times affluent settings used on Latin American telenovelas. This compelled for a rethinking of local productions and even programming. Serial dramas were gradually brought out of the studio and into slums or mansions, providing verisimilitude and compelling characterization in real spaces, usually with serious implications to conventional TV network spending. With K-Drama coming into the fore, the idea of setting was pushed further as local productions explored the utilization of specific places that often created characters out of the location’s terrain and culture. For Filipinos who consumed K-Dramas back in the early days, the serial drama’s setting became an education into the Korean landscape, enticing eventual tourism for Filipinos who can afford to travel. For instance, *Endless Love 2: Winter Sonata* (2002), the landmark Korean drama that started the

Korean wave, introduced audiences to the scenic destination Namiseom or Nami Island, a celebrated landmark that K-Drama fans always visited with televisual nostalgia. In picturesque Nami, tourists were able to relive the romantic moments of the star-crossed lovers Joon-Sang (Bae Yong-Joon) and Yoo-jin (Choi Ji Woo). K-Drama settings also educated audiences about various aspects of Korean culture, like Korean food and cooking. For instance, *Dae Jang Geum* or *Jewel in the Palace* (2003), a period drama that narrates the story of a court cook and doctor, Jang Geum (Lee Young-ae), introduced not only royal and day-to-day cuisine, but also native cooking techniques. The show appeared to have displayed the entirety of Korean cooking, as Jang Geum can only do, proving to Filipino audiences that there was more to Korean cuisine other than kimchi and soju.

With local destinations and locations as story settings, productions created fictional worlds out of places and cultures familiar to us. Baguio City, around 250 kilometers north of Manila, and the country's summer destination because of its mountain-cold climate, has been a favorite location for recent teleseryes. In 2014, the romance-comedy *Forevermore* brought audiences to the mountainous strawberry fields of a fictional community called La Presa, located in Tuba, Benguet, at the outskirts of Baguio City. It narrates the fortuitous encounter of a young rich man trying to find his place in the corporate life of his hotelier family; and a country lass, who has big dreams for the future. They fall for each other and brave all odds brought about by their class differences. The pilot episode also features a trope straight from K-Drama: the male protagonist paraglides and accidentally lands in the female beloved's truck. The popularity of the soap eventually brought hordes of fans to Baguio City, and more importantly to the series location in Tuba, which unfortunately brought traffic congestion and the accumulation of garbage in the area. This eventually led to the issuance of an environmental protection order which set the site as off limits to people (Cruz 2015). Quite recently, another teleserye, *The Broken Marriage Vow* (2022), set its narrative of vengeance, the story of a woman scorned in a fictional Baguio City. The series was a franchise of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s *Dr. Foster*, which

also happens to be a franchise of the K-Drama hit *The World of the Married*. People raved about the impeccable acting of the ensemble cast, as well as the native designs integrated in the wardrobe of the characters, representing the work of indigenous weavers. *The Broken Marriage Vow* is a testament to what local producers have learned so far about sense of place as taught by K-Drama. It appears that conjuring culture does not necessarily mean merely showcasing sites and eventually turning them into teleserye tourist attractions. It may also and simply be the distillation of culture for Filipino audiences, and for all the world to see.

Finally, we must assert that this complex process of cultural appropriation is clearly enabled by the "transnational and transcultural contexts" (Ju 2020: 1) of our current globalized media landscape. Transnational and transcultural television make for "quantity, quality, and diversity of audio-visual content," as well as "(bring) up new patterns to receive and entertain with different kinds of TV stories" (ibid). In the local front, cultural appropriation was necessary so that Filipino productions may be made to catch up with the audiences' sustained patronage of K-Drama. Local productions had to assert their place in the broadcasting grid and the only way to compete was to be at par with K-Drama, to which it is often compared particularly by critics and elitists. It later proved to be a long and productive process of acculturation so that productions may also carry on with efforts to internationalize and participate in the global market alongside K-Dramas, among others. By "internationalize," I mean two things: the modification and elevation of local production to make it at par with global standards and suitable for international templates like streaming; and of course, global distribution, which is very much connected with the earlier. The process is still on going. Transnational and transcultural television afforded Philippine TV with flow, that is not only "the mobility of both finished TV programs and TV formats in international media marketplaces," pace Ju (2020: 1-2), but more importantly, the impulse to reinvent the TV serial drama to what it has become today: a bolder and compact format encompassing concepts and genres, and more palatable to both local and foreign audiences.

#### IV. The "Korean Turn" in the Larger Philippine Entertainment

As mentioned, the "Korean turn" was not only confined to K-Dramas and K-Drama-influenced teleseryes. It was an expansive phenomenon in Philippine popular culture that also permeated at the same time as Korean novels were starting to make waves on television. How and why did this happen? Speculation brings me back to the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, when hallyu was making waves in Asian countries including the Philippines. In our own shores, what came before K-Dramas and other hallyu products were droves of Koreans visiting short term or moving into the country. A substantial number of them were young people intending to study or practice conversational and written English. I was myself a witness to this back in 2002, when I worked for one of the many English schools for Koreans that sprouted in the Philippine capital. Many of my more mature students told me they chose to study here because it was cheaper. They also wanted to study with Filipino teachers because of their aptitude in imparting the American accent. Add to this the promising socio-economic climate in the country, as well as the aggressive marketing of the Philippines as a retirement destination for expatriates. A tentative conclusion which needs to be validated in the future is that the arrival and stay of Koreans necessitated a circulation of hallyu, first among the Korean community, and later, an expanded dissemination into Philippine localities where they resided. This might be its curious, little history.

Korean popular music—what we know today as K-Pop culture consisting of Korean singers as well as girl and boy bands—first hit the Philippine airwaves sometime in the 2000s by way of Korean singer Shim Mina's "Answer the Phone" (Esteban 2020). If memory serves me right, people at first didn't really recognize that it was Korean. It was however perky enough to launch a dance craze on television, which made the song linger in the local ear for years on end. Meanwhile, sometime in 2004, as the influx of Koreans to the Philippines steadily increased, there came a watershed moment in Korean representation in Philippine popular culture. Sandara Park, whose screen name eventually became "Dara" when she became a member of the popular Korean girl group 2NE1, rose to stardom

(Nitura 2021). She won a local reality star search hosted by ABS-CBN, besting local applicants with her charm as a naïve Korean girl. Her popularity yielded for her the unforgettable monicker “Pambansang Krung-Krung” [National Crazy Loony Person] because of her adorable confidence despite the obvious awkwardness as a foreigner. She starred in TV shows and a film, and recorded an album which received a platinum award. In 2009, she left the country and joined 2NE1. The group disbanded in 2016, and she embarked on an equally successful career as a solo act, returning to the Philippines occasionally for vacation and projects. She released *Sandara Park* (2023), an extended play under the Korean label Abyss Company. It has five tracks showcasing her versatility as a singer. When she announced the album release via social media, her Filipino followers were quick to throw their support. In video appearances, and in interestingly fluent Tagalog, she constantly expresses her amazement and gratitude for the enduring fondness of her Filipino followers. She has essentially cleared the path for many other Korean celebrities (ibid).

Some others decided to make the Philippines their homebase, prominently appearing on TV and the public sphere. Among them are lifestyle newspaper and magazine columnist and TV host Sam Oh; radio and TV host Grace Lee; model and cosplayer Jinri Park; and comedian and TV host Ryan Bang, perhaps the most popular among them, probably next to Sandara Park. Bang, who first arrived in the Philippines sometime in 2005 for studies (Cruz 2021), achieved longevity for being a mainstay in the decade old ABS-CBN noontime musical variety show *It's Showtime*. Having stayed in the country for a long while, most of these individuals speak the Filipino language very well, making them very endearing to the public. They also perpetuate the Korean presence, and thus the Korean turn. Bang is exemplary with his daily appearance in his noontime show, aside from occasional TV and film cameos. The figures of Bang and company also illustrate how Korea has become one of our own in an ethos of global mobility—cultural appropriation at its best. In the Korean front, Filipinos also strived to make their presence felt, mesmerizing Korean studio and social media audiences with their prowess in performance and acting and foraying into the Korean

popular culture scene—a clear and interesting expansion of our conception of the "Korean turn." This means that aside from cultural appropriation in the home front, others explored penetrating the Korean cultural industry more directly. For instance, in 2007, the young Filipino belter Charice Pempengco [now Jake Zyrus after he began identifying as a transgender male] first trended in social media when she sang in the Korean TV talent show *Star King*; she even had a duet with boyband Super Junior's Kyuhyun. Her Korean stint catapulted her career which peaked with US invitations to guest in *The Ellen Degeneres Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. For one who historicizes the "Korean turn," Zyrus may be considered a forerunner to Filipino actors and artists who tried and found their luck in the Korean entertainment industry. Most notable among them are Noreen Joyce Esguerra, who starred in over 60 K-Dramas in her career doing minor acting roles; Lester Avan Andrada, who played an itinerant Filipino immigrant in the 2013 dystopic film *The Flu*; and Christian Lagahit, who has played minor roles in hit K-Dramas *Descendants of The Sun* (2016), *Crash Landing On You* (2019), *Squid Game* (2021), *Vincenzo* (2021), and the space opera *Space Sweepers* (2021) (Alumno 2021).

Meanwhile, the "Korean turn" also begs to be revalued as having been augmented by K-Pop. As an enduring industry, particularly during the pandemic, K-Pop was seen as one that "only keeps expanding, despite unprecedented challenges," as it is undeniably "a total experience that encompasses fashion, makeup, choreography...and 'a visual and auditory content package'" (Morin 2020a: 5). Being both "global obsessions" (ibid), K-Drama and K-Pop complemented in furthering each other's popularity and reach. We may surmise that such is the case in the Philippines where substantial K-Pop fandoms are also K-Drama fans. The so-called "modern idol system" (De Luna 2020: 6) of K-Pop may be said to be an important contributor to the enduring presence of K-Drama across the world. Fandoms may be seen as sustaining and even growing viewership, perhaps initiating more people into the "K-hole" of hallyu, to borrow from Natalie Morin (2020b: 62). Proof of this is the not-so-few K-Pop girl and boyband stars occasionally headlining serial drama, boosting their popularity and star power, and showing

their versatility for more audiences to adore. A Netflix listicle showcases the extensive participation of K-Pop stars in K-Drama: Jun of UKISS in the military drama *D.P.* (2021); Eunji of Apink in *That Winter, The Wind Blows* (2013), a story of a con-artist; Yeo One of Pentagon in *Spark* (2016), a K-Pop idol story; Lee Min-hyuk of BtoB in the mystery series *Nightmare High* (2016); Krystal Jung of f(x) in *Prison Playbook* (2017), a sports and prison story; Lee Jung-shin of CNBLUE and Son Na-eun of Apink in *Cinderella and the Four Knights* (2016), a contemporary fairy tale; Jung Chae-yeon of DIA and I.O.I, Jung Jin-young of B1A4, and Kang Tae-oh of Surprise in the love and friendship story *My First First Love* (2019); Siwan of ZE:A and Sooyoung of Girls' Generation in the love story *Run On* (2020); Seohyun of Girls' Generation in *Private Lives* (2020), another con-artist-themed story; Rowoon of SF9, Byungchan of Victon, and Jung Chae-yeon of DIA and I.O.I in the period romance *The King's Affection* (2021); Bae Suzy of Miss A in the business-themed series *Start-Up* (2020); Yoon Kye-sang of g.o.d and Yubin of Wonder Girls in the medical and culinary drama *Chocolate* (2019); Cha Eun-woo of Astro in another period romance *Rookie Historian Goo Hae-ryung* (2019); D.O. of EXO in *100 Days My Prince* (2018), a period drama about a prince and his peasant love; Hyeri of Girl's Day in the nostalgic series *Reply 1988* (2015); Eric Mun of Shinhwa and Seo Hyun-jin of M.I.L.K. in the doppelgänger drama *Another Miss Oh* (2016); IU and the late Sulli of f(x) in the ghost drama *Hotel Del Luna* (2019); Choi Si-won of Super Junior in the *chaebol* [rich family story] *Revolutionary Love* (2017); Han Seung-yeon of Kara and Ryu Hwa-young of T-ara in the college drama *Hello, My Twenties!* (2016); Rowoon of SF9 in the modern gothic-themed *Tomorrow* (2022); and Kim Se-jeong of I.O.I and Gugudan, Ahn Hyo-seop of One O One, Choi Byung-chan of Victon, and Bae Woo-hee of Dal Shabet in the romance-comedy *Business Proposal* (2022) (Kim 2022). In being deployed to act in K-Dramas, these selected K-Pop girl and boyband members, among others, ensured their lasting currency amidst intense competition, and in an equally popular and hallyu format at that. Perhaps, even if they decide to seek respite from the limelight for a brief period, like the global sensation BTS [of the seven-man BTS, only V starred in a K-Drama, the hit period series *Hwarang* (2016)] in June of 2022,



after a busy pandemic stint, they are usually assured to continue drawing fans, as K-Pop is built on sustained idol-making and fandom.

The cultural appropriation of K-Pop in the Philippines flourished in the recent emergence of local girl and boybands popularly labelled P-Pop, standing for "Pinoy" [shorthand for Filipino] popular music. Early forms of P-Pop appeared in the 2000s to the early 2010s in song and dance groups like Pop Girls, XLR8, 1:43, Down to Mars, and RPM. Like their K-Pop and even J-Pop [Japanese] counterparts, these groups were created and marketed as versatile musical and dance superstars followed by hordes of fans and sustained by organized fandoms that utilize social media to congregate and interact, and on occasion, even participate in various social causes. 2018 saw the launching of the first girl idol group, MNL48 [MNL stands for Manila], which was more J-Pop, being a sister of the Japanese girl group AKB48 [AKB stands for the Tokyo district of Akihabara]. Also making a debut that year was the five-member boyband SB19.<sup>1</sup> The boyband boasts of making waves in the Billboard Music Awards, being the first from the Philippines and Southeast Asia to be nominated in the award's Top Social Artist category, competing alongside American pop star Ariana Grande and Korean acts BTS, Blackpink, and Seventeen; as well as entering the 2020 Billboard Social 50 list. In 2020, two other P-Pop acts entered the scene—the eight-member girl band BINI [shorthand for the Filipino "binibini" or young lady] and the five-man group BGYO,<sup>2</sup> both products of an intensive ABS-CBN star search and training. Both groups had extensive exposure and promotion, being part of the local network system. They also engaged in advocacy

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<sup>1</sup> The name is a curious neologism. It reportedly stands for the melding of Filipino and Korean cultures in the group, being that it is trained and managed by ShowBT Philippines, "an entertainment and media contents company that branched out from South Korea to various countries" (When in Manila 2019). "SB" pays homage to the group's management, while 19 is the sum of the digits of South Korean and Philippine area codes, 82 and 63 (8+2+6+3).

<sup>2</sup> It is quite easy to assume that "BGYO" is a shorthand for the Filipino "bagyo" or storm. A 2021 Kapamilya World Online report says otherwise. It stands for "Be the Change, Go Further, You and I, Originally Filipino." BGYO is also trained and managed by Filipino-Korean collaborators.

work that spoke to their young “woke” audiences who are active in social media and often referred to themselves as “stans” or overzealous fans. In 2021, BGYO dropped its debut single “The Light,” which garnered a million views on YouTube. Perhaps the most notable among the acts is Alamat [in Filipino, “legend”], a six-member boyband also formed by way of a nationwide star search. While still being true to its K-Pop mold, Alamat packaged itself as a Filipino multiethnic group representing the major Philippine languages, singing lyrics in their respective vernaculars, and at times performing in ethnic-inspired costumes. Most of these bands underwent formal training by or are co-managed with Korean entertainment agencies. Their snappy and synchronized choreography and youthful sound are very reminiscent of K-Pop, but of course come with a distinct Filipino flavor. All have grown respective fandoms, particularly in the concert scene as well as in social media. While we are yet to see P-Pop stars being bannered in teleseryes, opportunities might come sooner or later. For instance, SB19’s Stell starred in a regional Disney special and much recently joined a franchise reality singing search as a regular coach and judge. All things considered, it is quite easy to get lost, to be rendered invisible by the power of spectacle in K-Pop. In spite of this, by way of mimicry, once described by Homi Bhabha (1994) as a “metonymy of presence” (128) the local realm through P-Pop is able to reiterate itself by doubling the images, in this case of spectacular K-Pop groups and practices, and coming up with its own impressions or versions of the spectacle, and even of fandom, which curiously cuts across national boundaries and goes global. A more comprehensive explication of P-Pop vis-a-vis the “Korean turn” is in order. I will do this on another occasion.

## V. The Story so Far and Some Conclusions

Further extending this critical narrative may find us throwing light on other equally interesting facets of Philippine popular culture where the “Korean turn” has also been taking place. For instance, in the culinary scene, the interest in *hansik* [Korean cuisine] first sampled in the K-Drama *Dae Jang Geum* may have been

synthesized in the current Filipino romance for *samgyeopsal-gi*, barbecued meat with *banchan* or side dishes such as fermented vegetables. In the past three to five years, the samgyeopsal restaurant business has flourished in the country, virtually establishing Korean enclaves, "Koreatowns" at every corner, usually packed with people willing to line up for meals (Tupas and Lee 2020). The vicissitudes of the pandemic have also never prevented people from bringing samgyeopsal even into their homes. I am inclined to say that it was so easy to culturally appropriate samgyeopsal because of the hefty, familial eating experience it offered, almost comparable to local family celebrations and fiestas. One does not eat samgyeopsal alone in these quarters—it is a meal to be shared with others. In this manner, "samgyeopsal" may have already replaced the American inherited "barbecue" in the local vocabulary, finally providing meat-grilling an Asian flair and flavor and reconnecting this culinary culture to Asian roots. In another front, the massive Korean skin care industry has also been transforming the Filipino sense of beauty that is known to be conservative and Western-oriented. The perceived Korean promotion of cosmetic procedures to self-improvement instills tolerance to a culture that has long valorized unadulterated, natural beauty. It must be talk of K-Pop stars and their facial enhancements that is changing the minds of many in this place where being "retokado"/"retokada" [having undergone cosmetic procedures] still bears a cultural stigma. On the other hand, the surge of skin care brands and products that usually promise blemish-free, "glass skin" also upholds the cultural aspiration for, and the glorification of skin whiteness, now Asianized by "brightening" agents more compatible to Asian skin pigments and are as accessible as many other Korean consumer goods on display in a growing number of Korean groceries around the country. Additionally, this aesthetic may also be promoted by the growing deployment by Philippine brands, from retail to real estate, of Korean celebrity endorsers, the most prominent of which is Lee Min Ho. At first glance, the "Korean turn" in food and skin care may be simply seen as a phenomenon of global consumption. However, consumption here must be considered as a complex partaking, not just a utilization of these supposed "K-products" peddled by hallyu. Consumption consists of

various facets of avid enjoyment. Enjoyment is absorbing and blissful. It absorbs not just utility but the entirety of the products, including the foreign cultures from which they originated. Consumption transforms the product. Its usage, through culinary sustenance or cosmetic application, is possessed not just by the consumer but by the entire complex of culture which contextualizes utility. In short, it is also acculturated.

How do we make sense of the story so far, of the story-in-progress that is the “Korean turn” in Philippine popular culture? An obvious opinion would have to do with the pivotal role of Korean novels/K-Drama in the wider dissemination and iterations of hallyu in Philippine soil. Korean serial drama not only educated Filipinos about South Korea, but also sustained interest in Korean culture. While it fed Filipino viewers with fresh story concepts and ideas, it also promoted both Korean cultural sites and practices that maybe aspired for. Aspiration has motivated cultural appropriation, thus the various instances I have narrated above. Aspiration may at first positioned the Filipino culture at a marginalized, receiving end of a soft power encroachment. Considering the issue more deeply however, it may be asserted that the continued circulation of hallyu not only shows the success of the Korean soft power in “conquering” Philippine culture, but also of Philippine culture’s aptitude to repurpose foreign culture as it permeates its realm. Repurposing offers the possibility of coming up with something original on the part of the receiving culture. For example, in instances of imitation, stylization, or borrowing—from teleseryes to skin care, possibly—elements of the foreign have already been “transmuted...into works [or artifacts that become] original in form [and are informed by our] own personal experiences and realities,” once again, to borrow from Hosillos (1984: 137). All in all, 10 years after I first explored the phenomenon of the “Korean turn,” I am very certain that in the Philippine-Korean encounter through hallyu, “original” artifacts and practices have been created, new pieces of culture that must be competently studied. The conquering Korean culture has been itself conquered, as it probably intends to do in its sustained global campaign. Regardless of hallyu’s orchestrated, and virtually state-funded endeavors, the local still wins, and reiterates itself.

The subject of Philippine-Korean complementarity itself still requires to be studied vigorously, and the critical history of the "Korean turn" promises a useful framework in expounding it. A productive path, as may be seen in this paper, is the path of popular culture, which almost always offers opportunities for a glimpse into intercultural dialogue and interface. Popular culture, being generally frowned upon, is unexplored and untapped, as far as complementarity is concerned. However, as a site of encounter between contesting forces, like different cultures coming together, it demonstrates the interrogations and negotiations undertaken, as well as that which were produced in these encounters. The "Korean turn" in Philippine popular culture is the story of more than two decades of cultural interface where the local and foreign engage each other in discourse and dynamics that bridge both commonality and difference, familiarity and strangeness. As a useful framework it locates hallyu as a platform and intermediary, where popular culture thrives as two cultures manifest the push and pull of encounter, as well as the conflicts and resolutions that ensue. As in the Koreanovela/K-Drama where everything coheres towards the end of the story, the "Korean turn" lays down a critical narrative, a narrative-in-progress, of a cultural encounter that proves to be exciting as it goes on and on. It may be asked at this point: Where is it headed? Nothing is set in stone at the moment. However, my gut feel tells me that we are up for an exciting part. Here is to hoping that the Philippines may also find both a place and a voice in the global arena, where South Korea has successfully demonstrated its being a cultural force to reckon with.

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## **Modular Imagined Community: Manila's Koreatown in the Time of Global Korea and the Popularity of Samgyupsal**

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### **[ Abstract ]**

Guided by the prism of cultural studies, this paper takes a look at the Manila Korea Town in Malate, Manila. The location, Manila Korea Town, figures as the paper's object of study by exploring, theorizing, and reflecting on its presence and location within the horizon of the signifying powers of Korea-Philippine relations in the contemporary period. With the subject position of this essay, the paper theorizes by responding to the following questions: How does the meaning-making of South Korea fare with other Koreatowns in the world from the scale of Koreatown in Manila? Subsequently, what happens to a place when a global cultural phenomenon evolves into a form of placemaking in a different nation and territory? As Koreatown finally grounds itself in the anarchic lifeworld of Manila, what does this historical development in our urban lives reveal about our contemporary times? Responding to this set of questions led this paper to foreground the idea of a modular imagined community within a four-part discussion. The body of the essay begins by theorizing on the concept that this paper proposes, modular imagined community, and such a

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concept work draws from the theories of nationalism by Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee. Subsequently, the antinomy between Anderson and Chatterjee is pursued by looking at the history of such a place, and through this step, the paper unravels the character of the place of Manila Korea Town, which explains the conditions of possibility of such social and communitarian formation. Yet as the public is caught by the presence of such development especially at the heart of Manila, the paper expands the scale and viewpoint by shining light on the globality of South Korea in relation to the Philippines. Lastly, this paper closes with a discussion on the food culture facilitated by this recent development, which also pushes us to imagine its potential, especially in light of the critique raised against South Korea and the popular culture associated with this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Modular, Friendship, Hospitality, Koreatown, Samgyupsal

## I . Introduction

Globally, we have marveled at the miraculous but also enchanting boom of the Korean wave. The Koreans have taken the spotlight of the global entertainment and creative industries, unraveling a different story of Asian success, which has overturned spaces that seem to be exclusive to the Western world, from Hollywood to European festivals. The craze of the world over Korean popular culture is a contemporary story, evolving from the stories of migration that can be gleaned from the classic work, *Pachinko* (Lee 2017). It is a novel turned into a movie that captures the history of World War II and the perpetual tension within the Far East Asian regional block, but eventually imbricated with the Asian American migration narrative within the scale of the history of the American empire. Yet with the present Korean wave, the struggling and oppressed migrant narrative of Korea has been crossed over, drawing what Jacques Derrida signifies as an X mark on its name (1997: 64). In turn, we are gradually becoming a witness to this nation's phenomenal rise through its Korean popular stars as figures

of success. Through these stars, our collective craze over Korean pop culture is consequently turning their visibility as a condition to efface a history of a past generation who have been subjects of global migrant labor oppression (Derrida 1997: 64). From such evolution of the Korean ethnicity, the global wave of Korean popular culture, at present, seemingly marks its crucial role at certain nodes of different global networks and assemblages at which nations, empires, and regional formations collide. The globality of the Korean wave, as a result, also becomes the horizon where stories of global history are changed, displaced, and at the same time, reinforced.

With such persuasion, it must be realized that stories of global transformation also crystalize in everyday life apart from the diplomatic talks of nations in high-power meetings. Everyday life, from building communities, daily domestic chores, popular entertainment, and up to restaurant visits, becomes the setting and the plotlines of modern stories of worldmaking, a story advancing the very rise of the Korean wave. Thus, over a coffee cup, upon seeing a Korean research informant who had lived in the Philippines for almost a decade, Danny Park (not his real name), I began recounting the present context of Koreatown in Malate, Manila. As I shared my research accounts, I told him about the rise of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) under the Korean Government that supports the construction of cities like Manila Korea Town in Malate (Park, Bang & Kang 2021: 1-3). The information I shared with him animated a sense of repulsion, and at the same time, bafflement. In our conversation, our exchange crossed the linguistic divide between Filipino and English languages, and his sharpest interpretation of such development marked through the political keyword: invasion. Such sentiment was animated by alarm. He weighed such social formation against a community he expected to be organic, which should capture a communal way of living, and at large, a social life immersed in Philippine culture. He cautioned us about such a scheme of the Korean Government, especially with its impact on its broader international relations with the Philippines.

Right off the bat, Park incites a critique whose idea of invasion can be rooted in the tradition of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist

nationalism in the Philippines, which has also served as a dominant discourse of local activism and postcolonial critiques (Patajo-Legasto 2008: x-xxiii). Yet such responses of alarm and surprise do not come from a Filipino. Instead, it is voiced by a Korean who has been here in the Philippines since the turn of the millennium. The steam of his apprehension seethes from the depths of experience in the vernacular Philippine popular culture, and at the same time, as someone who has reached exasperation whenever his racial visibility gets recognized. He has felt nothing but loath whenever one scrutinizes his racial otherness as people inquire about his place of origin in South Korea, or acknowledge his presence as if an ambassador of South Korea, despite almost becoming a migrant native—thinking, living, and speaking like a normal Filipino. He has almost reached the point in which he gives the impression that he wants to settle questions on his racial otherness by simplifying his identification as a naturalized Filipino.

Yet the idea of invasion has been imbricated and entangled with Korean Popular Culture, and in such a double bind, it has been, in fact, normalized, losing its symbolic and material damages to a nation-state. Our global reception to Korean popular culture allows us to realize how the idea of invasion has been generalized, turning it into South Korea's latest soft power. With such global popular appeal of South Korean popular culture, the response of Park can be a sentiment that evokes a forbidding future. After all, it is an invasion. Yet by highlighting such sentiment, I am not interested in sowing discontent between and among South Koreans who enjoy their citizenship in the Philippines. Instead, I seize this as an opportunity to look at this remark as a case of a critique of the city formation of Korea Town within the transnational sprawl, while sedimented by the history of the city of Manila. From such an angle, South Korea figures as a transnational society that serves as an allegory, structural edifice, and categorical index. As a result, this paper, despite the popular temptation, is by no means participating in identity politics. Much so, by having such a predisposition, I begin to ask instead, how does the meaning-making of South Korea fare with other Koreatowns in the world from the scale of Koreatown in Manila? Subsequently, what happens to a place when

a global cultural phenomenon evolves into a form of placemaking in a different nation and territory? As Koreatown finally grounds itself in the anarchic lifeworld of Manila, what does this historical development in our urban lives reveal about our contemporary times?

Answering these questions will be approached by using cultural studies, a method and perspective that, on the one hand, borrows from what John Jackson calls “thin fieldwork description,” (2013) and on the other hand, views Korea Town in Manila as a site that will be read by what Stuart Hall calls “a signifying practice” (2003). The imbrication of the two—thin description and signifying practice—propels us to see the Korean informant who expresses the keyword such as “invasion” as not someone who appears to be an inhabitant of a place whom we can observe and follow his personhood and placemaking within a locality for a long time. Instead, we situate him in this study as an individual whose presence can be apprehended with depth through his ability to “signify” (Hall 2003: 5) within a “representational system” (2003: 7) which, in fact, has been in a condition of struggle as his presence also serves as the “circuit of meaning” (Hall 2003: 16), making oneself a conduit and pathway in which the present worldmaking can prevail, remake itself, and in turn, apprehend his self-representation by virtue of only being, after all, “constitutive” (2003: 6). Thus, in this context, the informant has never been the bearer of absolute meaning. Instead, by following Jackson, one appears as a figure from whom we “slice into a world from different perspectives, scales, registers, and angles—all distinctively useful, valid, and worthy of consideration” (2013: 16-17).

The method of cultural studies, as a result, writes naturally a thin description that slices into the larger world of metropolitan Manila, and at the same time, the global migration of Koreans and Filipinos. Through this scale, we are going to describe the depth and larger worlds that govern the sentiment of the Korean informant through the circulation and signifying the presence of the category Korea within the scale of Korea Town in Manila. Thus, this paper contributes to the Korean-Philippine relations from thin, fragmentary, and microscale measures. The thin description draws

out traces of such international relations from the cultural history and practices of the people involved in such relations through Korea Town in Manila which serves also as the locus. Responding to this set of questions led this paper to foreground the idea of a modular imagined community within a four-part discussion. The body of the essay begins by theorizing on the concept that this paper proposes, modular imagined community, and such “concept work” (Stoler 2016) draws from the theories of nationalism by Benedict Anderson (2002) and Partha Chatterjee (1993). Subsequently, the antinomy between Anderson and Chatterjee is pursued by looking at the history of such a place, and through this step, the paper unravels the character of the place called, Manila Korea Town, which explains the conditions of possibility of such social and communitarian formation. Yet as the public is caught by the presence of such development especially at the heart of Manila, the paper expands the scale and viewpoint by shining light on the globality of South Korea in relation to the Philippines. Lastly, this paper closes with a discussion on the food culture facilitated by this recent development, which also pushes us to imagine its potential, especially in light of the critique raised against South Korea and the popular culture associated with this phenomenon.

## **II . Manila Koreatown: A Modular Imagined Community**

Park’s discomfort with the ODA as they support the rise of Korea Town in Manila has also been historically a strategy of the Korean government in dealing with other nations. The Korean government aims to take advantage and capitalize on the survivalist ethos of the transnational Korean business entrepreneurs across the world, a concern and historical development Jinwon Kim has also particularly explored among the diasporic Koreans in California and New York (2020). Kim and others have historicized the progress of the college-educated Koreans who have experienced “downward occupational mobility because of language barriers and general racial discrimination against Asians” (2020: 41). These Koreans have worked as “self-employed in the grocery business, dry cleaning, and wholesale retail Korean-imported merchandise” (2020: 217). Yet these Korean migrant workers have evolved from such a predicament

and eventually, have served as examples of “entrepreneurs [who] have practiced transnationalism from below” (2020: 215). Through such sociological character of the Korean diasporic presence, Kim shapes a concept called, “transclave” (2018), a conceptual rubric capturing the sociological imagination of the Koreans’ socio-economic existence, specifically in Manhattan, New York. Through this concept, Kim gives shape to the expansive reach of such Korean migration by illuminating the transit between the US Empire and the South Korean homeland. On the one hand, transclave captures how such migration brought the revitalization of Korean brands (2020: 42-44; 228-231) especially with the Korean Americans, and on the other hand, it also operates as a placeholder for the “transnational flows between two societies” (208: 2) that may pertain to economy, culture, and ethnicity. With the latitude of Kim’s transclave, the concept also plots the crucial sites for “government investment in the overseas” (2018: 2).

With the situation of the Korean migrants in the United States of America as a backdrop, the informant’s response, such as invasion, speaks of the cultural logic of nationalism. The response taps the process of forming communities that implicitly highlights the idealizing process of the localities. The intersections between the formation and idealization of communities foreground an important crossroad, especially with the broader politics of popular culture. In this context, Louie Jon Sanchez frames and ascertains such development through the category of “Korean turn” (2014: 68). The temporal marker of a Korean turn does not only capture what he describes as “merely an existing peak in the televisual process of change” (2014: 68). More so, it refracts our local cultural literacy (2014: 67-68), especially as the racial and national signifier, Korean, has been mediated as we enjoy the Korean televisual productions (2014: 70), whether in the form of “Tagalization” or translation into Tagalog of Korean soaps (2014: 70), or by adapting Korean television drama. These Korean televisual cultural productions, as our viewing evolves, have become a reservoir for our respective popular culture, which turns Korea, more than as a racial identity, but as a text that we presently read in the Philippines (2014: 83). Through such televisual experiences, the idea, name, or signifier, Korea, has

circulated and traveled across the Philippines in the contemporary period. By now, it has also become a name that has been affixed with a place that has a longer colonial and imperial history such as Malate Street. By drawing a sequence, beginning with the problem of Park regarding the transnational relations of South Korea with the world, followed by the nature of Philippine popular culture with its' Korean turn, and then the rise of Manila Korea Town—all of these can be considered as developments that expand the meaning of place, locality, community, and nations.

With the expansions of the categories for our placemaking, we must recognize that these categories stand on sediments of discourses that also support such relay of signs and ideas. Thus, Korea Town may not only be viewed as a mere place in Malate, Manila. The category, "Korea," also characterizes the racialization of a town. However, this racial affixation of Korea has a long history that can be complex, especially in a place that has served as an epicenter for the people's imagination of the Philippine nation, such as the city capital of Manila. After all, this place has become an important place from which we have anchored our imagination and theory of communities. Yet as we probe the substantive quality of placemaking of sites and nations, Benedict Anderson laments how these "have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse" (2002: 3). The difficulty he faces also has laid out its disperse and mobile capacity in its meaning-making for it has shown to be "'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (2002: 4). Drawing from Anderson's perspective, we may recognize the very visibility of Korea Town as an effect and perhaps a consequence of also precisely the persuasive power of nationalist discourses, and at the same time, the nature of nationalist discourse for it is endowed with modular qualities.

However, if the problem of defining the terms and limits of nationalism lies between expansiveness and certitude, the Korea Town of Manila subsequently also exposes how these names for places may also lack finitude. The name, Korea Town, may also exemplify as bi-products of historical and cultural experiences of



transplantation, migrations, and constellations of a prevailing political and ideological reality. Thus, by decentering empirical proofs to substantiate and solidify the meaning of placemaking categories, Anderson shows that nations can be mutable and shapeshifting, especially as the category also enables people to be granted imagination as a form of power. Imagination discloses its propensity to be the mechanism to advance the meaning of nations, and at the same time, to privilege human consciousness as a rationalizing agent when one faces the conflicts, emerging out of the attempts to particularize such category. For Anderson, imagination has been the stuff that provides the foundations of the communities, which shows nations to be capable of evolving into a limitation when it comes to basking on the nation's sovereignty, and at the same time, belonging in a community (2002: 7). As a result, communities of nations figure into our discursive communities, linguistic exchanges, and political relations through our cognitive ability. However, in the absence of such epistemological privilege, nations would have difficulty recognizing themselves, losing their power in representing people, society, and culture.

Yet crucial in Anderson's use of imagination is a response to Ernest Gellner's inability to appreciate, and process the rupture of the real of the nations as they "invent" themselves (2002: 6). As Gellner fails to grapple with the idea of invention of nations, he also fails to capture its complexity, and seize the possibilities of invention as a social process. The limits of Gellner, in this case, allow us to appreciate Anderson's critique to consider alternative ways communities can be realized, apart from hard and empirical evidence. Anderson paves the road for us to seize the community through what the mind can visualize and imagine, making the nations, whether the Korean, Manila, Filipino, Koreatown, and even Malate, Streets as not names that can be confined to substantive and empirical existence of such categories. These names also signify a process of creation, imagination, and to a certain extent, invention, which, for Anderson, may be developed through language, literature, notions of time, maps, museums, and other records of cultural importance. Thus, as all of these have shown the capacity to facilitate the practices of imagination, whether literature, language, maps, or others have also

shown the signifying possibilities for the nation, nationalism, and its citizens.

Apparently, Anderson's idea of imagined community has never been invincible from critiques, specifically from Partha Chatterjee. For the latter, he acknowledges the modularity of nations, and in this emphasis, he takes Anderson to task for his inability to provide more inclusive possibilities for the idea of imagination. With such problem, Chatterjee expresses his objection: "[i]f nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?" (1993: 5). Targeting the heart of Anderson's imagined community such as its implicit sanctification of Europe as whether the cornerstone, "cultural roots" or "official sources" of nationalism, Chatterjee illuminates what may be normally eclipsed: "anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society" (1993: 6). In shedding light on this aspect of nationalism, Chatterjee, in fact, sharpens and places to the fore the power of imagination, veering away from an Andersonian perspective that dwarfs the cognitive ability of imagination as a causality of existing and prevailing structures.

Nations and nationalism, coming from the antinomy between Anderson and Chatterjee, reveal how these have been the manifestations of the signifying ability of imagination as well. However, both of them have also traced the modularity of nations in which it draws, maps, and plots the mobility and mutability of such concepts. Unfortunately, such use of modularity as a category to show the utility of nationalism as a paradigm needs to be galvanized by mobilizing its meaning through its crucial role in other fields such as architecture and urban construction. After all, modular is not only limited to structures, frames, and scales. It is also a vocabulary that has been utilized to enlighten us regarding how architecture, as a field, tries to provide an alternative housing system for people who are perpetually haunted by the problem of homelessness (Wallace 2021: 8). Ironically, nationalism, apart from imagining one's community and sovereignty, also traces the natality of a citizen, which also serves as one's home, and at the same time,

the precarity of nations as well to allow people to have a dwelling place that they can call, home.

However, homes, like the Korea Towns, would vary as well, especially with Kim's idea of a "transclave" (2018), which firmly presses the transnational umbilical cord of any ethnic community. Migrant communities could not help but be involved within the transnational sphere, and in this situation, it complicates nationalism as either, on the one hand, sovereign freedom of a specific nation-state, and on the other, a component of a prevailing nationalism that participates in the political sphere of international relations. Such nature of nations informs Kim's move to thresh out the complexity of this category, transclave, as he traces and outlines the vast network of Koreatowns in the United States of America. From his research journey, these places have shown participation and activities in the global transnational capitalist arena. With the breadth of the scope of Koreatown's transclave, the transnational sphere has also empowered Korean Americans, local Korean entrepreneurs, and the Korean government to turn their local towns into "a global city [that] can play the role of a public advertisement within a nation branding effort," yet it has also become, as he cites Jerome Krase, "an 'ethnic theme park,' or 'a place where the experience of the ethnic, 'other' is for sale, particularly to tourists'" (qtd. in Kim 2018: 18). With Kim's use of transclave, nationalism evolves into a marker and a conduit of transnational economic transactions, making the fulfillment of the nation as a perpetual drive for economic relations, with the Korean national government as a big investor.

Apparently, the transnational relations, at the heart of it, continue to be reliant on the logic and capability to imagine. In this case, as the transclave continues to signify its meaning in certain parts of the West, especially with the development of Koreatown in America, it must be also recognized that its qualitative character lies also in its ability to function as a modular formation within the broader frame of a nation. Transclave, as it appears, is born out of the imagination of different state actors between the United States of America and South Korea. Yet the modularity of such formation needs to be ascertained while recognizing the energy and dynamism

of a transclave. After all, for Peter Carruthers, “a module can just be something like: a dissociable functional component,” yet its complexity may lie in the assumption that “independence amongst modules is by no means total. The different parts need to be connected up with one another in the right way” (2006: 2).

In the case of an architect, like David Wallace, it has been a “long-held dream of housing made in factories remains unrealized”, especially with the existence of the housing crisis, which makes modularity in terms of housing paradigm a way to mass-produce homes, reducing the cost of housing infrastructure by virtue of the process called, “prefabrication,” and at the same time, responding to massive growth of global middle class (2021: xiv & 14-15). Coming from Ryan Smith, modularity may be also understood through the idea of prefabrication that signifies a “transitive verb” where “parts that have been produced and then are assembled onsite” (2010: xi-xii), leading one to build a home from its off-site production up to the assembling process on-site. As a result, we cannot go on looking at one’s habitation without taking into account the inhabitants’ imagination through its parts, components, and prefabrication. By recognizing the parts of a home, our habitations may never be complete to begin with. Homes that also found nations may be perpetually disaggregated. However, in also finding a way to conceive connections, one’s national belonging may have components from elsewhere, traveling across the world, and finding a place where one can construct a modular structure.

It becomes crucial to recognize that the very process of fabrication congeals the inherent fictive and inventive process of home-building, which can be very analogous to the signifying nature of nation or nationalism. Thus, nations also reveal the depths of the nature of their modularity. Anderson’s imagined community, in other words, is modular, and by bearing this insight, Korea Town dawns to us a fictive and inventive process in a world contiguous with what Kim continues to see in the transclave of the United States of America. It is an invention in another nation that also continuously imagines its communities, which could hardly achieve horizontal comradeship, especially with the nature of transnational mobility, making everyone hardly in one place. However, despite the

limitations of one's habitation, the modular imagined community of Korea Town invites us to seize the practice of imagination while also recognizing the parts of a community as fabricated, being built in other sites, nations, and territories. Subsequently, in approaching a migrant subject like Park, he must be also viewed in other ways, apart from his biographical history, but also through the ways in which a street reconstructs, constitutes, and disassembles parts of his racial identity. His Korean distinction now becomes an ascription with the city capital of Manila, making it the Korea Town.

### **III. Historical Entanglements of Malate, Manila, and Koreatown as the City's Past-Future**

At this point, however, we should not dodge the bullet and confront important questions: what is the importance of knowing that Korea Town in Manila is a modular imagined community? What does this paradigm promise as a form of an understanding of the very nature of urban formations in the Philippines? Do urban formations naturally rise by being modular? In answering the questions, it is important to recognize that cities inherently, as seen by urban scholars, specifically Richard Le Gates, are aspirations of utopia, a place in which modernity aims to be perfected (2016: 27-28). At the same time, such aspirations may be deemed as the desire where one contends with the historical terminal points, which, for Michel Foucault—through the discursive interventions of Martina Tazzioli, Sophie Fuggle, and Yari Lanci—can be characterized by what he calls, “history of the present” (2015: 2). Despite the jarring combination of history and present, Foucault defamiliarizes the present as a temporal period that recognizes, on the one hand, “the creation of ourselves in our autonomy” (2015: 2) On the other hand, such a paradigm of history reveals to be “a diagnostic” that makes us seize its “transformative politics,” and such outcome takes place because the idea of a present is acknowledged through the “genealogical account of its emergence” (2015: 2-3). Taking off from such a perspective on history, communities grow, shape, and gain recognition, not entirely from their historical past. Communities are constituted from the history of the present. In fact, whenever we talk

about a community, one's narratological structure can be propelled and compelled by being historical. As history comes alive by looking at the present, historical perspectives become nuanced, particularized, and complicated because any discussion of the present would resort to a diagnostic language. Thus, when we speak of a modular imagined community through Koreatown in Manila, we end up also diagnosing the process, construction, and current existence of urbanism in Metro Manila. Unfortunately, without the modular imagined community, it would be a challenge to recognize differently the present. By introducing such a diagnostic name, this leads us to view urban developments beyond the qualities of presentism, but also with the beneficence of historical perspectives.

Thus, to effectively understand the present Manila Korea Town, we are poised to look at the historicity of such a place. History would locate Korea Town as a place that emerges as a tourist enclave of Manila, sedimented by histories of being the place, during the Spanish colonial period, for the wealthy Spanish families, a culinary haven for European dining experience, and a place proximate to some important universities in the Philippines. For a long time, Korea Town has been known by its street name, Malate, and such a street figures on the map as framed by other popular streets, such as Bocobo Street, Nakpil Street, Taft Road, Remedios Circle, Padre Faura, Ermita, and others (Collins 2016: xix). Looking at these street names that surround and intersect with Malate Street, these places have been witnesses to the historical developments in the Philippines, from the rise and fall of the Spanish colonial period, the arrival of the American imperialist occupation to the most destructive war with the Japanese, leaving Manila second to Warsaw as the most destroyed city in the world. Eventually, with the liberation period under the Americans, the Philippines is handed to its citizens to build its so-called independent republic (Constantino 1975). James Scott describes Manila's history, during World War II, as a period on a "rampage" (2018: Introduction). Perhaps, while Korea Town simply marks a recent placemaking in metropolitan Manila, it may also shed light on the inherent changes, destruction, and reconstruction of the city at large.

Before the rise of Koreatowns, specifically the 90s queer

ethnographic imagination of Malate Manila, the popular spaces or districts in Manila were Binondo of Chinatown and even from a distant, Malabon, Manila (De Los Reyes 2010: 517-549). These are spaces known for a lot of migrant workers and merchants across the Philippines, and at the same time, across Asia. Binondo is known as the first Chinatown in the world, which has been a home for a lot of Chinese merchants, a diaspora of Chinese migrants from East Asia. Eventually, the settlers here became immersed in the Philippine social life, and eventually, weaved into the socio-cultural fabric, transcending a very racist and marginalized distinction during the Spanish colonial period, leading them now to emerge as “Tsinoy” or Chinese Filipinos. Richard Chu even describes Binondo as, at one point, a targeted place for conversion, and “[b]y the nineteenth century, [it has become] the most prominent and important district outside Intramuros” (2010: 12 & 59). While in Malabon, it has been known as the working-class enclave whose settlers migrate from the provinces in the Philippines, which eventually also bleed and weave into the Chinese diaspora in Binondo for a lot of the earliest Chinese settlers have been part of the working-class migrants in the Philippines (De Los Reyes 2010: 535).

We have to recognize that Manila is not a culturally and economically homogenous place as early as the late 19th century. It has pockets of migrant workers whose distinct local communities vary not only in terms of economic class, but also ethnicity, national, and racial belonging, including participation in the dominant mode of economic production in the country. At present, Binondo is the place where people can buy some of the cheapest Chinese cultural commodities, ranging from charms, stones, and totemic objects, but also food, and other household items. In the case of Malabon, even in the work of Isabelo de Los Reyes, a scholar of the 19th century Philippines, it has been the backwater of the aristocratic and wealthy enclaves of Manila despite how such a location would not be so distant from the heart of the city capital (2010: 517-549). It is a place where workers can find cheaper housing rent, locations of warehouses for stores and market supplies, and at the same time, the production sites of some

factories, which have never emerged in the form of a highly industrialized zone (2010: 517-549). By this time, across Malabon, Binondo, and Malate, with a number of heritage buildings and infrastructures, we can also recognize the failed industrialization of the country. The cities within Metropolitan Manila continue to possess some its rundown buildings that some engineers have declared as condemned and mostly hazardous to people's safety (Collins 2016; Sembrano 2014).

Yet with the rise of Malate, it can be described as a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992). It serves as the hospitality frontier of the city capital, especially since it is located near the sea, the ports of Manila, and at the same time, the spaces of cosmopolitan thinking such as the universities. Before the rise of a mall in Padre Faura Street, educational institutions, such as the Assumption Convent of Manila and Ateneo de Manila University, stood there, educating the children of the most powerful and wealthiest families in the nation's capital. The alumni of these schools belong to the kinship networks of politicians, presidents, corporate executives, and even to a certain extent, national heroes. Surrounding these educational institutions, some of the infrastructures occupy vast territories of huge mansions designed with courtyards in the middle, similar to apartment complexes that can be found in Western Europe (Acosta 2020).

However, by the turn of the 90s up to the millennium, Malate transforms and unfolds into a sexual tourist spot. Manila, by this period, begins to lose its appeal that even, at some point, the city's vibrant life diminishes into a scandal after a Hollywood celebrity named, Claire Danes, describes it as a place that “smelled of cockroaches, with rats all over, and that there is no sewage system, and the people do not have anything—no arms, no legs, no eyes” (Associated Press 1998). Coming from a white woman, such a statement registers with severity that brings the governance of the city of Manila in the international arena in a humiliating position, and consequently, the city council retaliates by declaring Danes as “*persona non-grata*” (Associated Press 1998). The scandal smeared by Danes against the city government forces them to be on the defensive side, and in turn, they decide to ban her films from being shown in the theaters of the city. Perhaps, such a destructive



description of Manila has also forced the city to eventually change the circulating negative perceptions about the nation's capital. The city government, as a consequence, has decided to popularize the local lifeworld as a strategy. They use popular media by having their own television series titled, *Mahal Kong Maynila*, or in English, *Manila, My Love*, featuring the quotidian lives of the Manila folks.

Perhaps, it is sharp to say that the birthplace of Koreatown is a place of destruction and reconstruction. Apart from Danes's critique, before the deadly campaign of former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte on drugs, Manila stages a prelude to a war on drugs under the late Mayor Alfredo Lim. He publicly humiliates drug suspects in the form of residential identification (Porcalla 2000). In launching a campaign against drug addicts who have been "infesting" his territorial jurisdiction, the spray paint functions as their weapon as they identify and mark their homes with the case number of their drug case. However, such policing measure eventually needs to be halted for some of the fundamental principles of Human Rights Law and the Philippine Constitution have shown to be violated. Sadly, even without the court decisions and sentences on their cases, some innocent folks in Manila have been convicted as criminals and guilty as the markings on their homes make their crimes visible in the public eye (Porcalla 2000). Yet with such a nature of governance in Manila, getting rid of criminality, cleaning up the "pests" of the city, and turning the urban as safe, at one point, have been the wager of the city across different political administrations and leaders. As we notice the pattern of concerns from different administrations, Manila may also signify a city stereotype of criminality and disorder.

Despite the drab sociological imagination of the city, at the heart of it lies Malate's sexual frontier by the 90s. With this distinction of Malate, Dana Collins shows the uneven character of the street and describes such placemaking through "the rise and fall of an urban sexual community" in Malate, Manila (2016). The contradiction between rise and fall is rooted in precisely the collision with different travelers, migrants, locals, and transnational forces. Collins has seen such flux, on the one hand, as part of an "unraveling of a gay-led gentrification," and unfortunately, on the

other hand, how Malate also “loses out to the neoliberal forces of city government and global capital” (2016: 5). The tragic collapse of one’s supposed queer enclave has endured the insufferable effect of what Marco Garrido calls, “the patchwork” of metropolitan Manila (2019). The differences in class and the struggle with power continue to be up in arms, yet are also seduced and intimated to be in bed together, like seeing foreigners in the streets who desperately court the favor of women. Thus, upon seeing the foreigners attempt to have a tryst with the sexworkers on the streets of Malate, the sociality of local women with the foreigners achieve life and dynamism through a prevailing market activity that Neferti Tadiar calls, “sexual economy” (2004 38-39).

The sexual economy that Tadiar conceptually constructs for us captures a paradigmatic imagination of a nation-state that has been limited within empiricist terms. She exposes how the nation has functioned as a sexual organ that has been penetrated back and forth, situating us globally as “hyperfeminized” (2004: 49). Tadiar’s incisive deconstruction of the sexuality of capitalist imperial relations of the Philippines disparagingly shatters us with the truth about our ontology and the vitality of the economic and cultural life in the Philippines. She has revealed how our ontology and vitality can be flattened and reduced by the dominance of relations of sexual, economic, and political utility (2004: 38-39). Such harrowing and poignant description of Tadiar regarding the urban alterity paved the way for Collins to foray into the deeper world of this part of the city. In Collins’s immersive life within a decade-long of fieldwork experience, the sexual economy ironically has also opened up pockets of living. Behind the pains and violence of such sexual economic relations, Collins also bears witness to a life beyond the overdetermination of Metropolitan Manila, such as the queer people who yearn to discover themselves, to develop their sense of personhood, and for some, to find love whether with the locals or “AFAMS,” a colloquial category for foreigners, which means, “a foreigner assigned in the Philippines” (2016: 7-20). The obverse side of finding love and sex in Malate may be a means for one to open a doorway out of, perhaps, Manila, and for others, the economy of sex serves as a mechanism in the pursuit of the locals to find love,

happiness, and their souls.

The romance and search for oneself have been both crucial in the narrative of Malate by the turn of the millennium. A novel entitled, *Orosa-Nakpil, Malate*, by Louie Mar Gangcuangco finally culminates and appears in 2006 that narrates the story of a young medical student who explores the dark yet exciting queer spaces, such as the gay bars, in Malate, Manila, and through the main character's journey, the novel confronts the disease called, HIV. Apart from learning about the stories of the lives of queer characters in Manila, the novel also educates the public regarding the virus and hopefully casts away the stigma inherited by this commonly associated queer disease (Gangcuangco 2006). Unfortunately, by this time, Malate can be observed as a place to have lost gradually some of its iconic gay bars. These gay bars have played as the epicenters of gay urban life in Manila that have been remodeled eventually and apportioned into new ways of celebrating one's sexuality. Gay bars have now figured in a multitude of options that can range across spas, 24-hour gyms, and sauna bath houses. For the more adventurous, queer folks have explored the riskier and much outlawed public spaces, such as parks, sidewalks, dark alleys, fire exits, nooks and crannies, cars, and recently, the vast digital space. Perhaps, while gay bars have served as the paradise for the sexuality of the LGBTIQ, the dimming queer lights of Malate may also come with the dispersal of queer habitations but also displacements. Thus, when Collins returns in 2013, Malate has converted itself into "a developer's dreamscape," and at the same time an "entertainment enclave" (2016: 216 & 236). The "magic" of Malate that Collins relishes unfortunately gets eclipsed by its commercialization which ushers them into a failed "urban renewal" (2016: 224-225).

Despite the changes that have taken place in Malate, it must be emphasized that entertainment eventually played a crucial role, especially by the time the pandemic hit the world. In turn, since most of us cannot visit entertainment enclaves, Metropolitan Manila has deepened its subservience to digital social media. We can notice in the public sphere the mass consumption of the internet and social media in the Philippines, ranging across wifi connectivity in public spaces, tourist spots perfect for Instagram photography, and

the rise of the new breed of middle-class social media celebrities or influencers. With the change in the character of the behavior of our consumer population, the cityscapes have also followed, transforming itself according to the needs and desires of social media as well. Part of the development of the power of social media is the impact as well of the Korean wave as it has become viral on different social media platforms, and to a certain extent, they have conquered and colonized the mediascapes. This situation has catapulted Louie Sanchez to declare the state of Philippine popular culture, specifically through Philippine television, shifting to a “Korean turn” (2014: 66). Such development in television for Sanchez “signifies the continuing internalization of the Korean aesthetic by local productions” (2014 : 66), which has now gone beyond television. Instead, it has covered almost all the public social spaces, Pinoy popular music, culinary consumption, and even to a certain extent, the Hispanic spaces or enclave of Malate, Manila.

Malate has been part of the metamorphosis of Manila. By the time Korea Town rose, it was also reconstructed when former Mayor Isko Moreno started to radically transform the city by introducing massive but also scandalous clearing-up operations (Madarang 2019). Under the clearing-up operations, the mayor has decided to wipe out all illegal vendors, infrastructures, and other impediments to people’s mobility, whether on the sidewalks, thoroughfares, or highways. In the case of Malate, a lot of urban settlers on the sidewalks have been cleared, and displaced. Apart from clearing up the low-income vendors and the beggars on the streets, he has also launched beautification projects that hopefully may change the image of the city, such as rehabilitating old infrastructures like the infamous Jones Bridge, the historic sites of Rizal Park and Fort Santiago, including building important public infrastructures like Hospital ng Maynila and the expansion of the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila (Madarang 2019). Seizing the opportunistic time for investments and developments, the city government of Manila has decided to push the Korea Town during the time of the pandemic to officially recognize the partnership between South Korea and the city government of Manila (Manila Public Information Office 2021).

Certainly, there has been a presence of Koreans for a long time in Manila, and such presence has been defined by the transnational migration of a lot of East Asians, beginning with the Chinese and then followed by the Japanese. In fact, Korea Town is shared with few Japanese and Hispanic entrepreneurs. However, the birth of Koreatown, apart from the effort of the City Government of Manila, is also enabled by the historical entanglements of Manila with the worldmaking of empires and powerful nation-states. In other parts of Manila, one can also see enclaves of Japanese and Indians. The arrival of Koreatown has simply solidified the ongoing relations of coloniality brokered by the transnational economic relations in which the Philippines participates with other nation-states, making the naming of such space not only a distinction of direction but a formalization of political and economic relationships. Korea Town is also name for the very recognition of such spaces in Manila from the lens of the history of globalization where the world is informed by identifying and plotting possible itineraries and destinations to achieve global mobility, and at the same time, prospective places for further capital investments, and support. Thus, Korea town iterates Manila's effort to locate itself in the worldmaking in which East Asia is making some waves in media, food production, and the digital economy. We cannot deny the coloniality of Koreatown in Manila, and, indeed, this is not new for it is the city's past-future.

City as past-future is a temporality of repetition, which Zizek describes: "first as tragedy and then as farce" (2008). This reveals the transformation of Malate into Korea Town historically inscribed in the past as a colonial space, and at the same time, a victim of such a world system, from being converted into a Spanish wealthy enclave, a space for a neoliberal intimacy, an ideal gentrified urban city, and recently, a hospitable space for Korean food culture. The tragedy of colonial wars has become now a farce for, on the one hand, the shift from a sexual economy to a gastronomic and entertainment economy has been facilitated by the process of clearing up the city, the local infrastructures, and the people. By dismantling its local lifeworld, what unravels in the Korean turn is also the reach of such expansion into the nature of our food

consumption, which is not only informed by food taste but also simultaneously the spectacle of Korean popular entertainment. This development reconfigures what Jinwon Kim calls, “transclave,” into, apart from being a space for Korean transnational entrepreneurs, a global circuit of urban diasporic emergence, transformation, and reconstruction. The wide network in which the signifier, Korea, has spread itself with a tentacular breadth would not be enabled only by the homeland nation-state. The mobility and reach of Korea can be structurally reinforced by the history also of nations linked to political and cultural logics of coloniality, whether from the vantage point of the local, foreign, transnational, or diasporic (2020: 80).

The Korea Town in Malate may have a semblance with the conditions of what Ann Stoler calls, a “colony,” which may be “rendered unhomey for those on whom it is imposed, as well as for those to whom it is offered as a stolen gift,” consequently catapulting everyone into a condition where people are “only settled waiting for something else, for release from those unfulfilled promises and that anxious unfulfilled labor” (2018: 56). With the status of Manila caught in the crossroads between past and future, this city remains as a frontier colony that oscillates between past and future through the present developments whether in food culture, popular entertainment, or urban gentrification, yet also vulnerable to the history’s potentiality. This means that Korea Town in Malate has been open to conditions of invasion, violence, war, and renewed gentrification repetitively. Thus, the past may be previously tragic, but now, it is also in a state of farcical becoming.

#### **IV. The Farce as an Interlude to a Global Korea**

The farce certainly, for Žižek, critiques our globally shared poor understanding of Karl Marx’s purview of historical materialism (2008: 3). Marx has understood capitalism as history in its long *duree*, which cites the periods as phases of capitalist development, the depravity of its interior worlds, and in the long run, the *fin de siècle* for socialism to be bound, hoping to radically transform such prevailing political economy (2008: 3). Unfortunately, as Žižek has

seen, history seems to never stop us from having a throwback to our catastrophic pasts, even if such part of our history has been a traumatizing tragedy, with all the deaths and casualties. Despite all the chances to rectify such calamity, we unbelievably repeat such tragedy that ironically we are reduced to laughter because we end up unraveling ourselves as farcical in our inability to learn and finally correct things. In such an interlude, between past and present, what becomes farcical is how a South Korean nation is also sandwiched between forces of capitalism and socialism, revitalizing these two and turning itself into an exporter of its history, method, and version, not as a socialist society, but as an emblem of neoliberal urban development. After all, Hyun Ok Park hits the nail on the head: “Marx’s observation that history repeats itself the first time as tragedy and the next time as farce is apropos of the Korean context” (2015 : 8).

The expanse of Korea’s reach reveals its globality that simultaneously experiences frictions and contradictions between capitalism and socialism. Korea’s global latitude can be traced back to the history of the Cold War. Gregg Brazinsky believes South Korea has been “forcefully incorporated into the U.S. led economic order by an authoritarian government determined to achieve rapid economic growth” and at the same time, the so-called “Cold War international system” has provided “opportunities” for them “to transform its economy and achieve prosperity” (2019 : 2). The American presence in South Korea precisely ensures to contain the possible spread of socialism in the region. Yet from the side of South Korea, apart from the alliance with the American empire, they have also marshaled what Darcie Draudt calls “Global Korea” (2019: 158). The Korea’s expansion into the global scale paradoxically, for Draudt, orients on a “form of nation-bounded globalization” but it has also unveiled itself as a “new vision for Koreanness,” originating from “the foundation of national growth from the era of rapid development,” and an offshoot of the “national project for renewed and revised international competitiveness” (2019: 158). In other words, Korea takes the drive seat and operates its machinery towards a capitalist direction, which does not only happen in South Korea, but also for Park, it is also a force that shapes the very

existence of North Korea globally (2019: 1-8). Capitalism has become, indeed, for Park, a shared “political unconscious” (2015: 4). Yet out of such consciousness, what unravels through the years is the idea of global South Korea in which its expansion is, for Draudt, while it might be a form of “privileg[ing] national economic development over attention to political development,” it is also at large a “multicultural” reconstruction of its socio-cultural fabric, making its society’s membership diverse and inclusive to advance citizenship with robust labor force (2019: 158 & 168). Global Korea, in other words, may be viewed as a South Korean neoliberal capitalist production by shaping, sculpting, and disciplining a body of enterprising citizens whose labor presence can perform and stage the vitality needed for economic prosperity but also ensure its ideological borderland intact from the persuasions flagged by also the ideological socialist frontiers of North Korea.

The borderland also within the context of South Korea can be signified through its idea of a village or what they called, the “Global Saemaul,” which has now morphed into what Se Hoon Park and others have viewed as the “Korean model” of urban development (2021: 61-62). Such South Korea’s invention in the arena of urban development “under the banner of ‘city export’” must be also recognized as also shaped by what Mike Douglass describes as “outcomes of the changing relations of power among the state, civil society and corporate economic interests within and beyond the country” (2021: 71). From such characterization of urban development, Douglass exposes how the small units of social formations such as Saemaeul have reconstituted a different narrative in which the boundaries between the city and countryside, the rural and the urban, both establish an interlude. The idea of interlude takes form in what Park, Hyun Bang Shin, and Hyun Soo Kang have noticed where these models of urban and economic development narrow the complexity of the differences of such spatial developments into a “set of technical issues of resource allocation” and the ability of governments to “cultivate the spirit of development” (2021: 34). The globality of Korea somehow may also be interpreted as a global allocation of resources that cements the rise of the Koreatown in Manila, and in its discursive recognition, the allocated resources



reach the speech community in the form of performing a civic-mindedness, enabling South Korea to expand and attain its global stature. Yet ironically, South Korea targets other nations, communities, and places by virtue of creating a scalar formation of a village or a town.

During the pandemic, Korea Town in Manila has, in fact, executed a lot of civic projects and resource allocation. Similar to what had gone viral in the Philippines, the community pantry sprouts at the center of the rotunda where they share vegetables and other kinds of food with the people around the area. Such sharing has not only happened during the pandemic, but they have also provided culinary lessons to those who are interested in learning Korean cuisine. More so, they have even donated air purifiers, granted students scholarships, and staged cultural performances in the community. Thus, with the activities that may also be perceived as allocated resources, these events somehow shape the meaning of the place, especially as they also try to frame and claim the space by leaving Korean traces through identifying the location by its own logo, earning the distinction of Manila Korea Town. The logo, as a result, has not only marked the place but has also served as the marker and name even of the police station. Yet while these things are being shared, the working class folks in this area, such as the masseuse in a Korean spa, the simple parking attendant, and other waiters would share how they travel far to this place for work. They describe how most of them live far off the Manila Korea Town for the rent in the area has been unaffordable to people like them.

Looking at the vicinity of the area as well, the rotunda at the center has served as the playground of the urban residents who live in some urban poor communities cramped in a very limited space. Children could be seen playing games at the center of the empty rotunda which, at times, functions as an activity center in the community. The central rotunda functions as a makeshift playground, park, and at the same time, plaza. Surrounding the rotunda, the spaces circling around such road infrastructure would serve as the parking spaces for the consumers or diners of the restaurants in the area. There are options, apart from the dominant presence of Korean restaurants, such as the longstanding institution of

Filipino-Spanish cuisine of famous Adriatico Café. While a few blocks from it, one can also see the important culinary institution of Spanish food right next to the university grounds of the University of the Philippines Manila, Casa Armas, and of course, some Japanese restaurants at the interstices of the spread of Korean business ventures. While such is the landscape, the perceptions of some of the people I had the privilege to talk to regarding the presence and membership of the Koreans in this part of Manila can be uncertain. On the one hand, they felt that the place has been, at one point, especially with the China pivot of the Duterte administration, populated by the people who have come from China. Yet at the tail-end of the pandemic, most of the Chinese have left and there seems to be a noticeable return of the South Koreans. Danny Park also explains that most of them have chosen to live in Quezon City, Ortigas in Pasig, or Makati. For him, he speculates that a lot of them already left due to poor control of extortion led by some government officers in the past, targeting Korean citizens.

With the despair of some Koreans in the hands of some government agents, a police officer also describes this area as prone to theft, along with the sporadic presence of public disruption due to alcohol intoxication, and in some instances, the presence of conflicts within the Korean community. Among all the conflicts that normally occur in the city, the police officer I interviewed describes the situation of theft as expected in tourist areas like Manila Korea Town. Certainly, the volume of theft in this area can be explained by acknowledging the presumption we normally have regarding the highly dense commercial areas. Places like these have a livelier market activity, whether through restaurants, services, or the foot traffic of local and foreign tourists. However, what needs to be emphasized in this analysis of the nature of the rate of crime in a tourist area should go beyond looking at it as a cultural normativity of a place. If we follow this kind of argument, we might purport a logic that tourism simply becomes also a condition and market opportunity for petty crime-making. Instead, we also need to acknowledge tourism, through Manila Korea Town, as a local practice of global thinking and relations. With the clear presence of

different nationalities, business transactions come from different countries of origin, and in between the exchange, people share a semblance of a multicultural food experience. Yet the obverse side of such a global sphere booming in this area also makes it glaring the disparity of the global migrant population such as Koreans with the locals in terms of possession of capital. The class differential relations become attractive to theft, thus, leading the folks in the community to subsequently identify themselves as criminals, despite being of a small scale.

Apart from the presence of wealth brought by Koreans in Manila Korea Town, the perception of them also comes from a global understanding of this nation's wealth and development. Hyung Gu Lynn draws in the sand how most of the people in the world, which includes the Philippines, look at this nation: "South Korea ... appears to be developmentalist dream brought to life, a capitalist success story polished to a poster-like sheen" (2007: 1). While Lynn's point, on the one hand, prevails up to this point, and perhaps, it has even been exacerbated by the soft power brought by Korean pop, Park, on the other hand, also illuminates what is usually eclipsed by the way globally we appreciate the sovereignty of South Korea. As Park brings to fore South Korea's regional tension with North Korea's socialism because of its migrant refugees, the seeming triumph of this nation from its impoverished past gradually has evolved into a "hegemonic spread of neoliberal capitalism" especially through the border-crossing experiences of different Korean ethnicities as they are all attracted to the "market utopia" of South Korea, while also turning their nation into "transnational Korea... constituted by asynchronous constellations of old and new socioeconomic and emancipatory projects within each community" (2015: 3-4). With the spread of the seeming promise of South Korea, the Manila Korea Town does not appear off-kilter or out of sync. With our experience of such a Korean turn, it has precisely made Gayatri Spivak's argument on capital much more cogent. Spivak argues that capital turns into a "... mere [form of] socialism [that] means turning the use of capital from capitalist to socialist uses" (2012: 131).

Unfortunately, Spivak's insight points out the inversion of

socialism into the form of capitalism. This development forces Park to intercept the historical tragedy of the contradiction between socialism and capitalism in the Korean peninsula, and undeniably, it has eventually evolved into a form of farce. The farcical has turned into an aspect of such an approach in the form of the present exportation of Korean development that also aims to help developing nations of the global South like the Philippines. Yet these recipient nations of the Globality of Korea most of the time serve as an extension of the market circulation of their goods. Yet it is also within the links with the Global South where Korea recognizes itself in the world, and such links are also struggling villages of economic potential. From such historical and economic development of South Korea, the farce is how South Korea, borrowing from Park, unconsciously socializes capitalism through the rise of Manila Koreatown. With such a strategy, it has brought consequences to itself in the past as they find difficulty in handling their migrants, especially as the “[t]ransnational Korea does not involve a convergence of Korean communities on the modular form of neoliberal capitalism despite the hegemonic role of capital...” (2015: 3).

Since Marco Garrido describes Metro Manila as a “patchwork city,” a “classed spaces, particularly slums and upper- and middle-class enclaves... [in their] subsequent proximity ... [of] intensified class relations,” the “fragmentation” drawn on the ground would naturally situate the Manila Korea Town within the ambit of the politics of Global Korea (2019: 5). Thus, drawing from Park, the meaning of Korea, caught by the politics of reunification between North and South, unravels “simultaneous experiences of socioeconomic crisis and crisis resolution by means of privatization, deregulation, and border-crossing labor migration” (2015: 4). The modular imagined community allows us to seize the character of globalization as a socialization of the crisis, and contradictions of nation-states, which nations also hope to resolve, but in fact, deepen the depths of different conditions of inequity. Yet, viewing from the perspective of farce, the modular imagined community also captures the fact that moments of solidarity, resource distribution, multi-cultural interaction, and transnational dialogue can also be circulated around the world along with the global spread of a

nation's crisis. With the duality of a modular imagined community, we must harness it as a potential site for imagining and constructing a better global community.

## V. The Potential Friendship from a Shared Table

The globality of Korea, at this point, unfolds, as what has been observed by Se Hoon Park, Hyun Bang Shin, and Hyun Soo Kang, an expansion across the world but returns to a form of “self-referencing” (2021: 30). Yet this self that this process refers to also gets sustained and nourished by what the self consumes, eats, and distinguishes as food. The self, as it unfolds, echoes Brillat-Savarin's famous maxim, “we are what we eat” (Belasco 2008: 1). The idea of self for Warren Belasco figures a broader and a more encompassing category, which collocates it as “identity” (2008: 7). In situating identity as an important category in food studies, Belasco signifies this category by opening it to a range of interpretation, such as class, and at large, the invisible figures in food preparation, such as women, making it also highly gendered (2008: 3). However, Belasco avoids the entrapment of identity politics by also locating identity within a triangulation with responsibility and convenience (2008: 3 & 7). The self that Belasco identifies makes us recognize that our enjoyment of food, an attempt to nourish the self, may be brought by the sense of convenience, especially in terms of access, privilege, class, gender, and even race, but it also needs to be balanced by our sense of responsibility (2008: 7). Yet the ethical demand of Belasco to our self that Korea privileges would never be in a harmonious relationship.

Doreen Fernandez, a recognized fountainhead of Philippine food studies, acknowledges the role of food as a form of “digging deep into human experience because tasting, eating and savoring are very intimate ventures. They are not external activities... they are—literally and metaphorically—gut experiences” (1994: xi). Fernandez's argument shines a light on the aspect of a self that Korea refers to as also an experience, not only with economic development, but also with food, which cracks open to the idea that

the globality of Korea lies not only in its investments, infrastructures, and international relations. It is also found in the process of consuming the food as the self recognizes the value of such development and one's responsibility. The self also needs to experience pleasure, whether in the form of convenience, a recognition of one's identity, and certainly, a chance of being responsible for the life of the other. The farcical nature of such globality of Korea unveils the reality that, as much as investments in high infrastructures may rake in big capital, food continues to flesh out such development, the very language in which one touches what Fernandez describes, "human experience" (1994: xi). By limiting ourselves to heavy urban infrastructure developments, we might be leading ourselves to a farcical tragedy, which makes food, perhaps, our salvation.

It becomes a breath of fresh air when Robert Valgenti brings into conversation philosophy and food studies. He has shown that, for the longest time, we have avoided food as an integral part of our ways of studying human consciousness for such a subject in philosophy "fails to reflect the values of rationality, universality and purity" (2019: 234). However, Valgenti repels this rationalist viewpoint by showing how food foregrounds the potency of our senses or "gustatory experiences" (2019: 241). He expands the meaning of our food consumption into a condition of possibility to be probed into the depths of the questions regarding the nature of a "good life," which allows one to comprehend the value of the "complexity and fluidity of relations that require continual maintenance, care, and conversation" (Valgenti 2019: 243). Through such an opportunity to build a network of relations, such a situation may lead us to prepare "[a]n open table ... that welcomes the stranger" (2019: 246).

On the other hand, the farcical aspect of having a stranger has been also a source of tension and conflict between South Korea and other nations, like Japan, for it becomes a politics, according to Sonia Ryang, of those who try to steal and co-opt their local dishes, especially when "governments have even been known to claim national ownership of a particular variety of cuisine by way of artificially standardizing it" (2015: 1). Thus, from the rationalist

preference for the hierarchy of mind over the body, rational thought over the subjectivist experience of taste (Valgenti 2019: 234-236), and then from the nation over the regional and the local experiences with food, such contradictions of food make this important cultural studies subject, not only to point out the agricultural economy of a nation. Instead, it is also a subject from which we understand, explore, and theorize on the cultural politics of the contemporary period. With this larger possible concerns on food, the modular imagined community leads us to think of food, drawing from Valgenti, as an opportunity to create a community through sharing such earth's bounty on the table with strangers, no matter the race, ethnicity, class, and gender, especially as food could be easily retooled by the nation to efface its internal or local hierarchies.

Valgenti's intervention, thus, brings to the table the role of the quality of life as an important aspect of our study of society, human reason, philosophical quest, and certainly, culture. His presence and intellectual contributions make us realize the potential of food in enabling us to imagine the possibilities of creating a better society through a table where food can be shared with everyone including a stranger. However, the process of sharing food contended also with the rise of South Korea's soft power such as Korean popular entertainment, while being lubricated by the presence of the circulation of food, which were mostly products that had a history with Japanese colonialism, and at the same time, flattened by the pervasive role of the neoliberal free market. Ryang, in fact, draws from Sidney Mintz who argues that "the entire notion of 'national cuisine' is a problematic one, as cuisines are by definition regional, not national," and much so, from the end of the South Korean government, it has "been driven by a desire to delineate boundaries of the nation's culinary property on the global stage" (2015: 1 & 3). With the observations on the use and circulation of Korean food, it becomes an important technology in our contemporary processes of sociality, entertainment, and consumption, but also a mechanism in political international relations. Thus, through food, the relations of South Korea, Japan, the USA, and of course, the Philippines may be uneven with one another, but it becomes also softened, integrated with one another, and turned such important geopolitical relations

into what may be deemed by Jacques Derrida as a moment of the “politics of friendship” (2005).

Undeniably the appeal of the Korean turn can be sparked by the spectacle that its popular culture in mass media makes—the flash of neon colors, the sparkle of glitz and glamor. Yet this has been the only idea most have as if South Korea is exempted from its colonial and imperial histories. Some popular Korean novellas on television have, at one point, discussed the colonial histories of South Korea (Robinson 2007). However, what unravels and prevails beyond the attempts to discuss Korean history is the presence of the industry and entertainment. The spectacle that the Korean wave has brought to the world even enjoins the critical view of Guy Debord as spectacles inculcate an “automation” from the experience of the reception of the audience (2006: 45). Thus, as a spectacle, the Korean turn, through the entertainment, reveals the broader practice in which we contend with the coloniality of nation-states at the crossroads between territorial hospitality and the assertion of nationalism. These two motivate the kinds of political and social behavior we commit ourselves to as the world opens its borders to the transnational mobility of capital, goods, and resources. The automation that Debord critiques has mutated the relation of passivity by also integrating it with the subjectivity of the Filipino audience in which an interlude to the vitality of spectacle becomes possible. The spectacle turns into a coloniality of our relationship with South Korea, which also reveals the farcical nature of the broader politics of the Philippines with Asia. In this manner, farce has made our feelings ordinary as we see food, resources, environmental ecology, people, infrastructures, cities, and towns brokered and facilitated by other nations, specifically South Korea.

Going back to Korea Town in Malate, the bright lights of the disco houses and bars eventually recede into Korean restaurants. From such development in the restaurant scene of Malate, the gay bars, and other liquor stores dwindle in terms of presence and business to give way to Korean restaurants, leading Korea Town to eventually morph into a place for Korean barbeque served in a buffet-style or through the grilling tables. Korean barbeque certainly is not unfamiliar with Filipino culinary tradition. Roasting pork has



been integral in the carnivorous consumption and diet in the Philippines. Pork is notable in Philippine cuisine in the form of the festive lechon, a roasted pig on a bamboo pole. The entire pig is turned over a bed of charcoal and fire until it is evenly roasted. Lechon can be quite expensive, and thus, those who are salivating over roasted pork may opt for skewered pork barbeque, which can also be substituted by chicken or pork. For those who are either up for a culinary adventure or on a limited budget, they roast the innards of a pig, and the feet of a chicken, grilling what usually gets to be thrown away whenever we prepare either a pork or chicken dish. Roasting as part of the carnivorous practice reveals the cooking method's ability to accommodate class economic interests and privilege. Precisely, with the multitude of possibilities for barbeque or roasting, the openness has also welcomed Korean barbeque or Samgyupsal.

Interesting in the Korean Barbeque is how the samgyupsal has been translated into a restaurant's name called, "Samgyupsalamat" (Cortes 2021). The Korean barbeque evolves from a distinct Korean style of grilling food into a dining experience that enables and attracts at the same time the cultural stereotype of the Filipino, the warm hospitality. The name of the restaurant, Samgyupsalamat, is certainly a restaurant brand but it is also an index of an emergent sociality. In fact, the Filipino word, "salamat," means, "thank you," in English. Yet by fusing samgyupsal with salamat, the Korean barbeque morphs and welcomes the diners into a thanksgiving experience through the buffet style of grilling pork, beef, and chicken. Apart from meat and poultry, such dishes are spiced up with side dishes such as the staple kimchi, toasted peanuts, spicy cucumber salad, spinach, etc. The samgyupsal is an affordable spread that not only satisfies the consumer with the meat and poultry but also makes it more filling because of other surprising additions whenever one orders. By receiving such plenitude from the restaurant as the server lays down the food, one can only express "salamat," a kind of gesture that expresses gratitude to the restaurant for providing enough for one to enjoy an afternoon of grilling and eating pork or beef. Through this gesture, the act of giving thanks also extends by inviting people to share such a feast,

which makes samgyupsal a problematic eating experience for an individual. To eat samgyupsal alone may be interpreted as a social image of an emotional meltdown, and at the same time, a presence that reveals a bizarre disposition in life that one could not attract company or friends. In years of eating samgyupsal, I have not witnessed eating such a buffet alone. Thereby, it is a consumer practice at large of hospitality and politics of friendship, which certainly characterizes an emergent sociality, making samgyupsal as a collective thanksgiving, a buffet celebration, a group scale gathering, and recently, an affordable option whenever one eats out with a group.

Hospitality and friendship are not estranged from one another. Instead, these two can be intimately connected, but serve different purposes. Jacques Derrida confronts these two by looking at hospitality in relation to Europe and migration experience, while friendship takes off from Aristotle's famous quote: "O my friends, there is no friend" (2005: 1). The contiguous relationship between hospitality and friendship, for Derrida, makes us recognize also the figure of a "foreigner" or a "stranger" (2000: 3-11). Through these two characters, in one way or another, as they are invited into our fold, our differential relations with them can lead us to a potential relationship as friends, yet the friendship demands something else, such as ontological relations between two people (2000: 3-7). Derrida recognizes that friendship demands, apart from a good feeling with one another, a relationship in which one expresses an "incommensurable hope" by the time we reach "beyond life," yet from the one "who loves [even] before being loved" (2005: 4& 9). However, precisely, Derrida recognizes the dissymmetry in friendship, which can be, at large, present in politics, but such a relationship with a friend reveals a deeper effort of idealization and singularization of someone (2005: 10). In the case of hospitality, crucial in Derrida's interpretation of this concept is a foreigner who is a guest and an invited one, but also has the ability to enable a feeling of strangeness, and difference, which he believes could incite us to question the "chief," providing a condition of possibility for a parricide (2000: 5). This situation, however, provides a possibility where the foreigner denies and refuses to identify with the people

around, making hospitality as a relation with a foreigner. Despite the presence of differences, a foreigner can become a potential friend in the future. Unfortunately, despite all the possibilities and optimism we can muster, both also provide conditions of possibilities for violence, pain, hostility, and disagreement. Hospitality between a foreigner and a friend must come to terms with the idealization as well of the potential violence these people may enforce, and despite the dissymmetry between the two, the foreigner and the friend continue to insist on a sharing of an affective sense of belonging.

The deconstructive unraveling that Derrida reveals between friendship and hospitality highlights that, precisely, the Korean turn possesses a political import of coloniality, which also reveals a larger process of historic idealization of the country's relationship with the foreign world. Such idealization does not only capture the Korean nation-state but also the people that we meet and idealize through the process of sharing food and expressing thanks as we receive. In other words, the samgyupsal fused with the Filipino word, "salamat," becomes a new platform to perform such politics of friendship, and in turn, it gets to be effectively enunciated in a language of idealization as the process is enabled through the slow burn of the grilling process, the sizzling sound of the meat, the smoke permeating from the room, and even drinking exchange of soju cups for some. The rituals of eating samgyupsal with such restaurant's brand name facilitate the formation of friendships that also get to be supported and sedimented below by the rise of the Filipino middle class who are mostly part of the BPO industry, which relies on communicative networks, whether as call center agents, networking business agents, bankers, financial analysts etc. Such food cultures may have played an important role in the middle-class upward mobility, and some logics of organizational management supported by neoliberal capitalism in the Philippines.

The hospitality, at this point, is also at once foreign and strange, not specifically through eating pork, but through the plenitude, excess, and feast people share with one another. Certainly, the consumption of samgyupsal, especially on regular occasions, can be dangerous to one's health. The Department of Health in the Philippines has always repeatedly recorded that one of

the highest causes of death for people is a heart problem, which is mostly caused by what people eat, such as pork (DOH 2022). Yet, despite all these warnings, samgyupsal does not signify a peculiar and exotic cooking practice of the Koreans. Instead, while it is foreign, it becomes now ours, a source of excitement in different social gatherings, and even at some point, a cheaper way of eating out. What gets to be revealed with the opportunity and cost-benefit impact of Samgyup is how it has been foreign to the state's idea of good health. It is a kind of eating practice that threatens order and balance viewed by the medical science, while an excess for those who could not afford especially in a country with a huge percentage of victims of hunger. The foreign nature of samgyupsal becomes an attempt to disrupt the lawful order of the state in terms of its attempt to regulate people in their health. Much so, it is also a way to suspend one from contending with poverty and hunger. The samgyupsal affords us to cross the boundaries across state, health, and moral laws.

The modularity of Koreatown, in this case, through the samgyupsal reveals that it is also crossed over, effaced, and deconstructed, not only by Korea but also by the consumer society of the Philippines. The crossing over the of sign, South Korea, by the Filipinos is a revelation of the desire as well, not only to be entertained, but just like the dancers of Korean popular culture, to move, to enter in a rhythm of mobility, and to perform with the same theatrical frame. The restaurant's name, Samgyupsalamat, becomes an index of an expression of our hospitality to the South Korean guests, and the kind of friendship we commit with them. It is also an attempt to circumnavigate the world that they have revealed to us as possible, which, in turn, makes ourselves at times a performer of a spectacle—the one proving the farce. However, in the same problems, we also have our hands in the very process where the idea of our nation-state as a modular formation is substantiated, filled in, and at the same time, found its territorial, political, and even economic integrity. Perhaps, Koreatown and the wave of Korean popular culture become the neoliberal experience of freedom of the Filipinos in different forms. Through such experience with samgyupsal, it can also lead us to build the society that we

want by virtue of sharing food on the table. The table, in the long run, must also be welcoming to people, especially with food, as rallied by Valgenti. Food can be the means by which we can imagine, articulate, and philosophize on the idea of a good life.

In this sense, good food is the material proof of a good life. The sharing of good food makes the communities as a dwelling place of people. We need to imagine and even use such kind of opportunity as the very expression and character of a modular imagined community. The concept of a modular imagined community, after all, is an attempt to go beyond the control and tyranny of rational thinking, whether of the mind, the body, the nation, or the state. At the heart of such a concept, it allows the gut experiences to be taken care of, making it full, whether in terms of deliciousness, the value of nutrition, and certainly, the experience of a good life. The modular imagined community through the samgyupsal ushers us to a condition in which we are pushed to imagine a community where the modular parts will initiate a condition that good food will be distributed, apart from the mere dependence on fat and cholesterol. Through the delicious food, we also subsequently wish to transcend from the interminable presence of hierarchies, especially in a time when, as Park describes, a “market utopia” prevails and grows from “the modular form of neoliberal capitalism,” which may be “asynchronous constellations of old and new socioeconomic and emancipatory projects within each community” in an ever-expanding transnational scope of South Korea (2015: 3).

## **VI. Conclusion**

A modular imagined community unravels in Manila Korea Town as a potential site in which we can seize the imagination of our communities despite the fact the nation-state can always prevail and dictate the state of our things. After all, in the first part of the four-part arguments of this essay, the nationalism and nation sought by Anderson and Chatterjee do not signify the political ends, and instead, they can function as rubrics in which we can invent,

imagine, and build better worlds especially with the modular character of nations. The inventive capacity of nationalism and nation has not only proven itself to be so in the contemporary period, but instead, it has historically been integral to even the development of a city that may be deemed as its past-future. The historical nature of the Manila Korea Town in Malate, Manila should also be imagined as not an isolated case. Instead, it has been part of the very rise of South Korea within the scale of globality, which inherits its own problems within the region of East Asia, yet also showing somehow inroads that can be redemptive from the idea of nationalism. Through the openings in such developments, we can also seize the very potential of building an alternative community. Thus, food serves as an important cultural practice in which we can further advance politics that will allow us to reinvent our social world, and perhaps, the table could be a beginning, especially with the kind of sociality encouraged by the popular Korean samgyupsal. From this angle, we have to imagine and perhaps invent a different world, and through the modular imagined community, we create an open table through the samgyupsal found in Manila Korea Town. In the end, the modular imagined community unfolds and prevails as a perspective that one can draw from to explore, analyze, read, and theorize on the transnational formations. The modular imagined community now begins to unfold, connect, and frame the world in the 21st century, especially with the Philippines as an emerging player in this current era of globality.

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## Boy Power: Soft Power and Political Power in the Circulation of Boys Love (BL) Narratives from South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines



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### [ *Abstract* ]

This paper examines the complexities and creative opportunities brought about by the transnational circulation of texts specifically in the areas of transmission, consumption, and adaptation. The circulation of texts and along with it creative elements such as generic forms, tropes, and frameworks for consumption form an integral part in the production and advancement of any form of popular culture. In the process of such circulation, adaptation becomes a form of social and political process necessary for domestic palatability. In this paper, I examine how these complexities can be illustrated in the circulation of one emerging popular form in East and Southeast Asia: Boys Love (BL) television and web series. Using the transnational movement of the BL genre from South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, I examine how the circulation and adaptations are inflected by considerations related to regional geopolitics and domestic issues concerned with the creative praxis of representing gender and sexuality.

**Keywords:** Boys Love, South Korean Popular Culture, Philippine Popular Culture, Thai Popular Culture

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## I . Introduction

Popular texts from Southeast Asia, specifically television or web series, have enjoyed worldwide circulation and consumption in recent years. Accelerated by digital technology and accessible through streaming services such as Netflix, YouTube, DailyMotion, and even the LGBT-themed service GagaOOLala, such texts have reached the screens of audiences around the world. Of the various texts that have since gained popularity, one genre seems to stand out among the rest: the Boys' Love (BL) series. BL narratives conventionally feature tender, intimate, and sweet encounters between two young men, usually in youth-oriented settings such as schools or camps. The lovers, who are often depicted as opposites of each other, are constructed according to the visual precepts of the notion of *bishonen* (beautiful boy), appearing as neat, wide-eyed, bordering on androgynous boys. Originating from the rich and vibrant culture of Japan, BL stories first appeared in manga, graphic novels, and other forms of visual art. Often changed interchangeably with *yaoi*, BL stories are distinguished from the former through the absence of overt eroticism and sexually explicit encounters found in their *yaoi* counterparts.

The increased popularity of BL around the world has led to a proliferation of adaptations and modes of narrative production that deviate from the Japanese versions. For instance, while most BL content in Japan was written primarily by heterosexual female writers and enjoyed communal readership in established communities, the profiles of present-day BL writers are quite diverse. More importantly, the adaptation of BL stories into audio-visual media such as film and television has opened opportunities and challenges for the deployment and consumption of such stories. For one, the "success" and popularity of such texts are no longer dependent solely on the authors [or in this case, the screenwriters]. Rather, an entire production staff occasionally working under the patronage and social politics of a major media conglomerate actively participates in the figuration of the texts' narratives.

Secondly, the wide circulation and popularity of such texts have inevitably led to the deployment of the BL text itself as a vehicle for the advancement of certain LGBT advocacies, the transmission of national economic aspirations, and the strategic filtration of such mobilization in its wake. Indeed, while earlier forms of BL focused solely on the homoerotic encounters between the two lovers in an almost idyllic utopian setting evacuated from any kind of context, these emergent texts take the conventional form of BL, with all its usual narrative tropes and characterization, and elevate these into imaginative meditations on the social and political issues of their creative ports of origin. The Taiwanese film *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) for instance is set against the backdrop of the end of Martial Law rule in 1987. In the film, the burgeoning romance is fractured not just because of the political shifts but also by the prevailing homophobia and heteronormative paradigms of the 80s. Another example, one that will be discussed later, is the critically acclaimed Filipino web series *Gameboys* (2020) which is set during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the romance between the two protagonists—two computer gamers who initiate their encounters through a series of video calls—simultaneously functions both as a critique of the Philippine government’s inept response to the pandemic and as a parable of survival articulated through the trope of young love.

Sexual politics in these emergent BL texts, in other words, are not just sources of pleasure but resources of social and political narratives. In some stories, such as the aforementioned Taiwanese film and Filipino web series, the socio-political bent is obvious and apparent. In some instances, however, the inherent socio-political message is encrypted subtly not only within the text’s narrative structure but also in the creative infrastructure that supports it. Towards this, this paper is a critical meditation on how BL functions not as a textual platform to transmit political statements but as a medium of political power itself. Using samples from three territories and industries that have since taken the helm of the production of BL content, the ensuing discussion examines the various ways in which such power may be utilized and harnessed.

This essay on a meditation of two cases focuses on two forms of political power: soft power and political critique. The first part of the paper explores the notion of soft power and how contemporary BL textualizes contradictory articulations of soft power of a developing economy (Thailand) as it engages and contends with both its model and rival: South Korea. The relationship between contemporary Thai and South Korean popular culture is a contradictory one. On the one hand, the mass consumption of Korean popular media in Thailand represents the shift of preference from "farangs" (Caucasian foreigners) to what Dredge Byung'chu Kang calls "White Asians" as a source for intimacy and intercultural engagement—a turn to be sure that represents the larger geopolitical shift that positions East Asian economies as emergent superpowers (Kang, 2017: 188-189). On the other hand, the tendency of contemporary Thai popular culture to mimic and adapt Korean texts in terms of production procedures, narrative style, and ultimately infrastructure for stardom construction suggests an active movement towards utilizing the same strategies and style to compete for soft power supremacy in the Asian and international market. While these BL series are usually adapted from self-published novels written by Thai netizens, the eventual production of such narratives [from the choice of actors to the audio-visual rendition of such storylines] bears the artistic signatures of South Korean popular culture. The paper will focus on *Baker Boys* (2021), a *lakhon* (Thai television series) adaptation of the South Korean film *Antique Bakery* (2008) which in turn was an adaptation of a Japanese manga of the same name. The goal of the ensuing analyses will not be to do a side-by-side comparison. Rather, the goal is to demonstrate how, in *Baker Boys*, the aforementioned contradictions become, as in the baked sweets that emerge piping hot from the oven, a delightful textual confection of emergent sexual politics and representations of Thai soft power and visions of cosmopolitanism that are pleasing to the global eyes, ready for transnational consumption.

The second part of the work discusses the implications of such contradictions when applied to the Philippine case. While the utilization of BL as a medium to wield soft power may not

necessarily be a concern for Filipino BL, the iteration nevertheless inherits the genre’s penchant for embodying contradictions. Using *Gameboys* and the upcoming “BL Reality Show” *Sparks* (2023) as illustrative texts, the discussion examines how the genre utilizes constructions of gay masculinity to interrogate and maintain existing paradigms on sexuality, particularly in how such paradigms are constructed through the process of the consumption and adaptation of transnational texts.

As can be seen in the foregrounding of these two case studies, this paper is not necessarily a direct and clear-cut examination of Philippine-Korea relations [as in the case of the other articles in this issue]. Rather than taking a direct route, the ensuing discussion hopes to make several stopovers to extract shared concerns and possible converging points of critical reimaginings brought about by a genre that has since been circulating and wielding forms of political power in its wake.

## **II. Thai Sexual Politics and the Harnessing of Thai Soft Power in Boys Love (BL) *Lakhon***

To understand the significance of the role BL plays in the domestic sexual politics in Thailand and how it participates in the articulation of Thai soft power, it is important to do a cursory examination of BL—its perceived genesis in the Imperial courts of Japan, recurring tropes, and engagement through its reconfiguration of sexual politics—and how it was ultimately woven into the fabric of Thai popular culture and domestic political preoccupations. The focus of the ensuing discussion will be on how the importation of the BL genre into the commercial canon of Thai popular culture was and is continuously inflected by the engagement of Thai heteronationalist familialism with emergent queer subjectivities. As will be unpacked more thoroughly in this section, heteronationalist familialism in this regard refers to conservative, nationalist, and family-centered paradigms employed by the Thai government, especially during the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra, to navigate the wave of globalization in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis.

Existing scholarship on BL point to Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* (11th Century) as the urtext of sorts of BL (McLelland & Welker 2015: 6). Much of the generic conventions in BL, be they from Japan, China, or Thailand, can be found in the authorial politics and literary style associated with Murasaki's work: the image of the beautiful boy, the artistic power of the female hand in the rewriting of its milieu's concept of masculinity, and the privileging of private, domestic space in fleshing out the novel's creative treatise on sexual politics and gender-based decorum. Stories involving male-to-male romance [this time between an older and a younger samurai] during the Edo Period (1603-1867) highlighted the gender politics that minoritized women vis-a-vis the privileging of private masculine-oriented intimacies in its Confucian-oriented zeitgeist (McLelland & Welker 2015: 6-7). The proliferation of such narratives that focused on homoerotic practices and tendencies would first be supplanted during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) due to the deployment of Western sexology before seeing a revival in the Taisho Period (1912-1925) through the production of magazines that featured "young, beautiful, and sometimes effeminate-looking male figures" in women-less environments such as boarding schools and military camps (McLelland & Welker 2015: 8). The sustained mass production and consumption of such magazines, coupled with a burgeoning literacy rate, enabled a literary subculture to thrive. The primary movers and consumers in this subculture were women who not only gained access to magazines clandestinely through the subscription of their male relatives but also sought to read such texts along homoerotic lines. Ultimately, the creation of *shojo* manga in the 1960s and the authorial takeover of the so-called "Fabulous Forty-Niners" in the 1970s enabled a generation of female writers and artists, literary descendants in a way of Lady Murasaki Shikibu, to craft male-to-male romances that afforded a pleasurable form of escapism and engagement of existing heteropatriarchal structures (McLelland & Welker 2015: 9-10). The purposeful assignment of roles of the seme [the "top" or "attacker"] and the uke [the "bottom" or the "receiver"] in such texts reflects in a way the willful attempt to restructure the power play of sexual intimacy (Fujimoto & Quimby 2015: 85). Ultimately, the publication of magazines such as *Allan and June* which "functioned as a bridge... between commercial



and non-commercial worlds of *shōnen'ai manga*.” (Welker 2015: 62) and the international circulation of BL in the 1990s would facilitate the expansion of BL’s readership beyond the female demographic (Welker 2015: 66-67).

The popularity and practice of BL consumption entered Thailand through the transnational circulation of Japanese and Korean popular culture, specifically through the notion of the *bishonen* in the 1990s and Hallyu’s “flower boys syndrome” in the 2000s (Prasannam 2019: 65-66). Consumption of such texts was primarily an underground urban practice at first, with fans secretly purchasing materials through under-the-table transactions in department stores in Siam Square, a major commercial district and center for youth activity (Prasannam 2019: 66). BL entered the mainstream market by way of the award-winning film *Love of Siam* in 2007. The film, centering on the love story between two childhood friends Mew (Witwisit Hiranayawongkul) and Tong (Mario Maurer) who are reunited years later through a chance encounter in Siam Square after years of separation, swept the 2007 awards season in Thailand, winning Best Picture in almost all of the award-giving bodies. The film eventually went on to garner regional and international fame through its participation in various film festivals around the world. The success of *Love of Siam* was instrumental in laying the necessary foundation for the production of mainstream BL in Thailand. It not only assured producers that there was going to be a guaranteed domestic and international market for such content. As the thematic prototype of commercial Thai BL, the film also introduced the thematic tension and compromise that would structure the films and *lakhon* that succeeded it. In the film, the romance between Mew and Tong is aborted when the latter decides to return home to take care of his breadwinner mother and alcoholic father.

While it is easy to simply read such actions as the triumph of heteronormativity and the nuclear family, I argue that Tong’s decision must be positioned within the grid of post-1997 Thai sexual politics. It is therefore important at this juncture to briefly examine the effects of the policies enacted after the Asian financial crisis on the shaping of emergent sexual identities in Thailand. The response

to the Asian financial crisis, which began with the devaluation of the Thai baht and led to a mass withdrawal of investment from Southeast Asian economies, resulted in various changes in both the economic and political landscapes in Thailand such as the opening of the kingdom to foreign capital and investment as one of the conditions for receiving a billion-dollar aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Within the context of queer politics and practices, the importation of multinational investment and the economic recovery brought about by such policies gave rise to an emergent transnationally oriented class of queer consumers. Peter A. Jackson (2011) notes that the early 2000s saw an increase in the number of gay bars, saunas, and gay-oriented “zones” in Bangkok as well as a proliferation of queer-oriented print and media texts (Jackson 2011: 18). Aside from these, Thailand (most especially Bangkok) also became a hub for intra-Asian gay tourism and a home for regional queer non-government organizations (Jackson 2011: 19).

The proliferation of queer discourses triggered a dynamic push-and-pull that could still be seen in many queer-themed popular texts today. At the core is a tension between, on the one hand, the spirit of liberalism and the economic benefits brought about by the emerging class of queer local producers and transnational consumers (the notion of the “purple baht”) and, on the other, the heteronationalist paradigms that were set in place by conservative leaders to preserve the independence of a nation beset by the onslaught of foreign capital. Within the context of the production of Thai media texts, what emerges therefore are narratives that harness the lucrative power of queer capital within the acceptable parameters of a still heteronormatively-oriented nation-state. *Love of Siam* in many ways articulated the ideal compromise for such tensions. Tong’s final words to Mew [“I cannot be with you as your boyfriend, but it does not mean that I do not love you”] which he says before returning home to his family signals the kind of limited openness to queer sexuality so long as such identities and practices do not challenge the heteronormative stability of the nation. Such tension, as we will see later, is very much evident in the BL web series including *Baker Boys*.

The success of *Love of Siam* in both the domestic and the international markets encouraged the production of films that approximated its success. Some BL films such as *Red Wine in a Dark Night* (2015) and *The Blue Hour* (2015) utilize elements from the horror genre [which was also enjoying even greater viewership in the international film circuits] while others such as *My Bromance* (2014) and *Waterboyy* (2015) would later be adapted to *lakhon* formats. Such a shift increased the possibility for more sustained, long-term viewership from both domestic and international audiences. In recent years, media companies such as GMMTV have resorted to uploading subtitled episodes to free streaming websites such as YouTube. Such strategies eventually paid off, most especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when netizens, cooped up in their homes due to lockdown restrictions, began streaming new and old BL content. These investments in the burgeoning popularity of BL *lakhon* have cumulatively encouraged the Thai government to harness the lucrative potential of attracting international audiences to strengthen the nation's soft power. As defined by Joseph Nye in his seminal work *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004: 7).

More than reorienting the gaze of a captive audience to this Mekong River kingdom, however, the harnessing of soft power is also oriented by investment in utilizing the cultural apparatuses of the nation-state for economic benefits. As Nye points out, "soft power is also likely to be more important when power is dispersed in another country rather than concentrated" (Nye 2004: 16). In a meeting with major entertainment conglomerates, Prime Minister and Defense Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha endorsed "the proposal made by representatives of the film industry to promote the country's soft power through entertainment and film contents related to arts, culture, food, and tourism, as part of the Government's effort to restore national economy and enhance people's solidarity" (Asia News Monitor 2020). As illustrated by Chan-o-cha's characterization of soft power, texts and practices deployed to fulfill the function of harnessing soft power must fulfill the two-pronged function of amassing transnational attraction and

income while simultaneously maintaining the stability of the nation-state. What is interesting with the Thai case however is that their increased attempt and interest in harnessing soft power by way of its varied cultural apparatuses seems to be heavily influenced and inspired by an example *par excellence* of Asian soft power: South Korea.

As mentioned earlier, the sustained circulation and consumption of cultural texts in Thailand is not an entirely new phenomenon, with such activity going back to the earlier days of the Korean Wave. In recent years however, the traffic of cultural texts between the two nation-states has become more vibrant and visible, with the production and circulation of such texts now no longer confined to a specific subgroup or niche market as in the earlier days. In university entrance examinations for instance, more students chose Korean (18%) over Japanese (17%) as a second language—a considerable feat given that Korean was introduced as a language exam choice only in 2018 (Sukegawa 2022). Another notable example that highlights this energized Thai-Korean collaboration is the popularity of the Thai artist Lisa in the South Korean group Blackpink who has been making waves as both a member of the group and as a stand-alone artist.

Lisa's recent success, paired with the sustained influx of Korean texts, has motivated state leaders of Thailand to not only continue the working relationship but also to replicate South Korea's successful mobilization of cultural resources in the deployment of soft power (Chaiyong 2021). Such attempts however are not without criticism or pessimism. Sukegawa Seia (2022) for instance argues that "political values," specifically adherence to democratic values and processes, are necessary for the replication of South Korea's success story. In contrast to South Korea which has since enjoyed rapid growth in cultural and creative industry since its first democratic election in 1987, the kingdom of Thailand up to today is beset with coups and the establishment of military juntas [the latest one in 2014] that may impede democratic processes (Sukegawa 2022).

Despite such obstacles, however, decent attempts to follow the South Korean style and production procedure could still be found in the production of such texts. The recent BL *lakhon* quite interestingly demonstrates this mimicry. Most actors for instance bear strong features that allow them to be passed off as East Asian actors. Another notable example is the instrumental in the opening theme of the hit series *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019) which bears striking similarities with the 2008 South Korean drama, *Temptation of Wife* (2008). Such similarities are “justifiable” in the sense that both dramas deal with the problem of infidelity as the core conflict of their story. In terms of production, Thomas Baudinette (2020) discusses how the introduction and promotion of BL actors, who are usually heterosexual) follow the same pattern as the construction of young pop stars in Japan and South Korea: first debuting as relatively unknown actors in BL roles then briefly hinting at their roles in fan meets and vlogs with their assigned “romantic partner,” before finally “graduating” to heterosexual roles in later *lakhon* (Baudinette 2020).

Such forays into the deployment of soft power using BL as a medium of choice have so far been quite successful. Fan meets of different love tandems touring Asia are often sold out. Merchandise [such as apparel and replicas of set props] sold on GMMTV’s websites run out of stock immediately. While the so-called “turnovers” of old to new stars are quick and almost mechanical, the passionate and warm reception to such actors remains the same.

Writers of such series however are still careful with the appropriation and mimicry. Towards these, my examination of *Baker Boys* explores how the *lakhon* borrows the structure and style of *Antique Bakery* and then transforms the BL into a commodity that neutralizes the queering potential of the BL through its family-oriented narrative for its conservative domestic audiences while simultaneously retaining the necessary exoticizing tactics related to the notion of the Asian Boy to sustain the gaze of an international market and strengthen its perceived growing soft power.

### III. The Case of *Baker Boys*

*Baker Boys* is a *lakhon* version of *Antique Bakery*. Originating as a manga, the story has film and television versions from Japan and South Korea. Despite the differences in medium, all versions retain the story's core narrative. The story follows the friendship and misadventures of four men. Since the characters in each version have different names, I shall refer to each one first as Character A, B, C, and D. Character A is the heterosexual owner of the bakery. A playboy-wannabe, he claims to have opened the bakery to attract and flirt with women. It is later revealed that he was once kidnapped and forced to eat pastries. Character B is an openly gay world-class pastry chef who is known as the "Gay of Demonic Charm" given his unique ability to make anyone [except for Character A, whom he is attracted to] fall in love with him. He is also the former lover of his French mentor, Jean. Character C is a boxer who, owing to a head injury from his last match, could no longer compete in the ring. He has a sweet tooth and his love for pastries motivates Character B to take him in as an apprentice. Character D is Character A's childhood friend turned self-appointed bodyguard for life. He is characterized as socially inept and clumsy.

While it is possible that *Baker Boys* is based on the original manga and did not take a transit route via South Korea, the mere selection of the material itself suggests an implicit attempt to simultaneously mimic and challenge the South Korean one. For one, it is quite unusual for producers of Thai BL to adapt a foreign text. A majority of Thai BL *lakhon* are either based on novels and Wattpad stories on the Internet or occasionally original stories. Moreover, the South Korean version of *Antique Bakery* remains to this date the more accessible and recognized version, despite the common knowledge that there is in fact an original Japanese version. Finally, the decision to cast actors who mostly bear strong East Asian features, contributes to the advancement of aesthetic politics and cultural power play.

In *Baker Boys*, Thanat "Lee" Lowkhunsombat plays Punn, the Character A of this version. Purim "Pluem" Rattanaurangwattana plays Krating, the Character C boxer and Patara "Foei" Eksangkul

plays the bodyguard. Standing out in terms of casting choices is Prachaya “Singto” Ruangroj who puts on the chef attire of Weir, the “Gay of Demonic Charm” [or as he is known in this version, the “Gay Conqueror”]. The decision to cast Singto is worth noting given that, compared to his other castmates, he is already a recognized BL actor as part of the so-called triumvirate of BL couples, being the “partner” to Perawat “Krist” Sangpotirat in GMMTV’s maiden BL *lakhon* *SOTUS: The Series* (2016). More importantly, if we follow Baudinette’s formulation on the “trajectory” that BL actors take, Singto has already “graduated” from gay roles and has started playing straight and more “serious” characters in other *lakhon*. Given this, the apparent conscription of Singto to return to the pink and pretty realm of BL suggests an attempt to bring the big guns into the game.

The utilization of the *lakhon* as the medium of choice [as opposed to the film form in *Antique Bakery*] opened opportunities for *Baker Boys* to venture into other subplots that extend the narrative to twelve closely-knit episodes and introduce thematic thrusts that calcify the *lakhon*’s visual politics. One such addition is the existence of a baking contest between Sweet Day Café [the protagonists’ shop] and other rivals. Another is the giving of more airtime to Monet (Juthapich “Jamie” Indrajundra) and her parents, the journalists who were investigating the series of child kidnappings.

Much of the differences between *Baker Boys* and *Antique Bakery* however have to do with an overt refocusing the narrative of the *lakhon* to a family-centric narrative. This is very much apparent in the transformation of the character trajectories of Punn and Weir in the series. In particular, one finds an apparent systemic and surgical attempt to first desexualize the two characters and transform them into responsible, entrepreneurial, and family-oriented subjects. In the South Korean version, Jin-hyeok (Ju Ji-hoon) and Seon-woo (Kim Jae-wook) are continuously portrayed as flirtatious individuals with some reasonable degree of transformation towards the end. The metanoia and transformation experienced by Punn and Weir however extend beyond mere character adjustment; the focus instead is on how the two friends, who may not necessarily end up

as lovers in the end, participate in the restoration of the family for the different characters as well as in how they are able to heal themselves from their life's hurts by repairing their familial relationships. For instance, the boxer Krating's eventual willingness to join the café staff is motivated by his need to find a family given his metaphysical predicament as an abandoned child. In this way, Punn and Weir function as substitute parents whose role is to nurture the maturation and socialization of Krating as a capable and productive neoliberal subject. In a newly introduced subplot, Pooh the bodyguard character, is revealed to have fathered a child upon a stranger's request. While initially hesitant to acknowledge Pooh as a present father figure, the mother eventually acquiesces with the assistance of friends from the household. Finally, Weir is only able to perfect his mother's cookie recipe after forgiving her for cheating on his father by sleeping with Weir's tutor (and first love). In an overtly sentimental if not cheesy encounter, Punn directs Weir into seeing that the missing ingredient is the "flavor of family." In doing so, Weir's artistic dilemma and resolution signifies the role of familial love in the realization of being a full neoliberal subject.

Perhaps the biggest difference between *Baker Boys* and *Antique Bakery* has to do with how the major kidnapping subplot is resolved. In both versions, the community is alarmed and troubled by a series of child kidnapping and murder cases where the victims are found dead and with cake found inside their stomachs. The Character A's in this regard are alarmed because they too were kidnapped in the same way but they managed to escape. Their trauma—particularly the inability to eat sweet things—is caused by this incident. In *Antique Bakery*, the killer is caught by Jin-hyeok but it is revealed later that the man who kidnapped him is a different person. In *Baker Boys* however, Punn's kidnapper, still initially traumatized by the death of his son [which in turn motivates him to kidnap Punn] becomes repentant and apologetic. He ultimately assists the protagonists in tracking down the true culprits, the male substitute teacher and his adoptive mother.

The motivation behind the killers' kidnapping spree is important here in that it turns out the adoptive mother had resorted to kidnapping children earlier to make the family complete. In doing



so, the *lakhon* positions the mother-son tandem as the antithesis to the centrality of familialism as the chief value. They are positioned as the tragic alternative to the four protagonists who have since understood the meaning of family. Towards this, unlike in *Antique Bakery*, Punn's healing and metaphysical recovery in the story, made possible by the cumulative thrusts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and platonic love, is complete and unambiguous. In the end, he is presented as a fully realized and reformed subject, not entirely desexualized, but capable still of redirecting his energies and talents towards the meaningful figuration of familial relationships in a space that he has since reclaimed as both a site that reminds me of his trauma and healing.

*Baker Boys* is an illustrative text of the complex relationship between Thai and South Korean industries. The expansion into a television format, in contrast with the South Korean version, allowed the producers and screenwriters to inject new narratives and thematic foci into the story while still retaining the core narrative. As discussed earlier, much of contemporary Thai cultural texts made for export for global circulation are predominantly occupied by striking a balance between on the one hand, audio-visual palatability for an international audience and on the other, the heteronationalist preoccupations of the domestic market—a legacy to be sure of the post-1997 cultural politics that have since oriented the kingdom's visual economy.

The eventual success of *Baker Boys* functions as a viable metaphor for the contradictory relationship that defines the traffic of cultural texts. As illustrated here and elsewhere, particularly in the means by which young Thai global stars are now constructed, the aesthetic schematic of the Thai industry is defined by a simultaneous process of mimicry, competition, and ultimately appropriation. The dynamic transnational circulation of popular media between South Korea and Thailand is an illustrative case of the complexities regarding the reification of soft power by way of a balancing between competition and modeling. In the next section on Philippine BL, I explore how such adaptation is reoriented towards a different direction: the use of the popular form in projecting a mode of political resistance.

#### IV. The Case of Philippine Boys' Love

As in the case of South Korea and Thailand, the production and proliferation of Philippine BL was shaped initially and primarily by Thai BL. To be sure, it is incorrect to attribute the proliferation of BL content in the Philippines to the Thai entertainment industry alone. As Louie Jon Sanchez (2020) points out, “underground” BL conventions [ones that required a pre-purchased ticket] had been in existence since the early 2000s. The key difference here is that the BL content enjoyed by fans in the Philippines and elsewhere in the early 2000s were primarily visual forms [e.g. magazines, *manga*, images circulated on the Internet]. In contrast, Philippine BL today has taken on more audio-visual forms, with its audience base expanding during the COVID-19 pandemic through the accessibility of free streaming sites.

While Thailand may not be seen as a direct competition of the Philippines in terms of soft power [as in the aforementioned case of South Korea], the creative strategy to pattern stories after the character-driven storylines of Thai BL [as demonstrated in other BL such as *Dark Blue Kiss* and *Theory of Love*] and deploy these through the structure and stylistics of the Philippine *teleserye* [similar to the *lakhon* format] suggests an attempt to place Philippine BL as a comparative genre to Thai BL. For instance, early Philippine BL such as *Gaya sa Pelikula* (As in the Movies, 2020) and *Gameboys* (2020), the BL that will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, place the emotional fulcrum on the seventh episode of the season, similar to how things are done in Thai BL *lakhon*. As in the case of Thai BL, characters are not just avatars of sexual eroticism and play but are representations of certain ideological and political paradigms ripe for political play. While the radicalizing queer politics of Thai BL is occasionally limited and neutralized as a result of its participation in the harnessing of soft power, the independent nature of early Philippine BL takes on a different and more visibly political charge grants the writers some agency and flexibility in engaging issues in more creative and imaginative manners. In the subsequent discussions, I turn to *Gameboys* as an illustrative text for such creative praxis.

*Gameboys* not only adapted the popular East Asian form in the Philippine context but also utilized the form to deploy various reinterpretations of male sexuality in the homophobic and misogynist milieu of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. The series follows the romance of two computer gamers, Cairo Lazaro (Elijah Canlas) and his fan Gavreel Alarcon (Kokoy delos Santos) as they find love amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Manila. Their burgeoning romance is witnessed and occasionally assisted by Gavreel's ex-girlfriend-turned-best-friend and *babaeng bakla* (fag hag), Pearl (Adrianna So). While the arrival of two rivals, Gavreel's ex-boyfriend Terrence (Kyle Velino) and Cairo's childhood friend Wesley (Miggy Jimenez) cause some hormonally-charged drama, the pivotal complication of the story is one related to the series' socio-political context: the pandemic-related death of Cairo's father (Rommel Canlas, Elijah's real-life father) and its effects on the family.

What makes *Gameboys* unique is how the story is told. Due to limits brought about by government-imposed lockdown restrictions, the series is first told through recorded video calls, social media postings presented as screenshots, and emails that are read out loud. Actors had to receive directorial instructions through video calls and rely on members of the household to do the filming. It was only when restrictions were relaxed that the production crew could continue the story by filming scenes "outside." More importantly, the *raison d'être* of the project itself was not only to provide entertainment for a viewing public that was already exhausted by government incompetence but to also provide jobs to creative artists at that period.

At the core of *Gameboys* ' creative political praxis is the mobilization of queer domesticity as the site for its political engagement. Much like most of the BL series in the region, the domestic space is the realm of romance in *Gameboys*. What sets the series apart however is how such configurations of domestic space are elevated and appropriated as an imagined queer space. Queer domesticities are a nexus of contradictions. Functioning as a spatial means for utopian desires to be both enacted and interrupted, they are simultaneously transgressive in their construction of alternative

permutations of the household and constraining in their strategies for containment of such deployments in their wake, with the case of *Baker Boys* as well as other BL *lakhon* illustrative of the latter. *Gameboys* on the other hand activates the radicalizing power of queer domesticity more potently and visibly, highlighting the possibility of configuring and creating new and more accepting kinds of familial structures beyond the heteronormative ideal.

In *Gameboys*, the home and more importantly the notion of the home function as the center of the series' mode of queer engagement. It was after all Cairo's unintended outing [engineered by his heartbroken girl best friend] that pushes him to run away and ultimately results in his father being infected by the virus while searching for him—a return, to be sure, to the homophobic strategy of charging the homosexual with the crime of destroying the nuclear family. Such an initial charge however is later overturned when Cairo's family not only refuses to hold him accountable for his father's death but also grows to accept him for who he is. The domestic site, therefore, functions as the site for the possible termination and restoration of queer identity.

The radicalizing potential of queer domesticity reaches a full charge towards the end of the series. On the day of their flight back to their home province in the aftermath of the family patriarch's death, Cairo's sympathetic mother allows him to stay for a week with Gavreel, who resides in the neighboring city of Cavite. Cairo then surprises Gavreel, who was about to clichéd car run to the Manila International Airport. After ensuring that they are both negative for COVID-19, the boys unmask and kiss [for the first time], and spend a week or so together in Cavite. Here, a different type of queer domesticity emerges. The home-making act of the lovers, one orphaned (Gavreel) and the other fatherless (Cairo), may be read as an unlikely allegory that functions as a critique of the neglectful father's (Rodrigo Duterte) inability to defend the collapsing nation-state. The recreated queer home in this respect may not necessarily stand in as a site for pleasurable homoeroticized encounters but as an imagined site that foregrounds alternative forms of sociality beyond the nation-state. Read this way, the apparent success of *Gameboys*, as illustrated by its unique

deployment of domestic space, lies in its ability to equate the queerness of the household to allegorically stand for a politics of resistance and reinterpretation of socialities beyond the blood ties that bind citizenship to the nation-state. The happy ending which sees Cairo and Gavreel finally playing house returns us to Jose Esteban Muñoz’s notion of queer utopia as one that “insists on something else, something better, something dawning” (Muñoz 2009: 189).

The case of *Gameboys* illustrates the dynamic ways in which BL stories take on different ways of deploying and harnessing power as they go through the process of adaptation and appropriation. While the Thai case utilized the form to deploy soft power, the case of *Gameboys* demonstrates how it may be used as a means to generate narratives of hope and political engagement in more subtle yet poignant ways. This however may not always be the case. In May 2023 for instance, Black Sheep Productions, an independent film company, started airing *Sparks Camp*, which was described and marketed as the “first Boys Love (BL) dating reality show.” A curious characteristic of this description is the use of BL (instead of gay) to describe the reality show. We find here therefore an appropriation of the genre as a descriptor and framework for a mode of politics of pleasure. A cursory examination of the contestants eventually chosen for such a show elaborates on its politics some more. Most if not all its contestants were already widely recognized in the Philippines as content creators or Internet personalities and fall under the category of the typical beta male type reminiscent of BL characters. While the show and most of its contestants were well-received, such a deployment nevertheless runs the risk of maintaining a certain status quo regarding sexual politics, in this case, the privileging of one particular type of queer identity—middle class if not affluent, masculine, and highly educated – a criticism to be sure of early and contemporary BL. Given this, one finds in some instances of circulation and adaptation, the radicalizing potential of queer politics enabled by the generic parameters of the genre, may actually still be neutralized.

## V. Conclusion

The circulation and eventual adaptation of texts is a dynamic, complicated, and highly politicized process. As demonstrated by the movement and appropriation of the BL genre from the Land of Rising Sun to the Pearl of the Orient Seas, the process of adaptation is more than just a question of adapting to an imagined audience's tastes but is rather a means to structure, wield, and sustain varied forms of power. This essay explored two forms of such power. Using a close reading of *Baker Boys*, an adaptation of the South Korean version of the manga *Antique Bakery* as an example, the discussion on the Thai case of BL demonstrates how the form was utilized to harness soft power by systematically incorporating palatable elements from its chief rival in the soft power game of thrones while simultaneously maintaining the familialist charge of contemporary popular Thai visual forms. On the other hand, the case of *Gameboys*, a series that emerged in the wake of burgeoning interest in BL [thanks to Thai *lakhon* in particular] demonstrates how political power, one that engages issues in the domestic sphere, may be wielded by such adaptations. From the royal courts of the Heian emperors that somehow birthed it and now the millions of screens that multiply the genre's politics of representations, the smiles of these beautiful boys, crafted, curated, and perfected, are faces mobilized to perform forms of ideological labor. Heirs of Genji, they are both embodiments and pawns of power, articulating the political will of the invisible hands that pen them and send them out to the world to perform and play.

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## Forgetting Stories from the Islands, Jeju and Calauit

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### [ *Abstract* ]

The traumatic experiences of people from peripheral islands are susceptible to mnemocide. Such erasure of memory is facilitated by “defensive and complicit forgetting,” which, according to Aleida Assmann, leads to “protection of perpetrators.” My paper reflects on the vulnerability of traumas from the islands to mnemocide by looking into [1] the massacre of communists and civilians on Jeju Island, South Korea in 1948 as described in Hyun-Kil Un’s short story “Dead Silence” (2017; English trans.) and [2] the eviction of residents and indigenous people from Calauit Island, Philippines for the creation of a safari in 1976 as imagined in Annette A. Ferrer’s “Pablo and the Zebra” (2017). In “Dead Silence,” I direct the attention to how to the execution of the villagers—witnesses to the death of the communist guerrillas—is a three-pronged violence: it is a transgression committed against the innocent civilians; an act of “erasing traces to cover up” the military crackdown on the island; and, by leaving the corpses out in the open, a display of impunity. In “Pablo and the Zebra,” I second that both residents (i.e., humans and animals) experience

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post-traumatic stress because of their respective displacements; thus, the tension between them has got to stop. Curiously, while it concludes with a reconciliatory gesture between an elder and a zebra, no character demanded a reparation for their traumatic past per se. Could the latter be symptomatic of a silence that lets such violence “remain concealed for a long time”?

**Keywords:** Jeju April 3 incident, Martial Law, Calautit Safari Park, defensive and complicit forgetting, mnemocide

## I . Introduction

In 2021, Routledge published *Memory, Trauma, Asia: Recall, Affect, and Orientalism in Contemporary Narratives*, which aspired “to re-think established insights of memory and trauma theory and to enrich trauma studies with diverse Asian texts for critically analyzing literary and cultural representations of Asia and its global diasporas” (Jayawickrama 2021). Indeed, there is a need to re-think memory and trauma theory, which became heavily associated with the Shoah, especially during the 1990s with the pioneering works of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman that are fueled theoretically by psychoanalysis, by enriching this lens with contexts from Asia, the other region that was likewise traumatized by World War II on top of their experiences of colonizations and, eventually, compounded by their experiences of authoritarian regimes. Taking off from this movement, I turn my attention to South Korea and the Philippines, two of the many Asian countries that survived colonizations, wars, and dictatorships that still grapple with traumas suffered during those years, and the concept of forgetting, an integral part of discussions on memory and trauma, which is often eclipsed by the concept of remembering. In prevailing memory and trauma frameworks, for instance, the focus has always been on the acts of remembering for it could give insight into the events of the past that haunt and intrude in the present (see Freud, Caruth, and Felman), rather than the acts of forgetting. These could also give insight into the past—because forgetting and remembering are “twin sisters, twin powers” (Holmes qtd. in Ying 2021: 92)—but, at the same time,

calls our attention to potential reasons why certain events of the past were kept, or had to be kept, from the present [thus the belated haunting and intrusion], which cultural anthropologist and literary studies scholar Aleida Assmann lays out in “Forms of Forgetting.” Here, Assmann (2014) points out that “remembering is always framed by forgetting” but, the crux is, some forms of forgetting, like “defensive and complicit forgetting,” leads to “protection of perpetrators,” which do more harm than good. To illustrate this, I scrutinize two literary pieces, namely, “Dead Silence” by Hyun Kil-Un and “Pablo and the Zebra” by Annette A. Ferrer.

“Dead Silence” is among the short stories that compose Hyun’s collection titled *Dead Silence and Other Stories of the Jeju Massacre* (1980s), which provides context to the struggle of the Jeju islanders, especially in light of the island’s geographical location. The titular short story is selected for this textual analysis for its delineation of the massacre of communists and civilians on Jeju Island, which started in April 1948 and persisted until May 1949. Usually referred to as “4:3 incident,” it is an event relatively unknown to many not only because it was obscured by the Korean War (1950-1953) that leveled the peninsula, whose own international traction was then overshadowed by the Vietnam War (1954-1975). Because of this, it is generally described as “forgotten war.” The South Korean government itself at the time and “[f]or many years . . . suppressed and restricted information” about the incident and the “[p]eople who wrote about the killings were imprisoned” (Lee 2018) as the experience of Hyun Ki-Young who wrote the popular novel about the 4:3 incident titled *Suni Samchon* (1978).

“Pablo and the Zebra,” on the other hand, is a story collected in *Panyaan: Three Tales of the Tagbanua*, which presents the beliefs and culture of the ancient ethnic group residing on the Calamian archipelago in Palawan, Philippines called *Tagbanua*. While the two stories by Rhandee Garlitos—“The Sacred Islets” and “Great Elder”—delve into the Tagbanua’s islands, hero, deities, and epic, Ferrer’s story explores the eviction of the tribe from Calauit Island when former president Ferdinand E. Marcos, Sr. declared it a wildlife preserve in 1976. The eviction is an atrocity committed during Marcos, Sr.’s Martial Law (1972-1986), whose insidious effects [e.g.,

inbreeding among animals, land disputes] persist to this day. Like other atrocities committed in the provinces [e.g., the massacre of Moros in Sultan Kudarat in 1974, the famine in Negros in the mid-1980s], the eviction is inadvertently overshadowed by the atrocities carried out in the capital, Manila, which became the leitmotif of commercially successful works about Martial Law [see Rosca's *State of War*, Bautista's *Dekada '70 (The 1970s)*], making Ferrer's work thematically like no other thus far and thus provides another perspective about the atrocities, corruption, and excessiveness of the Marcos, Sr. regime.

"Dead Silence" and "Pablo and the Zebra" are stories about traumatic events suffered and survived by people from the islands, which, regrettably, are overshadowed by stories about more recognizable traumatic events. Continuing the conversation, the remembrance, which the very writing of these stories started is necessary, even after many years have already passed since the massacre of the Jeju islanders and the eviction of the Tagbanua from Calait, because the traumatic experiences of minorities, especially those from geographically peripheral islands, are always vulnerable to *mnemocide* or killing of memory.

In subjecting "Dead Silence" and "Pablo and the Zebra" to textual analysis after Assmann's memory framework laid out in "Forms of Forgetting," I inquire: How do these stories frame the traumatic experiences of people from the said peripheral islands? What makes their traumas vulnerable to *mnemocide*? How could we comprehend defensive and complicit forgetting through these stories?

In the following sections, I define *mnemocide* based on some examples from different situations where memories are [or in some cases frustratedly] erased and points out how it is facilitated by what Assmann calls defensive and complicit forgetting; and after this exposition, I proceed with my analyses of Hyun's "Dead Silence" and Ferrer's "Pablo and the Zebra." I conclude with a survey of ways through which South Korea and the Philippines respectively remember Jeju 4:3 and Calait and a summary. To this end, this literary analysis is aimed at illustrating how defensive and complicit

forgetting is at work, which facilitates mnemocide, rather than rendering a comparative look at forgetting per se and a study of the text's respective genres, which are routes for succeeding studies.

## II . Mnemocide, Forgetting

Mnemocide is an act of killing memory, and it is carried out in more ways than one. From the antiquities, the removal of figures from official accounts and the destruction of their images was not unheard of; this practice was later on described as "*damnatio memoriae*," condemnation of memory [see also Assmann 2014]. An early example of this is the condemnation of Geta's memory as attested to by the Severan Tondo, the family portrait of Roman emperor Septimius Severus housed at the Altes Museum in Berlin. When Septimius Severus who reigned from AD 193 died in February 211, his sons Caracalla and Geta assumed coregency of the empire; that same year, in December, however, Caracalla ordered the murder of Geta and the senate to "condemn Geta's memory" (von Zabern n.d.). Looking at the said portrait, one sees the face of a young Geta, "scratched out and smeared with grime" (von Zabern n.d.). He was killed twice over, yet his scratched and smeared countenance lives on to double haunt the image of their family. But mnemocide is exacted not only on individuals. Communities fall prey to it, too. For example, during the first world war, as if executing the Armenians in the then Ottoman empire from 1914 to 1918, which resulted in untold death toll and an exodus, was never enough, the Turks launched a mnemocide by "remov[ing], stone by stone, the evidence of millennia of Armenian architectural and art history" (Bevan n.d.); and they continued their attempt at removing Armenian traces by denying discussions about the atrocity, antagonizing those who recognize it as genocide, and reframing history (Bedrossian 2021). Yet as one may note, with almost three million Armenians alive today, a people cannot be completely annihilated. Survivors, and those who come after them, become traces of the traumatic past, which perpetrators have been attempting to remove and deny.

Such is the case of the “comfort women” who were held in sexual slavery and forced into prostitution at comfort stations by and for the Japanese military during the Second World War. The Japanese government endeavored to delete the role of their military at the time in the “‘comfort women’ system” and so, beginning in 2021, their textbooks, used by their junior and senior high school students, “no longer specify that the comfort women served the Japanese military during World War II” (Kim and Lee 2021). Plainly, it was a deliberate move to obscure, if not to kill or erase bit by bit from Japanese school curricula, the crucial role of their military at the time in the “human trafficking of minor children and women for the purposes of sex from Japan and its overseas territories and war zones,” like China, North Korea and South Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines to name a few, between 1930s to 1940s (Dudden 2022). It is worth pointing out that, in 2015, Japan had requested the American publishing company McGraw-Hill to “delete a passage containing a reference to comfort women from a text on world history used by high schools in California. The passage says that Japan’s imperial army ‘forcibly recruited, conscripted and dragooned as many as 200,000 women aged 14 to 20’ to serve in military brothels” (McCurry 2015). Revisionist motions like this must not be permitted for it could lead to mnemocide by misrepresenting historical facts and miseducating students of today who will be educators and policymakers in the years to come. We see a potential example of this in the present Philippine government’s non-inclusion of the anniversary of the People Power Revolution in the roster of celebrations and holidays for 2024. The nonviolent revolution in February 1986 on EDSA brought the two-decade presidency of Marcos, Sr. (1965-1986) to a conclusion, resulting in his exile in Hawai’i until his death in 1989. In 1972, as mentioned earlier, Marcos, Sr. placed the country under Martial Law. It was a 14-year period of corruption, excessiveness and violence, which left a national debt that “ballooned to \$26 billion” (Tadem 2018) and saw “un(ac)counted disappearances and 107,240 violated individuals” (Ritumban 2018: 2). While any form of commemoration of EDSA is not codified, whether as a special non-working holiday or a nationwide school holiday, it has been a tradition observed by presidents after Marcos, Sr.; in fact, it was consistently celebrated

from 2002 to 2023, the first year of Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. as president [see Cupin and Cruz 2023]. To civic groups that counter historical distortion like Project Gunita [“gunita,” from Tagalog is memory], the non-inclusion of EDSA is an “attempt to whitewash the history of the brutal dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. . . . [a] path [to] EDSA holiday’s complete eradication” (Suyat 2023). It is because calendrical events, like commemorative ceremonies, feast days, anniversaries, and holidays, are rites inherently, which “have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of those who perform them” (Connerton 2010: 45). Shall we not read the non-inclusion of EDSA in its core as a remembrance of, borrowing the term used by Project Gunita, “the ghost of the past?” (Suyat 2023) Indeed, as Assmann (2014) teaches us, “remembering is always framed by forgetting.”

From these examples, mnemocide is carried out through acts of destroying traces that could preserve the memory [e.g., visual image, architectural and artistic heritage, textbooks, calendrical commemorations, etc.] of the other. Such acts I reckon are facilitated by what Assmann (2014) calls in “Forms of Forgetting” as defensive and complicit forgetting.

Assmann (2014) teaches that defensive forgetting transpires when “acts of destroying relics and erasing traces to cover up practices that will henceforth be classified as crimes” are committed, while complicit forgetting occurs when the respective silences of perpetrator(s), victim(s), and society “reinforce each other, [allowing the crimes to] remain concealed for a long time.” Defensive and complicit forgetting then, says Assmann (2014), leads to “protection of perpetrators”; and victims and their traumatic experiences, dare I say, are always under the threat of mnemocide.

### III. Defensive Forgetting

“Dead Silence” describes a massacre of communists and civilians during the Jeju Uprising, which consisted of a series of battles between the communist guerillas on the island and the national armed forces from April 1948 to May 1949. The short story is set

during an “early morning surprise attack” by the commandos in December (Hyun 2017: 173), which was prompted by the latter’s “full-scale scorched-earth attacks” at the villages in Namwon district (Hyun 2017: 174). The narrative is rather straightforward whose plot may be sketched out as follows:

On the eve of their D-day, Lee Duk-Gu, the chief commander of the Jeju commando unit, and Oh Gyu-Min, a vice commander tasked to lead the surprise attack, delivered passionate speeches, rallying their comrades to persevere in the flight to liberate the island from the imperialist government of Syngman Rhee whose soldiers “committed acts of brutality, murdering innocent people, setting fire to people’s homes and fields, and forcefully seizing their harvests, the products of their sacred labor” (Hyun 2017: 173). Such brutality was suffered by the villagers of Namwon now being held at Eugwi Elementary School. At three in the morning, the commandos attacked the soldiers guarding the school, but the former’s outdated guns cannot put up with the latter’s machine guns stationed on the roofs of the building; and in no time, the commandos, except for Gyu-Min, died of “shots [that] rained down on [them] with thunderous noise” (Hyun 2017: 182). The soldiers then called on the villagers, ordering them to “move the bodies of the dead commandos and place them, one by one, beside the drill platform” (Hyun 2017: 183) and to “take a good look at . . . the bastards who were going to make Jeju a communist island (Hyun 2017: 184). Afterwards, the soldiers commanded the villagers to transfer the bodies to the muddy “empty field west of the school grounds” (Hyun 2017: 185); and there, the chief of the soldiers signaled the firing of the villagers because, to him, “[t]hey are all communists [because they] all knew the dead guerillas”:

The sound of the gunshots shook the entire village. Not one bullet missed its target.

The people who had gathered in the middle of the playground dropped to the ground, one by one.

The muzzles of the guns emitted puffs of white smoke, and the smell of the gunpowder soon entered Gyu-Min’s nostrils.

When the soldiers finished firing, they lowered the guns from their soldiers and walked slowly toward the school.



After they were gone, dead silence and sunshine filled the empty field. The village, the thick forest, the field, and even the sky that was looking down on them all sank into desolation.

Crows soon flocked to the field, stirring up a whistling wind. As they descended upon the dead bodies, they began to caw, Gyu-Min closed his eyes, The cawing of the crows, which ended the dead silence, reverberated throughout the village and beyond. (Hyun 2017: 187-188)

Gyu-Min witnessed all this while atop a camellia tree, about 80 meters away from the school where he had taught after their liberation from the Japanese, which used to be “full of joy” (Hyun 2017: 181), but now “sank into desolation” (Hyun 2017: 188).

I call this massacre of the villagers a three-pronged violence, which is symptomatic of defensive forgetting. The Namwon villagers were held in captivity at Eugwi Elementary School because the government soldiers caught them fleeing to the mountainside; but they were fleeing precisely because their houses and harvests were burned down by the soldiers under the pretext that their villages were communist hideouts (Hyun 2017: 175). This is why when the chief of the soldiers condemned the villagers as communists simply because they “knew the dead guerillas” (Hyun 2017: 187)—for how can they not remember “the youths of the nearby villages” (Hyun 2017: 188)—and ordered their execution, he together with the rest of the soldiers and Rhee’s government, which they represented, were abusing their power and transgressing the people. But executing the innocent civilians—after having ensured the “death of the guerillas” (Hyun 2017: 182)—is also an act of “erasing traces to cover up” (Assmann 2014) their abuse of power. The villagers who suffered their “full-scale scorched-earth attacks” (Hyun 2017: 174)—whose “houses in which families had lived for generations were... reduced to ashes [and whose] crops that had just been reaped, the product of a summer of hard work in the fields” were burned (Hyun 2017: 175)—would have been the very traces of their crimes whose testimony could hold them responsible for their “acts of brutality [against] innocent people” and even against the guerillas (Hyun 2017: 173). *They* were erased. And the third violence is their display of impunity: the soldiers left the villagers who “dropped to the

ground, one by one” (Hyun 2017: 187) out in the open where crows then flocked and cawed (Hyun 2017: 188). Who then would know? Jeju Island lies 237 nautical miles away from Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Indeed, as would be the fate of the communist guerillas, the innocent villagers “would be buried in the [muddy] ground and slowly they would decay” (Hyun 2017: 186).

This communist suppression on Jeju Island continued during the Korean War (1950-1953) and after, leaving somewhere between 25,000 to 30,000 deaths and an exodus. Key to understanding the context of the struggle of the Jeju islanders is history: The uprising occurred only about three years after the Koreans had been liberated from the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) during the conclusion of World War II (1945), which precipitated the division of the peninsula along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by the US and the USSR and their respective occupations of what would become South Korea and North Korea. At the time, the Cold War (1947-1991) already started and so the corollary clash of ideologies. In 1948, Syngman Rhee was elected president of South Korea. He held a strong stance against communism, the ideology espoused by the North, and his US-backed government and military violently dealt with left-leaning movements as was the case on Jeju Island during the uprising and the massacre. Note that in “Dead Silence,” the communist guerillas had been wanting for a unified Korea, whose division was brought about by “the imperialist US and its followers [that is the] puppet government” of Rhee (Hyun 2017: 173), and aligned themselves with the North; in fact, they believed that during the D-day, comrades from the North and the USSR would be in their aid (Hyun 2017: 172-173).

But while it is true that communism “has some influence on Jeju,” as philosopher and translator John Michael McGuire (2017: x) points out in his introduction to Hyun’s collection *Dead Silence and Other Stories of the Jeju Massacre*, the struggle also had, if not more, to do with the islanders’ “basic and legitimate desire for freedom,” most especially from the “mainland oppressors.” Jeju Island, formerly Tamna Island, was an island country, a kingdom with a culture of its own, that had convoluted relationships with earlier mainland kingdoms until it was subjugated in 938 by the Goryeo

dynasty (918-1392). Because of its distance from the capital [i.e., 237 nautical miles away southward] and the difficulty that came with reaching it, the old islandic kingdom became a place of exile where disgraced nobility, literati, and officers—as well as criminals—were banished. Such designation was made official during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897). This is an indication that the island has had a long history of being peripheral in terms of its position in Korean society, which was reinforced by its geographical location. The same can be said about Calautit, a 3,700-hectare island within the Calamian archipelago in Palawan, Philippines.

#### IV. Complicit Forgetting

In 1976, through Proclamation No. 1578, then Philippine president Ferdinand E. Marcos, Sr. declared Calautit Island “a game preserve and wildlife sanctuary” (Office of the President 1976). This resulted in the eviction of the residents of the island, which included 254 families whose members descended from the ancient ethnic group called Tagbanua. They were relocated to Halsey and Burabod in Cullion, which used to be a leprosarium, and were replaced with 104 exotic animals [e.g., bushbucks, elands, gazelles, giraffes, impals, topis, waterbucks, zebras] that had been bought and imported from Kenya. At the time, the country was already under Martial Law. The documentary *The Kingmaker*, directed and written by Lauren Greenfield, presents some insight into the conception of what is now called Calautit Safari Park and the selection of the said island by intercutting the recollection of former first lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos (IRM) with that of Beth Day Romulo (BDR), a columnist and widow of Carlos P. Romulo, former foreign affairs minister (1968-1984):

BDR: We were on safari in Kenya and Imelda was fascinated with the wild animals...

IRM: I got so envious that we did not have those...

BDR: So she ordered them. You know, you like buy a dress in Paris, you bring an animal from Africa...

IRM: Then I said: I will complete paradise for the Philippines because we will also have the animals from Africa here.

...

- BDR: I have no idea what it costs but she got her own little private zoo shipped from Africa. When Imelda's animals arrived there was a problem—of course these new guests would go if they were to roam free, which she insisted—so they finally settled on this small island where they wouldn't run into people...
- IRM: It was an island that was not inhabited by a group of people or did not have communities there except a few that I could tell them what to do... (Greenfield 2020)

This is indicative of how Mrs. Marcos [and so the government she led with her husband] perceived the island [and so the country] and the islanders: a personal possession and an easy mark because “few” or a minority. After Marcos, Sr.’s regime was overthrown in 1986, the original residents of Calauit returned—but this time as “illegal settlers,” thrashing on the animals and the sanctuary, as described in a 1989 *Los Angeles Times* report, which also claimed that former presidential son—and now president himself—Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., during his father’s incumbency, “[had flown] in twice by helicopter to hunt native wild boar” in the safari (Drogin 1989); indeed, the claim was affirmed in the 2010 *Philippine Daily Inquirer* report titled “Returning Calauit to tribe a waste, says Bongbong.” The everyday life of the human residents and the animals then is not without tension, especially when the animals freely roaming around the island would eat, or destroy, the crops planted by the human residents for their sustenance and livelihood. This tension is described in Annette A. Ferrer’s story, “Pablo and the Zebra,” which is collected in *Panyaan: Three Tales of the Tagbanua* published by The Center for Art, New Ventures & Sustainable Development, a non-profit organization that promotes children’s literacy.

The narrative has a simple plot. Pablo “could never understand his [grandfather’s] rage at the animals” (Ferrer 2017: 16), so he asked his mother who then narrated a story: There was a “powerful king” who ruled the country and who, on the occasion of his son’s twentieth birthday, chose Calauit to become his “playground filled with animals that he can play with, chase around, and even hunt” (Ferrer 2017: 17); in turn, the king’s soldiers made

the Tagbanua leave because it is “the king’s word, and no one can complain” (Ferrer 2017: 17). The following week, Pablo saw a zebra and threw a stone at it; when the animal spoke of its pain, the boy could only be remorseful and hid it behind thick bushes and cared for it, until “[t]heir friendship blossomed” (Ferrer 2017: 19). The zebra then asked his human friend why people hated them a lot. Pablo shared what his mother had narrated; in response, the zebra shared his grandfather’s story: Grandfather zebra was eating fresh grass with his parents when “he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his thigh and became sleepy” and the next thing he knew, together with other zebras, they were already in “a big crate”; and when the crate opened, they were already in Calaut, “a scary place because it was totally strange... not their home” (Ferrer 2017: 20). Pablo then brought his zebra friend and the story of the animals to the attention of his grandfather:

That evening, Pablo, Lolo, Mama and the zebra exchanged stories for hours. Lolo looked at Pablo, and then gazed into the eyes of the zebra.

“I am very happy that you and Pablo became friends. I hope you can forgive me,” said Lolo.

I now understand, that we—the people and animals of Calaut—are all Tagbanua.”

“And tomorrow,” Lolo continued, “the council of elders will know that as well.” (Ferrer 2017: 22).

The story concluded with this reconciliatory gesture between these two generations of Calaut residents, whose lives were tied by stories of violence.

I second that both residents [i.e., humans and animals] experienced post-traumatic stress because of their respective displacements when, on a whim, the king made Calaut “the prince’s royal playground” (Ferrer 2017: 17), driving the Tagbanua out of their ancestral land and deterring them from returning—“the soldiers would beat them or bore holes in their boats” (Ferrer 2017:17) when they tried—and deracinating the animals from their natural habitat only to be “hunted down for sport” (Ferrer 2017: 20). In fact, the violence of Pablo’s grandfather towards the animals can

be read as a hint of post-traumatic stress disorder; the symptom physiological arousal in the form of “an exaggerated startle response” (American Psychological Association n.d.) is noticeable in this scene:

There was a rustling of dry leaves and the snapping of twigs. “Who goes there?!” demanded the old man, his hand clenching a rock as he squinted in the darkness. “Lolo, it’s me, Pablo!” The boy lifted his hands in the air and he stepped into the glow of the lamp. Lolo then saw the suspicious shadowy figure behind his grandson “Who’s that with you?!” he shouted. (Ferrer 2017: 22).

Additionally, Pablo’s grandfather always had “his pockets with rocks, ready for any zebra, giraffe, or any other animal that made the mistake of coming too close” (Ferrer 2017: 16) and, as his mother put it, was resentful, blaming the king and the animals, because he “did not see many of his friends and relatives again” (Ferrer 2017: 17), another PTSD symptom in the form of “guilt about surviving the trauma when others did not” (American Psychological Association n.d.). I am not going to say that the animals suffered post-traumatic stress on the level of a disorder as Pablo’s grandfather might have had; but science writer Sharon Levy (2021), echoing scientists Liana Y. Zanette and Michael Clinchy in “Ecology and Neurobiology of Fear in Free-Living Wildlife,” writes that an “[ecology of] fear can alter the long-term behavior and physiology of wild animals,” an element inconspicuous in the animals in this story. What can be ascertained as far as this specific story is concerned is that, the zebra “[doesn’t] understand” why the people “hate [them] so much” (Ferrer 2017: 20), which is indicative of post-traumatic stress, a shock that follows a traumatic experience like when Pablo hit it with a stone “straight in the eye” (Ferrer 2017: 19) when it was simply existing there. Such tension, especially the violence towards animals, indeed, has got to stop.

It is commendable that Calautit is given a literary platform not only because it remembers, if not immortalizes, this lesser known Martial Law atrocity but also because it presents the nuances that shape the issue: The island taken is ancestral domain of an indigenous ethnolinguistic group, the Tagbanua, who has its own

culture and religious beliefs that were violated by their eviction from the land inherited from their ancestors and thus sacred to them. The victims were not only the human residents, but also the animals who were deracinated from Kenya and translocated to Calauit, that is, from one continent with distinct environs, climate, and vegetation to another, which brought in intergenerational problems among the human residents, the animals, and the environment. It is also worth noting that it is a child, a third-generation Calauit resident, the nine-year-old Pablo himself, who, although initially perpetuated his grandfather's "rage at the animals" when he threw a stone to a zebra, but feeling "sick to his stomach" for having done so (Ferrer 2017:19), demonstrated his agency or capacity, in terms of children's literature, to make "an independent statement in opposition to the established adult order" (Christensen 10) by apologizing to the zebra and befriending it and, equally important to it, upon learning the story of the animals, by facilitating a reconciliatory gesture between his grandfather and his friend zebra.

Curiously, however, none of the characters can be seen or heard demanding or advocating reparation for the displacement caused by the eviction ordered by the "powerful king," which is the root cause of their intergenerational suffering. This narrative thread is emblematic of what Assmann (2014) calls "symptomatic silence on the part of the victims," which, as far as the story is concerned, specifically the narration of Pablo's mother, is likely due to their experience of being intimidated and silenced. "It is the king's word, and no one can complain!" so they were told; and such threat, which when they tried to defy, would be coupled with physical violence (Ferrer 2017:17). Silence of this kind, especially when reinforced by the "defensive silence on the part of the perpetrators" and the "complicit silence on the part of society," could result in complicit forgetting, which would allow "crimes [to] remain concealed for a long time" (Assmann 2014). It conceals it precisely because the perpetrators are not being held responsible for the trauma they inflicted on the victims, which in the story were indigenous people, animals, and even the environment. When narratives like this, which deal with the plight of minority groups, and are intended for children especially, do not explicitly discuss the

need for justice, is it not conveying a regrettable message? That the closure of one's traumatic past is solely in the hands of the victims. *It is not*. Thus, the symptomatic silence of the characters must be broken, even in the storyworld itself, because their struggle to return—which “took [them] a long time” (Ferrer 2017: 17)—must be laid bare, remembered, inscribed into immortality, too. Doing so would also call out how society was complicitly silent as well. To this end, defensive and complicit forgetting, says Assmann (2014), leads to a “protection of perpetrators”; and victims and their traumatic experiences, dare I say, are always under the threat of *mnemocide*. But the question today is no longer *who* will remember, but *how*.

## V. Remembering

The Jeju Massacre remained *defensively forgotten* until the establishment of the National Committee for Investigation of the Truth About the Jeju 4.3 Events in 2000, whose findings prompted then South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun to issue a state apology to the people of Jeju Island in 2003:

As president, I accept the committee's recommendation and hold the government responsible and truly extend my official apology for the wrongdoings of past national authorities. I also cherish the sacrificed spirits and pray for the repose of the innocent victims.

The government will support the construction of the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park and the immediate restoration of honor to the victims. (Roh 2003)

In 2008, the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park, a memorial complex that honors the victims of the massacre was opened. In 2019, the court dismissed charges against the survivors and the Ministry of National Defense expressed their “deep dismay and condolences concerning the deaths of Jeju residents during the suppression process (qtd. in Huh and Noh 2019). In 2021, the National Assembly approved a special bill for the state compensation of the victims, which included “not only actual damage, such as medical expenses, but also lost profits and mental damage” (Yonhap 2021). These are some of the ways through which South Korea remembers its tragic past, a most



traumatic one for the Jeju islanders. Indeed, the “cawing of the crows,” the cry of the people and the cooperation of the government, “ended the dead silence,” the defensive forgetting, and it “reverberated throughout the village and beyond” (Hyun 2017: 188).

At least as of this writing, the same cannot be said about the Philippines yet. Many of us have *complicitly forgotten* that Calauit is also a Martial Law atrocity. Aside from *The Kingmaker* and “Pablo and the Zebra,” Calauit is but a note on the excessiveness of Marcos, Sr.’s regime [see “Keeping Up with the Marcoses: Money, Fame and Fortune”]. If the Tagbanua, who were evicted from their island during the creation of the safari, now hold land titles of their ancestral domain, it is only because, as the Supreme Court resolution dated July 6, 2015 shows, court case after court case, they were relentless in reclaiming what in the first place is rightfully theirs. This back and forth with the Philippine government began when Marcos, Sr. was ousted in 1986 and the formation of “Balik Calauit Movement” [Return to Calauit Movement] by the displaced residents. If the human residents were able to reclaim their land, the translocated animals and the park as a whole continue to face underlying issues like inbreeding among the animals, lack of funds to maintain the safari and its human resources, and the tension between the human residents and animals [see “Calauit Island: From Eden to paradise lost”]. I take it from Assmann (2014):

Nothing will really change as long as the victims are the only ones ready to break their silence and to claim their rights. It is the collective will of society alone which can change the situation and turn the tables. Only then will the testimony of the witnesses be heard and supported...

And until then, the traumatic memories of those in the periphery can only be vulnerable to mnemocide.

## VI. Conclusion

In the preceding sections I presented a textual analysis of Hyun Kil-Un’s “Dead Silence” and Annette A. Ferrer’s “Pablo and the

Zebra,” with Aleida Assmann’s concept of defensive and complicit forgetting as a theoretical viewpoint.

In “Dead Silence,” the execution of civilians, right after the execution of the communists during the uprising on Jeju Island, is a clear-cut indication of defensive forgetting where the government’s soldiers “erased” the witnesses to the extreme violence leveled at the islanders that they had committed. In “Pablo and the Zebra,” I argued that the absence of a character who would demand or advocate a reparation for their traumatic displacement per se is symptomatic of a silence that enables complicit forgetting. In one way or another, defensive and complicit forgetting, whether deliberate or not, leads to, as taught by Assmann, the “protection of perpetrators.” It facilitates mnemocide through erasure and silence.

This led me to posit that the question today is no longer *who* will remember, but *how*; and to illustrate possible ways, I presented a brief survey of how both traumatic events, the massacre of islanders on Jeju Island and the eviction of the Tagbanua from Calauit Island, are respectively dealt with in South Korea and the Philippines. Clearly, the South Korean government leads the way towards remembrance that involves state apology and memorial—a veritable context from Asia that can definitely enrich existing memory and trauma movements.

I conclude with a point for reflection: How else do we kill memory?

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## Traveling televisual texts: transnational adaptations of “Doctor Foster” into Korea’s “The World of the Married” and the Philippines’ “The Broken Marriage Vow”

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Korean dramas, commonly referred to as *Koreanovelas* or K-Dramas in the Philippines, have significantly influenced and reshaped Philippine television culture since the early 2000s. Their impact persists in contemporary television programming, reflecting the transnational flow of media texts across borders. As media content transcends geographical boundaries, local media companies have adopted the practice of producing adaptations of foreign television series for their audiences. This paper examines the adaptation of the Koreanovela *The World of the Married* into the Philippine series *The Broken Marriage Vow*, both of which are adaptations derived from the British show *Doctor Foster*. Through this comparative analysis, I argue that the process of localizing these television shows to suit the preferences of the target audience serves as a tangible manifestation of transnational adaptation. Particularly in an era of globalization, where entertainment is still a thriving enterprise, thus traversing international borders, this phenomenon demonstrates the evolving nature of television content as it adapts and caters to diverse cultural contexts

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let alone a profitable means to generate an ailing entertainment industry, especially in the time of the pandemic.

**Keywords:** *The World of the Married*, *Koreanovela*, transnational adaptation, *The Broken Marriage Vow*

## I . Introduction

This research examines the television series from Korea, *The World of the Married Couple*, and its Philippine counterpart, *The Broken Marriage Vow*, both adaptations of the British drama *Doctor Foster*. The first part of the paper traces how *Asianovelas* [dramas imported from East Asian countries] found their way to the Philippines and modified the Pinoy televiewer's viewing experience. Through an analysis of thematic elements and characterization present in these adaptations, the study contends that both series exemplify transnational adaptation. I argue then that the adaptation of these dramas highlights commonalities between the audience and the characters portrayed as they draw inspiration from foreign sources and appropriate these shows to cultural sensibilities thus making these shows profitable while striving to overcome any cultural disparities that could hinder the audience's engagement with the narrative (Wells-Lassagne 2017: 115).

### 1.1. The arrival of *Koreanovelas* (K-Drama) in Philippine television

The Philippines, given its colonial experience, has consistently imported foreign television shows that would cater to their viewer's interests since the inception of television broadcasting. For instance, Filipino television viewers were once enamored by *Mexicanovelas* (soap opera series that were produced in Mexico) which were dubbed in Tagalog, the country's *lingua franca*, and the most famous of them all is *Marimar*, which was aired in RPN-9 in the late 90s (Lacuata 2023: 65), competing against primetime newscasts. With the entry of canned telenovelas, television networks started to purchase their broadcasting rights and reinvent locally produced soap operas by borrowing some conventions and attributes of these



Mexicanovelas like having “a more compact and engaging plot with a more time-bound seriality” (Sanchez 2022a). This led to the Philippines’ response to the telenovela: the *teleserye* which was birthed at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for television also spelled the beginning of the Asianovela wave. The series that started this craze was Taiwan’s *Meteor Garden*, which aired in ABS-CBN in 2003 and was dubbed in Tagalog. The drama series is a coming-of-age story between two characters who come from different social classes: Shan Chai (Barbie Xu), coming from a middle-class family, and Dao Ming Si (Jerry Yan), heir to a multi-national conglomerate. The show was a great success as it dominated the afternoon block with an audience rating of 24.9% in its initial airing versus 11% of the main competitor, GMA-7 (Sales 2004 & Sison-Buban 2014). The popularity of this series paved the way for local networks [ABS-CBN and GMA in particular] to secure rights and licenses to air these canned TV series from Asian media networks (Aberin et al. 2021: 79).

In response to the overwhelming success of a particular show, GMA-7, a major competitor of ABS-CBN, secured the broadcasting rights for the South Korean drama series *Autumn in My Heart*, the initial installment of the *Endless Love* series. This move marked the onset of Koreanovelas [later referred to as K-Dramas] in the Philippine television landscape, captivating Filipino audiences with Hallyu (Gongora, 2013 & Cruz, 2018). Notably, this was the first Korean drama to occupy a primetime slot on a local channel, paving the way for subsequent K-Dramas to follow suit in the primetime blocks of Philippine networks. Another significant K-drama that resonated with Filipinos was *Dae Jang Geum*, also known as *Jewel in the Palace*, which aired on GMA-7 towards the end of 2005, despite its period/historical genre. Broadcasting this type of drama posed a risk due to potential cultural disparities that might alienate the audience. To mitigate this, the network devised strategies beyond mere language dubbing, such as incorporating a theme song in the local language to alter the drama’s overall perception (Anarcon 2021). Building upon the success of K-Dramas in the primetime slot, both ABS-CBN Channel 2 and GMA-7 integrated these shows into their primetime line-ups. Examples include *Lovers*

*in Paris* (ABS-CBN), featuring Kim Jung-eun, Park Shin-yang, and Lee Dong-gun, and *Stairway to Heaven* (GMA-7), starring Choi Ji-woo, Kwon Sang-woo, Kim Tae-hee, and Shin Hyun-joon (Igno & Cenidoza, 2016). This practice of importing canned Asian dramas since then became a norm in the Philippines. For Hicap (2009), K-dramas offer audiences a distinctive narrative approach compared to traditional Filipino soap operas or *teleseryes*. They present well-defined characters and narratives that span across both physical and emotional dimensions. Furthermore, K-Dramas are more compact and would give a semblance of Western production in terms of its production value.

## **1.2. Koreanovelas and Philippine *teleserye*: and the beginnings of transnational adaptation**

The localization of K-Dramas also began in the mid-2000s, seeing the dubbed K-Dramas' domination and unparalleled success. ABS-CBN and GMA-7 explored the idea of adapting these K-Dramas in the Filipino setting, thus paving the way for GMA-7's *The Heart of Asia* (Anarcon 2021) and ABS-CBN's *The First True Home of Asianovelas* (Hicap 2009). *Ako si Kim Sam Soon*, an adaptation of *My Name is Kim Sam Soon*, a K-Drama that was shown in the same network two years earlier, was the first Philippine adaptation of a K-drama which starred Asia's Songbird Regine Velasquez and Mark Anthony Fernandez (Dimaculangan 2008). This was part of GMA's anniversary offering as the network celebrated its 58th year on the Philippine airwaves. Given her large following earning and her versatility as a singer, actress, and endorser, the network deemed her deserving of the role<sup>1</sup>. The adaptation spelled success as it dominated the ratings' game where it garnered a 33.8% audience share compared to *My Girl*, another Philippine K-Drama adaptation starring then-newly launched teen artists Kim Chiu and Gerald Anderson from the rival network (Santiago 2008). This phenomenon shed a new skin on Philippine television, with the emergence of a Hanoyvela where local television networks either adapt a K-Drama

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<sup>1</sup> In Waxy Galang's foregrounding study on Regine Velasquez's "gayze" as a gay icon, he propounds that her multimodality as an artist (singer, actress, product endorser) makes her a bankable star let alone her versatility as an artist.

or pattern a local drama series with some conventions borrowed from the former (Cruz 2018).

## II. Method

In conducting this comparative analysis, I employed a comprehensive methodology that involved a thorough viewing of all episodes from the two television series, namely *The World of the Married* (TWOTM) and *The Broken Marriage Vow* (TBMV). The primary focus of the study was to elucidate and juxtapose prevalent themes and character portrayals across both narratives. Through a meticulous examination of each episode, particular attention was dedicated to the development of key themes evident in the TV series. Additionally, the researcher rigorously observed and analyzed the characterization of the protagonists, Dr. Ji-Seon-u in TWOTM and Dr. Jill Victorino-Ilustre in TBMV, as central figures within their respective storylines. The viewing process encompassed an in-depth scrutiny of character arcs, interactions, emotional states, and decisions made by the main characters in response to the challenges presented, aiming to discern nuanced differences and similarities in their portrayals and actions. By employing this meticulous approach, the study sought to offer a comprehensive comparative analysis that elucidates the divergent and convergent elements within these two TV series, shedding light on their narrative structures, character developments, and thematic underpinnings. Through this, I will expound on the idea of transnational adaptation where entertainment products, such as television shows, contextualize or culturally appropriate themselves to fit the viewers' taste and culture (Wells-Lassagne 2017: 90).

## III. Results

*The World of the Married Couple*, an adaptation of the British drama series, *Dr. Foster* is a South Korean drama that was aired on JTBC network from March 27 until May 16, 2020, and is considered the highest-rating drama of the year with its final episode reaching an all-time high rating of 28.371% with an average rating of 18.829%

according to the data from Nielsen Korea (Lee 2020). The drama series is an example of *makjang* where extreme, unrealistic, abnormal, or ridiculous situations and usually uses topics like birth secrets, potential incest, adultery, revenge, terminal illnesses, rape, murder, and suicide are used as themes, thus watering the viewers' emotions, the show is aired in late primetime in Korea (Cho 2020). The story is about Ji Seon-u (Kim Hee-ae) and Lee Tae-o's (Park Hae Joon) married life which led to its ruin because of Tae-o's infidelity with Yeon Da Kyung (Han So-Hee).

Despite its shutdown in 2020 due to a Congressional resolution that denied its franchise renewal, ABS-CBN bought the broadcasting rights of this K-drama and aired it in the primetime block. It premiered on June 2020 despite the network's shutdown. According to Anarcon (2020), acquiring the broadcasting rights of *The World of the Married* was not a problem as the network forged a partnership with JTBC, the network that holds the show's broadcasting rights. Also, this was not the first time that ABS-CBN acquired the rights to air the drama series shown on this Korean network as the former has previously aired K-dramas *Gangnam Beauty* and *Flower Crew Dating Agency*. As in Korea, the Filipino-dubbed K-drama spelled success despite being aired at a late timeslot of the primetime block.

Almost two years after airing the "Tagalized" or Tagalog<sup>2</sup> dramas, ABS-CBN decided to make a Filipino adaptation of *The World of The Married* called *The Broken Marriage Vow* in partnership with Dreamscape (TBMV). It premiered in the first quarter of 2022 where it was top billed by Jodi Sta. Maria, who took on the role of Dr. Jill Ilustre, the local counterpart of Ji Seon-u in the Korean version, while actor and model Zanjoe Marudo portrayed the role of Jill Ilustre's husband, David, or Lee Tae-o in the Korean version. It was Sue Ramirez who played the third-party character of Lexy or Da-Kyung in the show's Korean counterpart (Pineda 2021). Apart from the network's online streaming platforms, the Filipino adaptation was also shown in Viu, an online streaming platform of

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<sup>2</sup> Since these dramas are imported from various parts from Korea, it was originally rendered in Hangeul. To make it palatable to Filipino viewers, local media networks translate these series into Tagalog, the country's most used language or lingua franca. This is done through dubbing.

local and foreign dramas, where viewers can also access advanced episodes (Llemit 2022).

<Table 1> Comparing *The World of the Married* and *The Broken Marriage Vow*

	<b>The World of the Married</b>	<b>The Broken Marriage Vow</b>
<b>No. of episodes and air time</b>	16 episodes, 70 minutes per episode	107 episodes, 30-40 minutes per episode
<b>Character depictions</b>	Seon-u as scheming and rational in dealing with her husband's philandering	Jill Ilustre and the feisty woman trope
<b>Themes explored</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Emancipation from a philandering partner</li> <li>▶ Divorcee's life</li> <li>▶ Gender in the workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Celebrating the Filipino culture (food, fashion, scenery)</li> <li>▶ Filipino family relationships</li> <li>▶ Gossip culture (Marites)</li> </ul>

### 3.1. Characters

#### 3.1.1. Seon-u: the lonely avenger vs. Jill: the fighter woman with a golden heart

Both *The World of the Married* (TWOTM) and *The Broken Marriage Vow* (TBMV) showcase main characters who are physicians, Dr. Ji-Seon-u and Dr. Jill Victorino-Ilustre, respectively, as the narratives unfold from their viewpoints. These stories portray the protagonists endeavoring to salvage their marriages after discovering their husbands'

Infidelities and striving to maintain familial harmony despite their spouses' ongoing affairs. Despite their initial portrayal as dedicated and faithful partners, nurturing mothers, and successful professionals, a more detailed analysis reveals nuanced distinctions between these characters.

In TWOTM, Seon-u confronts the situation alone, employing manipulative tactics seen in the initial episodes and orchestrating a calculated series of actions that result in the downfall of her

husband and his mistress. However, this vengeful pursuit becomes isolating, almost leading to her own ruin later in the series. Despite achieving revenge and shouldering the roles of both mother and father to her son, Seon-u ultimately experiences emptiness, numbness, and indifference, culminating in a moment where she nearly ends her own life by allowing herself to drown in the ocean in Episode 14. Edmund Lee (2020) lauds the show for its "vividly caustic dialogue, melancholic plot twists, and convincing performances," capturing the audience's attention and building anticipation toward the narrative's resolution.

Dr. Jill Ilustre embodies the persona of a resilient woman scorned, referred to as *babaeng palabán* or a scorned but feisty woman (Ducay 2021). Unlike her Korean counterpart, Dr. Ji-Seon-u, who maintains a rational and strategic approach to address her husband's infidelity, Dr. Jill is depicted as giving way to her emotions to drive her quest for vengeance. Initially stunned by her husband's unfaithfulness, Jill pledges to hold accountable not only her husband but also those who have caused her pain. Her determination is succinctly conveyed in Episode 6 through her strong statement, *Ako ang magsasabi kung kailan, saan, at kung paano ko ito tatapusin*. (I will decide when, where, and how this shall end). Furthermore, Episode 7 offers a glimpse into Jill's plan for retribution, foreshadowed by her vision of stabbing Lexie at David's birthday party, culminating in a dramatic confrontation with Lexy's parents during an unexpected and tense dinner at Lexy's household in Episode 31.

In TBMV, being a Philippine adaptation, Dr. Jill's character prominently reflects the Filipino traits of hospitality and compassion, known as *malasakit* in the local context. This attribute is evident in various episodes where Dr. Jill engages in charitable work at a local clinic in Atok, providing free medical care to its residents who lack access to hospital services, endearing her to the local community. This demeanor sets Jill apart from Seon-u, whose character is perceived as sophisticated and well-rounded. Additionally, Dr. Jill assumes a dual role, teaching at a medical school while practicing as a doctor, in contrast to Seon-u who occupies a high-ranking administrative position at the Family Care Hospital alongside her

responsibilities as a family medicine practitioner.

### **3.1.2. Yi-Rim the cold hearted vs. Carol the advocate**

In *TBMV*, Carol Manansala's character (Bianca Manalo) is the local version of Go Yi-rim (Park Sun-young). Both characters are friends of Jill and Seon-u and are full-time housewives after marrying their husbands who are both engaged in numerous affairs that put both of their married lives on the rocks.

Despite some similarities, Carol's characterization can be seen as distinct from Yi-rim's. In the Korean version, Yi-Rim's character becomes cold and distant when she discovers that Seon-u had a one-night stand with her husband. It takes a while for both Seon-u and Yi-Rim to settle their differences. Carol's characterization, on the other hand, is distinct as she still becomes that loyal friend to Jill despite the knowledge of her husband's and friend's one-night affair. She is that friend whom Jill has relied on, especially in times when the latter needed a companion to figure things out for her to solve. Towards the end of the narrative, both characters are emancipated from their tangled married life: Yi-rim broke free of her husband despite trying to save their marriage, while Carol broke free of her marriage from her husband despite being pregnant.

### **3.2. Underlying Themes**

Both series follow a similar premise: the doctor wife discovers a strand of hair on the shawl gifted by her husband, sparking a cascade of doubts regarding their spouses' faithfulness, ultimately culminating in the tumultuous collapse of their marriages. However, both characters forgive their husbands, as they are taunted by society's judgment for being broken family. For Lee Jae-lin (2020), *TWOTM* meticulously focused on Seon-u's state of mind and underscored how familial relations, the very basic unit and fundamental root of one's social fabric, can be precarious. Despite the efforts to salvage the family by giving their husbands a second chance, both series end with the female lead characters losing not only their husbands but also their son, whom they have both protected. It turns out that their protection stifled their children, which led them to be abandoned by their sons after finally

emancipating themselves from a treacherous relationship.

The drama series also mirrored a divorcee's life, which is a highly sensitive topic in Korea today. According to Kim (2020), South Korea has one of the highest divorce rates in OECD<sup>3</sup> countries, thus making divorced women face challenges not only in terms of social stigma but also financial hardship, which is why most of them are forced to leave town and start anew somewhere else. This was underscored when Tae-o, after marrying Da Kyung, coerced Seon-u to leave town and even demanded for their son's sole custody. This particular issue was quite controversial as some viewers discussed this in various platforms, especially divorced women who were struck by a chord by this scene. In another vein though, the show was praised as it provided a realistic option for women who were divorced. In the series, Seon-u was wooed by her colleague, Kim Yoon-gi [portrayed by Lee Moo-saeng], who is also a divorcee.

TWOTM also highlights workplace issues concerning gender. For example, Dr. Ji's character as an assistant director of Family Care Hospital may be seen as a strong character on the surface level, but underneath this portrayal is an image of gender discrimination, as she is taken for granted by her immediate supervisor, Kong Ji-cheol [portrayed by Jung Jae-sung]. As Kim (2020) posits, one viewer of the series mentioned that the character of Kong Ji-cheol [portrayed by Jung Jae-sung], Ji Seon-u's immediate supervisor, reminds him of a colleague, to the point that the character was labeled as a "middle-aged sexist pig." Moreover, TWOTM breaks away from the South Korean norm in portraying the masculine. In contrast to the masculine being the head of the household, this role is assumed by Dr. Ji given her financial stability as a professional, while Tae-o, her husband, depends on her to finance his gradually bankrupt film production outfit. As such, the drama series celebrates women being empowered and independent from the male companions they have. In relation to this, the show

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<sup>3</sup> The OECD, consisting of 37 democratic nations with market-oriented economies, serves as an exceptional platform for collaborative efforts among governments. Their primary goal is to formulate policy guidelines aimed at fostering enduring economic growth while ensuring sustainability.



drew negative feedback in the episode where Seon-u was attacked by a home intruder. For Kim (2020), this moment seemed to trivialize women and children who are victims of violence and abuse.

What also sets apart TWOTM from TBMV is the latter still underscoring its local traditions and cultures, while the former is a subtle manifestation of Korea fantasizing to be British. For instance, in TWOTM, it was underscored that Korean kids would need to spend extra hours after school to learn English given that most of them would want to pursue higher education studies in international schools or universities. There was also an instance where Da Kyung even suggested to Tae-o to send to a British boarding school to secure his bright future. In another instance, instead of showcasing Korean cuisine in Seon-u's household, she would instead cook Western dishes such as roast beef in the first episode of the drama series. These are just some manifestations that Koreans, albeit being an industrialized country compared to the Philippines.

Unlike in TWOTM where the lead characters end up in divorce, which is the dissolution of one's marriage, TBMV used annulment as the recourse and consequence. This change is due to the non-existence of a divorce law in the Philippines, one of the few countries in the world (Wibawa 2018).

with only annulment as a possible recourse.

In contrast to TWOTM, TBMV was made at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was thus an effective way of promoting local color and culture by choosing strategic locations that at some point would bear some semblance in the Korean adaptation and at the same time, promote local wear and local cuisine. It cannot be denied that the hospitality industry was heavily damaged brought about by the long series of lockdowns due to COVID-19. For Manucom (2021), TBMV is a celebration of everything that comprises Filipino culture: food, fashion, and even cuisine! Throughout the show, Philippine fashion was greatly underscored in the costumes of the lead character Jill Ilustre and in some supporting characters such as Nathalie Ilustre, Alexis' mother who

was played by singer-actress Rachel Alejandro, in which she dons a *terno* outfit, which consists of the blouse [*baro* or *camisa*], a folded rectangular piece of fabric worn over the shoulders [*pañuelo* or *fichu*], and a short rectangular cloth [*tapis*] wrapped over top of a long skirt [*saya*]. Jor-el Espina, the show's costume designer, designed Nathalie's wardrobe and his manner of designing is focused on the details, where the colors, textures, and structures are deliberately chosen to make sure that each creation is beautifully unique (Veloso 2022). There is also a conscious effort in Jill Ilustre's clothing to give viewers a taste of local color from her kaftan dress to her handwoven coats and even her accessories. As Veloso (2022) writes, Jill's kaftan dress was designed by Leonora Cabili's *Filip+Inna*, whose design, beadwork, and embroidery are done by indigenous community artisans in the country. In some episodes also, Jill wears coats that were handcrafted by Tausug artisans and took over two months just to complete one outfit.

The Filipino cuisine is also promoted in TBMV. In the first episode, Jill cooked *adobo* for dinner. Adobo, which traces its etymological roots in the Spanish word *adobar* which means marinade, is a popular dish in the Philippines. As De Witt (2010) writes, cooking an *adobo* dish involves meat [usually chicken or pork] which is marinated in soy sauce, vinegar, and other blends of spices such as garlic, bay leaves, and black peppercorns, thus making it easy to prepare cook, which is quite suitable for middle-class families such that of the Ilustre-Victorino household. In the 31<sup>st</sup> episode, a showcase of Filipino delicacies and food was prepared [local desserts such as *bibingka* or rice cake], but what took center stage is known by the name *cochinillo* (suckling pig). According to Frayer (2013), it is a dish that was inherited by the Filipinos from its Spanish conquistadores. Its difference from the *lechon* that most Filipinos are accustomed to is a young pig is the main ingredient for *cochinillo*, while a full-grown pig is roasted from the former. Moreover, it is not only tiresome to prepare but would also be costly as this dish is only served in important occasions and celebrations. In an interview with the designers by Anarcon (2022), the *cochinillo* is a symbolic representation of Lexy: someone who is young, fresh, and succulent. Coincidentally, the dinner scene opens

with the breaking of the *cochinillo*, a prelude to what will happen to Lexy in the succeeding episodes as she and David are about to taste Jill's scornful wrath because of their adulterous relationship.

To emphasize the Cordillera's setting, the series incorporated the native dish *pinikpikan*. As outlined by Locsin (2006), *pinikpikan*'s roots trace back to pre-colonial religious practices, reflecting its ritualistic nature in both preparation and consumption. Originally utilized for seeking favors, appealing to departed loved ones or *Kabuniyan* [the local deity], or expressing gratitude for answered prayers, the dish evolved with the decline of pre-colonial customs due to colonization. In the series, the traditional method involving the gradual beating of the chicken was replaced by using already dressed chickens obtained from local traders in the area (Locsin 2006: 77). Despite this adaptation, featuring *pinikpikan* in the narrative signals the series' distinctly Filipino identity, providing viewers with something culturally familiar and authentic. Interestingly, this scene coincides with Jill and David's marital discord, seemingly symbolizing Jill's lingering hope for the relationship despite her suspicions about David's infidelity.

The Filipino adaptation strongly emphasizes close family bonds, evident in the relationships portrayed between David, Jill, and Gio throughout the series, even before David's infidelity. Despite David's betrayal, Jill displays immense hospitality towards Marina, David's mother. The show underscores the protective nature of mothers toward their children, showcased through Jill's vigilant protectiveness over Gio following her separation from David. Additionally, instances such as Marina's plea to Jill not to press charges against David after he nearly fatally assaults her in episode 44 highlight this theme. Nathalie's attempt to bribe Jill to leave Baguio further accentuates the lengths parents are willing to go to for the sake of familial peace. Towards the series' conclusion, Lexy decides to end her marriage with David to shield her daughter from the potential harm they might endure by staying with him.

Gossiping or in local parlance, *chismis*, is also embedded throughout the narrative. Be it in the form of online gossip or rumor-mongering, these were highlighted in the show. In the first

few episodes, Sandy, Jill's friend and colleague is a typical example of what is typified as a *Marites* [local term for gossip monger]. It is she from whom David knew Jill's annulment plan even before being served the papers for it. Furthermore, online gossiping, which is quite reminiscent of the current social media climate in the Philippines is highlighted in the series as it is evident how Jill's reputation is greatly affected by online gossip propelled by Enzo (Joem Bascon). According to Puache (2022), the series provides a sneak preview of the negative consequences brought about by spreading false information and rumors to the point of making it viral as it may put a person's reputation at risk, thus very timely with the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in the country, which makes it quite apt as the Philippines is also dubbed as the world's social media capital.

As mentioned earlier, given that the show was shot and shown at the height of the pandemic, local tourism was actively promoted, as much as how K-Dramas would indirectly promote its unique sites to attract tourists. As such, to be able to rouse some sense of familiarity and similitude to the K-Drama, the provinces of Baguio and the Mountain Provinces, one of the go-to destinations of both local and foreign tourists were highlighted throughout the drama series. In some shooting locations, some scenic spots were used which is an indirect promotion of tourism in the place given that the tourism industry was badly hit by the pandemic. Moreover, in the opening scenes of the pilot episode, the Rice Terraces were momentarily focused before zooming into the action taking place. As Abanes (2022) writes, the interior of each setting is intricately and carefully planned not only to reflect Jill's personality in her familial abode, but to also add a layer of Filipino flair to the series. In both the Ilustre and the Lucero households, the fireplace is "a focal point, the wood-cabin feel, and the pine trees are seen from almost every angle," which is a symbolism of Filipino warmth and hospitality.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

With the morphing of the television series format in the wake of

digital technology and the emergence of globalization where entertainment commodities cross national boundaries, transnational adaptations of foreign drama series are a commercial effort “to become available for a specific kind of audience” (Wells-Lassagne 2017: 92). Audiences now enjoy having a distinct positionality on issues that are timely and relevant in their countries. As adaptations of *Doctor Foster*, TWOTM and TBMV retained the original story’s premise with some modifications to cater to the largest possible viewership. These included changes in character portrayals, setting and cultural nuances that may not make sense to local viewers should producers stay *faithful* to the source text. TBMV not only underscored family life after the divorce proceedings, but also celebrated a woman’s independence, while TWOTM gave viewers a glimpse of discrimination of women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is the cultural applicability of the series that made them palatable to target audiences, given that they underscore sensitivities specific to a certain locale, as television productions “lose their value when they cross borders as foreign viewers do not appreciate the cultural references contained in the ‘original text’” (Wells-Lassagne 2017: 92).

A closing point of reflection perhaps is why local television networks in the Philippines keep on adapting K-dramas in the local teleserye setting since the invasion of Tagalog-dubbed versions in primetime viewing. Given the popularity and the dominance of Korean culture [also collectively known as hallyu], Korea’s cultural products have dramatically influenced not only our televisual experience but have become popular cultural products in the Philippines. The choice of which series should be adapted is quite tricky as there are many factors to be considered. For Aberin et al. (2021), the audience plays a determining factor in whether they can relate to the storyline of the drama to be adapted. In addition, adapting these dramas into the local palette may appear to be uncomplicated but a tricky one as cultural context plays an important role in the adaptation process. It is a challenge for the production team to find out these cultural nuances and “tweak the storyline so that it best matches the plot of the original series while retaining the basic premise and the essence of the story” (96).

The process of adapting a text echoes the complexities

inherent in translation, involving a profound intercultural and intertemporal exchange and a forward means of reappropriating a story from one form, from one culture, or from one period to another (Wells-Lassagne 2017: 22). After all, the adapted text as a product can be compared to a translated text in which there is no literal translation but an intercultural and intertemporal communication where the adapted text retrofits itself in the local palette, thus its journey from one point to another point [in this case, from Britain's *Doctor Foster* to Korea's *The World of the Married* and the Philippines' *The Broken Marriage Vow*]. Adaptation transcends mere linguistic or cultural shifts as it intricately transforms the original content to harmonize with the distinct tastes, societal norms, and contexts of the new audience, illustrating a substantial recognition and alignment with local audience preferences and cultural identity. This adaptation strategy aligns narratives with local sensibilities, incorporating familiar cultural elements, traditions, and societal norms to enhance relatability and connection with Filipino viewers.

Furthermore, this practice reflects the industry's dynamic nature, revealing its adaptability and willingness to innovate. Integrating Filipino cultural elements into storytelling not only expands viewership but also nurtures a deeper bond between the teleserye and its audience, fostering a sense of cultural belonging and appreciation. Additionally, this shift suggests a more sophisticated approach to storytelling and production design, prioritizing cultural authenticity and contextual relevance as the industry appears to be moving beyond the replication of foreign content. It now ventures into emphasizing localized narratives that entertain while also resonating culturally related themes and motifs with the local audience. The teleserye has achieved its originality as it travels from one culture to another by transmuted foreign influences which has relevance to social consciousness, which ultimately leads to the formation of national character. This signifies a mature evolution in the teleserye landscape, as it strives to create (and re-create) narratives that are both entertaining and culturally meaningful to the Filipino audience.

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# Articles





## The Multidimensional Masculinity in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's Short Stories

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is a pillar in Vietnamese cultural life after the Second Indochina War, and the fates of men and women at the beginning of *Đổi mới* (Renovation) is one of the prominent themes in his short stories. To show off sexual power, seek glory, and maintain his dominant position, Thiệp's heroes engage in a game of oppressing the weak, hunting animals, and harassing women. However, due to the complex changes in social life, moral values, and gender inequality, men in the postwar period quickly experienced the feeling of humiliation, impotence, and failure. In turn, the sophisticated aspects of masculinity demonstrate the cultural and ethical concerns of contemporary Vietnamese society. By exploring the multidimensional nature of masculinity expressed in Thiệp's stories, this study aims to resolve misconceptions about gender and the relationship between men and women in his work.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, ethical, impotence, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

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## I . Introduction

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1950–2021) has been writing for publication since the 1970s become controversial literary phenomenon almost immediately upon his debut. Thiệp emerged during the renovation of Vietnamese literature and became the most typical manifestation of the movement (Nguyễn 2008: 203). Since *Đổi mới* (Renovation)<sup>1</sup> until now, he has been a great Vietnamese writer in general, particularly well known for his short stories. His writing is concise, profound, multi-faceted, and polysemantic. Thanks to the deep influence of Confucian and Buddhist thought, as well as “sử bút” style,<sup>2</sup> Thiệp has produced stories that are “the best of Vietnamese literature over the last three decades” (Le 2014: 146). He interrogates the eternal relationships between literature and politics, good and evil, and men and women through his creation of unique characters to cultivate compassion, altruism, and search for the true meaning of human life. Diving into Thiệp’s writings can evoke in readers many misconceptions, one of which must be the misinterpretation of men and women.

Men and women—or male and female—are two primary archetypes, as well as a permanent pair of dualistic opposites that govern human thinking. Men and women are different and similar, separated and merged, antagonistic and complementary. They have always existed in a state of interdependence, as in the relationship of Yin and Yang in Eastern philosophy, the anima and animus in C.G. Jung’s conception of the human psyche, and the common conception of a picture and a shadow. Men need women to define themselves and vice versa. They cannot confirm their independent and autonomous identities when excluding the other from their consciousness (Eagleton 1996: 110–30). According to Morin (2015: 123–28), from a genetic, anatomical, physiological, psychological,

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<sup>1</sup> “Đổi mới” was a comprehensive reform campaign, especially economic and political renovation, which the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) began implementing in the late 1980s. *Đổi mới* was officially carried out by the 6th Party Congress of CPV in December 1986.

<sup>2</sup> “Sử bút” (史筆) is the literary style of ancient Chinese historians. This method stands out for its flexible coloration and vivid images, as well as containing praise or criticism of objects based on Confucian moral principles.

and cultural perspective, masculinity is within femininity and vice versa. Each person, male and female, carries inside himself or herself a restrained presence and power of each other. Thiệp's works highlight the duality of men's attitudes towards women. Male characters often affirm female qualities, even while they reject and even demean female characters. Male characters often humble themselves when advocating femininity, self-identifying as weak, pitiful, despicable, or useless. When demeaning women and exalting masculinity, Thiệp's heroes often demonstrate disgust at all manifestations of femininity. Sometimes they try to protect, defend, and support women. At other times, they find ways to harass female characters. On the surface of texts, Thiệp's characters present themselves as victims and perpetrators of the opposite sex. This is an essential point that many critics have missed when analyzing the male–female relationships in Thiệp's writing.

A dynamic nature and monopoly on political power have given men the privilege to explore and create the world. Winning enemies, shooting down quarry, and conquering nature bring glory to men. Because women are considered to embody nature, men also seek glory through subduing and dominating women. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's writings contain a distinctly masculine nature, because his main topics are closely related to the activities of war, hunting, conquering, and raping women. Unlike writers such as Nguyễn Minh Châu,<sup>3</sup> Bảo Ninh,<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Bình Phương,<sup>5</sup> Sương Nguyệt Minh,<sup>6</sup> and many others, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not directly write about the war. Rather, the shadows of war in his works are mostly received, edited, and arranged from different texts, or in other words, appear

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<sup>3</sup> Nguyễn Minh Châu (1930–1989), a writer who made vital contributions to Vietnamese literature after the Vietnam War (1975) and a pioneer who paved the way for *Đổi mới* literature (since 1986).

<sup>4</sup> A pseudonym of Hoàng Ấu Phương, son of renowned Vietnamese linguist Hoàng Tuệ (1922–1999). He specializes in writing novels and short stories, and is best known to world readers through the novel *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*).

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Bình Phương, a contemporary Vietnamese novelist, was born in 1965 and is currently the editor-in-chief of *Văn nghệ Quân đội* (*Military Arts Magazine*), a prestigious art and literary magazine in Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> Sương Nguyệt Minh is the pen name of Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn (1958–), a well-known Vietnamese soldier-writer.

in a kind of intertextual warfare. These are the wars between Nguyễn Ánh<sup>7</sup> and Nguyễn Huệ,<sup>8</sup> the resistance against the French by Hoàng Hoa Thám<sup>9</sup> and Nguyễn Thái Học,<sup>10</sup> the Sino-Vietnamese War (1946–1954), and the Vietnam War (1954–1975). When referring to these wars, Thiệp does not describe battlefields or fierce struggles as seen in other writers' war-related writings. Instead, he primarily focuses on what is behind the war. From Thiệp's perspective, wars are a specific game for men—an extreme form of masculinity. Indeed, Thiệp is not interested in the field of battle as such and replaces it with areas for hunting and travelling. This type of space in Thiệp's works is associated with masculine activities such as catching fish and hunting animals (frogs, monkeys, bear, tigers, and wolves). For Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, trips to the forest or hunting activities are as glorious as war and can satisfy men's desire for adventurous pleasure. However, male characters' efforts to find the extraordinary and glory are a trap, because these activities push them into an unreasonable and meaningless realm. All the pleasure a man obtains from the challenges of taking risks is ephemeral. Disappointed by the impermanence surrounding him, he falls into an embarrassing situation. Thiệp's view shows that the opposition of victory–defeat or glory–humiliation is relative and dualistic: “is there any glory not built on dishonor and shame?” (Nguyen 2013: 205). In this duality, the male–female antagonism illustrates a new face in which a complicated masculinity is imbued with femininity.

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<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Ánh (阮暎) or King Gia Long (嘉隆), whose real name Nguyễn Phúc Ánh (阮福暎) (1762–1820), was the founder of the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945), the last monarchy in the history of Vietnam.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Huệ (阮惠) or Emperor Quang Trung (光中皇帝), whose real name was Hồ Thom (1753–1792), was the second emperor of the Tây Sơn Dynasty (1778–1802). Nguyễn Huệ was a prominent military leader who significantly contributed to ending the civil war and defeating foreign invaders in the 18th century.

<sup>9</sup> Hoàng Hoa Thám (黄花探) (1858–1913), commonly known as Đê Thám, was the leader of the Yên Thế uprising against the French colonialists (1885–1913) in Vietnam.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Thái Học (阮太學) (1902–1930) was one of the leaders of the Yên Bái uprising against the French colonialists in 1930. Hoàng Hoa Thám and Nguyễn Thái Học were considered symbols of Vietnamese patriotism.



## II. Hunting Games: Glory and Humiliation

In almost every culture, hunting is regarded as a job, right, and duty of men. It is an activity in which they can exhibit their strength, courage, intelligence, bravery, and world-creative ability. In hunting, males use bows, arrows, sticks, and guns as tools or weapons. These objects stand for masculinity, and psychoanalysts often refer to them as various symbols of the phallus. They hunt in forests, valleys, ravines, and caves, which represent the female vagina. A woman does not enjoy the hunting game but passively waits for her husband to bring back the spoils. As a result, a male's working environment is lively, unfamiliar, and dangerous, unlike a woman's, which is usually static, familiar, and boring.

The hunting motif appears in Thiệp's short stories "Muối của rừng" (The Salt of the Jungle), "Sang sông" (Crossing the River), "Những người muôn năm cũ" (The Accustomed People), and "Những ngọn gió Hua Tát" (The Winds of Hua Tát). "Muối của rừng" narrates the complex story of a monkey hunting trip by the male protagonist Diều. On a spring day, "the jungle is deep green and damp" and "nature is both dignified and sentimental" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 137). With a new shotgun given to him by his son, Diều goes to the forest to hunt. The old man finds a monkey family foraging with a herd. He shoots and wounds the male monkey, and the female monkey and her babies try everything to save the male monkey. Later, the hunter loses his gun and becomes exhausted. Realizing that he cannot carry the injured male monkey out of the jungle, Diều takes off all his clothes, bandages its wound, "releases" (phóng sinh)<sup>11</sup> the animal, and, naked, the man finds his way back home. When he reaches the edge of the forest, Diều is stunned by the countless *tử huyền*, flowers that bloom only once every thirty years. The flower symbolizes the wish for peace in the country and a bountiful harvest for communities.

Hunter and beast are not new motifs in world literature. Consider the story of Santiago and the swordfish in Ernest

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<sup>11</sup> In Buddhist and Vietnamese culture, "phóng sinh" is finding a way to redeem, liberate, release, and save the lives of animals that are captured, imprisoned, or about to be killed.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, widely popular in Vietnam, and thus reinforcing and increasing local readers' impression of the motif. In traditional Vietnamese literature, stories such as *Truyện kì mạn lục* (*Casual Records of Transmitted Strange Tales*) by Nguyễn Dữ<sup>12</sup> exploited the theme of hunting or used the hunter–beast motif. Contemporary writers such as Vũ Hùng (1931–2022),<sup>13</sup> Trần Duy Phiên (1942–),<sup>14</sup> and Suong Nguyệt Minh (1958–) have created many excellent stories on the theme of hunting. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, too, embraced this topic, but did not emphasize politics, ethics, ecology, or environmental protection; rather, Thiệp praises the male protagonist's cognitive process and journey back to nature. Diều's monkey hunting, for example, is a journey of awareness back to nature. The man starts from a position of antagonism and moves toward the perception of the reciprocal relationships between male and female, victory and defeat, nature and culture. In the beginning, Diều presents the male and female monkeys as genders of mutually exclusive antagonism, but near the end of the hunt, he provides profound insights. He highlights the similarities between humans and animals, the interdependence between nature and culture, and the correlation between rulers and subjects, males and females. The hunter is suddenly enlightened by the shared burden of the species that nature bestows on each individual, regardless of gender. Departing with a cultural/civilized consciousness and a wish to dominate nature, Diều reaches his destination only by giving up all the male/ruler/culture characteristics to integrate with the female/subject/nature ones. The image of Diều walking naked in the

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<sup>12</sup> Nguyễn Dữ (阮興), whose real name Nguyễn Dữ (阮興) (dates unknown, although he seems to have lived and wrote around the 16th century). His only remaining work is *Truyện kì mạn lục* (《傳奇漫錄》 literally, “discursive notes of strange stories.”) The book includes 20 stories written in Chinese characters and combines prose, poetry, and commentary by the author and others. *Truyện kì mạn lục* has been praised as a “spectacular work through all ages.”

<sup>13</sup> Vũ Hùng is famous for his works about nature and animals for children. His first book, *Mùa săn trên núi* (*Hunting Season in the Mountains*) was released in 1961. At the time of his death, Vũ Hùng had composed more than 40 works for children, many of which have been translated into English, French, Russian, and Chinese.

<sup>14</sup> Trần Duy Phiên (born 1942) is a writer and poet closely associated with the highlands of Vietnam. His compositions primarily portray the environment, people, and culture of the land, and hunting appears as an important theme in some of his works.

wet spring rain, surrounded by countless blooming *từ huyền* flowers, his soul full of hope for the future, is beautiful. It is a typical metaphor for Thiệp: human beings should understand how to give up their sense of hegemony in the face of nature. It also suggests the possibility of redemption through transformation despite the ironic logic of that transformation (Taylor 1996: 451). The unusual flower reflects Diêu's transition from glory to humiliation. The figure of the male hunter explores glory, which is not the one that occurs after defeating nature. On the contrary, it appears after the protagonist fails and compromises with great Mother Nature.

In *Những ngọn gió Hua Tát*, a series of ten concise stories composed in the 1970s, Thiệp's message focuses on karma and the vanity of glory, which is precisely the lesson learned by the male character Nhân in "Sói trả thù" (A Wolf's Revenge). Nhân leads a group of hunters to prey upon wolves. The man and his fellows show their brutal strength as they faced the proud, wise, tricky, and cruel wolves. They chase and destroy the entire pack of wolves, including the leader, who flees to "a deep cave with mossy stone pillars" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 121). Nhân kills the wisest leader of the pack, captures the most beautiful wolf, and takes it home to raise with his dogs. This little wolf later bites San, Nhân's only son, to death. Surprisingly, Nhân does not take revenge or transmit hatred, as the lead wolf did to its cub. He cuts the metal chain and sets the wolf free into the jungle. The passage where he "swung the axe down onto the metal chain" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 122) is filled with symbolism: it terminates the cycle of mutual vengeance and affirms man's free will to aim for good, so that humans can indeed be benevolent beings, as the name of the protagonist suggests.<sup>15</sup> Nhân accepts defeat, and in return, he overcomes his instinct to suppress, destroy, and take revenge. Winning himself, rising to be an actual human being, is Nhân's most significant victory.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp also depicts the vanity of victory in another short story, "Trái tim hổ" (A Tiger's Heart). Khó, the main character, is an ugly orphan who tries to chase a fierce tiger to get its heart.

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<sup>15</sup> In Vietnamese, "Nhân" (仁) means loving people or compassion.

He believes that the tiger's heart is a sacred medicine and could cure the polio of the beautiful Pùa. Whoever possesses the heart would be lucky and wealthy for his entire life (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 108). Finally, the ugly man overcomes the tiger, a clever and dangerous animal that other hunters were never able to capture. However, like Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Khó's triumph is empty. He never basks in the glory because an unknown figure steals the tiger's heart as soon as he kills the animal. The heart, which should have been the reward for the winner, disappears and Pùa is not cured. At the same time, shame, humiliation, anger, and bitterness overcome Khó and the other boys of Hua Tát. Although the hero participates in the hunt and kills the fierce animal, he still fails miserably. He wins by killing the big cat but loses to fellow humans. His victory and failure contain the value of awakening the community, because the more vital the achievement, the easier it is to steal. All glory is ephemeral, and may cause bitterness and ignominy.

This is also the painful lesson learned by the male character Chương in "Con gái thủy thần" (The Water-Nymph's Daughter) as he participated in a wrestling competition. Chương is a gentle rural man. Born in poverty, he lives in a challenging situation. During a village festival, he is suddenly pushed to the wrestling floor, and Chương is unexpectedly engaged in a competition with members of the village of Đòai Hạ to "clean (the) disgrace" of his village. Chương's hard-work gifted him with a powerful physique, so although he was not good at wrestling techniques, he still defeats all of his opponents, bringing glory to his teammates. Unfortunately, right after his victory, on his way back home, the losers took revenge on him with exceptional brutality. Chương's mother is the one who illuminates the humiliation inherent in man's quest for glory: "Oh Chương, my son! Why do you always have to outdo everyone else? Giving over your body for other's entertainment—aren't you embarrassed?" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 295). From the beginning, Chương was not an athlete in the competition. He was pushed into the game by accident. He was then agitated and instigated by the fans' excited cheers, and the clamor and vague humiliation of his fellow villagers plunged him deep into the fight.

Until Chương is violently beaten, he does not realize that his success was a disgraceful glory.

The glory-humiliation pair is also associated with Thiệp's masculine style in "Những người thợ xẻ" (The Woodcutters), a solid, cinematic short story about a young man named Bường and a group of woodcutters who go to the Northwest to work for a deputy director of a forestry enterprise. Their timber sawmill is in the middle of the primeval forest. When these men are about to complete their mission, a bear suddenly attacks them. The team overcomes the huge animal. Meanwhile Bường slits its neck to get the bile and wears the gallbladder as a trophy. The workers carry the dead bear to the house of a female teacher Thục, and the whole forestry team celebrates a crazy party with bear meat. Behind these men's victory, Thiệp alludes to the unforgettable experiences of those who are considered heroes right after their success: "After several last moves, the bear died. We were completely exhausted. Our hands and feet trembled. Bường looked pale, his smile was like a cry. Later, I witnessed many victorious smiles in many different cases, and those smiles always looked like cries. I always felt frightened and moved by them" (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 352). Men take part in hunting to fight, win, and bring back glory. They are revered as heroes but immediately fall into a disgraceful state. With smiles like cries, frightened and moved, are they winners? Or does the glory belong to the noisy crowd of the forestry farm? The contemplation of failure and humiliation is quiet, sad, and numbing because it is always personal and private. As Hemingway nicely demonstrates in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Thiệp's concept of glory and humiliation are companions. In every instance of victory, he does not forget to remind the man not to ignore the areas of gray shading to ignominy.

Noticeably, there is no sign of a woman in Thiệp's hunting games. No female characters accompany Diêu ("Muối của rừng") or Khó ("Trái tim hổ"). If there are any women, they are usually obstacles to the game or are identified as prey, which is the position of some female characters, including An, Thắm, and the hunter's silent wife in the stories "Những người muôn năm cũ," "Chạy đi sông ơ" (Run River Run), and "Con thú lớn nhất" (The Largest

Animal). The heroines often do humble jobs such as digging roots, weaving fabrics, catching insects, cooking meals, washing dishes, and rowing boats. They wander around in small living spaces, such as kitchens, houses, gardens, fields, and villages. Once they leave the confines of their world and enter men's hunting space, they plunge into a forbidden realm where they are confused with prey or hunted animals. This confusion is evident in the case of the man in the short story "Con thú lớn nhất." The hunter fails on a long trip and must return home. When he sees the flickering blue fire in his house, however, the man immediately re-enters the forest, where tragedy strikes. The hunter's wife had gone to the forest's edge to wait for her husband. She holds a peacock feather in her hand, which confuses her husband, and he is unable to distinguish between animal and human. The hunter mistakenly thinks he has had a successful hunt, but he has shot and killed his wife.

In unusual circumstances such as wars or instances where states are "without a king," the disguised and controlled exterior disturbs the inner world in Thiệp's writings. The situation causes men to lose their values. Characters' intellectual strength and analytical thinking are reduced or become useless. "Những người muôn năm cũ" describes the daily life of male teachers in a mountainous Northwest school. Because of his shortcomings, the character Mr. Doanh has been sent to the remote area as a form of discipline, while, in contrast, Ms. Xuân, the principal's daughter, has returned to the city to attend university. Doanh had a sharp ability to analyze society and people, but no one listens to him. The same goes for Đòai's astute, radical, merciless social and moral analyses in "Không có vua" (Without a King). Together with "Tướng về hưu" (The General Retires), "Không có vua" is one of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's best stories, which "confirm the talent of its controversial author" (Doan 2019: 67). The stories combine the techniques of fragmentation, dramatic dialogues, and unmoved narrations with many shocking details about social decay and ethical chaos. The most unforgettable character of the stories is Đòai, the pragmatic and mercenary expert at the Ministry of Education. He ruthlessly rejects contemporary morality. However, Đòai is also very attractive, and he is abominable because of his sensitive social intelligence and ability to understand

others' temperaments. Despite being an education official, Đòai is the villain of the story. He represents the corruption of the educated, which swirls violently in the whirlwind of the nascent market economy, an example of the irony of knowledge and morality that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp would like to incarnate.

This satire is born in the context of post-*Đổi mới* Vietnamese culture. Along with the renovation, the socialist-oriented market economy was also present, but this led to unforeseen consequences when the moral system was undermined by materialism. Both Doanh (“Những người muôn năm cũ”) and Đòai (“Không có vua”) have the power of reason but fail in terms of morality. In a society of ethical disorder, Đòai does not have enough rational will<sup>16</sup> and efficiency to restrain himself. He thus lets his biological instincts to get out of control, while letting the irrational will<sup>17</sup> do whatever it wants. The old father Kiên and his sons would undoubtedly be in “the cesspool” without Sinh, the woman who symbolizes negative chaos and the womb of a new life. While conquering, domesticating, and mastering nature, man is also deceived, resisted, and subdued by nature. It is both victory and defeat—the inevitable duality of the human condition.

### III. The Rape of Women and the Degeneration of Masculinity

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not write about men conquering women in the manner that is elegant, romantic, or seductive. Nor does he portray femininity as a political tool of masculinity to improve symbolic and practical power. He primarily describes it through violence: men forcibly harassing and possessing women, while also

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<sup>16</sup> Rational will (理性意志) is a term from ethical literary criticism (文学伦理学批评), a school of literary criticism initiated by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊, 1952-) in 2004. Rational will is the core and exterior of humanity (人性因子); this will belongs to an ethics that uses good and evil as the standards for promoting the rational effect of controlling irrational desire (非理性意志) to make men rational. In certain circumstances, rational will is activated by religious beliefs, moral principles, ethical norms, and rational judgments.

<sup>17</sup> Irrational will (非理性意志), another term from ethical literary criticism, refers to all the irrational impulses of emotion and action; it is thus opposed to rational will. It also belongs to ethics and always carries moral value judgments.

simultaneously presenting the opposite side of this masculine degeneration, their impotence. The relationships between male and female, strong and weak, glory and humiliation, emerge outstandingly in his writings.

The topic of men harassing, abusing, and raping women is ubiquitous in modern Vietnamese literature, which can be seen in many works by famous authors, such as *Giông tố* (*Storm*, 1936) and *Số đỏ* (*A Nice Fortune*, 1936) by Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912–1939),<sup>18</sup> *Tắt đèn* (*Turning off the Light*, 1937) by Ngô Tất Tố (1893–1954),<sup>19</sup> “Chí Phèo” (1941) by Nam Cao (1915–1951),<sup>20</sup> and *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*, 1990) by Bảo Ninh (1952–), among others. “Chí Phèo,” one of the classics of modern Vietnamese literature, portrays a beautiful scene: on an erotic moonlit night, on the bank of a calm, windy river, the drunken farmer Chí accidentally sees Thị Nở, a silly and ugly woman, sleeping in a very provocative pose. The natural setting, the man’s loss of rational control, and the girl’s nude body lead Chí Phèo to rape Thị Nở. Interestingly, the male character’s behavior almost received approval from many generations of Vietnamese readers until there was an objection: “Chí got drunk and then raped Thị Nở. In any society, the act is condemned” (Thành 7/12/2017, n.p.). Chí Phèo’s behavior is unacceptable because it makes the short story without educational significance and adversely affects students’ intellectual development. Before this objection was registered, the text was taught in Vietnamese high schools but did not include the passages about the rape. Local pedagogues also focused on analyzing the changes in the couple’s life after the event, not on the event itself. Phạm Xuân Nguyên, a local literary critic, admits that the scene between Chí Phèo and Thị Nở is rape, but suggests that the act awakened Chí Phèo’s human will and Thị Nở’s

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<sup>18</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng was an eminent Vietnamese writer and journalist in the early 20th century. He left a remarkable literary legacy in many short stories, novels, reports, essays, plays, translations, criticism, and journal articles.

<sup>19</sup> He was a writer, journalist, Confucianist, translator, and scholar with significant influence in Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century.

<sup>20</sup> His real name is Trần Hữu Tri, one of Vietnam’s most representative writers of the 20th century. Although he wrote poetry and newspaper articles, Nam Cao made many contributions to local short stories and novels in the first half of the 20th century.



female instincts (Nguyễn T. 7/12/2017, n.p.). In this debate, the critic considered Nam Cao's story as deplorable, while advocates praised the story's rape incident for awakening human dignity. The outstanding issue here is not how to interpret literature, but through this classic, readers have a clear distinction between Nam Cao and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. The distinction lies in the message behind the rape: for the former, Chí Phèo violated Thị Nở as an act of "rape to save humanity," while for the latter, raping a woman humiliates the man.

In Thiệp's compositions, the motif of men sexually assaulting women is common. For example, Đoàn harasses and gropes his sister-in-law ("Không có vua"); Bường rapes Quy ("Những người thợ xê"); Hạnh assaults the old woman Thiều ("Huyền thoại phố phường" or Legends of the Streets); the narrator ravishes a Mường girl<sup>21</sup> ("Thỏ cẩm" or Brocade); the narrator character touches a young woman named Hương ("Chút thoáng Xuân Hương" or A Little Glimpse of Xuân Hương); a young man sexually abuses the village girl Lược ("Những bài học nông thôn" or Lessons from the Countryside); and two male characters, Chiêu and Phong, cheat and rape many ladies ("Giọt máu" or A Drop of Blood). These examples show the various levels of inappropriate sexual behavior that male characters exhibit towards female ones in Thiệp's writings.

The motives for men's abuse are also very diverse, including teasing, voyeurism, sexual gratification, and material satisfaction. For instance, in "Huyền thoại phố phường," which intertextuality relates with Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades," a male character named Hạnh rapes an elderly woman named Thiều to exchange a lottery ticket with the potential to win the jackpot. Hạnh is a poor land boy who struggles to make a better living in the city. He craves the wealth of Mrs. Thiều's family, and he has discovered that they had the disease of boredom common urban rich people. He also detected signs of sexual desire in the old lady's eyes. As in "The Queen of Spades," Mrs. Thiều's house lacks the presence of a man. On that fateful night, her daughter was absent. When Hạnh

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<sup>21</sup> The Mường are an ethnic minority in Vietnam. They primarily live in the northern midland and mountainous areas of the country.

suddenly appears in her room, Thiều is wearing a thin and sexy shirt. The man flirts a bit, and the woman does not demur; on the contrary, she expresses her secret agreement. The rape thus took place unhampered because of the woman's complicity. Notably, both characters were quite confused: Thiều mistook Hạnh's actions for love or at least his lust for her body. When she realizes that Hạnh was only interested in the lottery ticket, she understands her tragic situation and feels embarrassed. Meanwhile, the man's desire to change his life via a lottery blinding him, and he defies morality to rape a woman. Ironically, the ticket he gave to the victim was the one that won the jackpot, and the one he stole from her did not win. This is the ultimate humiliation of the male character. He threw away all his ethical standards to violate a woman so he could become rich, but all Hạnh got in return was a bad ending: he went crazy. Hạnh's case is shameful, and the writer alludes to the death of morality, the alarming collapse of social values, and the breakdown of humanity before the power of money.

Sexual harassment and the rape of women make manifest men's bestiality based on humans' biological instincts. The instinct is natural, uncultured, uneducated, and unethical. In the works described above, it seems that males do not consider their actions a heinous crime; no matter what, they still covertly defend themselves and sympathize with each other for a straightforward reason: they have a phallus! The father Kiền ("Không có vua"), for instance, does not care about morality and peeks at his daughter-in-law bathing. His son Đoài catches him in this shameful behavior:

After emptying his cup, Old Kien said, "You're educated but still stupid. Now I'll talk to you man-to-man."

Doai said, "I won't forgive you."

Old Kien said, "I don't need your forgiveness. A man needn't be ashamed for having a prick."

Doai sat in silence, drank another cup of whiskey. After a while, he sighed. "True enough." (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 81).

As Kiền notes (and his son agrees), men have phalluses; they thus have a natural tendency to violate moral principles, and their

victims are women. This immoral and anti-female proposition is quite popular in the works of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. In “Những người thợ xé,” while not able to rape Quy, Bường told Ngọc that two men fighting over a woman are foolish: “Ngọc, don’t be so miserable. Do you know why the elders call that part of a woman a butterfly? Because it has wings that flutter. It’s Heaven’s blessing. Wherever it stops, that person can have it. Sometimes one even has to catch it” (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 349). Bường’s discourse is obviously demeaning. He considers a woman’s body a gift from heaven that men have the right to possess and chase. The male characters use this language to excuse their irrational thoughts and actions.

The short story “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” draws this out in detail: the narrator gropes a girl on the ferry and is severely rejected by her. The narrator stammers, apologizing, and then suddenly becomes angry: “If you don’t forgive me, then who cares? What are we in this world? I will die sooner or later! You also die! Your pigs are all dead, too!”<sup>22</sup> (Nguyễn T.H. 2021: 87). The speaker’s statement implies that because both will be dead anyway, the lady does not need to deny his rape. Meanwhile, the story “Thỏ cảm” describes a young man who rapes a Mường girl while on a national mission in the mountainous region. The poor girl later gives birth to a disabled son who dies a short time later. Thiệp’s readers can find an altruistic attitude toward men’s sins that are linked to their sexual gratification, especially when they admit their mistakes, take responsibility, and correct their faults. It is, however, quite unfair if the readers forget the victims, the pure and innocent ladies who have been raped.

Thiệp’s male characters in these sexual assault cases always find excuses for their sins. They try to seek a rationale based on a patriarchal, masculinity-centered ideology to protect themselves. However, in this gender conquest, all the men fail, being represented as impotent. These men “misread” women’s multidimensional body language. They impose their own views on feminine objects. Men’s prejudices create a mono-meaning signal that women approve of playing sex games with them. This game leads to orgasm, which for

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<sup>22</sup> Translated by Anh Dân Nguyễn.

men is associated with penetration. Women's emotional climax is polymorphic, and sometimes only requires flattery or cuddling.

In the events related to men groping, harassing, and raping ladies, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp seems to ignore the status of women as victims. He also rarely mentions woman's sexual infatuation after the tragedy. It cannot be denied that men sexually attacking women indicates the degeneration of masculinity, and this kind of depravity is especially harmful to women. This depravity regulates and maintains the permanent dependence and passivity of the female body before the man intends to possess it by force. Thiệp often writes about evil and is never cold-blooded about evil, but he emphasizes men forcibly possessing women based on a patriarchal logic. His male characters thus refuse to acknowledge a woman's rights to bodily integrity. By "having a prick" guys have their own set of ethical standards. The sexual motivation and possessive instincts (aggression) of male characters are implicitly viewed as natural. This leads readers to doubt the true connotation of femininity in Thiệp's writing (Phạm N.X. 2001: 16–20). For Thiệp, it seems that "femininity" is just a game for male characters to play, while it is also a disguised cover in the writer's narrative discourses.

#### **IV. Phallic Narcissism and Impotence**

The glorification of the phallus is an essential part of the myth about men as creators and enslaved people. Because of the penis, men have the right to be arrogant. Because they lack a penis, women carry a "castration complex" and are often considered of low status, and thus must accept being enslaved. The erect state of the phallus provides men with pride and power. Women's different genitals represent inferiority. In Thiệp's writings, heroines tend to "shrive!" in front of men's eyes. This is the case even with the most unmoved characters, as when the male teacher Triệu looks at Hiền in the story "Những bài học nông thôn." Meanwhile, in "Sang sông," the girl's joyful submission to the rough touches from her boyfriend's hands is a persuasive testimony to men's power over a woman's body. In other words, the female body itself is a sign of

submission and an arena for male domination. Nonetheless, as a cultural observer, Thiệp chooses this method to stand out for excessive masculinity. He extensively depicts phallic narcissism and the male characters' impotence to deconstruct the mythical power of those overconfident in their masculinity.

Phallic narcissism in women and the habit of penile display in men have been mentioned by psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, as well as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the zoologist Desmond Morris. Phallic narcissism encourages the display of the penis and refers to the imposition and submission of power and social status established by men. Penile display and phallic infatuation are sometimes overtly manifest in primitive cultures; in modern societies, however, most phenomena are symbolic, hidden in metaphors, subtle expressions, or physical representations, so it is not easy to recognize them (Morris 2011: 169–201). Thiệp's language contains a tendency to expose male genitalia regularly, as can be seen in an example from the short story "Những bài học nông thôn":

Lam's grandmother chimed in, "A long, long time ago, there was a Mr. Hai Chép, a ferryman who loved playing *tam cúc*<sup>23</sup> for money. At first he lost his money, then he lost his field, then he lost his house, and finally his wife left him. So when night came, he went out to his boat, sat, and cried. Angry at life, but wanting to redeem himself, Mr. Hai Chép took out his knife, cut off his two testicles and threw them into the river. But his wife didn't go back to him." Lam's mother replied, "That's an unfaithful woman." Lam's grandmother said, "Unfaithful? He only had those two testicles and now he'd lost those, too." (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 21).

In the Vietnamese language, "của quý" is a word that is only used for the male genitals, not for female genitalia. The phallic narcissism stated by a "philosopher" like Mrs. Lâm shows that the penis is a symbol affirming the value and domination of men in

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<sup>23</sup> "Tam cúc" (三菊) is a popular folk card game in Northern Vietnam; tam cúc involves 32 cards, divided into two sides: red and black, 16 cards each. Card names in tam cúc are similar to Chinese chess (象棋). The rules of the game are simple, thus it attracts a large number of players, especially women.

rural society. One of the “rural lessons” that Hiếu learned was that the size of a man’s genitals determines a man’s position in the family. That is why the severest punishment to humiliate a man is castration. Historically, the author of the Chinese masterpiece *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史記》), Si Maqian (司馬遷), was a famous victim of this humiliation. In Thiệp’s short stories, the reader encounters this terrible punishment in “Phẩm tiết” (Chastity). When the character King Gia Long discovers that his servant Vũ Văn Hoàn wanted to take over his beauty Vinh Hoa, the king punishes Hoàn by castrating him.

Phallic narcissism is closely connected to penile display, which men use in various contexts to flaunt power, strength, and status. In Thiệp’s stories, penile infatuation appears in metaphorical forms. Male characters tend to love showing off phallic symbols and sexual behavior in “Muối của rừng,” “Chuyện tình kể trong đêm mưa” (Love Story Told on a Rainy Night), and “Những ngọn gió Hua Tát.” This metaphorical ostentation is apparent in the pounding of rice in “Những bài học nông thôn,” ploughing in “Con gái thủy thần,” and the wedding in “Không có vua.” Moreover, their penile flaunting reflects its complicity with profanity, swearing, and bawdiness in “Những người muôn năm cũ.” In Vietnamese folk culture, young men often secretly brag to each about “squeezing breasts” and “touching the butts” of women. They see such actions as an achievement to improve their position and strength in the group. Thiệp delightfully describes this behavior in the stories “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” and “Đời thế mà vui” (Life’s So Fun). The youth of the village of Duệ Đông in “Những bài học nông thôn,” for example, are complicit in committing sexual harassment against the landgirls. They all share the same attitude. Ironically, for their collective consciousness, the display of erect penises, reckless aggression, and sexual attacks on women are seen as a natural right equal to political power. In another scene, Ms. Hiên’s laughter (“Những bài học nông thôn”), as well as the tolerant manner of the ferry lady Hương’s (“Chút thoáng Xuân Hương”) lead to the interpretation that women must submit to the men’s sexual whims.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp deconstructs male rights, however, by placing male characters in the transitional situation from a

subsidized economy (kinh tế bao cấp) to a market economy. The era 10 years after the Vietnam War (1975) and before Vietnam officially implemented the *Đổi mới* policy in 1986 is called the subsidized period (thời bao cấp), and the country's economy at this stage was a subsidized economy. The state undertook economic activities during the period, and private economy was abolished. The central government focused on developing collective and state business. Subsidized economy contains five essential characteristics: (i) goods on the market are distributed according to vouchers (tem phiếu) issued by the state; (ii) exchange, trade, and transportation of goods are limited; (iii) cash transactions are limited; (iv) food is distributed per person in each family; and (v) the state regulates the amount of rice and items each family is allowed to buy. The period was light, spare, and saw deceptively simple accounts of the "extraordinary everyday" (Collins 2016: 83). It witnessed the worship of money. The traditional cultural order was broken, there were many ethical dilemmas,<sup>24</sup> and the status of men in the family and in society was challenged.

In this context, culturally expected masculinity was endless, multi-directional, and uncertain. Efforts to fill it up thus created a helpless feeling in characters with nothing but knowledge. In some places, knowledge can be power, but in the circumstances of *Đoài* ("Không có vua") and *Doanh* ("Những người muôn năm cũ"), however, it is only frivolous. Thiệp was obsessed with connecting reality with the business of raising dogs, birds, and trading gold. At that time, if men's honor, which is symbolic property, is drastically depreciated, money, which is genderless and does not need honor, becomes "king." A man can become a raffish person (*Hạnh*, "Huyền thoại phố phường"), a thief (*Khiêm*, "Không có vua"), or a prostitute (*Chuong*, "Con gái thủy thần") as long as he gets money. In Thiệp's stories, men's feeling of impotence originates primarily from their unsuccessful experiences in sex and career, not from failed

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<sup>24</sup> Ethical dilemma (伦理两难) is a term from ethical literary criticism; an ethical dilemma is made up of two moral propositions: if the chooser makes a separate moral judgment regarding each proposition, then each choice is correct and consistent with broad moral principles. However, once the chooser chooses between two propositions, it leads to a choice against morality and contrary to common moral principles.

experiences in the market. The cultural situation led men to face and fall into a sense of impotence, and they feel superfluous or useless in relation to everything that seems abstract, ideal, or purely spiritual such as interest in philosophy literature, and art (“Không có vua” and “Huyền thoại phố phường”). People turn away from the abstract world of morality to enter the real world, where gold is the symbol of success. This world is ideally suited for women who “need understanding and caresses, and they need help with money” (“Những bài học nông thôn”) (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 28).

The writer reveals a stupefied sorrow in his description of masculine impotence in the face of feminine expectations. The writer agonizes over the humiliation and vileness of Chuong, a rural young man who leaves the village to find the Water-Nymph’s daughter in the work of the same name. Exhausted and dazzled by the landlord Phuong, Chuong is powerless. He is no longer a man in front of Mây, a pretty girl who willingly offers her virginity to him. The village man is impotent and cannot participate in love and sexual games.

May pulled away from me in dismay. “Chuong! You’re impotent?” I buried my face and cried noiselessly in shame. She stood up and said, “I understand. Such is my fate. Don’t be sad. Don’t cry anymore. Those people in the house up there, they always have it all. Chuong, I’m asking you to take it easy on yourself, if only to relieve me of my misery.”

She slipped away and ran out to the courtyard. I felt the roof above me collapse onto my head, the very heavens collapse upon my head. All was destroyed, left in ruins. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 325).

Chuong spent his entire youth searching for the girl of his fanciful dreams, the daughter of the Water Nymph. Mây is most likely the girl he has long been looking for. She is just a maid and is tempted by the vast amount her master would pay her. She therefore agrees to sleep with him. Mây takes pride in her virginity and wants to give it to Chuong before she selling it to her boss. The maid takes the initiative by appearing naked before the guest, and when he sees her naked back, Chuong immediately thinks of the legendary lady he has been looking for. His heart burn with pain



and sorrow. Chương's impotence is subject to further humiliation by Mây's comforting words, thus becoming even more tragic as he shows his helplessness in front of the girl he desires.

Thiệp delves into the profound pain of his male character because sexual impotence is a man's own bodily experience, just as menstruation, loss of virginity, and childbirth are women's experiences. For Gia Long, the protagonist in the story "Vàng lửa" ("Fired Gold"), his sexual incapability as an emperor living in a palace full of beautiful young ladies is closely intertwined with his political helplessness in the face of the poor and depressed state of the Vietnamese people.

The King is one colossal solitary mass. He performs his role in the imperial court with great skill. He moves, stands, exists, enters, issues orders, and receives homage from his clique of court officials. He is a stern father toward his selfish and dimwitted children. As a husband, he commands respect from his mediocre wives. He knows he is old, and with the young, beautiful concubines in his royal harem he is impotent. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 205).

The King's impotence is shared between himself and his women, and readers can predict that Gia Long's illness will be a secret as no wife would be allowed to reveal it on pain of being beheaded. The King himself is, however, the one who feels the humiliation of his phallus the most.

The feeling of incapability arises from the experience of sexual failure, but more broadly and beyond sexuality, it indicates powerlessness in the face of life and great cultural expectations. The sense of humiliation, failure, and impotence, therefore, are profoundly expressed in stories "Không có vua," "Tuống về hưu," "Chút thoáng Xuân Hương," "Mưa Nhã Nam" (The Rain Nha Nam), "Phẩm tiết," and "Những người thợ xè." Readers can recognize that Thiệp's heroes such as Tổng Cốc, Nguyễn Trãi,<sup>25</sup> Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Du,<sup>26</sup> Đề Thám, and General Thuận are powerless losers.

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<sup>25</sup> Nguyễn Trãi (阮鵬) (1380–1442) was a great politician, writer, and cultural figure in Vietnam, whom UNESCO recognized as a world cultural celebrity.

<sup>26</sup> Nguyễn Du (阮攸) (1766–1820) was a great poet and cultural figure in Vietnamese

Nguyễn Huệ, for example, is diffident and ineffectual before an arranged fate (“Phẩm tiết”). Đê Thám’s helplessness is not in the face the enemy but rather in being confronted by all the social habits that overwhelm his life (“Mưa Nhã Nam”). General Thuần is old and powerless in the face of the chaos, anarchy, and vulgarity surrounding him and his relatives (“Trống về hưu”).

In most of Thiệp’s writings where the word “bất lực” (impotence) appears, it is usually accompanied by the loneliness, sadness, pain, indignity, grief, and diffidence of male characters. This impotence is extremely complex. It can include the narrator’s helplessness in the barbarous life of the minorities (“Tội ác và trừng phạt” or Crime and Punishment), the powerlessness before the vast and boundless mysterious power of nature (“Mưa Nhã Nam” and “Những người thợ xẻ”), and men’s incompetence before women’s nobility (“Chút thoáng Xuân Hương” and “Muối của rừng”). In Vietnamese literature, no one focuses on the impotence of words and forms of expressions with such bitterness, sorrow, and torment as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does in the story “Thương nhớ đồng quê” (Remembrance of the Countryside):

I’m thinking  
I’m thinking about the simplicity of words  
Forms of expression are too powerless  
While exhaustion fills the earth  
Shameless injustice fills the earth  
Desolate fates fill the earth  
How many months and years pass by  
How many lives pass by  
No words has the skill to describe it. (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 268)

This sense of “bất lực” appears often in the work of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. It is a repetitive chorus. In “Giọt máu,” the character Phong says: “Good poetry is melancholy but impotent” (Nguyen and Sachs 2013: 182). In “Bài học tiếng Việt” (“Vietnamese Lessons”), Vũ

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feudal history. He was dubbed the “Great National Poet” by the Vietnamese people and has been honored by UNESCO as a world cultural celebrity. His poetic story, *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kieu*), is considered a masterpiece of medieval Vietnamese literature.

is impotent because he cannot always answer the question of what a person's soul is. Thiệp hopes to convey that writers are powerless because they are not always solid and honest in exploring life, themselves, and society.

Paying attention to the presentation of male characters' impotence is how the writer examines male identity in the contemporary context. In this environment, the prospect of material and physical success has pushed men back, giving away women's resourcefulness in a developing market economy. This is presented in a cold, sharp-witted style in "Tuống về hưu," which sounds "the alarm and confusion of a war hero faced with the chaotic reality of postwar society" (Nguyễn 2008: 199). Thuấn won in the war and the symbolic market, but in the new daily life and real market, he and the other men failed. General Thuấn was able to manage his family in a military barracks but could not keep them safe in contemporary social life, because he belonged to a class of people who did not know, like, or want to earn money.

Thiệp's male characters are powerless to realize their golden dreams and exalted ambition, and this is related to issues of male honor. Many men run away from home, looking for a way out in the outside world, but they are miserably unsuccessful and must return from whence they departed. Living in families with the wife's tenderness and the children's docility makes men like Phụng ("Thương nhớ đồng quê") and Hội ("Chăn trâu cắt cỏ" or Herding Buffalo and Cutting Grass) feel that their value is in decline, which leads to depression. The dream of consuming "Galant Tobacco,"<sup>27</sup> the dream of changing one's life with a lottery ticket, and the dream of marrying a rich wife become the ironic moral choices of men like General Thuấn ("Tuống về hưu"), Hạnh ("Huyền thoại phố phường"), and Đoài ("Không có vua"). In the new economic reality established after 1986, many local men, especially intellectuals, were twice as impotent. After the excessively favorable period of the Vietnam War, they passively dropped into the dark and chaotic womb of a new life. Stuck in the disordered negative world, bewildered by practical

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<sup>27</sup> "Thuốc lá Ga-lăng" is an expensive brand of imported cigarettes; it symbolizes luxury and shows the class ranking of the rich people in urban Vietnam in the 1980s.

physical and financial demands, they submit to helplessness. Women's work, which men consider vile, shows unexpected economic effects. The principle of "eating first," which female characters like Thùy worship, challenges and overturns men's abstract illusions ("Trống về hưu"), as men possess "exalted ambitions" and try to seek honor in prestigious but useless jobs. Men, immersed in illusions, are lost in the real market that has never been a "battlefield," as in the works of some later Vietnamese writers. This is one of the causes of men's sense of social incompetence.

Relativizing the boundaries and status of masculinity and femininity by designating their weakness, helplessness, and humble status, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp softens the lines between male powerfulness/nobility and female feebleness/abjection. Barker (2005: 279–314) notes that sad, weak, lonely, helpless men turn out to be the kind characters who win the author's sympathy and the readers' love: "any person with a soul is fragile and conservative... he always doubts and are skeptical in their hearts"<sup>28</sup> ("Bài học tiếng Việt") (Nguyễn T.H. 2021: 419). As Bourdieu (2018: 50) argues, the socially recognized dignity of man is a leverage by which a woman can enhance her position. In the short story "Sang sông," the girl's proud attitude and long-term commitment to the boy's rough sexual touches is typical. This is probably Thiệp's romantic social solution. The masculinity in these writings, in other words, is the manifestation of masculinity linked to femininity in contemporary Vietnamese life, which has indeed become more complicated—but also more exciting—than traditional views.

## V. Conclusion

In medieval Vietnamese literature, male and female characters are often presented according to gendered expectations: men are strong and dominant, while women are weak and subjected. In modern writings, women are pictured as victims of feudal patriarchy. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, however, realized the heavy burdens on the shoulders of both men and women. These tensions make them feel helpless,

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<sup>28</sup> Translated by Anh Dân Nguyễn.

miserable, and unhappy. Consequently, he does not provide a dualistic, opposing view of men's and women's rights. He goes beyond the gender binary to concentrate on human identity and the right to a decent life among people in post-war Vietnam. One can see, however, that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's heroes are regressing toward the negative, which is a passive, disappointed, and confused turn. In terms of today's audience, "the retired general" is an essential condition of *Đổi mới*, because the light and order commanded and controlled by General Thuận has dimmed and collapsed. Meanwhile, "without a king" is life's womb—a dark, slimy, and chaotic place, but still the source of new life. The world of "the accustomed people," or the old-fashioned generation, such as Thuận ("Tuống về hưu"), must descend to create conditions for another world. It is the world of a new generation like that of the daughter of Sinh ("Không có vua").

The writer's sophisticated and puzzling discursive strategies wrap an irreversible situation in a severe effect. He destabilizes the stereotypes of gender and power, and by relativizing male-female antagonism, the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity discourse, and blurring and reducing gender contradictions, Thiệp reveals his talent as a writer. In his stories, he illustrates complex aspects of masculinity in a unique way. Perhaps this is why local critics consider him to be standing out in contemporary Vietnamese literature (Vuong, Nguyễn, and Zinoma 2021: 119). Nguyễn Huy Thiệp delicately captures the deep and rich depths of the relationships between men and women. The masculinity of the characters in his works is multidimensional, and this appears in different ways in many of his short stories, where Thiệp's male protagonists demonstrate their sexual strength, seek glory, and maintain their dominant position in society by engaging in the game of hunt and conquering women. Due to complex changes in the social and moral context, however, gender expectations became multi-directional and polymorphic, and male figures in the new environment quickly entered the realm of prostitution, humiliation, helplessness, and failure. Ultimately, Thiệp eliminates gender misunderstandings and presents widespread and subtle manifestations of patriarchal consciousness in Vietnamese language and culture after 1975.

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## Indonesia in the BIMP-EAGA: Assessing Connectivity Development in Reducing Inequality

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### [ *Abstract* ]

With the enactment of international free trade and economic agreements and cooperation, BIMP-EAGA is an opportunity to accelerate development and economic growth in eastern Indonesia. This subregional cooperation could be used to reduce the development gap or inequality between the western and eastern regions, which are geographically, demographically, and economically different. This cooperation also may accelerate development in the border area. This study analyzes Indonesia's policies related to connectivity in BIMP-EAGA subregional cooperation and its implementation. The study results show that the National Secretariat of Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation has encouraged cooperation clusters ranging from natural resources, transportation, infrastructure, ICT, and tourism to MSMEs. In terms of connectivity, Indonesia is also involved in the development program of three economic corridors, namely West Borneo, East Borneo, and Sulu-Sulawesi. Indonesia's involvement in the three corridors has boosted the connectivity of Indonesia's territory, especially border areas,

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with neighboring countries. Connectivity has covered not only physical but also institutional and people-to-people dimensions. However, there are still several challenges, ranging from the standardization of the Customs, Immigration, and Quarantine (CIQ) mechanisms, improvement of institutional quality, and consistent strong political will among the involved parties. In addition, considering the vulnerability of the BIMP subregion to transnational crimes and acts of radical terrorism, BIMP-EAGA needs to think about solutions to overcome these cross-border security problems so that the momentum of development in the subregion may be sustained.

**Keywords:** BIMP-EAGA, Connectivity, Indonesia, Inequality, Subregional Cooperation

## I . Introduction

Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) is a subregional cooperation established on March 24, 1994. Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos initiated the idea in 1992, which was welcomed by Indonesia and Brunei in 1993, and Malaysia in 1994 (Mindanao Development Authority 2014). This subregional cooperation was formed initially to provide an opportunity for the less-developed southern Philippines region to advance its economy (Dent and Richter 2011: 36). Along the way, this subregional cooperation was also seen as a mechanism to enhance the economic and social development of remote and less-developed areas in Southeast Asia (BIMP-EAGA 2012:1). Cross-border cooperation among member countries was expected to reduce the gap, both between the border area and other regions in the country, as well as the gap between BIMP-EAGA and other ASEAN sub-regions.

As of 2021, BIMP-EAGA covers the entire territory of Brunei Darussalam, the Indonesian provinces in Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua Islands, the states of Sabah and Sarawak and the federal territory of Labuan in Malaysia, as well as 26 provinces on the island of Mindanao and Palawan in the Philippines.

<Table 1> Working Areas of BIMP-EAGA

<b>Brunei Darussalam</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Philippines</b>
Brunei Darussalam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ West Kalimantan</li> <li>○ Central Kalimantan</li> <li>○ South Kalimantan</li> <li>○ East Kalimantan</li> <li>○ North Kalimantan</li> <li>○ North Sulawesi</li> <li>○ Gorontalo</li> <li>○ Central Sulawesi</li> <li>○ West Sulawesi</li> <li>○ South Sulawesi</li> <li>○ Southeast Sulawesi</li> <li>○ Maluku</li> <li>○ North Maluku</li> <li>○ Papua</li> <li>○ West Papua</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sarawak</li> <li>○ Sabah</li> <li>○ Labuan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Region IX</li> <li>○ Region X</li> <li>○ Region XI</li> <li>○ Region XII</li> <li>○ CARAGA</li> <li>○ BARMM</li> <li>○ Palawan (Province)</li> </ul>

Source: BIMP-EAGA 2015; Mindanao Development Authority 2021.

Historically, the existence of BIMP-EAGA has also experienced ups and downs. In the first three years (1994-1996), BIMP-EAGA was geographically an underdeveloped and remote region in Southeast Asia, so it needed extra regulation to be able to capture the development gap between its sub-national regions. BIMP-EAGA succeeded in compiling several cooperation agreements among its members to make national policies and cross-border agreements. For example, BIMP-EAGA reached an agreement to facilitate the liberalization of the transportation sector, which would allow for greater mobilization of people, goods, and services in the region, as well as the telecommunications and tourism sectors (Raharjo 2019: 6).

During the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the development of BIMP-EAGA began to stall. During that period, the member countries were more focused on domestic issues and the recovery of economic conditions in their countries. In addition, the occurrence of El Niño and La Niña in 1998 also harmed the economic development of BIMP-EAGA in several working areas. In general, a way out of the economic crisis at that time was sought by building cooperation, so that sub-regional cooperation, including BIMP-EAGA,

became one to rely on. BIMP-EAGA's performance improved by the end of 2000 when its member countries recovered from the economic crisis. At the 7th ASEAN Summit in 2001, the heads of state of BIMP-EAGA members committed to supporting the revitalization of this subregional cooperation.

The revival of BIMP-EAGA as a subregional cooperation is an interesting phenomenon to investigate. From a regional perspective, BIMP-EAGA can be a platform to support the development of ASEAN Connectivity, which is an essential requirement for achieving the ASEAN Community. BIMP-EAGA can play crucial roles in the eastern part of ASEAN, where its connectivity development is relatively slower than in the western part of ASEAN (Foreign Policy Strategy Agency 2011: 24). Geographically, the eastern part of ASEAN is an insular area dominated by islands and waters, in contrast to the western part of ASEAN which is a continuation of mainland Asia. In general, the disadvantage is that building connectivity between islands requires large amounts of funding, but the advantage is that the region is rich in resources that have not been developed properly.

From an Indonesian perspective, the post-reform government still faces the problem of development gaps, both between the eastern and western parts as well as between the border areas and the capital area. Since 2014, the Government of Indonesia has prioritized the policy of "Building Indonesia from the Periphery" to address this problem under Presidential Regulation No. 2/2015. Indonesia can use BIMP-EAGA to accelerate development in the eastern and border areas to reduce existing inequalities, especially by building cross-border connectivity.

This study analyzes Indonesia's policies related to connectivity in the BIMP-EAGA subregional cooperation, consisting of three aspects: implementation, challenges, and impact. Normatively, the Indonesian government inserts provinces in Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua into the cooperation. However, in reality, not all of these provinces are active in BIMP-EAGA meetings. Geographical proximity and cultural similarities with other BIMP-EAGA member countries have made the Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan and

northern Sulawesi more active than Maluku and Papua. Therefore, this study focuses on these active provinces.

## **II. Conceptual framework: Connectivity and subregionalism**

This study focuses on two main concepts to answer research questions: connectivity and subregionalism. According to UNESCAP (2014), connectivity is regarded as the level and effectiveness of networks to facilitate flows of goods, services, people, and knowledge. Meanwhile, Betts (2006) categorizes connectivity into two types: embeddedness, a structural relationship that already exists; and linkages, which is a relationship created through a bargaining process.

In The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (ASEAN 2010), connectivity refers to the various action plans of its member countries through three strategies. First, the development of physical connectivity through improving existing infrastructure, building new logistics infrastructure and facilities, harmonizing the existing regulatory framework, and fostering a culture of innovation. Second, the development of institutional connectivity, namely effective institutions, mechanisms, and processes carried out through the resolution of various obstacles in the movement of goods and people. This strategy also includes facilitation of trade and investment, harmonization of standard or uniform procedures, and operationalization of various agreements to reduce the cost of moving goods across borders. Third, the development of people-to-people connectivity, namely community empowerment to promote deeper intra-ASEAN social and cultural interactions through community development efforts, as well as promoting greater intra-ASEAN mobility through progressive relaxation of visa requirements and the development of Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs).

Based on the various opinions about connectivity above, this paper will use the concept of connectivity according to the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, which categorizes connectivity into three strategies/dimensions: physical, institutional, and people-to-people (ASEAN 2010: 2). The author considers this concept to explain

BIMP-EAGA as a subregional cooperation that can become a building block for implementing the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity programs (ASEAN 2017: 8-10).

The second main concept is Subregionalism. A subregion refers to international cross-border spaces or units in the interior of a certain region, which include multiple states, states and parts of states, or more than two parts of states (Taga and Igarashi 2019: 2). Taga and Igarashi (2019) also argue that subregion or sub-regionalism is not only defined by state actors and international institutions but also by companies and other non-state actors. Meanwhile, the term subregionalism has not only a geographical meaning but also a political context (Gochhayat 2014:12). In this context, the definition of subregionalism can be adapted from Gochhayat (2014: 10), who defines it as a transnational cooperation between countries that are connected geographically, historically, and economically to achieve common goals or to solve common problems.

Subregional cooperation often takes advantage of cross-border cooperation as a concrete form of its work program (Irewati 2020, Raharjo 2019, Takahashi 2019). Perkmann (2003) states that cross-border cooperation is an institutionalized collaboration between subnational authorities that cross national borders. Meanwhile, Usui (2019) defines cross-border cooperation as cooperation between regional and municipal governments and social organizations on a wide range of cross-border socio-economic projects at the local level. There are various forms of cross-border cooperation, such as the construction of demilitarized zones and peace parks (Lee and Forss 2005), border crossing and trade agreements (Raharjo 2018), and cross-border resource management (Guo 2005).

Cottey (2009) indicates that subregional cooperation can play such roles as building bridges of relations, encouraging its member countries' integration into larger regional cooperation, creating a framework to overcome transnational policy challenges, and facilitating political, economic, and institutional reforms within member countries. In the context of cross-border cooperation as a concrete form of subregional cooperation program, it can remove physical and psychological barriers, thereby strengthening the

socio-economic welfare of local communities towards regional integration (Lee and Forss 2011). The effectiveness of this role is determined by several factors, including the existence of a political will and the quality of the institution (Thao 1999), the strategic level of the area of cooperation (Starr and Thomas 2005), the existence of complementary commodities for cross-border trade (Raharjo 2019), differences in the political system, social instability, and gap in economic development (Guo 2005).

Based on the literature review above, this paper highlights BIMP-EAGA as an international collaboration carried out by Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to achieve their common interests or goals, namely the development of cross-border connectivity consisting of physical, institutional, and people-to-people dimensions.

### **III. Indonesia's policy to build connectivity in BIMP-EAGA**

Indonesia places BIMP-EAGA as one of the essential sub-regional economic cooperation. Based on Presidential Decree No. 184/1998 regarding the Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation Coordination Team, which was updated through Presidential Decree No. 13/2001, five sub-regions are of concern to Indonesia, namely Singapore-Indonesia Tourism Cooperation, Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), BIMP-EAGA, Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), and Australia-Indonesia Development Area (AIDA). Along the way, BIMP-EAGA and IMT-GT have survived, while the others were terminated or inactive. In November 2001, during the 7th ASEAN Leaders Summit forum, Indonesia gave full support for the change of the BIMP-EAGA commitment to focus on efforts to revitalize development activities in border areas. It shows that the Indonesian government was aware of the importance of development that is not only confined to the capital but is spread out to other regions. The ASEAN Summit Chair asserts back then:

We reaffirmed the importance of our sub-regional growth areas in ASEAN development and integration. We also discussed ways to revitalize these growth areas, including those centered on Brunei,

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. (Press Statement by the Chairman of the 7th ASEAN Summit 2001).

Indonesia places the eastern region of Indonesia as the BIMP-EAGA working area to enhance its social and economic development, especially trade, investment, and tourism on the islands of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua. Indonesia conceptually prioritizes the private sector as a growth driver, while the government is the facilitating party.

To carry out this role, the Indonesian government participates in various hierarchical meetings as a medium of communication between member countries. The meetings are conducted gradually from the working group level to the senior officials, ministries, and state leaders (Summit). This hierarchical meeting scheme became the forum for BIMP-EAGA stakeholders to achieve BIMP-EAGA's vision of Resilient, Inclusive, Sustainable and Economically competitive (RISE) (BIMP-EAGA 2017: xi). Then, Indonesia also formed a National Secretariat that carried out internal coordination among line ministries/institutions and external coordination with other countries' national secretariats, BIMP-Facilitation Center, and external partners such as the Asian Development Bank. Meanwhile, the private actors have the BIMP-EAGA Business Council as their meeting forum. In addition, a private sector representative was also invited to Senior Officials Meetings (SOM) and MM meetings.

At the 14th BIMP-EAGA Ministerial Meeting in Brunei Darussalam on August 08, 2009, Indonesia, represented by the coordinating minister for Economic Affairs, encouraged BIMP-EAGA to restructure and improve its working mechanism to facilitate economic and trade cooperation (Tarakan Chamber of Commerce 2009). This improvement aimed to increase the competitive advantage of BIMP-EAGA countries in the world market, namely through consolidation, complementation, and grouping.

In February 2010, Indonesia began to restructure its mechanism for BIMP-EAGA cooperation after issuing a letter from the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs regarding the implementation of the National Secretariat for BIMP-EAGA and



IMT-GT subregional economic cooperation. Indonesia encouraged the placement of one Investment Coordinating Board staff member at the BIMP Facilitation Center (BIMP-FC) in Kota Kinabalu, which has been under discussion since 2005. This way, Indonesia can consolidate its interests within the framework of sub-regional cooperation.

In the BIMP-EAGA implementation plan, Indonesia and other member countries prioritize the welfare approach over the security approach. Indonesia encouraged the implementation of the agreements reached at technical meetings under the SOM consisting of clusters and task forces, namely: Natural Resources Development, Transport, Infrastructure and Information, Communication, and Technology Development, Joint Tourism Development, Small and Medium Enterprises Development, and Task Force on Customs, Immigration, Quarantine, and Security. BIMP-EAGA rotated the chairmanship of these clusters among member countries (MOFA Republic of Indonesia 2019).

Several economic sectors became BIMP-EAGA's priorities. For the transportation or connectivity sector, BIMP-EAGA agreed on the MoU on Establishing and Promoting Efficient and Integrated Sea Linkages in 2007. The Roll On/Roll Off (RORO) Passenger Ferry program has been operating between Muara, Brunei Darussalam, and Menumbok, Malaysia, since December 2009. BIMP-EAGA has also signed an MoU on the border Movement of Commercial Busses and Coaches, which at the beginning of its implementation in 2009, succeeded in facilitating the traffic of around 40,000 people per year using bus services across the Pontianak-Bandar Seri Begawan area. For the energy sector, BIMP-EAGA leaders established the BIMP-EAGA Infrastructure Project Pipeline in their meeting in Hua Hin on October 28, 2011. For the food security sector, BIMP-EAGA has agreed on a Food Basket Strategic Plan of Action to realize its vision as one of the food storage centers for ASEAN and other regions in Asia.

Regarding connectivity, BIMP-EAGA has also established two economic corridors: West Borneo and Greater Sulu-Sulawesi. Moreover, the member countries also discussed the development of

the third economic corridor in the East Borneo area. The West Borneo economic corridor has a length of about 1,500 kilometers, crossing the territory of three member countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. For the Indonesian part, this corridor is located in West Kalimantan Province, spanning about 235 kilometers from Pontianak City to Entikong District. This corridor connects Pontianak with the commercial center of Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia, Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei Darussalam, as well as Labuan and Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia (Lord and Tangtrongjita 2016).

The East Borneo economic corridor is expected to connect Sabah in Malaysia with Indonesia's North, East, South, and Central Kalimantan provinces. Some main cities are Tawau in Malaysia, and Tarakan, Samarinda, Balikpapan, Banjarmasin, and Palangkaraya in Indonesia.

The Sulu-Sulawesi is the widest economic corridor in BIMP-EAGA, which covers Sabah in Malaysia, Palawan and Mindanao in the Philippines, and North Sulawesi in Indonesia. This corridor has been a trade route for a long time, even before Indonesia and the Philippines became independent states. Portuguese and Spanish sailors used the route in search of spices (Ulaen 2003).

For Indonesia, connectivity is one of the most important sectors to be developed in BIMP-EAGA. Connectivity, especially at sea, will create new shipping and trade routes, develop regional economic potential, and increase tourism and regional investment. In addition, connectivity development also supports the Indonesian government's national priority program of designating Bitung Port in North Sulawesi as an international hub for the eastern region. This policy aligns with Indonesia's vision to become a global maritime fulcrum.

The various programs outlined in the BIMP-EAGA policy in Indonesia above are expected to positively and significantly impact the economic development of the provinces involved. Therefore, observation in the West Borneo, East Borneo, and Greater Sulu-Sulawesi economic corridors is crucial to evaluating the

policies' effectiveness.

### 3.1. Physical connectivity

In the West Borneo economic corridor, observations made in May 2017 and September 2021 showed that the road from Pontianak to Entikong was in good condition. The road consists of two lanes in opposite directions. When approaching the Entikong Cross-Border Post, the road gets more exhaustive to four lanes. In addition to the main corridor route, the government has also widened access roads to the Aruk Border Post in Sambas Regency and the Nanga Badau Cross-Border Post in Kapuas Hulu Regency. It then facilitates transportation routes between West Kalimantan Province and its neighboring countries. State-owned and private companies operate cross-border bus routes connecting Pontianak with Kuching and Bandar Seri Begawan. It aligns with the Indonesian government's commitment, especially under Joko Widodo, to realizing the mission of building Indonesia from the periphery. The government of Joko Widodo has accelerated the construction of cross-border posts in the West Kalimantan region through Presidential Instruction No. 6 of 2015 for the 2015-2019 development period. In addition to land transportation, West Kalimantan's physical connectivity with neighboring countries is also served by air transportation. In 2017, at least two Indonesian and Malaysian-based aircraft operators were serving the Pontianak-Kuching route. For sea transportation, Pontianak has been designated as a Gateway Node for goods from the BIMP-EAGA subregion to regional and international markets, together with Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan in Malaysia (Lord and Tangtrongjita 2016: 7).

For the East Borneo economic corridor, land transportation routes at several Cross-Border Posts in North Kalimantan still need to be developed. According to the Border Section in North Kalimantan Province, access to the entrance and exit to Malaysia must be taken by road, followed by a river route for about 4 hours. For air transportation, there are direct flights from Tawau to Tarakan. From Tarakan, there are connecting flights to Balikpapan, Jakarta, and Surabaya. As for sea transportation, there is a fast ferry for the Nunukan-Tawau route. However, there are no passenger

ships on the Sebatik-Tawau route, even though Sebatik is the frontier island of Indonesia heading to Tawau, Malaysia. Sei Pancang Cross-Border Post on Sebatik Island has been closed for regular passengers. Malaysian authorities found out that ships did not meet international standards. In addition, the Malaysian government is also concerned with the large number of smugglers who use this route to send Malaysia's subsidized goods into Indonesian territory. As a result, residents of Sebatik Island who wish to travel to Tawau officially have to cross to Tunontaka Harbor in Nunukan.

There is also the Manado-Bitung toll road which cuts travel time from around 4 hours to 1 hour. This route is very strategic for the distribution of goods from areas in northern Sulawesi to the Bitung International Port and vice versa. For air transportation, there have been direct flights from Manado, Indonesia, to Davao, Philippines, since September 2019. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has stopped the operation of this route for an unknown time.

Meanwhile, there are no direct commercial flight routes from Manado to Palawan in the Philippines or Sabah in Malaysia. This is more due to the less profitable commercial side, rather than other social considerations. However, air transportation is more crowded from Manado to several cities in China. For sea transportation, there are no cross-border commercial services for passengers between North Sulawesi and Mindanao. Pioneer ships serving the northern part of the province only reached border islands such as Miangas and Marore. Border residents who will cross to Balut Island or Sarangani and General Santos City in Southern Philippines take small private fishing boats [local people call them pump boats under 1 Gross Ton for about two hours]. For the transportation of goods, Indonesia and the Philippines launched RORO ships for the Davao-General Santos-Bitung route, which departed from Davao on April 29, 2017, and arrived at Bitung on May 2, 2017. Ideally, RORO ships arrive every 2-3 weeks. However, since its inauguration in April 2017, RORO has not operated anymore. There have been no comparative advantage established in the Davao-Bitung trade. The two areas have similar commodities and container prices were too high for local business people.

### 3.2. Institutional connectivity

In West Borneo, the Indonesian government has built three National Cross-Border Posts (PLBN) in West Kalimantan gateway to Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. They are Entikong in Sanggau Regency, Aruk in Sambas Regency, and Nanga Badau in Kapuas Hulu Regency. The President inaugurated the three PLBNs in West Kalimantan at the end of 2016 and early 2017. Residents crossing borders must follow the Immigration and Customs inspection procedures on both sides of Indonesia and Malaysia. The inspection process is not too strict. Some people can go in and out without having their documents checked because they are familiar with officers from both sides. They are usually residents who have businesses in the territory of a neighboring country less than 5 kilometers from the cross-border post. On the one hand, this makes it easier for residents at the border who have high cross-border intensity. However, on the other hand, it increases the potential for transnational crimes such as drug trafficking and the smuggling of undocumented workers.

Although institutional connectivity development has made good progress, it still needs to be improved. Referring to the GMS subregional cooperation in mainland Southeast Asia, cross-border procedures can be simplified and shortened through the Cross-Border Transport Agreement (CBTA) mechanism, which unites CIQ inspections from two countries under one roof (Awani 2018). Another way is to follow the procedure applied at the Sungai Tujuh Border Check Point, Brunei Darussalam, which borders Miri, Malaysia. In this place, passengers do not need to get out of the vehicle. The officer only scans the passports/other documents of the passengers so that the cross-border process is faster and reduces the potential for queues, as can be seen at PLB Entikong. The two methods above can be considered by Indonesia and BIMP-EAGA to be adapted and standardized for all cross-border posts in this economic corridor.

For East Borneo, based on experience using the Tawau-Tarakan air transportation route, there is a significant difference between the inspection process at Tawau Airport and Juwata airport in Tarakan.

At Tawau Airport, several parallel posts serve to check immigration documents, making it take only a short time. Meanwhile, when landing in Juwata, of the two available posts, only one actively served the immigration process for passengers who had just disembarked. As a result, there have been long queues, and the passport stamping took more than 30 minutes. It can be detrimental especially for passengers who need to transfer their flights to other cities.

Meanwhile, for sea transportation, the opposite situation occurs between the Tunontaka Port in Nunukan and the Tawau Port. In Tunontaka, the immigration process is fast because several posts are open in parallel. Each post serves different types of passengers based on their nationality and travel documents, whether passports or cross-border passes. On the contrary, when arriving at Tawau Port, all passengers are required to weigh their luggage, and there is a long queue. Passenger goods that exceed 10 kilograms will be charged an additional fee per kilogram. This procedure does not apply at Tunontaka Port, Nunukan. According to Malaysian immigration officials at Tawau Port, the private sector manages Tawau Port, not the government. In the future, it is important to standardize and simplify Custom, Immigration, and Quarantine procedures between Tawau and Nunukan and other transboundary ports, which can be discussed and agreed upon within the BIMP-EAGA framework.

In Greater Sulu-Sulawesi, there was an agreement on procedures for cross-border activities between Indonesia and the Philippines, which was signed before BIMP-EAGA was formed, namely the 1956 Border Crossing Agreement. This agreement allows border residents who hold a Cross-Border Pass to carry out business activities, family visits, religious pilgrimages, and recreation to neighboring countries. In addition, both countries also agreed on the 1974 Border Trade Agreement, which provides concessions in the form of exemption from import duties for passenger luggage that does not exceed US\$150 per person per month or US\$1500 per boat for one trip. The Indonesian government then increased the quota to US\$250 based on the Minister of Finance Regulation No. 188/PMK.04/2010. The two countries then built the Miangas and

Marore Cross-Border Posts on the Indonesian side and Mabila on the Philippines side to facilitate these cross-border activities. However, only cross-border pass holders may use the postal service, and not passport holders. The potential for cross-border flows is very high, considering that there are large numbers of Indonesian diaspora communities [people of Sangihe-Talaud descent] living in the Southern Philippines. It is an opportunity for BIMP-EAGA to support and develop strategies to prosper the Indonesian-Philippines border community by facilitating the opening of Cross-Border Posts.

### **3.3. People-to-people connectivity**

As part of ASEAN, BIMP-EAGA member countries also enjoy visa-free arrangements for short stays under the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption (Pinatih 2016). Residents of the Indonesian border in West Borneo can use a Cross-Border Pass to visit the Malaysian territory up to a maximum of five kilometers from the borderline. They can go through three large cross-border posts and smaller traditional posts along the West Kalimantan-Sarawak border. However, this mechanism is based on the 1967 and 2006 bilateral agreements, not under BIMP-EAGA. As for residents outside the border sub-districts, they can use their passports to carry out social visits for up to 30 days.

However, smooth cross-border mobility also has some downside. Organized transnational crimes exploit the openness of cross-border traffic. Based on field observations, many West Kalimantan residents use cross-country buses to Malaysia with the initial purpose of visa-free social visits. However, many of them get off the bus on oil palm plantations. They become illegal workers who are vulnerable before the law.

As a consequence, many undocumented Indonesian migrant workers were repatriated from Malaysia. The flow of repatriation increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, the Entikong-Tebedu cross-border posts have been closed to ordinary border crossers and only serves Indonesian migrant workers' repatriation from Malaysia. In 2017-2019, the average number of Indonesian migrant workers repatriated was less than

2,000 people per year. However, in 2020, the number rose sharply to more than 20,000 people.

<Table 2> Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Repatriation from Malaysia via Entikong Cross-border Post

Year	Number of Indonesian Migrant Workers
2017	3,356
2018	1,764
2019	847
2020 (March-December)	21,354
2021 (January-August)	16,310

Source: BNP2TKI 2020 (data for 2017-2019); Immigration Office of Entikong 2021 (data for 2020-2021).

Table 2 above does not include those that enter through irregular or sea routes. Therefore, BIMP-EAGA needs to discuss serious precautions to avoid misusing cross-border transportation, such as the prohibition of dropping passengers at any place like palm oil plantations, and only allowing passengers to drop off at designated places so their data can be tracked.

In East Borneo, the presence of sea and air transportation has led to intensified community interactions between countries. More Indonesian citizens (WNI) cross Tawau than Malaysians who come to Nunukan. Likewise, more Indonesian-owned vessels are crossing borders than Malaysian-owned vessels (see Table 3 below).

<Table 3> Traffic of Indonesia-Malaysia Cross-border Passengers and Vessels in Nunukan

Year	Number of Passengers				Number of Vessels			
	Indonesian Citizens		Foreign Citizens		Indonesia Registered		Foreign Registered	
	Departure	Arrival	Departure	Arrival	Departure	Arrival	Departure	Arrival
<b>2012</b>	221,241	195,071	14,220	14,508	1,351	1,262	495	464
<b>2013</b>	152,649	140,127	11,918	13,625	1,104	1,102	693	695
<b>2014</b>	124,793	121,102	12,363	13,690	870	865	687	688
<b>2015</b>	154,959	141,898	11,707	12,500	854	854	751	751
<b>2016</b>	127,570	128,102	11,582	11,523	825	824	490	490
<b>2017</b>	92,980	87,425	12,328	12,520	741	741	602	602
<b>2018</b>	86,354	78,788	11,817	12,355	668	665	540	540
<b>2019</b>	99,339	92,490	19,634	19,303	654	652	583	584
<b>2020</b>	19,800	21,024	3,816	3,471	172	170	130	130
<b>2021 (Jan-May)</b>	472	2,089	-	-	29	29	50	51

Source: Immigration Office of Nunukan 2021.



The high traffic of people passing by in the border area has been going on for hundreds of years. It forms a cross-border community. Every day, many Indonesians go to Tawau to sell various commodities such as bananas and fish, buy necessities to resell in Nunukan, and seek medical treatment. In contrast, a small proportion of Malaysians go to Nunukan and Tarakan to do business, namely buying raw materials for their restaurants in Malaysia. Meanwhile, most Malaysians come to Indonesia to “go home” and visit relatives. Many Malaysians living in Tawau are descendants of Indonesians, especially the Bugis, Javanese, and Timorese (Maunati 2019). Therefore, the language used in Sabah is more similar to Indonesian than Peninsular Malay. They have built a cultural pattern for border communities, which is slightly different from the communities of each ethnic group.

For Greater Sulu-Sulawesi, the people of the Sangihe Islands Regency and the Talaud Islands Regency in North Sulawesi have established solid social relations with the people of the Southern Philippines. An Indonesian diaspora community in the Southern Philippines is estimated to be up to 35,000, but only 7,946 are officially recorded (Talampas 2015). In interviews, cross-border residents in Marore admitted that they have family on Balut Island, so they often visit each other. Good relations are established at the community level and between local governments. On the Independence Day of the Philippines, the local government in Balut often invites government officials from the Marore Islands District to visit Balut and celebrate it together.

Moreover, there was once a Balut mayor descended from the Sangir people of Indonesia. People-to-people connectivity can be further improved, considering that in the more northern parts of Balut and Sarangani Islands (such as Marawi), many residents feel that they are descendants of the Sriwijaya Kingdom in South Sumatra. There is even an area in Mindanao called Palimbang, similar to the name of the capital city of South Sumatra Province, Indonesia. In this case, BIMP-EAGA can play a more significant role in building people-to-people connectivity at the Indonesia-Philippines border.

The development of connectivity above implies several determinant factors in the practice of cross-border cooperation under the scheme of subregional cooperation. First, the successful development of cross-border connectivity between West Kalimantan and Sarawak in the West Borneo economic corridor shows the presence of a strong political will from the Indonesian government, referring to Thao (1999) in the conceptual framework section. Then, in the case of the obstruction of Sebatik-Tawau cross-border activities in the East Borneo economic corridor, the absence of a cross-border post that meets international standards implies the low quality of cross-border cooperation institutions as a determining factor, as proposed by Thao (1999). Meanwhile, the absence of goods transported by the Bitung-Davao RORO ship route shows the significance of comparative advantage commodities that can be exchanged to generate a reversible cross-border trade (Raharjo 2019).

Moreover, the application of the different standards of the CIQ mechanism in the three economic corridors above shows that there are still problems in harmonizing regulations between state parties in BIMP-EAGA. This factor hinders the flow of people and goods across countries. Then, the pattern of more intensive cross-border activities by Indonesian residents to Malaysia to sell raw commodities and for medical treatment, while the reverse flow is less, indicates a development gap between Indonesia and Malaysia border areas. This development gap encourages cross-border activities, as previously identified by Guo (2005).

Even though there are still some obstacles, in general, the development of physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity in the West Borneo Economic Corridor on the Indonesian side (West Kalimantan) has been relatively good. As a result of this connectivity, development in the Province of West Kalimantan has also been encouraged. According to the Government of the West Kalimantan Province (2017), one of the results is that economic growth in the province has increased by 5.22%, higher than the national economic growth (5.02%) in 2016. In addition, West Kalimantan also enjoyed purchasing contracts for electricity from Sarawak in 2016, which reached 230 MW to meet electricity

needs in the border areas of Sambas and Bengkayang.

Similar to West Borneo, Indonesian Provinces located in the East Borneo Economic Corridor also enjoy the positive impact of connectivity. Regarding welfare, residents of Nunukan and Tarakan in North Kalimantan can enjoy Malaysian-made goods that are relatively cheaper than similar goods produced in the country. Some central government officials in Jakarta worry about the Indonesian border community's dependence on Malaysia. However, when observing the Tawau market, many Indonesian products are also sold there, ranging from home industry products and snacks to herbal medicines. In other words, there is actually an interdependent relationship between the Indonesian and Malaysian border communities.

The impact of this connectivity is not only enjoyed by North Kalimantan. Derawan Island and Maratua Island Tourism Objects in East Kalimantan are also the targets of tourism development cooperation within the BIMP-EAGA framework. Derawan and Maratua become parts of the route for the Trans Borneo Route 4x4 adventure events, which attracts tourists from BIMP-EAGA countries. It means that all working areas of BIMP-EAGA in four countries can enjoy the benefits of connectivity, not only provinces or states that have direct border areas with other member countries. The benefits are anchored not only on connectivity but also on other BIMP-EAGA's strategic pillars: food basket; tourism; environment; and socio-cultural and education (BIMP-EAGA 2017: 11).

In addition, Sepinggan Airport in Balikpapan is also designated as an air traffic gateway for the BIMP-EAGA subregional economic relationship on Kalimantan Island, together with Supadio Airport in Pontianak. It is a follow-up to the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding on Expansion on Air Linkage. In addition, Balikpapan Seaport is also one of 21 ports designated as BIMP-EAGA's main port. Private companies from Indonesia and the Philippines also collaborate in developing a hybrid rice seed production program in Berau Regency covering an area of 1,200 hectares (BIMP-EAGA Secretariat in the East Kalimantan Province 2015: 22). The program reflects the contribution of the BIMP-EAGA Business Council to

economic development in East Kalimantan.

In Greater Sulu-Sulawesi, connectivity development also benefits North Sulawesi Province. The various BIMP-EAGA meetings held in Manado-Meeting the Ministers of Transport in 2008, the Eco-Tourism Meeting in 2008, and the Ministerial Meeting in 2014 have helped stimulate the tourism sector in North Sulawesi. Manado Tua Island is also designated as a Sea-Community Based Eco-Tourism within the BIMP-EAGA framework. In addition, based on the information from the BIMP-EAGA Secretariat of the North Sulawesi Province, there are two projects in North Sulawesi proposed for BIMP-EAGA Vision 2025, namely Integrated Coconut Industry for Small Holder Farmers and Corn Post Harvest Handling, in coordination with the Philippines.

Regarding the role of BIMP-EAGA in overcoming the development gap between western and eastern Indonesia, BPS-Statistics Indonesia's data shows that the contribution of Kalimantan Island to the national gross domestic product at current prices has decreased from 9.40% in 2010, 8.16% in 2015, and 7.95% in 2020. On the contrary, Sulawesi Island experienced an increase, namely 5.19% in 2010, 5.89% in 2015, and 6.67% in 2020. However, if these two islands are combined, the contribution of provinces actively involved in BIMP-EAGA to Indonesia's GDP will increase slightly, from 14.59% in 2010 to 14.62% in 2020. In other words, during the last ten years, BIMP-EAGA has still played a small role in overcoming the development gap in Indonesia.

These findings enrich the discussion between optimistic versus pessimistic views on subregional cooperation. From the optimistic view, this paper supports the opinion that subregional cooperation has played a role in regional integration and community building (Chheang 2013), primarily through the development of connectivity that encourages investment opportunities in value chains (Lord and Tangtrongjita 2016) and becomes part of capacity building to deal with non-traditional security issues (Hashim and Julay 2021). On the other hand, this paper also agrees with the pessimistic view that the role played by subregional cooperation, especially BIMP-EAGA, is still relatively limited (Dent 2017), leaving substantial development

gaps within the region (Kimura 2020). Even though it does not ignore the pessimistic view, this paper tends towards optimism, that subregional cooperation is an essential instrument in building connectivity in regional integration. It applies on condition that improvements continue to be made and challenges continue to be addressed.

#### **IV. Challenges on connectivity development in BIMP-EAGA**

To further develop connectivity in eastern Indonesia through BIMP-EAGA, Indonesia and other countries still face major challenges related to security issues. First, several segments of borders between countries have not been agreed upon. Indonesia and Malaysia still dispute the boundaries of the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the Sulawesi Sea. One well-known case is regarding the Ambalat block, following the designation of Sipadan and Ligitan Islands as Malaysian property in 2001. Second, the historical conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines regarding the Philippines' claim to the Sabah area. Third, there are differences of opinion between Malaysia and Brunei regarding the unmarked boundaries of the Sarawak mainland, East Malaysia, and the territorial waters of the Exclusive Economic Zone.

The second security challenge is that the border area between Indonesia and these countries is prone to terrorist threats and piracy, theft of natural resources, and smuggling of prohibited goods, drugs, and people. Many foreign fishermen from neighboring countries still carry out fishing activities without permits because they do not know the maritime boundaries between the two countries or because the boundaries are still being disputed. Moreover, The Maute and Abu Sayyaf terrorist groups based in Mindanao have in recent years kidnapped dozens of tourists, fishermen, and sailors around the Sulu waters. Moreover, Armed clashes also took place in Marawi City between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and hundreds of militants from the Maute and Abu Sayyaf terrorist groups in 2017. These two challenges can create uncertainty and instability, which is one of the inhibiting factors in

cross-border cooperation (Guo 2005) under subregionalism.

To enforce and maintain security, several countries conduct joint security cooperation in border areas. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines are working together to conduct joint operations in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. The Trilateral Maritime Patrol was inaugurated at a ceremony attended by Indonesian Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, and Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, at Tarakan Naval Base on June 19, 2017 (Chan and Soeriaatmadja 2017). This initiative is a response to terrorist activities and transnational crimes in the Sulu Sea. Although the joint operation is maritime (navy) based, the Air Force and Army are also expected to be involved in securing the Sulu Sea, which lies northeast of the island of Borneo and southwest of the Philippines. The countries also established Marine Command Centers (MCC) in Tarakan, Tawau in Sabah, Malaysia, and Bongao, the capital of Tawi-Tawi Province in the Philippines (Chan and Soeriaatmadja 2017).

In the end, the security challenges in the BIMP-EAGA subregion remind us that BIMP-EAGA cannot only focus on economic cooperation alone. There needs to be a guarantee of political stability and security so that economic growth in the subregion can run well. BIMP-EAGA can ask ASEAN to help carry out the functions of the defense-security sector through the ASEAN Political-Security Community. However, another alternative BIMP-EAGA may consider is adding defense-security as an area of cooperation and turning it into a separate cluster in addition to the existing fields.

In addition to security challenges, Indonesia, in particular, faces the challenge of sharing authority between the central and sub-national governments in developing the BIMP-EAGA working area. As mentioned earlier, BIMP-EAGA relies on the active roles of subnational governments both in program initiation and implementation. However, in the context of the prevailing governance system in Indonesia, provincial governments do not have the authority they need to facilitate this active role. First is the authority to establish cross-border cooperation. Many of the programs in BIMP-EAGA are

cross-border in nature, for example, the construction of cross-border transportation routes and power grid connectivity. However, local governments cannot directly establish such cross-border cooperation with their foreign partners. According to the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 23 of 2014, foreign policy affairs become the absolute authority of the central government, as well as other government affairs in which locations, users, and benefits have a cross-border nature.

Second is the authority to manage border areas. BIMP-EAGA covers many border regions as parts of its working area. According to the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 43 of 2008, the border area is part of the country's territory which is located inside along the boundaries of Indonesia's territory with other countries. For land territory, the border area is at the sub-district level. Subnational/provincial governments need to manage border areas for various cross-border activities, such as trade and tourism, that support economic growth. However, referring to Law No. 43 of 2008, the central government has the authority to set policies on the management and utilization of border areas. Meanwhile, the provincial government only has the authority to implement the central government's policies.

The division of authority is increasingly complicated because, based on several experiences, perspectives, and interests between the central government and the provincial government are often different in managing border areas. For example, the central government emphasizes a defense-security approach in developing border areas on the small outermost islands in North Sulawesi, which are in the Greater Sulu-Sulawesi Economic Corridor. In contrast, local governments want to encourage a welfare approach (Alami et al. 2014). Another example is the issue of traditional Indonesia-Philippines and Indonesia-Malaysia cross-border trade. The Provincial Governments of North Sulawesi and North Kalimantan want the threshold value of goods exempted from customs to be increased to improve the welfare of border communities. However, central government agencies such as the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Finance rejected the idea because unscrupulous traders often misuse the threshold value to

seek profit. It then would reduce state revenue. This issue shows that the political system prevailing in a country also affects the success of the subregional cooperation that he participates in, as previously identified by Guo (2005).

To deal with the authority dilemma, stakeholders should consider dialogue as a middle way. The central government may need to listen to the voices of local governments, which are assumed to understand the context and dynamics of the border areas better. Therefore, the management and utilization of border areas as part of the BIMP-EAGA working area can accommodate both parties' perspectives and interests.

## **V. Conclusion**

Indonesia has been involved in BIMP-EAGA subregional economic cooperation since its establishment in 1994. Indonesia's interest in BIMP-EAGA is to accelerate development and economic growth in eastern Indonesia, which lags behind the western region. Therefore, 15 provinces are involved in BIMP-EAGA, which covers all provinces in Kalimantan Island, Sulawesi Island, Maluku Islands, and Papua Island.

Regarding its policy at BIMP-EAGA, Indonesia has established the National Secretariat for Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation under the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs based in Jakarta. This National Secretariat oversees the IMT-GT and BIMP-EAGA. Indonesia plays active roles in various cooperative clusters, ranging from natural resources, transportation, infrastructure-ICT, and tourism to MSMEs. In terms of connectivity, Indonesia has also joined the program to develop three economic corridors, namely West Borneo, East Borneo, and Sulu-Sulawesi.

Indonesia's involvement in the three corridors has boosted the connectivity of Indonesia's territory, especially border areas, with neighboring countries. The connectivity includes physical, institutional, and people-to-people dimensions. However, the existing connectivity is still insufficient to boost Kalimantan and Sulawesi contribution to



Indonesia's GDP. Some obstacles need to be overcome to optimize BIMP-EAGA's role in building connectivity and reducing Indonesia's development gap, such as standardization of the CIQ procedure, an improvement in institutional mechanism, and consistency of strong political will among the involved parties.

In addition, considering the vulnerability of the BIMP subregion to transnational crimes and terrorism, BIMP-EAGA needs to start thinking about security aspects and find solutions to maintain sub-regional stability, which have not been a priority so far. In Indonesia's case, the issue of distributing authority between the central and provincial governments also needs to be considered in establishing and implementing border area management policies. These are important to ensure economic growth and sustained development in the BIMP-EAGA area.

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## R.O.K Minilateral Engagement with ASEAN: Assessment of BIMP-EAGA\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

The ASEAN and ROK have played a crucial role in fostering regional peace and economic development. Nevertheless, the recent strategic competition between the US and China has turned the region into a contested arena. The relationship faces challenges due to the ROK's growing alignment with the US, prompting a rising interest in minilateralism as an alternative collaboration model. This paper scrutinizes the impact of ROK's foreign policy behavior, with a focus on minilateralism as a preferred cooperation model with ASEAN. The study centers on BIMP-EAGA, investigating its effectiveness in sustaining collaboration amid geopolitical rivalry. The paper concludes that BIMP-EAGA, as a manifestation of minilateralism, serves as an alternative platform for ROK and ASEAN cooperation. However, the study reveals that the implementation of BIMP-EAGA falls short of expectations. This paper emphasizes the need for greater subregional focus and comprehensive coverage of BIMP-EAGA to truly reflect the shared interests of ASEAN member states.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Republic of Korea, Minilateralism, BIMP-EAGA

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## **I . Introduction**

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation), established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, is a regional organization comprising countries in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia joined, making it the prominent international organization representing Southeast Asia. Over the past 56 years, ASEAN has made significant contributions to maintaining regional peace and stability and achieving economic development. The absence of serious armed conflicts among member countries and the influx of foreign investments based on peace have facilitated rapid economic growth. Indeed, ASEAN's core principles of sovereign equality, consensus decision-making, and non-interference in domestic affairs have been subject to significant criticism in terms of efficiency. However, it can be considered valid to unify ten sovereign nations with diverse characteristics under one organization (D. Y. Kim 2023).

However, due to the recent strategic competition between the United States and China, ASEAN has turned into a battleground for external major power rivalry, jeopardizing its role as a mediator. The erosion of ASEAN's leadership in regional multilateral cooperation has led to a growing interest in new forms of collaboration, especially minilateralism. Minilateralism refers to the collaboration among a limited number of nations that possess a shared understanding. It is essentially a scaled-down version of multilateralism, wherein three or more countries engage in cooperative efforts. Minilateralism is frequently likened to subregional cooperation in discussions of ASEAN.

ASEAN's subregionalism began with the establishment of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) in 1989, proposed by Singapore. Subsequently, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) was founded in 1992, IMT-GT involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand was established in 1993, and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) was formed in 1994. The ASEAN subregional economic cooperation initiatives aim to promote economic growth by fostering mutual cooperation in various fields such as trade,



investment, tourism, and transportation among regions sharing common development goals.

The relationship between Republic of Korea (ROK) and ASEAN was established in 1989 with sectoral dialogue relations, which were elevated to a full dialogue partnership in 1991. Over the years, the cooperation has become indissoluble, encompassing various areas such as economy, politics, and society. Currently, ASEAN is South Korea's second-largest trading partner and investment partner. The partnership is emphasized as an optimal collaboration due to the mutual strengths and development potential shared between the two.

The significance of the relationship between ROK and ASEAN is underscored by initiatives such as the New Southern Policy announced in 2017 and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) in 2022. Particularly, KASI represents a tailored regional strategy for ASEAN within the Indo-Pacific policy framework. ASEAN-centered policies, including the New Southern Policy, have been consistent across successive governments, with differences in degree, and KASI represents a further improved policy. It outlines plans to strengthen digital technology, climate change and environmental interventions, health, national and international security and defense, human resources, and sub-regional cooperation. This approach centered around ASEAN demonstrates a consistent policy across successive governments, showcasing Korea's dedication to fostering stronger ties with its regional partners.

However, ROK foreign policy indicates a different orientation. In August 2023, President Yoon Seok Yul flew to the US in order to participate in a trilateral summit with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The summit was held with the objective of exploring avenues to strengthen security collaboration in response to the nuclear danger posed by North Korea. Principal Deputy National Security Adviser of ROK Kim Tae Hyo stressed that the trilateral negotiations are expected to establish a distinct and autonomous identity as a cooperative entity in the Indo-Pacific region (Lee 2023). ROK's interest in building a newfound conception of "distinct identity" within the Indo-Pacific has garnered concern from ASEAN scholars on the relative

importance of the regional block's "leading" position.

Considering this context, experts have posited that Seoul's increasing alignment with the US has undermined the ASEAN Centrality, thereby placing Seoul in an awkward situation vis-à-vis the ASEAN. However, optimistic scholars have highlighted ROK's continued engagement with ASEAN, with goals and interests intertwined (Indraswari & Martinus 2023).

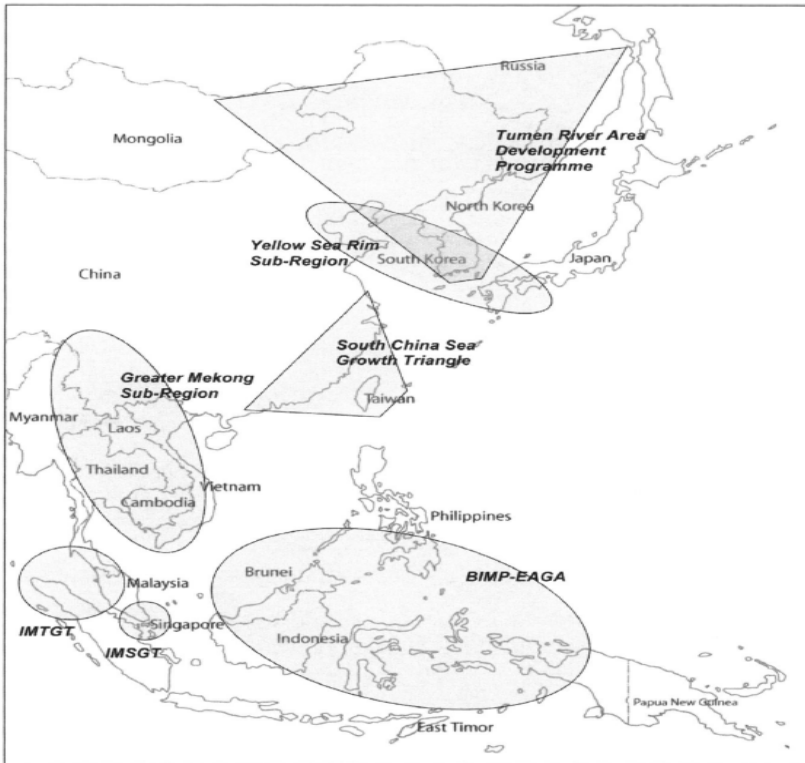
Instead of adopting an over-encompassing approach, ROK focuses on a small-scope and issue-focused cooperation. By focusing on specific issues, ROK and ASEAN are able to sustain collaboration despite growing rivalry.

The current main clustering of minilateralism cooperation between ROK and ASEAN are as follows: GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region), IMT-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle), IMS-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle), and BIMP-EAGA (Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area). BIMP-EAGA is chosen as the subject of this research because compared to other minilateralism, it covers the largest area. Furthermore, the project is central for both ASEAN and ROK. For ASEAN, BIMP-EAGA supports the narrowing of development gap among member states as enshrined in the ASEAN connectivity vision. BIMP-EAGA is tasked to enhance the economic capacity of lesser developed and peripheral areas through the promotion of regional economic activity. Areas under BIMP-EAGA have low GDP in comparison to national GDPs with inadequate infrastructure (Evangelista 2000). BIMP-EAGA is also one of the main projects in the ASEAN Outlook of Indo Pacific (AOIP). AOIP focuses on connectivity by exploring the potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks, including BIMP-EAGA. This key priority area of cooperation in connectivity reinforces the existing ASEAN Master Plan Action on Connectivity (MPAC) 2025.

Meanwhile for ROK, BIMP-EAGA sits well under KASI. Launched by the Korean government during the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in 2022, KASI is part of Seoul's vision to become a Global Pivotal State under the Strategy for Free Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Seoul wishes for ASEAN to be an

ROK key partner in peace and shared prosperity and is committed in supporting AOIP's four-priority areas including connectivity, SDGs, and economic and maritime cooperation. Regarding narrowing the development gap in the region, KASI aims to sustain ASEAN-ROK cooperation by increasing budgets to approximately 200 million USD. Seoul also committed to increase the annual volume of the ASEAN Korean Cooperation Fund (AKCF) to 32 million USD, the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation Found (MKCF) to 10 million USD, and the BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to 6 million USD. Respectively ROK's official development assistance (ODA) allocation remained focused on infrastructure projects.

<Figure 1> Mapping of Minilateralism in East Asia (Dent & Richter 2011)



*Notes:* BIMP-EAGA = Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area  
 IMSGT = Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle  
 IMTGT = Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle

The prevailing general optimism suggests that the concept of minilateralism contributes to the long-term viability of the ROK-ASEAN relationship in the face of significant geopolitical competition. Against this backdrop, this research seeks to examine the extent to which minilateralism contributes to the development of the ROK-ASEAN relationship. In doing so, the research assesses the efficacy of BIMP-EAGA as an alternative minilateralism model of cooperation strategy against external constraints.

## **II . Literature Review**

Tow and Envall (2011) define minilateralism as “usually three, but sometimes four or five states meeting and interacting informally (in the absence of governing documents) to discuss issues-areas involving mutual threats to their security or more often to go over specific task related to building regional stability and order” (p. 62). Recent developments indicate that there have been alterations in this definition. However, minilateralism’s character remains distinctive. It is “informal, non-binding, [with the] purpose to build partnership and coalitions of the interested, willing and capable” (Stewart 2015).

Minilateralism emerges due to mounting disappointment in the inability of current multilateral systems to solve old problems. Multilateralism in its inception was a response to achieve equality among states in which small powers are often discriminate (Kahler 1992). However, this universalist character is a subject to criticism. Neoliberalism challenges the idea of universalism by positing that it leads to the emergence of “large number problem” and inefficiencies. Meanwhile, realism posits that major countries tend to favor bilateralism as it is immune from the scrutiny of others.

In his commentary, Naim Moises (2009) questions the work of multilateral institutions in solving global concerns. The failure of multilateral global governance, for example, on trade negotiation blocks and the inefficiency of the UN in addressing global issues, has forced states to seek alternative ways of managing international relations. Moises stresses that there has been no global consensus

since 2000 and this pinpoints to the global public's shared "flawed obsession with multilateralism as the panacea for all the world ills" (Naim 2009). He suggested that minilateralism's "magic number" serves as the solution for the current global impasse. Minilateralism offers a "smarter and targeted approach, ... to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naim 2009).

Similarly, Sung Mi Kim, et al. argue that traditional multilateral avenues have become increasingly "deadlock prone and anachronistic" (S.M. Kim et al. 2018). They argue that the heightening interdependency and "multiplex" order create a geopolitical uncertainty that pushes states to search for alternate strategies to insert influences. Here, minilateralism comes to the front by providing a fresh approach characterized by its small size and agility.

William T. Tow (2015) argues that minilateralism strength lies in its small size. It is able to circumvent problems coming from alliance politic as it focuses on a small number of members willing and interested to solve a particular issue. Furthermore, minilateralism is task oriented, it doesn't aspire to build an identity, nor establish norms or rules. It is also not a bilateral alliance, thus it is less threatening (Tow 2015).

Yet minilateralism is not free from criticism. Patrick Stewart (2015) argues that the emergence of this informal club of the like-minded also has certain risks as it leads to the erosion of crucial international organizations, and diminished accountability within global governance structures (Stewart 2015). Meanwhile, Amalina Anuar and Nazia Hussain (2021) argue that despite minilateralism's focus on small members eases the development of trust shared by its individual leaders, the very same closeness is precarious as cooperation rests on individual leaders. The informality of minilateralism leads to low institutionalization, thus is dangerous because it creates a vacuum when leaders change (Anuar & Hussain 2021). As government leadership is changing regularly, the absence of formal institutionalization incapacitates minilateral groupings. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2007 was one example. The grouping went on "hiatus" when Japan Prime Minister Shinzo

Abe stepped down and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd refused to go against China.

In general, research on minilateralism addresses topics from the perspective of macro-level governance, especially on its efficiency in tackling international problems. Sung Mi Kim, et al. contribute to minilateralism on a micro level by focusing on the perspective of members of the club (S.M. Kim et al. 2018). They assess minilateral groupings on key motivations sustaining them. They found that minilateralism allows a member to get benefits without incurring a major additional budget. Minilateralism is also low maintenance and provides more flexibility. Therefore, it is an inexpensive multipurpose tool that can be deployed for capacity building and network sharing, as well for gaining diplomatic diversification and global visibility.

Research in minilateralism predominantly addresses non-security issues. Falkner, for example, argues that the minilateralism's "magic number club" is important in tackling climate change issues (Falkner 2016). Similarly, McGee goes further by distinguishing what he calls inclusive and exclusive multilateralism. He concludes that the later provides greater effectiveness in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions, further emphasizing the effective performance by small, like-minded groups (McGee 2011). On the contrary, minilateralism is less preferred in addressing security issues. Because compared to multilateralism, minilateralism is less inclusive and amenable to implementing norms of regional order and governance (Tow 2015).

The concept of minilateralism has been under discussed in the context of regional security issues (Moore 2007). Despite the lack of utilization of minilateralism in security cooperation, Tow argues that in the contemporary Asia Pacific geopolitical setting, minilateralism is becoming a prominent security trend. This is because the cooperation of small groups to pursue a common security interest informally is a better fit for post-war Asian models of institutional design. Few explanations supported this trend. First, the shift towards a multilateral system weakened the asymmetrical alliances with the US, in particular the hub and spokes system in addressing

security concerns in the Asia Pacific. As such, states in the region have at their disposal more elbow room to create their own security clubs through minilateralism. Second, the regional multilateral setting of the security framework in Asia is limited and has not been able to manage overall security issues. ASEAN is the only multilateral, regional grouping that provides a platform to discuss security challenges. However, its power is curbed by its institutional design that prohibits the emergence of rigid and binding resolutions to solve any security issues. In contrast, the region has been a focal point of prolonged security tensions, with the Korean peninsula peace issues and the South China Sea territorial disputes present, making it difficult for regional multilateral grouping to antagonize the great power interests and sensitivity. Hence, as suggested by Michael Green (2014), minilateralism is suitable in Asia as it serves as a hedging instrument applied within an environment that has an “immature” regional security architecture” (Green 2014) .

Similarly, David Cha (2011) argues that minilateralism works best in the “complex patchwork” of the security environment in Asia. The patchwork refers to the “informality, absence of rules-based institution, smattering bilateral alliances and inseparability of low vs. high politic” (Van 2014), making it difficult to navigate the Asia security framework. Cha further argues that Asia's contemporary security environment is not primarily influenced by China, nor is it primarily characterized by a decrease in the influence of the United States. Instead, it incorporates the major power states in the region. To make the regional architecture framework work best, he stressed that major powers must be able to overcome the security dilemma of having to choose between US and China.

Because minilateralism focuses on the “willing,” it allows middle and small powers to assume more roles. Amitav Acharya underscores that in minilateralism, “the agency in building a world order is more dispersed and lies more with the audience than with the producers (great powers)” (Acharya 2018). By focusing on the agency role, security minilateralism in Asia gives the stage to major powers. Thus, they should have more say in shaping security issues in the region.

ROK minilateral cooperation in the Asia Pacific takes two forms. First, minilateralism with the US, and second, minilateralism with ASEAN. This two-sphered minilateral conception was created because of the ROK's struggle for autonomy. On the one hand, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) security threat and Seoul's dependence on the US in security provisions prompted the establishment of the first security minilateralism. On the other hand, the increasing desire for autonomy prompted Seoul to entertain its middle power status and cooperate with like-minded countries through ASEAN, giving birth to the second minilateral clubs. While the first focuses on security, the second encompasses a wider area of concerns, particularly in development strategy.

ROK's struggle for autonomy determines the character of minilateralism it has developed with the US and ASEAN. At the same time, both multilateralisms may be argued as mutually exclusive. Hoang Thi Ha stresses that the ROK's tendency to engage in security minilateralism with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) erodes ROK relations with ASEAN (Ha 2023). Hoang argues that ROK minilateralism with the US challenges ASEAN in three ways. First, the ROK shows hard balancing towards the US and reduced reliance on ASEAN. Second, small memberships hold out better than ASEAN, which is known for its informal and hence infective problem-solving mechanism. Third, ROK minilateralism accentuates the existing strategic incoherence within ASEAN in the face of great power competitions. Thus, it logically follows why ROK drifted away from ASEAN. The increasing prevalence of minilateralism can be attributed to the influence of great power competition and the perceived inefficacy of established multilateral frameworks. In the Asia Pacific, ASEAN's limited capacity to enhance its centrality and unity in its interactions with external powers allow the emergence of minilateralism outside the ASEAN framework. ROK's minilateral engagement with the US poses risks to ASEAN Centrality. The possible erosion of ASEAN's credibility arises from the discriminatory characteristics inherent in minilateralism. The fundamental principles of centrality and unity within ASEAN are also inherently incompatible with minilateralism's exclusivity. Thus, concerns regarding great power interests presiding over lesser power



interests in the region comes with minilateralism.

ROK is aware that its engagement in minilateralism with the US serves its security interests and at the same time puts strain to Seoul relations with ASEAN. To overcome it, ROK retains engagement with ASEAN through minilateralism on non-security issues.

Subregional (and essentially, minilateral) cooperation matters for ASEAN. Lim and Lee (2023) argue that ASEAN's slow and inefficient nature raises concerns about its efficacy in leading the region. They advocate for minilateral cooperation within ASEAN, suggesting that smaller groups of like-minded member countries collaborate more effectively in addressing specific issues (Lin & Lee 2023). Similarly, Heydrian suggests that shifting towards minilateralism is crucial for ASEAN. He argues that ASEAN is falling into the “middle institutional trap” as current decision-making mechanisms are inadequate in confronting institutionally evolving challenges. Hence, preserving the principle of ASEAN centrality demands that the regional organization goes beyond its consensus-driven decision-making and adopts minilateral agreements to address contentious issues (Heydarian 2017).

Minilateralism allows ASEAN to be more flexible and efficient as it offers a venue for a smaller group of ASEAN member states to concentrate on specific issues, bypassing the complexities of involving an entire bloc. This approach can lead to faster decision-making and more effective resolution of problems as it can address specific challenges more directly. By focusing only on like-minded states, minilateralism creates a stronger and deeper bond among countries, which may consequently lead to ease of coordination and increased collaborations. For one, minilateralism “saves” ASEAN from its lagging decision-making process. With fewer states involved, an agreed decision is easier to be achieved. Minilateralism, in this sense, aims to complement rather than replace multilateralism, and therefore does not undermine ASEAN unity.

On connectivity issues, BIMP-EAGA serves as a nodal that connects ASEAN and ROK interests. Despite the massive coverage area, BIMP-EAGA has received less attention. Dent and Ritcher (2011) assess how BIMP-EAGA pursued developmental regionalism

through initiatives aimed at enhancing interrelated development capacities and improve connectivity (Dent & Richter 2011). Devi Putri Kussanti explores the contribution of BIMP-EAGA to benefit ecotourism in Indonesia (Kussanti 2017). Similarly, Anugrah and Pengestu argues that tourism benefited from BIMP-EAGA. Their study shows an increase in bilateral trade, and ease in trade barriers and carrying out infrastructure to boost FDI (Anugrah & Pangestu 2023). Despite shared optimism on the impact of BIMP-EAGA for Indonesian scholars, Evangelista is less convinced that this is the case. She argued that it was only in 2003 when significant progress was noted, and in spite of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. However, Evangelista (2000) adds that there is hope on the long term as BIMP-EAGA incorporates strong private sector collaborations.

### **III. Analyses**

#### **3.1. BIMP-EAGA Background**

BIMP-EAGA was initiated during the 1992 ASEAN Summit, when President Fidel V. Ramos of the Philippines introduced the concept of a subregional cooperation, connecting southern Philippines, eastern Indonesia, and eastern Malaysia. This initiative aimed to bolster maritime connectivity, enhance security, and foster economic development among the Southeast Asian maritime nations.

In response, Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir officially approved the East Coast Growth Zone (EAGA) in October 1993. Brunei eventually participated in November, officially launching it in 1994. The subregion covers the entire sultanate of Brunei Darussalam; the provinces of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and West Papua of Indonesia; the states of Sabah and Sarawak and the federal territory of Labuan in Malaysia; and the island of Mindanao and the province of Palawan in the Philippines.

Except for Brunei, the regions were geographically far from the capital, and although the countries were different, they were geographically close and have great cultural similarities among

them. The majority of EAGA's local populace adheres to Islam, comprising a significant proportion of Malays and indigenous communities. This region shares the Malay language and preserves traditional economic ties, enabling the unrestricted flow of goods and people across borders since ancient times. Also, these states and provinces account for over 60% of the land area, but has a population of less than 20%, of the BIMP-EAGA countries (Gu 2022).

This subregional cooperation initiative's main objective is to expedite the socio-economic progress of underdeveloped and geographically isolated regions by strengthening trade, tourism, and investments through the facilitation of seamless movement of individuals, commodities, and services. This initiative aimed to address the wider goal of narrowing development gaps and was achieved by maximizing the utilization of infrastructure and natural resources, as well as fully capitalizing on economic complementarity. BIMP-EAGA was organized around five fundamental strategic pillars: connectivity, food production, tourism, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural education. The long-term goal of BIMP-EAGA was to develop non-resource sectors in resource-based economies. This involved easing the movement of products, public services, and human resources across borders, as well as utilizing infrastructure and natural resources to stimulate trade, tourism facilities, and foreign investments. The fundamental strategy was led by the private sector to activate the market, while governments and institutions provided an environment conducive to increased private investment.

BIMP-EAGA integrated the facilitation of private sector investments, with governments at different levels of administration (national, state, provincial, and local) working towards establishing a conducive climate and providing necessary support. Decision making in BIMP-EAGA was guided from various levels of meetings within BIMP-EAGA, ranging from the Summit and Ministerial Meetings to the Senior Official Level Meeting and technical meetings under the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM). These technical meetings include clusters and task forces; the Cluster on Natural Resources Development was chaired by Indonesia; Transport, Infrastructure, & ICT Development chaired by Brunei Darussalam; Joint Tourism Development chaired by Malaysia; and Customs, Immigration,

Quarantine, and Security (CIQSTask Force) and SME chaired by the Philippines.

However, BIMP-EAGA experienced a deceleration following the occurrence of the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis. The establishment of the Facilitation Center, an intergovernmental coordinating entity, only happened in 2003, about ten years after the initiation of the program. It is then followed by the inaugural BIMP-EAGA Leaders' meeting coinciding with an ASEAN meeting in the same year. Since then, the development of BIMP-EAGA has been led by three significant documents: The Roadmap to Development (2006-2010), the Implementation Blueprint (2012-2016), and the BIMP-EAGA Vision 2025 (2017-2025). The aforementioned publications delineated the strategic pillars, significant economic sectors, and essential initiatives of the group, which were intended to actualize the vision of BIMP-EAGA for a subregion that is resilient, inclusive, sustainable, and economically competitive.

### **3.2. ASEAN Perspectives**

Indonesia covers the West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC) together with Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, as well as the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC) together with Malaysia and the Philippines. Jakarta has consistently highlighted the importance of the connectivity sector in BIMP-EAGA, particularly on sea connectivity. During the 12th BIMP-EAGA Meeting held in 2018, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized that connectivity stands as a pivotal element in the concrete collaboration among BIMP-EAGA member countries. She emphasized that improved connectivity provides twofold benefits. First, it plays a vital role in fostering parity among local administrations. Second, it creates harmonization between central and local governments, allowing for more seamless operations and cooperation. Indonesian President Joko Widodo or Jokowi re-emphasized the importance of the maritime sector during the 13th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2019 (SetKab 2019) by highlighting the critical significance of the maritime sector in bolstering inclusive economic empowerment programs. He specifically addressed the importance of developing a

maritime community base to support the eco-tourism sector. In addition, Jokowi has also mentioned that the advancement of connectivity cooperation needs to be supported by the development of ICT infrastructure. Despite acknowledging the BIMP-EAGA setback caused by the pandemic, Jokowi once again reiterated that Indonesia's specific focus was on projects enhancing sea connectivity during the 14th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2021 (SetKab 2021). Sea connectivity is important to bolster sub-regional economic cooperation as it plays a crucial role in supporting trade, tourism, investment, and people-to-people connectivity. At the 16th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2023, Indonesian Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi proposed Indonesia's role as a hub in sea connectivity. He pointed out that as an archipelagic country, Indonesia possesses numerous harbours. The minister advocated that collaborations among harbour management within the four BIMP-EAGA countries are crucial to ultimately establishing a prominent global presence in the logistics sector (Junida & Ruhman 2023). Furthermore, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto argued that revitalizing (transportation) connectivity require the reopening or creation of new routes to support trade and tourism. Rebuilding the tourism sector was a priority to make it resilient and sustainable (Heriyanto & Liman 2022)

Malaysia shares a border with Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam under the West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC), as well as Indonesia and the Philippines under the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC). Like Indonesia, Malaysia takes great interest in connectivity issues. During the 11th BIMP-EAGA Transport Ministers Meeting in October 2016, Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai highlighted the objective to expand the number of townships serviced by flights within the BIMP-EAGA region. This was in line with the ASEAN Sky Policy, in which broadening flight connectivity to smaller cities across this region was a crucial step in enhancing regional integration and accessibility. Meanwhile, Minister of Economy Rafizi Ramli stressed Malaysia's call for a more active involvement of the private sector and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) to capitalize on business opportunities facilitated by these subregional collaborations. He noted that

BIMP-EAGA delivered economic recovery, in which the combined GDP of BIMP-EAGA in 2021 was recorded at US\$358.6 billion, exceeding the 20% target by 2025. Additionally, the total trade in goods surged to US\$65.8 billion in 2022.

The Philippines is part of the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC), which shares its border with Indonesia and Malaysia. Similarly, connectivity remains a recurring theme of focus. During the 15th BIMP-EAGA Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Alfredo Pascual reemphasized the importance of fostering "soft connectivity" to bolster the sub-region's economy (Crismundo 2023). Pascual argued that connectivity opens opportunities for the private sector and MSMEs. The total value of these priority investment projects within BIMP-EAGA stands at USD32.8 billion, enhancing private sector engagement on crucial programs infrastructure projects like roads, bridges, railways, seaports, airports, and technological advancements in information and communications. Furthermore, connectivity develops and promotes sub-regional value chains to augment the region's competitiveness offer opportunities for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

### **3.3. Korean Perspective**

At the 21st ASEAN-ROK Summit in 2020, the South Korean government announced the establishment of the BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to enhance collaboration with countries in Maritime Southeast Asia. Through this partnership with BIMP-EAGA, ROK aims to contribute to the balanced and inclusive growth of Maritime Southeast Asia and establish a cornerstone for its maritime expansion into the Indo-Pacific region (Gu 2022)

Compared to Korea's formal cooperation with GMS since 2011 and the establishment of MKCF in 2013, its engagement with BIMP-EAGA seems relatively delayed (Kim 2023). The limited progress in ROK's collaboration with BIMP-EAGA can be attributed to several factors. First was Korea's tepidness in relation to BIMP-EAGA. Additionally, the decision-making structure and practical negotiation processes within BIMP-EAGA were complex

due to the relatively low level of institutionalization, making it challenging to consider BIMP-EAGA as a fully-fledged international organization. BIMP-EAGA was established in 1994, but the Asian financial crisis in 1997 halted the cooperation's activities. It was not until 2003 that a first summit was held. By adopting VISION 2025 as a development strategy with the support of ADB in 2015, a specific direction and system for cooperation has been established, and practical cooperation has begun. Moreover, the implementation structure was complicated because there were four countries involved, which meant that there were many stakeholders from the private sector, such as local governments and business councils. The multilayered procedural system resulted in lengthy timelines for discussions and implementation, leading to a relatively slow and delayed practical negotiation process and the commencement of cooperation with South Korea (Koh 2023).

Nevertheless, the establishment of BKCF appears to indicate an inclusive, collaborative direction and intent with BIMP members. Furthermore, the ASEAN-specific policy framework of KASI plans to double BKCF until 2027, further solidifying its determination in this regard.

#### **IV. Implementation Projects in BIMP-EAGA**

At the 1st ROK-BIMP-EAGA Senior Officials' Meeting held in 2021, regularizing diplomacy cooperation, delegations, and agreements were formalized. In particular, and in consideration of the needs of BIMP-EAGA countries which were vulnerable to climate change, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively supported environmental interventions by establishing a triangular partnership that includes the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) as a third party. And this fund (approx. 1 million USD) carried out cooperation projects in various areas such as the environment, tourism, and connectivity (MOFA ROK 2021).

The first call was held in December 2021 and two projects were adopted. In 2022, the fund was increased to 3 million US

dollars, prioritizing proposals that provide economic recovery solutions for subregion after COVID-19. Efforts were made to facilitate economic recovery in these areas (BIMP-EAGA 2022). In the third call conducted in 2023, the agricultural and fisheries sectors were included to develop high-quality agricultural products and ensure long-term food security and stable livelihood for farmers in BIMP-EAGA (BKCF 2023b).

<Table 1> provides a list of ongoing BKCF projects from 2021 to 2023. A total of 21 projects have been approved over three rounds of proposals. The most recent call for proposals received applications for 66 projects, indicating an increasing interest in BKCF. However, upon examining the list and details of the selected 21 projects, it becomes evident that the focus is more on multilateral cooperation with individual countries rather than a comprehensive coverage of EAGA, contradicting the implications of subregional cooperation.

<Table 1> 2021~2023 BKCF Project

	Target	Project Title	Proponent
1st	Philippines	Developing Land Management Options for Diverse Cacao-based system in Mindanao	University of Southern Mindanao
	EAGA	Renewable Energy Certificate Potential in the Area of BIMP	ASEAN Center for Energy
2nd	Indonesia	Increasing resilience of small-scale fisheries to climate change impact	Research Center for Fisheries
	Indonesia	Low-emission landscape management in the Meratus Mountains, South Kalimantan	South Kalimantan Forestry Agency
	Malaysia	Waterworks improvement project for rural areas in Sabah	K-water
	Malaysia	Promoting low-carbon schools in East Malaysia	IMT-GT Joint Business Council
	Philippines	Off-grid solar home systems deployment in disaster vulnerable Mindanao	Light of Hope Ph Ventures INC
	Philippines	Creating Livelihood Options through Agroenterprise Development towards the Reinvention of the Municipality of Butig as a Premier Agro-Ecotourism Destination in Lanao del Sur	Peace Corps Incorporated



	Target	Project Title	Proponent
	Philippines	Mainstream energy efficiency in MSME buildings in the Philippines	Department of Trade and Industry
	EAGA	Farm Konek Agri-Tech supply chain platform for BIMP-EAGA markets	Project Zaccheus
3rd	Brunei	Promoting youth engagement and employment in bio-circular-green (BCG) agriculture and food systems for food security	Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies
	Indonesia	Improvement of Eucheumatoid seed production in Indonesia through Gradual Selection and Good Aquaculture Practice	PT SELT Alga, Indonesia
	Indonesia	Strengthening the resilience of social forestry groups to climate change through the development of adaptive coffee	Aku Rimba Indonesia Foundation
	Indonesia	Community-led improved marine management that benefits dugongs, people, and nature in Kalimantan	Yayasan International Animal Rescue Indonesia
	Malaysia	Intelligent water loss management system in Sarawak	WI.Plant Co., Ltd
	Malaysia	Segama integrated catchment management strategy	Forever Sabah
	Philippines	Sustainable intensification through vegetable intercropping in perennial crops farming systems in Zamboanga Peninsula, Mindanao Island	East West Seed Company, Inc.
	Philippines	Smart FARM through internet of things and Biosensing technology for sustainable liberica and arabica nursery coffee production in Mindanao	Varacco Inc
	Philippines	Enabling immediate wireless connectivity to underserved/unserved communities in Mindanao	STEMEd, Philippines, Inc.
	Philippines	A/I machine learning-powered digital monitoring of mangrove ecosystems in Surigao del Sur	Thinking Machines Data Science, Inc.
	EAGA	BIMP-EAGA mission on innovation and SMEs start-ups in South Korea	MSMED Working group

Source: BKCF 2023a

## V. Conclusion

This paper concludes that minilateralism emerged as a favored alternative approach to maintain and enhance ROK-ASEAN collaboration in the face of escalating competition among major powers. It demonstrates efficacy in facilitating prompt collaboration across nations by concentrating on particular concerns and fostering cooperation among governments with similar perspectives. The efficacy of minilateralism is in its capacity to concentrate on specific issues, circumventing the potential for political inertia that is inherent in the ASEAN multilateral framework. Furthermore, minilateralism does not operate in opposition to ASEAN multilateralism; rather, it serves to complement to regional dispositions and forces.

The BIMP-EAGA, functioning as a manifestation of minilateralism, serves as an alternative venue where ROK and ASEAN can cooperate. However, this research discovered that the implementation of BIMP-EAGA falls short of the expectations. The spirit of BIMP-EAGA stresses the subregional character of cooperation. However, the current focus is more on multilateral cooperation with individual countries rather than a comprehensive coverage of EAGA. Furthermore, the agreed upon implemented projects have yet to reflect the shared interests of ASEAN member states on connectivity issues.

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## Indonesia's Efforts in Developing Halal Tourism through the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)

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### [ *Abstract* ]

This research aims to comprehend the progress of Halal tourism in specific Indonesian regions, including Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands. It investigates ways to boost this progress through collaboration within the IMT-GT. Majority of the population in these areas, as in Malaysia and Southern Thailand, is Muslim. Consequently, developing Halal Tourism within the IMT-GT framework poses a challenge for them. While the IMT-GT framework already encompasses the Tourism and Halal Product sectors, it doesn't explicitly mention Halal Tourism aspect. Despite this, efforts to develop Halal Tourism in Indonesia offer opportunities for both domestic growth and taking advantage of proximity to two more advanced neighboring countries, Malaysia and Thailand, in this aspect. This research employs explanatory analysis, examining Indonesia's opportunities and approaches to developing the Halal Tourism sector, both domestically, designed by the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2021-2024, and within the IMT-GT framework itself. A new aspect of this study involves assessing the

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readiness within Indonesia and its correlation with the opportunities provided by the IMT-GT. Indonesia should actively embrace opportunities presented by its two neighboring countries. The recognition through various awards that Indonesia has received can strongly motivate efforts to enhance the preparedness of regions designated for Halal Tourism. The economic corridors established by the IMT-GT among these three countries can serve as a conduit for Indonesia's advancement in developing Halal Tourism.

**Keywords:** Halal tourism, Indonesia, IMT-GT, subregional cooperation

## I . Introduction

The Muslim population across 57 countries forming the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is increasingly engaging in travel with their families and friends, leading to the development of Halal tourism to accommodate this trend (Henderson 2010). The consistent growth of Halal tourism is now a global phenomenon in the tourism industry. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 24% of the world's population, equivalent to around 1.7 billion people, are Muslims and thus potential targets for the Halal tourism industry (Pew Research Center 2017). This sizable potential Muslim tourist demographic has captured the attention of academia, government bodies, and tourism agencies, fostering efforts to enhance Halal tourism. This industry is not only rapidly growing in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia but is also gaining traction in non-Muslim countries such as Thailand, Australia, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan.

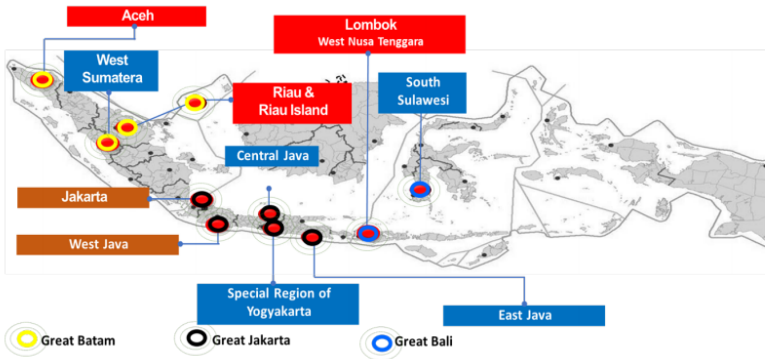
Being the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia holds tremendous potential for the development of Halal tourism, presenting a substantial opportunity. The tourism sector has consistently made a significant contribution to the country's economic growth, emerging as one of the foremost generators of foreign currency profits (Ollivaud & Haxton 2019). Since 2016, the Indonesian government has played a crucial role in advancing the Halal tourism



industry, primarily through the Ministry of Tourism, subsequently renamed the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif - Kemenparekraf). The government has identified ten provinces as key Halal tourism destinations, including Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, Riau Islands, Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, Yogyakarta, East Java, Lombok (Nusa Tenggara Barat), and South Sulawesi (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). Lombok, beginning with its victory at the World Halal Tourism Award in Abu Dhabi in 2015, has emerged as a model for Halal tourism development in other Indonesian regions. During that period, Lombok received recognition as the World Best Halal Destination and World Best Halal Honeymoon Destination (Chotijah 2017).

Receiving global recognition, Lombok is expected to motivate other tourist destinations to actively improve their standards. The key is not Lombok's ability to consistently uphold its global recognition, but rather its potential to inspire other tourist destinations to enhance their standards. These standards include fundamental criteria like Halal food, prayer facilities, water-friendly washrooms, and an environment free from Islamic phobia. In essence, Lombok serves as a model, motivating all stakeholders to enhance and elevate tourist areas to higher standards. The achieved status is a motivating factor for the Local Government of Lombok to uphold Lombok as a comfortable tourist destination, and the continual preservation of its reputation is crucial both on a global and national scale.

The ongoing government initiatives to develop Halal Tourism are currently part of the broader implementation of regional tourism improvement programs in Indonesia. Unlike focusing on the concepts of "Islamization" or "Arabization," the Halal Tourism program aims to enhance the preparedness of tourist destinations, ensuring they meet at least the essential "Need to have" criteria. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy has implemented a comprehensive strategy to enhance the industry. In 2019, the ministry set a target that 5 million foreign tourists visiting Indonesia should be Muslim tourists (Patriella 2019). To achieve this goal, the 10 designated provinces have been actively competing to advance the Halal tourism industry.



Sources: *Rencana Strategis Pengembangan Pariwisata Halal 2019-2024 (Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024)*, Kementerian Pariwisata, 2019.

<Figure 1> Ten Designated Provinces for Halal Tourism in Indonesia

Among the designated provinces, Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands are situated on Sumatra Island, sharing borders with Malaysia and Thailand. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand collaboratively participate in sub-regional cooperation known as the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Within this cooperation, the three countries aim to develop their border regions through economic collaboration, including the advancement of Industry and Halal Product, as well as in the tourism sector. The Halal Product program is an initiative under the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) to amplify the potential of the sub-region as a tourist destination. IMT-GT, functioning as a sub-regional collaboration, contributes to ASEAN connectivity (ASEAN Economic Community) alongside the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) and the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The three types of sub-regional cooperation act as a foundation for ASEAN.

Areas with a predominant Muslim population in Indonesia, Malaysia, and southern Thailand are now incorporating their distinctiveness into tour packages to attract more visitors. From a business standpoint, this could serve as a potential source of regional income with proper support from regulations and infrastructure. However, the social readiness of the local community must be carefully considered and prepared. This paper, utilizing the

qualitative explanative method, seeks to comprehend how Indonesia is developing Halal tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands, and how it can further enhance this development through cooperation in the IMT-GT. This article starts by examining documents and writings from scholars who focus on Halal Tourism issues. Additionally, we analyze issues that have arisen in the three IMT-GT countries since 2016, specifically related to connectivity concerns [infrastructure, institutions, and people-to-people] among these nations, including aspects of social life. In the context of Halal Tourism development within the IMT-GT, each member country is actively working on implementing this program. Indonesia is focusing on the development of this sector, recognizing its substantial potential to contribute to the advancement of the national tourism industry.

## **II . Halal Tourism and Cross-border Tourism Cooperation**

Halal tourism is defined by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as Muslim travelers who do not seek to jeopardize their essential faith-based demands while traveling for a valid purpose (COMCEC Coordinator Office 2016). Halal tourism is a relatively new concept in the tourism industry that tries to cater to Muslim faith-based needs, such as Halal cuisine, Halal transportation, Halal hotels, Halal logistics, Islamic finance, Islamic holiday packages, and Halal spas (Satriana & Faridah 2018). The Halal tourism industry must meet six requirements for Muslim tourists: (1) Halal food and products; (2) prayer facilities; (3) toilet with washing facilities; (4) Ramadan service or fasting; (5) management of tourist attractions and inns ensuring the absence of immoral activities; and (6) provision of facilities for certain activities by men and women (Perbawasari et al. 2019). The terminology of Halal tourism varies in some countries, such as Islamic tourism, Halal travel, Muslim-friendly tourism, and others. Halal tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism are used interchangeably in several IMT-GT documents. In this article, Halal tourism is used because it conforms with the terminology used officially by the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy.

A study by Yusuf, et al., titled "The Determinants of Tourists' Intention to Visit Halal Tourism," (2021) reviews Aceh's readiness for tourism, considering its Islamic ambiance, accessibility, communication, and services as variables that influence tourists' likelihood to visit. Unlike the current article under discussion, this article does not explore external relationships, such as sub-regional cooperation within the IMT-GT. It identifies service quality and the Islamic environment as crucial factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit Aceh. Although not directly related to the ongoing article, these two variables provide important insights when discussing Aceh as a destination for Halal Tourism.

A 2018 report from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), referenced in the Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024, highlighted the tourism sector's significant positive impact on the global economy. As depicted in <Figure 2>, the tourism sector surpassed other industries, contributing 4.60% to global economic growth and providing 9.9% of total employment, amounting to 313 million jobs. Furthermore, the travel and tourism sector accounted for 10.40% of the global GDP. Based on the information presented, it is suggested that fostering the development



Source: "Travel and Tourism Economic Impact World Report" (WTTC), 2018, cited in *Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024*

<Figure 2> Impact of Tourism on Global Economy

of the travel and tourism sector can contribute to "three macro variables such as the GDP, economic growth, and reducing unemployment," as indicated by the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning in 2019.

The growth of the travel and tourism sector is closely tied to the substantial influx of both domestic and international visitors. This progress is notably influenced by the expanding market share of Muslim tourists. According to the 2018 Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) Report, the expenditure by Muslim travelers has surged from USD 220 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach approximately USD 300 billion by 2026. Starting from 2016, the number of Muslim tourists has increased from 121 million to 131 million in 2017 (MasterCard & Crescent 2018), with a continued upward trend in 2018 and 2019, until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

The 2018 GMTI report identified seven factors contributing to the rapid growth of global Halal travel, including the increasing Muslim population, growth of the middle-income Muslim demographic, millennial Muslims, better access to travel information, more travel service providers, Ramadan travel, and travel businesses (MasterCard & Crescent 2018). According to the Global Islamic Economy Report 2018/19, the Halal travel sector is expected to reach USD 274 billion in 2023, up from USD 177 billion in 2017 (Thomson Reuters and Dinar Standard 2018). The report highlighted that many Muslim travelers come from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. These trends are prompting Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, to develop Halal-standard tourist destinations to attract Muslim tourists and seize emerging opportunities. In ASEAN, initiatives like IMT-GT are working on Halal Tourism programs covering Peninsular Malaysia, Southern Thailand, and Sumatra, Indonesia.

According to Pasaribu (2019), the tourism arrivals from Singapore, China, Australia, and Germany to North Sumatra during January-July 2019, for example, exhibited a decline compared to the same period in 2018. Specifically, Singapore saw 10,263 visitors [a reduction of 1,663], China 4,611 visitors [a decrease of 24], Australia

2,980 visitors [a decrease of 83], and Germany 3,186 visitors [a decrease of 478].

Additionally, in July 2019, Malaysian tourists were the most prominent, totaling 9,549 visitors to North Sumatra, followed by the Netherlands with 1,124 visitors, Singapore with 1,023 visitors, China with 777 visitors, Germany with 701 visitors, and Australia with 636 visitors (Pasaribu 2019). The Chief of BPS Aceh, Ahmadriswan Nasution, reported that in December 2022, the number of foreign arrivals in the Aceh Province was at 1,856 individuals. This marked an increase compared to November 2022, which had 457 foreign visitors, and October 2022, with only 266 arrivals. According to data recorded by BPS Aceh, the highest number of foreign tourists in Aceh in 2022 came from Malaysia, totaling 1,447 individuals. Following this were visitors from the United States (203 individuals), the United Kingdom (321 individuals), Germany (41 individuals), Australia (34 individuals), France (30 individuals), Singapore (14 individuals), the Netherlands (7 individuals), New Zealand (4 individuals), Thailand (2 individuals), and 524 tourists from other countries in the Middle East and Africa (Infoaceh.net 2023).

The plan for developing cooperation in Halal tourism within the IMT-GT can be seen as a type of collaboration in cross-border tourism. Cross-border cooperation is when countries or regions work together across shared or non-shared borders to achieve common goals (Gerfert, 2009). In this case, the usual idea of borders as barriers is reduced, and neighboring regions collaborate for sustainable development in border areas. Tourism always involves crossing borders in some way. Even though tourism can change how borders look and work, it's often the border that affects the landscapes, functions, and types of tourism. Some activities, like shopping and tourism, do well in border regions when prices and taxes are lower on one side, or when exchange rates are favorable. From the perspective of people living near borders, tourism growth can change how border regions are set up. For example, in some border areas, tourism facilities have developed near major crossing points so that visitors from other countries can easily enjoy without traveling far into the country.

In the realm of cross-border tourism development, technology and consumer behavior significantly influence how tourists choose their destinations. The contemporary era has become a benchmark for the transformation of consumers' general consumption behaviors. The abundance of information accessible through various technological options provides consumers with numerous choices, but their attention spans are brief. Technology and infrastructure advancements enhance connectivity, enabling travelers to swiftly search for information and make decisions. Many middle-class travelers embark on "once-in-a-lifetime" journeys, often exploring entire countries or even continents. Throughout their travels, they tend to switch between destinations or options, preferring short trips encompassing multiple destinations, whether near or far. In a short timeframe, they aim to maximize the value and enrich their experience. In response, cross-border tourism destinations are adapting to facilitate traveler access and movement, thereby increasing the diversity and value of travel. Short-distance travel is becoming more convenient due to proximity and accessible transport networks. Additionally, combining multiple destinations usually offers better value for money, making efficient use of time and resources. Given these trends, cross-border collaborations like the IMT-GT are deemed essential. Countries may consider combining various sites or tourist attractions with neighboring countries to enhance the overall travel experience.

To boost cross-border tourism, it's crucial to enhance coordination and cooperation in building connectivity among all the involved countries (Guo 2015). Various trends are fueling the growth of cross-border tourism (UNWTO 2014), including 1) making travel easier for more tourists to cross borders; 2) simplifying visa and cross-border formalities; 3) improving transportation networks and offering flexible transport options; 4) encouraging shorter and more frequent active travel; 5) diversifying experiences; 6) allowing access to information through technology; 7) and collaboration among cross-border partners and the development of ecotourism.

As per Kozak and Buhalis (2019), collaboration in cross-border tourism has the potential to create opportunities for all involved parties. Firstly, everyone can benefit by developing innovative

products and marketing strategies, gaining a competitive edge. Secondly, their joint efforts in positioning and branding may boost the yearly influx of visitors and tourism revenue in each destination. Thirdly, mutual assessments can lead to the exchange of new strategies. Fourthly, a wider range of attractions and activities can be offered to customers. From a sociological perspective, both sides can gain a better understanding of each other's values through the exchange of industry practices or cultural visits.

Nevertheless, it's important to underscore certain challenges in cross-border tourism. Firstly, obstacles may arise due to variations in management culture, leadership styles, entrepreneurship, and the historical context of industries and nations. Secondly, the unpredictable nature of political connections might impede the development of effective organizational structures and cross-border networks. Thirdly, cross-border destinations fall under the jurisdiction of multiple administrative organizations with conflicting goals and budgets. Fourthly, managing the sentiments of residents and involving local communities poses difficulties. Furthermore, the lack of financial resources or uneven distribution among member states or destinations could be a root of problem. Lastly, successful cross-border tourism cooperation requires a smart vision, good leadership, and solid teamwork. The development of cross-border tourism between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand is significant in this context, serving as a catalyst for connectivity within the IMT-GT and contributing to the overall strengthening of the ASEAN Economic Community. As IMT-GT, along with other sub-regional cooperation frameworks (GMS, BIMP-EAGA), is integral to ASEAN collaboration, cross-border tourism plays a role in enhancing economic interactions between nations, fostering cooperation within the broader ASEAN context.

### **III. Indonesia's Efforts to Develop Halal Tourism in Sumatra Islands**

#### **3.1. Indonesia's Halal Tourism Concept and Strategy**

In his article "Islamic Tradition and Religious Culture in Halal



Tourism: Empirical Evidence from Indonesia," Sholehuddin draws connections between Islamic traditions and the religious-cultural aspects of halal tourism. He explores how the culture of mutual forgiveness, both outwardly and inwardly, for example, contributes to building harmonious relationships within the community. The Sekaten tradition in Yogyakarta is also highlighted as being linked to the implementation of Islamic values in society. Sholehuddin's work underscores the interplay of traditional cultures with embedded Islamic values in the lives of specific communities. The research provides empirical findings, emphasizing the importance of delineating the relationship between Islamic religious values and halal tourism in Indonesia through Islamic traditions and religious culture. In his article, Sholehuddin lays the groundwork for understanding Halal Tourism by connecting it with traditional cultural practices that inherently contain religious values. Sholehuddin's viewpoint adds depth to our article as we examine it from a different perspective.

In the article by Cipta, Hatamar, and Indrawati, Islamic Sharia serves as the underpinning for community life, as encapsulated in the Minangkabau proverb "*Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah*" (Minangkabau custom is based on Islam and Islam itself is based on the Qur'an). In exploring Minangkabau, West Sumatra, they reinforce our article's comprehension of the direct application of religious values in traditional life. However, their article does not establish a connection to a broader framework, whereas our article aims to explore its relevance within the context of IMT-GT as a sub-regional cooperation.

To promote Halal tourism in 10 specified provinces, the Indonesian government has released the Indonesia Islamic Economic Masterplan 2019-2024 and the National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah-KNEKS) Work Plan for 2020-2024. These documents act as guiding frameworks for the advancement of Halal tourism in the country. Additionally, the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, published by the Deputy for Industrial and Institutional Development of the Ministry of Tourism in 2019, further supports the development of Halal tourism in Indonesia.

In the master plan, Halal tourism is identified as a component of the broader Halal value chain (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). The Masterplan recognizes that the increasing number of destinations and investments in tourism has elevated this sector to a significant contributor to foreign exchange earnings, employment, business growth, and infrastructure development. Furthermore, within the tourism industry, it stands out as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors when compared to others (UNWTO 2014). The awareness of numerous potential tourist attractions that can positively impact the local economy, particularly through Muslim-friendly tourism, motivates Indonesia to foster the development of Halal tourism. According to the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, the prospective areas for Indonesia's Halal tourism include 1) Natural attractions such as beaches, mountains, waterfalls, lakes; 2) Cultural tourism; 3) Educational tourism; 4) Heritage tourism, encompassing structures associated with Islam, such as mosques; and 5) Historical tours, covering the history of Islam's growth in Indonesia (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019).

Halal tourism, as outlined in the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, is described as a comprehensive array of services, facilities, attractions, and accessibility designed to provide and cater to the experiences, needs, and desires of Muslim travelers (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). The precise definition of Halal tourism is crucial to reduce any potential confusion. The initiation of Halal Tourism by Arief Yahya, Indonesia's tourism minister, in 2015 led to protests in various locations, including Lake Toba, Tana Toraja, Bali, Labuan Bajo, and South Sulawesi, with people opposing government programs (Purba 2019). Bali and other provinces also resisted Shariah Tourism in 2019, resulting in its cancellation (Mardiastuti 2019). Non-Muslims in Lake Toba, North Sumatra, expressed skepticism about Halal tourism.

The rejection from certain regions reflects a lack of continuous socialization about the meaning of Halal Tourism by stakeholders before the plan is implemented. Because it is not easy for tourist areas with a majority non-Muslim population to accept the concept of Halal Tourism. It is not wrong if they interpret the concept of

Halal Tourism as the government's intention to carry out Islamization or Arabization. On the other hand, tourist areas with a majority Muslim population, such as Aceh, also cannot escape the question of why Aceh should implement the Halal Tourism program when its region already adheres to Islamic (Shariah) values. Once again, this reflects the ambiguity in interpreting the intended concept of Halal Tourism. If we look at what the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy means, it emphasizes Halal Tourism as an effort to provide, improve, and enhance services, facilities, and everything needed for Muslim travelers, which should be a standard fulfillment for a tourist destination. Therefore, the aim is not to transform tourist destination regions by way of "Islamization" or "Arabization" but to establish standardized facilities for tourist destinations, ensuring comfort for all travelers, regardless of the predominant religious composition in those areas.

To address the challenges, the government needs to communicate that the development of Halal tourism is aimed at providing essential facilities for visitors, such as places of worship, clean and well-maintained toilets, separate wudhu/ritual ablution areas, Halal food options and restaurants, hotels equipped with Qibla signs in each room, and so forth. This initiative has nothing to do with the concept of "Islamization." The government's responsibility is to clarify the Halal tourism concept to those who hold misconceptions. Furthermore, with the incorporation of Muslim-friendly facilities, the destination could be highly appealing to Muslim tourists seeking extended stays at this beautiful lake. It's worth noting that the Halal tourism program currently excludes Lake Toba due to potential challenges that may not be quickly resolved.

Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga Uno, is introducing Halal tourism to rejuvenate the tourism industry in various locations. The government is reinforcing the purpose of the Halal tourism concept, emphasizing that it does not involve transforming tourist spots into religious areas. Instead, the focus is on establishing facilities catering to Muslim tourists, including Halal dining options, Shariah-compliant accommodations, and well-maintained prayer spaces. This aligns with Vice President KH Ma'ruf Amin's statement, who, as the chairman of the Advisory Board of MUI

(Indonesian Ulama Council), emphasized that the perspective of Halal Tourism does not entail converting tourist attractions into Halal spaces but rather ensuring the provision of Halal food in restaurants, the availability of places of worship, and meeting worship standards among accommodations (Sugianto 2021).

Similarly, Sandiaga Uno clarified that Halal Tourism represents an "opportunity and a government focus on enhancing the creative economy sector and does not imply the Islamization of destinations." He stated, "Halal tourism is more focused on being Muslim-friendly. This concept centers on expanding service efforts or providing additional services during travelers' journeys, rather than zoning destinations or creative economy centers" (Muhammad, 2021). Uno emphasized that the implementation of Halal Tourism in Indonesia should involve additional service efforts based on three criteria aligned with GMTI's Halal Tourism Standard: Need to have, Good to have, and Nice to have.

<Table 1> The Gradual Three Criteria of Halal Tourism Standard (GMTI)

	Need to Have	Good to Have	Nice to Have
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Halal Food</li> <li>· Prayer Facility</li> <li>· Water-friendly washrooms</li> <li>· Environment with No Islamic phobia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Unique Islamic Culture (Local Muslim experiences)</li> <li>· Ramadhan Facilities</li> <li>· Social Causes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Recreational spaces with privacy</li> <li>· No Non-Halal Services</li> </ul>

Source: Arranged and compiled from Global Moslem Travel Index

<Tabel 1> illustrates that the primary criteria labeled as "Need to have" are essential for the development of Halal Tourism. The second set, categorized as "Good to have," serves as a complement to the initial criteria, although it does not carry specific qualifications. Simultaneously, the third set adds more value to the Halal facility but does not constitute an immediate requirement. In the context of Halal Tourism in Indonesia, it is imperative for all suggested tourist destinations to meet the initial "Need to have" criteria.

The Indonesian government envisions positioning Indonesia as

a world-class Halal tourism destination. To realize this vision, the government, through the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2019-2024, has outlined nine strategies, which include: 1) enhancing facilities and services for the convenience of tourists; 2) enhancing the appeal for Muslim travelers; 3) improving connectivity among Halal tourist destinations; 4) implementing targeted marketing based on destination, origin, and time, tailored to the preferences of the Muslim travel market; 5) developing promotions and marketing communications for the promotion of Halal tourism; 6) promoting the use of digital media in marketing efforts; 7) enhancing the quality and quantity of human resources; 8) fortifying policies and institutions, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and conducting research; and 9) enhancing industry competence through the development of Muslim-friendly tourist destinations (Kementerian Pariwisata 2019). The effective implementation of these nine strategies requires collaboration and coordination among the government and all stakeholders to promote the 10 designated Halal tourist attractions. Before the Master Plan for Halal Tourism and other government policies, Indonesia already had the "Halal Product Assurance Law" (Government Regulation No. 31 of 2019 and Law No. 33 of 2014). This law is crucial for Halal Tourism, especially for food and beverage products. The importance lies in ensuring that the nine strategies proposed would be ineffective without this Halal Product Assurance.

### **3.2. Halal Tourism Development in Sumatra Islands: Challenges and Opportunities**

Concerning the development of Halal tourism in IMT-GT, the designated Halal tourism destinations in Indonesia, which are also directly linked to the IMT-GT, are the provinces on Sumatra Island. Sumatra Island is part of Indonesia's territory and is a member of sub-national cooperation in IMT-GT. Regarding Halal Tourism, the Government has decided that three provinces of Sumatra, namely Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands, are prioritized regions. West Sumatra and Aceh have achieved international awards in the Halal Tourism Industry. West Sumatra earned the World Halal Tourism Award in 2016 in terms of

being the World's Best Halal Destination, World's Best Culinary Destination, and World's Best Tour Operator. In the same year, Aceh also achieved the World Halal Tourism Award as the World's Best Airport for Halal Travelers and the World's Best Halal Cultural Destination (MasterCard & Crescent Rating 2019). Furthermore, Aceh has successfully secured its position as the second Muslim-friendly tourism destination at the Indonesia Muslim Travel Index (IMTI) Award 2023 (Safrina 2023).

These achievements significantly encouraged Indonesia to promote and improve the Halal tourism industry over the assigned preference zones. However, efforts to make Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands become favorite Halal tourism industry destinations are still facing some challenges. Sharia principles such as cleanliness, qualified products according to established standards, and amenities [hotels, restaurants, travel agents, souvenir shops] for travelers have to be an essential requirement that must be implemented in all tourism sectors (Rozalinda and Nuhasnah, 2021).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist arrivals to Indonesia have decreased. This trend has prompted the Indonesian government to increase the Halal value chain through Halal tourism. The development of Halal tourism in Indonesia has not been smooth since the country seems not too eager to compete in the Halal tourism industry. It had a slower start than other countries, particularly behind Malaysia which is frequently considered its main market competitor. The Halal Tourism Indonesia Association (Perkumpulan Pariwisata Halal Indonesia, PPHI) was only founded in 2012, and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy just published its Halal Tourism Implementation Guideline in 2019, five years after Malaysia (Putri 2020).

The absence of a legal basis as the regulation for Halal tourism implementation could challenge Halal tourism development in Sumatra. The current legal framework for Halal tourism is Law No. 10 of 2009 on Tourism and Act No. 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Guarantee. However, because there is no single item specific to Halal tourism. The two regulations are only sufficient to be utilized as a supplementary legal basis for Halal tourism. The DSN-MUI

(Dewan Syariah Nasional, Majelis Ulama Indonesia) Fatwa Number 08/DSN-MUI [National Sharia Council of the Indonesian Ulama]/X/2016 or The Guidelines for Organizing Tourism Based on Sharia Principles contains comprehensive Halal tourism arrangements. Unfortunately, as is well known, the DSN-MUI fatwa does not have binding legal authority (Susilawati 2019). In 2018, the Minister of Tourism issued a Decree of the Minister of Tourism No. KM.40/UM.001/MP/2018 regarding the Halal Tourism Indonesia Logo, followed by the Halal Tourism Development Strategic Plan in 2019 (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). These documents are insufficient to become a legal umbrella for implementing Halal tourism in Indonesia.

Several regions have issued regional regulations regarding halal tourism, such as West Nusa Tenggara Province Regional Regulation No. 2 of 2016 concerning Halal Tourism, West Sumatra Province Regional Regulation No. 1 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Halal Tourism, and Riau Governor Regulation Number 18 of 2019 concerning Halal Tourism. Aceh Province already has local regulations based on sharia law which is called Qanun. An example is the Qanun of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province No. 11 of 2002, concerning the implementation of Islamic law related to *aqidah*, worship and *syi'ar Islam*, and Qanun No. 8 of 2013 concerning tourism. Qanun that specifically regulates the implementation of halal tourism was issued by the Mayor of Banda Aceh through Banda Aceh City's Qanun Number 3 of 2022.

However, these local government regulations still require comprehensive technical guidance and standardization. This indicates that the development of halal tourism has not been considered crucial in some Indonesian regions. It is not supported by the issuance of local regulations and comprehensive standardization of technical policy that can be a reference for tourism stakeholders. The shortage of regulations and guidance from the central government has made some provincial governments afraid of issuing a policy to develop halal tourism. This problem will hinder local governments and the business community from developing Halal tourism destinations in the long term. Halal tourism will receive more attention if mandated by the central government. To achieve

Indonesia's goal of becoming the best Halal tourism destination, a breakthrough in the process of developing and ratifying the Halal tourism law is required.

Looking specifically at how Indonesia developed Halal tourism in some provinces, in 2020, the National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance published a report entitled: "Report on the Development of Muslim-Friendly Tourism in the Region, 2019-2020." This report contains an assessment of the readiness of several priority destinations for Halal tourism development at the provincial level, assessed from four aspects, namely Access, Communication, Environment, and Services. In this assessment, the scoring for each aspect ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the worst condition and 5 indicating the best condition. <Table 2> shows the assessment for three destinations on Sumatra Island.

<Table 2> Assessment of the Readiness of Halal Tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands

Aspect		Aceh	West Sumatra	Riau and Riau Islands
Access	Air	5	5	4
	Rail	1	3	1
	Sea	5	4	1
	Road	3	4	1
Communication	Muslim Visitor Guide	4	3	1
	Stakeholder Education	5	3	3
	Market Outreach	5	5	5
	Tour Guide	5	5	5
	Digital Marketing	5	5	5
Environment	Muslim Tourist Arrival	5	5	3
	Wi-Fi Coverage	4	4	3
	Commitment to Halal Tourism	4	2	4
Services	Halal Restaurants	5	5	5
	Mosque	5	5	5
	Airports	5	5	5
	Hotels	5	4	5
	Attraction	5	5	1
Total Score		76	72	57

Source: *Laporan Perkembangan Pariwisata Ramah Muslim Daerah 2019-2020 (Report on the Development of Muslim-Friendly Tourism in the Region, 2019-2020)*, Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah, 2020



According to <Table 2>, Aceh and West Sumatra have relatively good conditions, while Riau and Riau Islands are still lagging. Aceh has the highest score in air and sea connectivity in the aspect of access. Aceh has a strategic geographical position on Sumatra Island, a gateway in the Strait of Malacca from Indonesia's side. This advantageous geographical connection made Aceh easily connect with neighboring countries. Besides, Aceh has also been exposing its economic corridor within the ongoing Halal Tourism project of IMT-GT since Aceh is included in one of the IMT-GT Economic Corridor (EC).

The Sultan Iskandar Muda International airport in Aceh is listed as the 23rd busiest airport in Indonesia and awarded the World's Best Airport for Halal Travelers in the World Halal Tourism Awards 2016 (Airlineshq.com 2017). The availability of air connectivity enlarges the opportunity for Aceh to attract many tourists worldwide via Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Sandiaga S. Uno, stated that many foreign tourists who come to Aceh are not from the Middle East but mainly from Malaysia. Singapore comes in as second (Stuka Aceh 2021).

Apart from tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, another potential group to tap for Aceh Halal tourism are those coming from Thailand. Aceh can benefit from the Ranong-Phuket-Aceh connection in EC 5 IMT-GT. Aceh should consider Phuket a source of foreign tourists, as Phuket has become the most popular destination for global tourists. In this case, Sabang (Aceh) is the one who can profit from the connectivity in the EC 5. Unfortunately, there is still no direct flight between Aceh and Phuket, and connectivity is only through cruise and yacht routes. The Sabang International Regatta, which has been held since 2011 and has been changed into to the Sabang Marine Festival in 2015, is an annual festival that attracts yachters from Asia and Europe to Aceh. One of the yacht routes used is the Triangular Sailing Passage between the three points of Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi (JPNN.com 2017). This route was opened in 2017 and takes place on an annual basis, but in 2023 it was not implemented due to unfavorable weather conditions.

Connectivity among Aceh, Malaysia, and Thailand is an excellent opportunity for Sabang because Phuket is one of the world's yacht centers. Apart from the Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi corridor, another corridor, the Aceh-Krabi-Langkawi, is also an important spot for cross-border tourism. The air connectivity from Sabang to Phuket or Sabang to Langkawi will undoubtedly stimulate a flow of tourists coming to Sabang.

Further efforts that need to be developed by the government are how to market Sabang not only for marine tourism but also for Halal tourism, which is also an advantage of Aceh as it is well known as "Serambi Mekkah" (the Veranda of Mecca). Thus, Aceh also needs to improve infrastructure and connectivity within the region. As shown in <Table 2>, land access and rail transport in Aceh have not yet reached a satisfactory level. Aceh still does not have rail access, and only 46 percent of the total 1,781.72 km of roads are in good condition. Access to tourist attractions requires more attention (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

In developing Halal tourism in Aceh, all the existing connectivity will also depend on the readiness of Aceh to meet the Halal tourism industry standard with all proper hospitality, medical services, food and beverage, clean water supply. Take Sabang for example. Sabang has frequently been conducting World Yacht Competition and has become a cruise ship destination. Based on field research conducted by the authors in 2016, tourists in Sabang only come and take a few days to stay before they return to cruise. When the authors conducted fieldwork in Sabang in 2016, the Sabang Area Concession Agency (Badan Pengusahaan Kawasan Sabang-BPKS) explained that it has not been fully equipped with proper accommodations. Only backpacker tourists could stay longer and check in at hotels rated as three stars or below. This needs to change.

However, since Sabang plays the role of one of the tourism preference destinations, the government has been improving all the needed tourist attractions by enforcing coordination among the private sector, government, and community. Currently, many hotels

and resorts are in much better condition in Sabang. Sabang has already been growing its tourism industry, being known to be "the Golden Island" [one of 501 "Golden Islands" according to Great Britain Publishing] (Afif, 2018). Even though Sabang is not directly focused on Halal tourism, progress in the tourism industry will positively impact the efforts of the Halal tourism industry in Aceh.

Moreover, to develop an international network with neighboring countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand, Aceh has already played soft diplomacy by exposing its unique culture, culinary tours, and historical sites. In 2017, the province of Aceh had declared its vision to become a world-class tourism destination, with Halal tourism as a priority, following the government program of "the 3As" (Amenities, Accessibility, and Attraction) to make an excellent and Muslim-friendly environment in Aceh (Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata Aceh 2017). The government also published five visitor guidebooks in English and Arabic to accommodate Muslim tourists worldwide. The Aceh local government shows a reasonably good commitment compared to the West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands. The local governments are actively holding workshops to improve Halal tourism in their respective regions, such as FGD for Formulation of Halal Industry-Based Islamic Economic Masterplan, FGD for Synchronizing Development of Muslim Friendly Tourism Programs in Aceh Province, Muslim Friendly Tourism Campaign for Families, and Technical Guidance for Muslim Friendly Tourism Development (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

Compared to Aceh, West Sumatra does not have a geographical advantage because it is not directly connected to Malaysia and Thailand. Besides, it is also not yet included in IMT-GT's economic corridors. Therefore, air flights from Minangkabau International Airport to Phuket, Thailand, or Alor Setar Malaysia, Malaysia, have connected West Sumatra to neighboring countries. Furthermore, international flights from Padang Pariaman to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Padang Pariaman to Singapore provide convenient access for foreign Muslim tourists from other countries to visit West Sumatra via Singapore and Malaysia. This connectivity can become an opportunity for West Sumatra to develop its Halal tourism. West

Sumatra has a better condition than Aceh and Riau/Riau Islands in terms of connectivity within the region.

Together with Aceh, West Sumatra is also one of the mainstays in implementing Halal tourism in Sumatra. Rahmayanti, et al. (2021) conclude that there are 27 criteria of opportunities for West Sumatra in improving Halal tourism, including a growing creative industry, plenty of cultural and historical tourist destinations, specific culinary destinations, beautiful mountains and beaches, and comfortable hotel accommodations. They mentioned that “the population of West Sumatra, which is almost 100 percent Muslim, has great potential for development of Halal tourism” (ibid.). Halal tourism is a part of the general tourism industry, which aims to facilitate the needs of Muslim tourists by referring to Islamic rules (Rozalinda and Nurhasnah, 2019). These opportunities can be captured and implemented if various challenges faced by West Sumatra can be addressed and overcome.

Based on the assessment in <Table 2>, West Sumatra still lacks stakeholder education and commitment to Halal tourism. This assessment is in line with the result of the study of Rahmayanti et al., which stated that lack of public understanding of the concept of Halal tourism, socialization from the government to the community, facilities for the development of Halal tourism, and travel agencies that provide services to tourists are challenges for Halal tourism in West Sumatra (Rahmayanti et al. 2021). According to Yenita and Widodo (2021), the level of people's awareness of the tourism sector's critical role, which can contribute significantly to the local economy, remains low. There remains concern about the large number of tourists visiting West Sumatra, which will negatively impact local morals and customs (Yenita and Widodo 2021). The government's task is to provide continuous understanding and socialization on the purpose of Halal tourism implementation to the community in West Sumatra.

However, it does not mean that the West Sumatra government is not trying to increase halal tourism in its respective region. West Sumatra has published an English-language guidebook for Muslim tourists. They have also conducted halal tourism socialization,

though not as frequently as in Aceh, primarily through a Muslim-friendly tourism campaign and several tourism events such as the Minangkabau Fashion Festival, Nusantara Marandang, Sumarak Syawal, and the Tabuk Festival (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020).

Among the three designated provinces in Sumatra, Riau and Riau Islands are provinces where readiness levels lagged. The main problems in these provinces lie in the inadequate connectivity and infrastructure as seen in the assessment in <Table 2>, only the air access got a score of (4), while sea, rail, and road access only got (1). There are two international airports in Riau and the Riau Islands, namely Sultan Syarif Kasim Airport in Pekanbaru and Raja Haji Fisabilillah Airport in Tanjung Pinang. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sultan Syarif Kasim Airport has direct flights to and from Malaysia, Singapore, Malacca, and Medina. Meanwhile, Raja Haji Fisabilillah Airport has direct flight routes to five cities in China, namely Chongqing, Hanzhou, Ningbo, Chengdu, and Wenzhou.

In fact, Riau and Riau Islands have considerable halal tourism potential. As the Malay homeland in Indonesia, Riau and Riau Islands have a rich Islamic culture, customs, and literature. Malay Arabic letters are widely used and Malay teaching guidebooks are available. In addition, several historical heritage sites of the Riau Malay kingdom, such as Kesultanan Siak Sri Inderapura in Riau and Kesultanan Lingga-Riau in the Riau Islands, strengthen the role of Islam in the lives of society, government, and organizations in those two provinces (Suryani and Bustaman 2021). Riau and Riau Islands' geographical location close to Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Singapore are beneficial for Halal tourism development.

Nonetheless, inadequate access and facilities in Riau and the Riau Islands are significant challenges. No matter how wonderful the attraction is, it is ineffective if tourists cannot reach it in a reasonable amount of time and without inconvenience. There is no rail transportation in this area, and road access is limited compared to Aceh and West Sumatra. From the whole province's road area of 1,374 kilometers, only 391 kilometers have been paved (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020). Moreover, access to

and from the tourist attractions is inadequate, as some of which cannot even be reached by four-wheeled vehicles. Even if it is reachable by car, it will take a long time due to the road quality. Even some tourist attractions cannot be reached by road and must be accessed by motorboat (Suryani and Bustaman, 2021). Aside from road infrastructure, adequate accommodation following halal tourism standards, such as separate toilets and ablution facilities for guests, and separate swimming pool facilities for men and women, must also be considered. The local and the central government need to work hand in hand to improve the existing infrastructure and accommodation in these provinces to support a more effective promotion of halal tourism.

Aside from the lack of a regulation from the central government to serve as a guide as well as the limitations of infrastructure and accommodation to meet the needs of foreign Muslim tourists, another issue encountered in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands is the lack of awareness and support for halal tourism from the people. The government faces a challenge because there is still a lack of awareness about obtaining Halal certification (Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning 2019). In an area where most of the population is Muslim, the general perception is that all products provided and sold are perceived as Halal products. Only a few realize that Halal certification can provide reassurance for inbound Muslim tourists. Many entrepreneurs continue to face challenges in carrying out standard Halal procedures. There is a belief that obtaining Halal certification necessitates extensive and time-consuming bureaucratic paperwork. According to the result of field research conducted by Mastan East Java in 2018-2020, many local businesses think that they are already Muslim, thus they do not need to convince others about the Halal status of their products and services or they simply take a shortcut by printing out a Halal label and sticking it on their products. In contrary, both Malaysia and Thailand have demonstrated a high level of awareness and commitment to Halal certification, making significant progress in promoting and catering to the needs of Muslim consumers. In comparison to Indonesia, both Malaysia and Thailand have made significant strides in promoting Halal certification and awareness.

Malaysia established the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) which plays a crucial role in instilling Halal awareness and certification. Similarly, Thailand has a Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT) responsible for determining and announcing Thai Halal standards, indicating a high level of awareness and regulation (Mawardi et al. 2021).

Even though Aceh is one of the provinces that follow Islamic sharia law, many local businesses do not obtain a Halal certificate. Twelve eateries in Aceh have already been certified as Halal, but 1,448 restaurants do not have Halal certificates and are only self-proclaimed Halal restaurants. West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands experienced the same thing. Simply 20 restaurants in West Sumatra have Halal certificates, while the remaining 1,300 restaurants are only self-declared Halal. There are 16 Halal-certified restaurants in Riau and the Riau Islands, while 2,321 eateries are only self-proclaimed Halal (Komite Nasional Ekonomi dan Keuangan Syariah 2020). Aceh already has Aceh Qanun Number 8 of 2016 which is governing the Halal Product Guarantee System. However, some people still may not grasp the regulations; this may be due to the government's insufficient communication with the people.

Another obstacle is a scarcity of qualified human resources, which will impact the quality of service in Halal Tourism destinations. People working in popular tourist destinations must be knowledgeable about tourism, the provisions, and the standards of halal tourism and have adequate language skills. The availability of high-quality human resources will eventually affect tourist satisfaction. To address the issues, the central government can collaborate and coordinate with the local government, business sector, and the people to encourage each region to increase the competitiveness of halal tourism in their respective regions. Besides, central and local governments can benefit from existing international cooperation, such as the IMT-GT, to help promote and improve the quality of halal tourism in their regions.

## **IV. Indonesia's Halal Tourism Development and the IMT-GT Cooperation**

### **4.1. Halal Tourism Development Under the IMT-GT's Framework**

After taking off in 1993, IMT-GT became a strategic international economic cooperation for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, involving education, culture, human resources, trade and investment, tourism, and Halal industry. IMT-GT effectively assists, promotes, and encourages economic growth through integration and economic innovation between countries and regions. As a growth triangle, IMT-GT is a unique form of international cooperation that takes advantage of untapped cross-border complementarities within geographical proximity. In the IMT-GT, there are seven strategic pillars, namely, agriculture and agro-based industry, tourism, Halal products and services, transport and ICT connectivity, trade and investment facilitation, environment, and human resource development, education, and culture. The seven pillars have been identified as key focus areas that will produce the most significant economic and social impact on the IMT-GT (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2017a).

One of the IMT-GT's strengths is tourism development, since the sub-region is gifted with a diversified geographic landscape and cultural history that attracts visitors. IMT-GT aims to bring 109 million foreign tourists to the region by 2036 (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2017b). To achieve this goal, IMT-GT has launched the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021. The program's implementation is carried out under the Working Group on Tourism (WGT), which aim to maximize and promote the tourism potential in the sub-region. The programs of WGT are consolidated with the strength of IMT-GT and strategic directives. IMT-GT Tourism programs persistently revolve around cross-border tourism. The geographical and cultural proximity among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand allows IMT-GT to market this region as a tourism package/hub with specific thematic tourism, such as medical, marine, and heritage.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> IMT-GT Tourism Forum held in Langkawi, Kedah, in



October 2018, the IMT-GT Tourism Packages were completed and launched (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2021). In the 29<sup>th</sup> IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting held in Batam, Riau Island, on September 29, 2023, the ministers of the three countries acknowledged the progressive recovery of the subregion's tourism following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To promote the Visit IMT-GT Year 2023-2025 initiative, the IMT-GT countries launched a campaign on promoting Muslim-friendly tourism. Part of this effort is publishing guidelines on their website (<https://imtgt.org/visit-imtgt/>) for Muslim-friendly tourism and gastronomy tourism routes. The guidebook provides comprehensive information on Muslim-friendly travel routes and highlights notable attractions in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. It includes detailed recommendations for halal dining options and accommodations that cater to the needs of Muslim tourists.

Halal tourism in IMT-GT has the potential to expand in the future. Halal products and services are essential for the IMT-GT as the subregion has a sizeable Muslim population. The increasing awareness of Muslims towards the importance of living a life in conformity with Islamic law makes the demand for Halal products and services grow. The IMT-GT countries have acknowledged the need to set internationally recognized Halal standards for current products and services, including tourism (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation 2021). With the rise in Muslim travelers, the IM-GT accommodated this upcoming tourism trend and niche market and initiated Muslim Friendly Tourism (MFT) as a new proposed program in WGT. The development of this program will be incorporated with WG of Halal Products and Services (WGHAPAS).

The IMT-GT cooperation aims to address the demands of Halal tourism by expanding the market and meeting the needs of Muslim tourists from all over the world by establishing a hub in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Regrettably, the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021 have yet to classify Halal tourism as a cross-border thematic circuit and route. In the document, the potential cross-border thematic circuits and routes only covered marine, cultural heritage, and ecotourism adventure circuits. However, the Tourism Strategic Framework

mentioned that developing and implementing a new Halal Destination Standard is categorized as one of the IMT-GT projects, to raise the tourism sector's competitiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness (IMT-GT 2017).

Among IMT-GT member countries, Malaysia was the first to standardize Halal tourism and successfully promote Halal tourism globally. Thus, Malaysia contributes to Halal tourism in IMT-GT by sharing its experiences and strategies for developing Halal tourism. For instance, on August 19, 2021, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) of the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture held the "IMT-GT Webinar: Understanding Muslim-friendly Tourism." The webinar showcased Malaysia's commitment to developing and promoting Islamic Tourism by introducing the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality concept. In the webinar, Datuk Wira Dr. Noo Zari, the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, & Culture Malaysia, and the Chairman of ITC, emphasized that Malaysia is willing to support Halal tourism in IMT-GT through the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC). Webinars, training sessions, research, industry consultation, and standards and certification development will help promote growth in the Islamic tourism market through more robust regional economic integration and innovation (ITC 2021).

The future development of Halal tourism in IMT-GT will require the commitment of the three members countries and the collaboration of several IMT-GT working groups (WGs) since the development of Halal tourism involves other Halal production value chains, such as the availability of Halal food and beverage, hospitality, and transportation that following the Islamic Sharia. Moreover, the availability of infrastructure that supports connectivity among the three countries and the improvement of the quality of tourism operators are essential in developing Halal tourism in the region. Thus, effective consultation and coordination must be established, not only between WGT and WGHAPAS, which are the two main WGs for developing Halal tourism projects in IMT-GT, but also with the WG on Transport and ICT Connectivity (WGTIC) and WG on HRD, Education, and Culture (WGHREDEC).

#### **4.2. Developing Indonesia's Halal Tourism through the IMT-GT**

The Indonesian National Committee for Islamic Economic and Finance Work Plan 2020-2024 recognized the need for international cooperation initiatives to advance the Halal industry and tourism in Indonesia. Even though the work plan emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, it does not explicitly mention IMT-GT's role in developing Halal tourism in Indonesia, particularly in Sumatra. In fact, in the National Development Plan of Indonesia (RPJMN 2020-2024), IMT-GT has been identified as one of the international cooperation initiatives that are beneficial to expanding investment, trade, and diversifying regional and global markets for Sumatra Island.

In the previous section, nine strategies for developing Halal tourism in Indonesia have been described. The implementation of the nine strategies is still primarily focused on domestic development, with little consideration is given to the use of international cooperation as part of the strategy. Sumatra Island's inclusion in the IMT-GT opens the opportunity for Indonesia to take advantage of the physical and institutional connections within the IMT-GT to promote Halal tourism in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands. The cross-border cooperation in IMT-GT is carried out to complement each member's needs to add value to the development of Halal tourism in the IMT-GT.

According to the principles of comparative advantage and mutual complementarity, cross-border cooperation could greatly benefit all participants in the area (Guo 2015). Given that Indonesia has the world's and Southeast Asia's largest Muslim population, the country has a sizable Halal market. Malaysia has a well-developed Halal ecosystem and a strong Halal brand, while the strength of Thailand is its Halal science and technology. In carrying out Halal tourism programs, particularly in Sumatra, Indonesia can utilize the complementarities among the three countries. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have sufficiently put their concern to Halal tourism as one of many potential economic fields for their national economic growth.

Cooperation for Halal tourism development in IMT-GT can be started by leveraging each other's strengths. Knowledge sharing, technology transfer, cross-border value chain development, and regulatory harmonization related to Halal standardization in the region are all critical. In IMT-GT, Malaysia is a country with a relatively developed Halal ecosystem and strong Halal branding capabilities. Meanwhile, Thailand leads the way in research and the application of digital technology to the development of Halal tourism. Through collaboration in the IMT-GT, Indonesia can learn from Malaysia and Thailand. To improve its Halal tourism destination branding, for example, Indonesia can participate in Halal tourism exhibitions held by Malaysia, such as the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), as Indonesia did in 2018 (Maria 2021). This effort is consistent with Indonesia's Halal tourism work plan, which emphasizes the importance of participating in sustainable Halal tourism exhibitions both at home and abroad.

In addition, from Thailand, Indonesia can learn how to increase awareness of the importance of Halal standardization and certification. Although Thailand is not a Muslim majority country, it is the world's fifth largest exporter of Halal products. In 2015, approximately 3,600 Thai companies held the overall Halal certification, covering 120,000 different products, with an export volume increase of 10% per year (Wiryapong 2015). Thailand believes that standardization and Halal certification are essential because tourism activities must include values that are in accordance with the needs of Muslim tourists. In addition, this is also related to Thailand's vision to establish itself as a hub for scientific research and testing of halal product certification. To promote halal tourism, Thailand launched a branding initiative called "Thailand Diamond Halal" to promote all halal products and services from Thailand, including halal tourism. The brand was created through a collaboration between the Halal Science Center of Chulalongkorn (HASCI) at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, and the Thai Halal Standards Institute. All hotels with Muslim-friendly facilities, tour operators offering Muslim heritage tour packages, and Muslim-friendly tours

must apply for this brand. Indonesia can adopt this strategy to enhance awareness of halal certification among businesses.

Aside from information sharing, another collaboration that Indonesia can do through the IMT-GT is to use the economic corridor that has been established in the IMT-GT to promote Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and the Riau Islands through its connectivity with Malaysia and Thailand. The geographical and cultural proximity of the Sumatra Islands to Malaysia and southern Thailand encourages collaboration to establish IMT-GT as a Halal tourism package/hub. Due to their geographical proximity, the three countries have potential tourism products that can be sold as a cross-border Halal tour package. However, there is one thing that also needs to be taken into consideration. As many Halal tourism activities are located in southern Thailand, the conflict in the locality could create problems as a result of ongoing conflicts and violence related to separatist movements. This instability and security concerns could deter Muslim tourists from visiting the region, impacting the overall appeal of the sub-region as a Halal tourism destination.

On the other hand, if Thailand can successfully develop Halal tourism, it can potentially help manage the conflict in the southern part of the country by promoting economic growth and stability in the region. By investing in Halal-friendly facilities and services, the government and private sector can create job opportunities and stimulate the local economy, providing an alternative source of income for communities affected by the conflict. This economic development can contribute to reducing poverty and addressing some of the underlying grievances that fuel the conflict in Southern Thailand. Furthermore, the promotion of halal tourism in the sub-region can also foster greater cultural understanding and tolerance. As Muslim-friendly facilities and services are established, it can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for both local Muslim communities and Muslim tourists, potentially fostering greater social cohesion and harmony in the region. Additionally, the focus on halal tourism development can also attract international attention and investment in the region, potentially leading to increased infrastructure development and improved connectivity,

which can benefit the overall development and stability of the southern provinces.

Overall, the development of Halal tourism in the IMT-GT has the potential to contribute to economic growth, social cohesion, and international investment for provinces that are included in IMT-GT cooperation, particularly through the development of the economic corridors. Currently, Aceh is included in the two economic corridors (EC) in the IMT-GT, namely EC 3 (Banda Aceh-Medan- Pekanbaru-Palembang Economic Corridor) and EC 5 (Ranong-Phuket-Aceh Economic Corridor). EC 5 has already started promoting this area for marine tourism. As mentioned in the previous section, Aceh, in particular Sabang, benefits from the existing connectivity in EC 5. In addition to Aceh, Riau is also part of EC 4 (Dumai - Melaka Economic Corridor), a maritime corridor that connects Sumatra Island and the Malay Peninsula through the two strategic ports of Dumai and Melaka. This maritime corridor has a long freight and passenger traffic that traverses Sumatra and Malaysia. Connectivity in EC 4 is primarily used for trade purposes. Indonesia needs to see this connection as an opportunity to develop Halal tourism in Riau. Unlike Aceh and Riau, West Sumatra has not yet joined the EC in the IMT-GT, but it has the potential to be included in EC 3, which will cover the entire mainland Sumatra, both west and east coasts. It is hoped that the existence of EC 3 will facilitate the development of land infrastructure in Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands.

The long COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the economic corridors of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Travel restrictions and border closures hindered the flow of goods, services, and people across the corridors, reducing trade volume, and foreign direct investments. The tourism industry has been severely impacted in the three countries, particularly affecting tourist destinations within the economic corridors. However, the long-term impact of the pandemic on IMT-GT economic corridors has undoubtedly triggered a period of adaptation and transformation. Recovery efforts focus on strengthening physical and digital connectivity, fostering innovation, and promoting cross-border collaboration to build a more resilient and adaptable economy in the region. As acknowledged during the

29th IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting in September 2023, the Ministers expressed satisfaction with the subregion's economic recovery, which saw a trade value of US\$727 billion in 2022. This represents a US\$109 billion gain compared to the US\$618 billion recorded in 2021. The Ministers acknowledge the advancements achieved in the halal industry and express their approval of technology-based initiatives including Halal Blockchain, Online Halal Registration Systems, and Halal Integrated Information Systems, which contribute to the development of IMT-GT Halal cooperation.

Cultural diversity, natural beauty, and the unique ecosystem in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are IMT-GT tourism assets. Combined with physical connectivity, adequate infrastructure, and transportation, it has the potential to make IMT-GT one of the best tourist destinations in the world. Aceh, Penang, Melaka, Phuket, and Krabi have always been popular destinations for IMT-GT visitors. For example, in 2018, seven cruise ships and 96 yachts called on the port of Sabang. Tourist arrivals in Sabang Port have been increasing, reaching over 6,000 international visitors and close to 737,000 domestic visitors in 2017 (Guina 2023). Meanwhile, in Aceh, the total number of foreign tourists who visited in 2019 reached 34,465 visitors. The numbers declined in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but has begun to increase and reached 20,467 in 2023 (BPS Provinsi Aceh, 2023).

The preservation of local wisdom rich in Islamic lifestyles in developed tourist destinations can also encourage the involvement of all elements of society in economic development along the border. Other factors that also need to be considered in marketing IMT-GT as a Halal tourism package is the ease of travel throughout and to the IMT-GT region, which can support the mobilization of foreign tourists to halal tourist destinations in three countries. Therefore, the IMT-GT member countries' regulations must be coordinated and harmonized to ease foreign tourists' mobilization.

Infrastructure and institutional improvements that can support halal tourism must then be assisted by integrated tourism development among its components. The IMT-GT Implementation Blueprint 2017-2021 stated that the Halal products and services

cooperation is built to promote and transfer capacity and develop networking among Halal research centers in universities in the IMT-GT. On September 25-29, 2017, the University of Bangka Belitung (UBB) in Indonesia hosted the University Network (UNINET) meeting, a cooperation network between universities in IMT-GT member countries. At the event, Dr. Nor Lelawati Jamaluddin, a lecturer from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia, shared the experiences of Malaysia in managing their Halal tourism development from which Indonesia and Malaysia may learn (Maria 2021).

Cooperation through the IMT-GT's UNINET can support one of Indonesia's nine Halal tourism development strategies, namely improving the quality and quantity of human resources. UNINET has become a strategic forum for various sciences and technicalities among IMT-GT members in applying the Halal concept to many businesses and products. Collaboration can be carried out through UNINET in the form of training for business sectors and communities in halal tourist destinations and joint research on the demand characteristics of Muslim tourists and their behavior to design tourism products and services that meet the needs of Muslim tourists globally.

Given that Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are all concerned about developing Halal tourism, a collaboration between these three countries will be able to promote IMT-GT as a hub that focuses on leveraging the combined strengths of the three countries in the Halal tourism and industry for the global market. However, how IMT-GT institutionalizes its halal tourism cooperation at the subregional level must be considered in the future, given that halal tourism is not explicitly mentioned in the IMT-GT Tourism Strategic Framework 2017–2036 and Action Plan 2017–2021 as part of Potential Cross-Border Thematic Circuits and Routes. Moreover, the program's implementation is highly dependent on effective coordination and collaboration between WGT and WGHAPAS. Meanwhile, for Indonesia, the synergy between domestic halal tourism strategies and projects with existing IMT-GT programs is required to support the success of halal tourism development, particularly in Sumatra.



## V. Conclusion

The Halal tourism effort in Indonesia has been conducted despite the limitations. Indonesia has identified 10 halal tourist destinations, each appealing to foreign visitors. In addition, Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy has developed nine strategies to support the development of halal tourism in the country. According to the MasterCard & Crescent Rating on Global Muslim Travel Index 2018, Indonesia is the second most visited country by Muslim tourists worldwide. This factor shows how Halal tourism can be potentially beneficial for its border development and national economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although there are opportunities to develop halal tourism, Indonesia still faces several challenges, such as the unavailability of the highest regulations for the implementation of halal tourism in Indonesia, inadequate connectivity and access to tourist destinations, poor facilities such as the restrooms and prayer rooms at several local halal destinations, lack of qualified human resources, as well as the low awareness of the importance of halal certification for the food and beverage in the Halal tourism destinations.

To improve its Halal tourism development, Indonesia can benefit from international cooperation, such as IMT-GT. Within the scope of its collaboration, IMT-GT focuses on developing thematic cross-border tourism, and Halal tourism has the potential to be developed in this region. In this context, Aceh, West Sumatra, Riau, and Riau Islands are included in Indonesia's ten designated Halal tourism destinations and part of the Indonesian border area in Sumatra Island that participates in IMT-GT.

Even though the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy is a member of the IMT-GT's WGT, IMT-GT has not been identified as a potential opportunity to develop Halal tourism on Sumatra Island. Indonesia can benefit from the comparative advantages between the IMT-GT member countries. Indonesia has a sizable Halal market, Malaysia has a well-developed Halal ecosystem and a strong Halal brand, while Thailand has scientific and technological advantages for the Halal tourism industry. Furthermore,

the geographical and cultural proximity of the three countries can be leveraged to create a halal tourism destination product that is appealing to foreign tourists.

Cooperation that can be carried out through IMT-GT, for instance, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, may use existing mechanisms such as working groups in IMT-GT to share information and experience in developing halal tourism. To market halal tourism destinations in IMT-GT as a package, they can optimize the connectivity existing in the economic corridors. Moreover, Indonesia can also utilize networks between universities in UNINET IMT-GT to support the development of halal tourism through business and public training and joint research to improve the quality of halal tourism in each country. To face the challenges of developing halal tourism in the future, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand need to establish effective coordination and work together to ensure that the development of halal tourism in this sub-region can be properly institutionalized through the IMT-GT.

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## United Arab Emirates' Soft Power Approaches towards Indonesia (2015-2022)\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia have been going on for almost five decades. However, the cooperation between the two countries was still very limited at the beginning of diplomatic relations. As time went by, this cooperation began to expand, especially after Jokowi's visit to the United Arab Emirates in 2015. After this visit, the United Arab Emirates also showed increased interest in Indonesia and started to aggressively exercise soft power in Indonesia. Agreement after agreement have been signed, not only in the economic, political, and security sectors, but also in other areas. This phenomenon of increasing cooperation is one form of success in the soft power exercised by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia. Therefore, this research will look at the United Arab Emirates' soft power strategy towards Indonesia from 2015-2022. The concept developed by Joshua Kurlantzick is used to analyze using four important indicators that include

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educational cooperation, religious exchanges, humanitarian assistance, as well as cultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** Soft power, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates

## I . Introduction

It cannot be denied that Asia is increasingly becoming a significant player on the international stage in the 21st century. Strategic opportunities in Asia have even been explored by the Gulf Countries Council (GCC) countries since the 1980s, when Western economies began weakening due to inflation; on the other hand, Asian economies were increasingly showing growth (Jensen 2017). Through the "pivot to Asia" policy, the GCC countries, including the United Arab Emirates, saw good potential in Asia not only for an expansion of economic and geopolitical interests (Janardhan 2020).

In the context of Southeast Asia, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries play an important role in increasingly competitive economic growth. This makes ASEAN more attractive to Middle Eastern countries. The "Look East Policy" (LEP) also proves that countries in Asia and ASEAN are increasingly receiving more attention from the Gulf countries (Talbot and Tramballi 2020). One form of implementation of the "Look East Policy" can be seen in the cooperation established between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia. Indonesia began diplomatic relations with the UAE in 1976 and the relationship commenced with cooperation in the economic and political fields (Bagis 2021). Subsequently, these two countries began to show increased closeness in the last eight years (Djalal 2021). Dozens of Memoranda of Understanding in various sectors have been signed, which shows that the cooperation being established is increasingly expansive (Hendartyo 2022). For instance, the total values of trade between Indonesia and the UAE reached US\$ 3 billion in 2020 and the same figured reached US\$ 4 billion in 2021, an increase of US\$ 1 billion or 37.8% (ibid.). Furthermore, in mid-July 2022, the two countries signed a comprehensive economic cooperation through the Indonesia-United Arab Emirates-Comprehensive Economic

Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA) which is expected to increase the value of trade between the two countries to up to three times (Abdulkader 2022). This IUEA-CEPA is also based on Dubai's potential as the world's main logistics center. The strategic positioning of Dubai makes it an agent for developing business partner networks and expanding the market for Indonesian products to the Middle East, Africa and Europe (Embassy Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi n.d.).

The relationship between the two countries is not limited to political and economic partnerships. For Indonesia, the UAE is a strategic partner in establishing bilateral relations because it also has a predominantly Muslim population (Kusnandar 2021; World Population Review, n.d.). Therefore, this common identity has become a catalyst for the two countries to strengthen cooperative relations through soft power strategies. Soft power activities from the UAE emanate from the closeness between Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) and President Jokowi, who have visited each other several times (Rakhmat et al. 2021). Apart from that, both countries are also active in participating in several events held in both countries. For instance, President Jokowi attended the "Dubai Expo 2020" which was held from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022, with the participation of 192 countries (Khalid 2019). Moreover, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Abu Dhabi strongly supported Indonesia's participation in the Gulfood exhibition which was held in Dubai in 2018. Indonesia highlighted cultural culinary delights as its main product, by serving various types of traditional Indonesian food products (Gpriority 2021). This area is crucial because, as Marwanti (1997) argues, food is a very important part of culture since cuisine from a nation says so much about its culture. Marwanti further argued that food is not only a means of maintaining human relations but can also be sold and promoted to increase the country's foreign exchange (ibid).

Apart from cultural exhibitions, in 2022, the two countries began exploring educational cooperation through one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama. This was realized in the IUEA-CEPA MoU point number five, namely collaboration between Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) and Mohammed bin

Zayed Humanitarian University (Ernis 2022). Furthermore, the Chancellor of Al-Azhar University Indonesia (UAI) began exploring cultural cooperation in 2019 and educational cooperation in 2020 with the UAE (Fahlevi 2021). The two countries are also interested in exchanging information regarding strengthening the concept of moderate Islam through the exchange of mosque imams (Kastara.id 2019). This collaboration became fruitful in 2021 with the arrival of 15 mosque imams from Indonesia to be placed in several mosques in Abu Dhabi (Asikin 2021), and continued in 2022 with the departure of 17 imams by the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) to the United Arab Emirates (Swasty 2022).

Despite these, there have been no literature that discusses the soft power strategies carried out by the two countries in their relationship. Therefore, this research aims to examine the soft power strategy of the United Arab Emirates in cooperation with Indonesia from 2015 to 2022. In doing so, the paper attempts to cover three important points: First, to examine what soft power strategies are being implemented by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia in the 2015-2022 period; second, to investigate why the United Arab Emirates is interested in making Indonesia its soft power target; and third, to analyze the impact of the United Arab Emirates' soft power strategy on the relations between Jakarta and Abu Dhabi.

The relationship between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia has been discussed in various journal articles and books. The discussions are quite diverse, from economic cooperation to energy cooperation in bilateral and regional contexts. A discussion of Indonesia-UAE relations in regional security can be found in Sterling Jensen's article entitled "Indonesia-UAE Relations in the Context of Regional Governance." In general, Jensen (2017) explains how the instability in the Middle East, especially the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, could affect Indonesia's relations with the Gulf countries, especially with the United Arab Emirates. In this case, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the dangers of expanding external extremism and terrorism from Iranian expansionism. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is keen to spread its influence in Indonesia to limit the geopolitical power of Iran. However, this is an issue of concern for Indonesia, as Saudi Arabia is also considered to have an

ideological influence that tends to be extreme. This also has the potential to cause new problems. Therefore, to stem these two influences, the United Arab Emirates is seen as a country of balance. Moreover, the UAE also has an interest in promoting moderate Islam within the country.

Furthermore, Mustofa (2021) discussed the defense cooperation in the article titled "Analysis of Cooperation between Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates in the Defense Sector (2019-2021)." Mustofa's study highlights how there has been a significant increase in defense cooperation established between the UAE and Indonesia. This can be seen from several replies to visits made by the Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, from 2017 to 2022. This collaboration also sees the potential for the exchange of cadets from Indonesia and the UAE.

Another study explains the tourism relationship between the two countries, as written by Riska Destiana and Retno Sunu Astuti (2011) in the article entitled "Development of Halal Tourism in Indonesia." Destiana and Astuti explain how the promotion of Indonesian halal tourism at the World Halal Tourism Award event in Abu Dhabi. To increase foreign tourists, Indonesia has been actively promoting its tourism, including in Middle Eastern countries. The United Arab Emirates is one of the countries that contributes to foreign tourists in Indonesia. The number of Emirati tourists increased quite significantly over the nine months of 2017, reaching 6,074 people. Indonesia is earnest in developing halal tourism considering the need for halal tourism from Muslim-majority countries is quite high, such as tourists from Middle Eastern countries. The halal tourism industry began developing in 2015 and it is one of the priority programs of the Ministry of Tourism. Indonesia experienced an increase of 18% in 2018 with an increase in foreign exchange reaching more than 40 trillion Rupiah in the halal tourism sector. In 2019, the figure increased to 25%, or 5 million foreign Muslim tourists (Destiana and Astuti 2011).

Some of the literature above shows that there have been various discussions regarding relations between the UAE and

Indonesia. However, there has been no discussion that specifically highlights the soft power strategies carried out by the United Arab Emirates towards Indonesia. Therefore, the main objective of the paper is to examine the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia from 2015-2022. To that aim, the paper adopts the concept of soft power. Nowadays, soft power has become the most widely implemented strategic tactic in activities for establishing cooperative relations between countries. Soft power itself is a complex concept to define, as it views the relation between international actors are broader than the role of Government-to-Government (G to G) relations. Joseph Samuel Nye (2008) defines soft power as the ability to influence other people to obtain desired results through attraction rather than coercion or payment which includes cultural resources, values, and policies (Nye 2008). Furthermore, Nye also states that soft power is a strategy to attract the attention of other people to avoid threats from the use of military weapons or economic sanctions. In other words, soft power can be used as a means for success in world politics, given that the country has a strong hard power base. Soft power and hard power must go hand in hand to achieve interests because a soft power strategy has a higher potential for success when a country has a mature hard power base (Nye 2004).

In the context of soft power relations, the paper tries to analyze the case of the UAE and Indonesia using the concept of soft power put forth by Joshua Kurlantzick, who is of the view that soft power is a dynamic strategy. In other words, soft power changes from time to time, which is broader than Nye's definition (Nye 2008). Apart from cultural resources, values, and policies, the domain of soft power according to Kurlantzick also includes religious exchange, mutual cooperation, and social assistance (Kurlantzick 2006). Therefore, this research will identify the types of soft power activities between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia using Kurlantzick's theory. This is also relevant to the case study where from 2015 to 2022, relations between the two countries improved significantly with the signing of several memoranda of understanding in the fields of educational cooperation, religious exchanges, humanitarian assistance, as well as street naming and

cultural exchanges.

## II. UAE-Indonesia Relations

In this part, two important points will be discussed. First, it will cover the background of the relationship between the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia in general, namely political, economic, and security cooperation. This discussion is crucial as they form the foundation of the collaboration between the two nations. Furthermore, it also illustrates the United Arab Emirates' interests in cooperating with Indonesia. This part is crucial to lay the basis of the analyses in the next subsection, which explores the UAE's soft power strategies towards Indonesia and why the UAE is interested in exerting soft power in its ties with Indonesia.

### 2.1 Political, Economic and Security Cooperation between UAE and Indonesia

The United Arab Emirates is strategically located between the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the Northwestern Indian Ocean and is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC consists of six sovereign countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. The region gained global strategic interest due to the discovery of oil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, petroleum was first discovered in Iran in 1908 (Brew 2016). Following World War II and the subsequent withdrawal of Britain from the region, countries in the region increased cooperation with each other and formed the regional organization, Gulf Cooperation Council, in 1981 (Al Makhawi 1990). However, the GCC's journey was not as smooth as expected. Initially, the GCC was formed with the aim of protecting the region. On the contrary, the organization has been characterized by inevitable internal conflicts, disputed by various religious groups and other political conflicts to date (Guzansky 2016). The proximity with Iran and shared borders with Iraq and Yemen increase the security threats in these six countries. In addition, apart from ongoing conflicts surrounding the region including the Israeli-Palestinian war and the Syrian conflict, there is a prolonged tension between the two influential axes in the Middle East, namely Iran and Saudi

Arabia. Despite these threats, the region is strategic in the global politics due to its role in global energy supply. This started when World War II ended, and the Gulf energy sector increasingly accelerated and succeeded in influencing global market upheaval (Rakhmat et al. 2021). Meanwhile, countries in the region have limited human resources and technology for processing petrochemicals. This ultimately gave rise to competition among world hegemonies to get a role in processing petroleum and natural gas there (ibid). Therefore, the increasingly uncertain regional instability has encouraged GCC members to look at partners in safer regions. One of them is the United Arab Emirates which seems to be very aggressive in partnering in the Southeast Asian region, especially Indonesia.

The unitary federation of the United Arab Emirates has been recognized by Indonesia as a sovereign country since 1976, followed by the start of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Two years after that, in October 1978, Indonesia officially opened the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Abu Dhabi n.d.). In 1993, Indonesia appointed an Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to the Indonesian Mission in the UAE. Indonesia also opened the Indonesian Consulate General and the Indonesia Trade Promotion Center (ITPC) in 2003 to facilitate trade and friendly relations between the two countries and increase exports of domestic non-oil and gas commodities to the UAE. On the other hand, the UAE sent its representative to Indonesia in June 1991, which was led by an Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to facilitate the continuation of friendly relations. The opening of embassies in both countries has led to developing relations in the political field. This has been supported by the UAE's support for the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Indonesia's position as a crucial player in regional and international organizations.

The frequency of visits between these two countries continued to increase in the years that followed, which culminated during the presidency of Joko Widodo. In 2020, for example, then Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) was appointed to the steering committee for the development of Indonesia's new capital city in



East Kalimantan along with two other important figures including Masayoshi Son who is the CEO of Softbank and Anthony Charles Lynton Blair who is the former British Prime Minister (Islam 2020). These three figures were given the task of providing input and advice, promoting Indonesia, and building trust regarding the development of the new capital city in East Kalimantan. The appointment of MBZ is one of the signs of heightened collaborations between the UAE and Indonesia during the Jokowi era. In 2021, the two countries held a meeting to discuss strategic cooperation to develop business and investment, which resulted in a cooperation agreement between the Indonesia Investment Authority (INA) and the Abu Dhabi Growth Fund (ADG) (Wareza 2021). Another collaboration was related to floating solar panels between Masdar and Pertamina. In addition, the meeting also discussed cooperation on the development of the Balikpapan refinery, on manufacturing, and on distribution of vaccine and bioproducts.

The joint economic cooperation played an important role in the deepening of relations between the UAE and Indonesia. Indonesia's position as one of the countries with the largest market in Southeast Asia is one of the factors that attracted the UAE to collaborate with Indonesia. Indonesia's active involvement in G20 and large population of 275 million people feature heavily in the UAE's strategic calculations (World Population Review 2022). This large population makes Indonesia a consumer market with high appeal to global and regional countries. The increase in Indonesian people's purchasing power in recent years has additionally lured the UAE to give Indonesia its share of the country's export market.

This economic collaboration resulted in both countries experiencing increased synergy in a multitude of sectors. For example, Indonesia and the UAE deepened their cooperation in the Sharia banking sector and the automotive industry in the years that followed (Kemenlu 2021; Kumparan Bisnis 2021). Furthermore, Abu Dhabi and Jakarta agreed to open the Indonesia Trade Promotion Center (ITPC) in Dubai to facilitate the smooth running of non-oil and gas export activities from Indonesia in 2003. In 2021, the ITPC office was moved to the Port Saeed area, which is one of the business districts in Dubai. The new location is close to UAE

government institutions and to the offices of ITPC partners such as Dubai Economic Development (DED) and the Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology (ESMA). This transfer can be considered as an effort to promote and advance the economic ties between the two countries.

The relationship has also been facilitated by air connectivity. In 2006, Indonesia and UAE signed an MoU in the field of air transportation. This air transportation cooperation has facilitated operations in the logistics sector which is considered pivotal for economic cooperation. In 2009, UAE's First Gulf Bank offered a loan of US\$ 350 million to the Indonesian coal company PT Asmin Koalindo Tuhup (AKT) for promoting coal export to the UAE (Reuters 2012). Indonesian products that are very popular for export to the UAE domestic market include textiles, machinery, aircraft spare parts, garments, plywood, paper, plastic products, household appliances, furniture, electronic equipment, charcoal, tea, flour, and fresh fruits. Moreover, in 2015, the two countries began to develop cooperation in the infrastructure sector. This collaboration has been continuing to accelerate with Tasweek Real Estate Development of UAE's investment in a mixed-use project on Indonesia's Bintan Island worth US\$ 300 million (Deil 2015). This project consisted of building condominium towers, villas, hotels, and commercial shops on 26 hectares of land.

The UAE and Indonesia are also promoting cooperation in the energy sector. An agreement by PT Chandra Asri Petromichal Tbk with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) worth US\$ 270 million has been signed to develop the oil and gas sector cooperation (CNN Indonesia 2020). This agreement aims to explore crude oil processing in Indonesia, specifically in the Balongan area, West Java. One of the contents of the agreement is ADNOC's willingness to supply 528,000 MT of LPG to Pertamina by the end of 2020. Moreover, the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy began cooperating with the UAE in 2021 to develop the creative economy in the field of publications, fine arts, design, fashion, and architecture sub-sectors (Sofia 2021). Following up on this collaboration, the two countries signed an MoU during the Indonesian-Emirates Amazing Week (IEAW) series in Manado and

Abu Dhabi. This agreement was signed directly by Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno, Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, and Noura bin Mohammed Al Kaabi, Minister of Culture and Youth of the United Arab Emirates. Organizing this event is part of the diplomacy carried out by the Indonesian Embassy in Abu Dhabi which involves three other ministries, namely the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment, and the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy. The IEAW event also attracted cooperation between Bank Syariah Indonesia and Dubai Islamic Bank in the financial sector.

Furthermore, the UAE also showed interest in the Indonesian Investment Institute with investment funds amounting to US\$ 10 billion or 143.9 trillion in the Rupiah exchange rate (Ulya 2021). According to the direction of Mohammed Bin Zayed, these funds would be allocated for the development of strategic sectors in Indonesia such as infrastructure, development of roads, ports, tourism, agriculture, and other potential sectors. Another promising collaboration that the UAE and Indonesia are currently working on is in the renewable energy sector (Cahyadi 2022). The UAE is presently developing a 142-megawatt floating solar power plant (PLTS), which is predicted to be the largest solar power plant in Southeast Asia (Primadhyta 2017). The UAE has expressed its keenness to support Indonesia's preparations for the energy transition which seeks a target of using 23% of EBT by 2025 and 30% by 2030 (BAPPENAS 2021). In addition, the UAE also played a major role in the development of the Cirata Reservoir in West Java with a land area of 250 hectares (Directorate General of New Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation 2020). The construction of the solar power plant was signed in 2020, with funds disbursed amounting to US\$ 22.9 billion.

As a concrete sign of closer cooperation, the UAE and Indonesia signed the Indonesia-United Arab Emirates Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA) on July 1, 2022 (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia 2022). This agreement is seen as Indonesia's entry point to the UAE, which is a hub for increasing exports to non-traditional destinations such as

the Gulf region, Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, while it is a means for the UAE to expand its foothold in Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asia region. During the IUAE-CEPA negotiations, the two countries agreed to open market access to the UAE by reducing and eliminating import duties of around 94% of the total tariff line using a direct or gradual mechanism once the agreement comes into force (Romys 2022). The agreement also includes regulations in the fields of economic cooperation, trade in goods, services, investment, intellectual property rights (IPR), Islamic finance, rules of origin of goods, customs procedures, and trade facilitation, government procurement of goods and services, small businesses and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), digital trade, as well as legal provisions and institutional issues. Based on the cost-benefit and prognosis analysis of the IUAE-CEPA agreement, it is projected that Indonesia's exports to the UAE will increase by US\$ 844.4 million or an increase of 53.9% in the 10 years since Entry Into Force (EIF) (ibid). Apart from that, Indonesia's imports from the UAE are also projected to increase by 307.3 million, or an increase of 18.26%. This could be an opportunity for Indonesia to reduce the trade deficit with the UAE.

Meanwhile, the two countries have also maintained cooperation in the security sector, motivated by the rise of terrorist activities in Indonesia and the Middle East. To counter this, the two countries have started cooperation in the defense sector. In 2015, this effort was manifested in a defense partnership agreement between PT Pindad (Persero), the producer of Indonesia's main weapons system (Alutsista), which the UAE has trusted as an arms trade partner (Maulana 2015). In this partnership, there is an agreement on the technology transfer and licensing plan for the SS2 assault rifle, as well as the marketing distribution of various ammunition to Middle Eastern countries through the strategic partnership Continental Aviation Services (CAS) (Tempo.co 2015). According to PT Pindad, this collaboration allows for the development of long-range weapons for the Indonesian military. On the other hand, CAS will also collaborate with Rheinmetall Defense (RhD) Canada, by transferring technology and investing in the manufacture of a Remote Weapon System (RWS) including the

Pindad brand to be marketed for the domestic needs of the Indonesian National Army (TNI) and the Police Republic of Indonesia (POLRI). Apart from that, this military partnership also includes Indonesia sending approximately 100 units of Fire Support Ships (KPA) X 18, or known as Tank Boats to the UAE (Maman 2021). In 2020, PT Lundin Indonesia began producing these ship units and 105 mm cannon in collaboration with Cockerill Maintenance and Ingenierie (CMI Defense) from Belgium (Pindad n.d.)

The UAE and Indonesia's defense cooperation is not only bilateral but also multilateral. The two countries participated in an international forum, namely the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which is an organization consisting of 20 members. Within IORA, countries in the Indian Ocean region are tasked with facilitating and promoting security, economic and social cooperation in the maritime sector (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia 2017). In the 2015-2016 period, Indonesia was given the mandate to serve as the chairman. The IORA High Level Committee (Summit) in 2017 was held in Jakarta and brought together the leaders of the UAE and Indonesia (ibid). Apart from IORA, the UAE and Indonesia also joined the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) defense cooperation which is an effort to increase security in the Indian Ocean (Bateman 2008).

Recently, the UAE and Indonesia have increasingly demonstrated their closeness, marked by the visit of the UAE Minister of Defense to Indonesia in 2019. Conversely, the Indonesian Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, visited the UAE in early 2020. During the visit, the leaders of the two countries agreed on several defense cooperation agreements, including the construction of light aircraft with PT Dirgantara, and the exchange of officers at various levels between the UAE and Indonesian militaries. Moreover, both countries agreed to exchange information to maintain regional security. In 2022, defense cooperation between the UAE and Indonesia was discussed again in a meeting held by Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto with UAE Minister of Defense Mohammed Ahmed Al Bowardi, as well as attending the 2022 World Defense Show exhibition in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Hakim 2022). In

this meeting, the two leaders discussed continuing cooperation in the fields of defense and education following the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2020 in Abu Dhabi at the Joint Defense Cooperation Plan (JDCP) meeting.

2020 was a historic year for bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and the UAE. The agreement, valued at US\$ 22.9 billion or approximately 314.9 trillion Indonesian Rupiah, encompasses the signing of sixteen MoUs. This includes five MoUs that involve government entities, aimed at bolstering collaboration in areas such as religion, education, agriculture, health, and counter-terrorism, with a focus on defense cooperation (CNN Indonesia 2020). Additionally, eleven other MoUs were established to develop various B2B sectors, encompassing oil and gas, petrochemicals, ports, telecommunications, and research.

Based on the analysis, the UAE and Indonesia have deepened their cooperation in the political, economic, and security sectors. This cooperation has been discussed in several existing literature. However, there has not been much discussion regarding the soft power strategies of the two countries. Therefore, the following part will discuss the soft power strategies of the UAE with Indonesia which is the topic of this research.

## **2.2 Factors Behind the United Arab Emirates' Soft Power Strategies Towards Indonesia**

The United Arab Emirates is keen on leveraging soft power in Indonesia due to its recognition of Indonesia as a promising market, particularly within the economic sphere. Indonesia's substantial influence in regional contexts like ASEAN underscores its significance, largely driven by the sizable Indonesian market. Collaborating with Indonesia, particularly in trade, exports, and imports, holds the potential for the United Arab Emirates to derive significant economic benefits.

Apart from economic factors, Indonesia's image as a country that promotes moderate Islam and religious inclusiveness motivates the UAE to promote its soft power. The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also promoting the country's image related to

moderate Islam as a defining aspect of Indonesian Foreign Policy, aiming to shape its position within the global order (Miftahuddin 2010). However, the protests that erupted in 2016 questioned the image of moderate Islam in Indonesia. The protest was started after a statement by the governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's was considered blasphemous and contained verses of the Quran (Burhani 2016). Several Muslim groups were behind the protest. They mobilized large crowds and were often viewed as radical and conservative due to their intolerance towards non-Muslims (ibid). The protest attracted a lot of international media attention, with quite a few even questioning the face of religious moderation that had been advocated by Indonesia (Chandra et al. 2017). Despite this, Indonesia is still persistent in trying to keep the image of moderate Islam alive.

The United Arab Emirates, recognized as a global model for promoting moderate Islam, shares a vision with Indonesia on mainstreaming Wasathiyah Islam (moderate Islam). Consequently, the UAE is leveraging this alignment to further promote Wasathiyah Islam in Indonesia through collaborative efforts. Indonesia, through Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which is considered a milestone and reference for Indonesian society as an inclusive and pluralistic representation of Islam, took the central role in bridging cooperation in promoting moderate Islam with the UAE. If we look closely, top NU officials have had a special relationship with Abu Dhabi in recent times. Furthermore, President Jokowi also shares a close personal relationship with the ruler of UAE Mohammad bin Zayed. This was conveyed directly by Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Panjaitan. This closeness can be seen as part of the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia, and the cooperation will be explained further in the next chapter.

### **III. The UAE's Soft Power Strategy towards Indonesia**

#### **3.1. Educational Collaborations**

The education sector is one of the most exploited soft power tools by international relations actors. In the case of UAE and Indonesia,

it is done mainly through student exchange programs from various universities and madrasas. Even though this educational cooperation is not as developed as the cooperation between Indonesia and Egypt, the educational cooperation between Indonesia and UAE is progressing. In 2021, for instance, Al-Azhar University Indonesia (UAI) and the UAE Embassy in Indonesia began fostering cooperation to maintain the UAE's diverse cultural heritage through knowledge. This strategy exemplifies one of the UAE's effective soft power approaches, precisely hitting the mark by creating avenues for cultural observers and researchers to engage in collaborative studies on UAE culture. Furthermore, the UAE and UAI are also committed to encouraging the development and strengthening of Arabic language studies. The development of the Arabic language has become a common soft power strategy for Gulf countries. For example, Saudi Arabia has also established the Institute for Islamic and Arab Sciences (LIPIA) in Indonesia to strengthen its identity in Indonesia (Juan and Rakhmat 2022).

In addition, the UAE, through Alef Education, has signed an agreement to expand digital cooperation for madrasa students in Indonesia. This agreement was discussed in the 2019 Joint Steering Committee Forum discussing the digital implementation program in the education sector. As many as 500 thousand Indonesian madrasa students had access to the digital platform by 2020 as part of the agreement (Damaledo 2022). Initially, mathematics lessons were prioritized which aimed to hone the numerical literacy skills of seventh-grade madrasa students. Alef Education extended the free trial contract for using the education platform for Indonesian students, and this was expanded to include Arabic language learning in 2022. This digital platform access opportunity was also extended to students in grades 7 to 12. In other words, more than 1.5 million madrasa students benefited this access as part of the agreement (ibid). As a developed country, the UAE has long-established best practices in the digital-based education sector. Digital-based learning has the potential to reduce operational expenses in the education sector. Additionally, it is recognized as a valuable factor in promoting educational advancement in Indonesia.

Apart from that, the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU)



together with representatives from the Mohammed bin Zayed Humanitarian University have launched a cooperation regarding the establishment of the School of Future Studies under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama University in Yogyakarta through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2022 (Aziz 2022). This MoU is one of the points of agreement between the Indonesia United Arab Emirates-Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IUEA-CEPA).

### **3.2. Religious Exchanges**

As the largest Muslim country in the world, religious relations between Indonesia and the Middle East are innate, including the United Arab Emirates. This common identity has been used by the two countries as a reason to work together in promoting religious moderation. Starting in 2019, the UAE and Indonesian governments agreed to explore cooperation regarding the mainstreaming of Wasathiyah Islam and madrasa education development in the country (Ministry of Religion 2019). This collaboration was conveyed by M. Nur Kholis Setiawan, the then Secretary General of the Ministry of Religion, during his visit to Abu Dhabi. The collaboration includes several programs to mainstream Wasathiyah Islam, one of which is sending mosque imams from Indonesia to work in several mosques in the UAE. As a part of this program, 13 and 15 imams were sent to the UAE in 2019 and 2020 respectively (Michella 2021). The program was held again in 2022 with 17 imams were sent to the UAE (Christiyaningsih 2022). The Indonesian government plans to continue to encourage the UAE to increase the quota for accepting mosque imams in the country.

The UAE's religious soft power in Indonesia was strengthened by the signing of an MoU regarding cooperation in Islamic religious affairs and was represented by the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia Fachrul Razi and the Chairman of the General Authority for Islamic Affairs of the UAE Mohammed bin Matar Kaabi in Qasr al-Wathan Presidential Palace, Abu Dhabi in 2020 (Setiaji 2020). This signing was witnessed directly by President Jokowi and the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates, Mohammed bin Zayed. The MoU included six points:

1. Collaboration of experience and expertise in promoting the concepts of religious moderation and the dangers of extremism, as well as the values of tolerance.
2. Collaboration in developing the resource capacity of imams, khatibs, and muftis to share best practices.
3. Cooperation to exchange expertise in the field of hafiz or memorizing the Quran, reading and translating skills, and memorizing the Sunnah.
4. Cooperation in exchanging experiences in the fields of waqf management, development, and investment.
5. Collaboration in exchanging prints, translations, and publications of the Holy Quran as well as related research results, publications, and magazines.
6. Exchange of expertise in the construction and management of mosques which aims to promote mosques as safe and comfortable places of worship and moderate religious guidance.

During the 2019 visit of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed to Indonesia, he pledged to gift President Jokowi a mosque in the latter's hometown. This mosque, personally designed by the Crown Prince, mirrors the architecture of the Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. The construction of the mosque began in March 2021 on approximately 3 hectares of land with funds reaching US\$ 20 million or around 300 billion Indonesian Rupiah. It is estimated that it can accommodate 10 thousand worshipers and is expected to be operational in September 2022 (Rakhmat and Purnama 2020). It is anticipated that this mosque will serve as a beacon of moderation and religious tolerance. Additionally, it has the potential to emerge as a landmark for religious tourism in Indonesia.

In examining the religious cooperation between the UAE and Indonesia, numerous noteworthy aspects merit consideration. One of them is that countries in the Middle East have a very strong influence in Indonesia and even the wider Southeast Asian region. One influential factor is the trend toward adopting more devout religious views, commonly referred to as *hijrah*. This variety of Islamist movements is increasingly expansive transnationally from various countries in the Middle East. This phenomenon is formed by students who receive education in the Middle East and preach

according to the views they have absorbed upon their return (CNN Indonesia 2019). For example, students of Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood traditions incorporate their newly influenced worldviews into their students in Indonesia after they finish their studies in the Middle East. Apart from preaching to the public, they also reach out to educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, Quran schools, printing presses, and other places of strategic importance. Most of them also preach through social media and YouTube utilizing modern technologies.

In this case, Indonesia is a soft target for Middle Eastern countries to spread their influence. Several narratives have emerged that Indonesia has become a field of competition for the spread of religious influence according to the version of each Middle Eastern country. For example, Indonesian religious scholars can be traced to the influence of Saudi Arabia with its Salafis, and Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood. It can therefore be said that Indonesia has become a battleground for the United Arab Emirates in promoting its influence known as Wasathiyah Islam. The UAE's efforts can be seen in its intensity through the cooperation described above, such as exchanging imams, building mosques, and so on.

### **3.3. Humanitarian Assistance**

Besides educational and religious sectors, the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia has also focused on humanitarian affairs, especially amid the global rise in COVID-19 cases. Given Indonesia's high case numbers, nations like China, South Korea, and the UAE have stepped up their support during the early days of the global pandemic (Nurbaiti 2020). In 2020, the UAE sent 20 tons of medical supplies estimated to help around 20,000 medical professionals overcome the spread of the COVID-19 virus (The Filipino Times 2020). This assistance reached US\$750,000, including 100,000 units of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), 20,000 hand sanitizers, 500,000 pairs of medical gloves, and 50,000 surgical masks and respirators (Nugraha 2020).

In the following year, in mid-2021, the UAE again sent aid to the country as the cases of coronavirus infection increased in

Indonesia. The government in Abu Dhabi sent 54 tonnes of emergency health aid, 26 tonnes of which contained 450 tonnes of oxygen cylinders and equipment, in addition to 250,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine (Nurganingsih 2021). As of 2021, the UAE has sent two aid shipments, the first of which was received in May which included 500,000 vaccine doses, 960 Seegene Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) kits, 12,000 units of Rapid Molecular Testing kits, 12,000 Swab Collection Kits, and 18 tons of PPE. Moreover, the UAE government also sent vaccine assistance of 121,648 doses to 60,824 people with disabilities in Bandung, West Java (Sinaga 2021). The UAE's vaccine aid to Indonesia represents more than just a gift; it signifies Indonesia's successful vaccine diplomacy as part of its soft power strategy. Indonesia's strategy to lobby influential countries to procure the COVID-19 vaccine has borne fruit. Apart from the UAE, several countries such as China, Japan, and the United States have also sent vaccine aid to Indonesia (Farmita 2021). The UAE is the largest vaccine producer in the Gulf countries and the Middle East, achieved through collaboration between the Chinese pharmaceutical giant Sinopharm and the UAE's Group 42 (G42). This partnership is estimated to produce 200 million vaccine doses per month (Wardah 2020). Furthermore, China's close ties with Indonesia imply that the vaccine aid also represents a contribution from China. This situation further strengthens the bonds between the three nations.

Apart from vaccine assistance and cooperation, the UAE has assisted Indonesia in several other projects. For instance, the UAE constructed a 100-meter-long suspension bridge connecting Ciwaru Village and Pasir Tanjung Village, Lebak, Banten (Ulya and Djumena 2021). This construction was fully funded by the UAE government which is channelled through The United Arab Emirates' Red Crescent Authority (RCA) in 2021. The UAE's generosity is estimated to help approximately 1,000 families access the suspension bridge daily. Furthermore, the UAE sent humanitarian aid to victims of the landslide disaster in West Java and the aid reached approximately 2,500 people (ibid). In the same year, the UAE Red Crescent's rapid response action sent aid to victims of the earthquake disaster in Mamuju, West Sulawesi. It is estimated that as many as 30,000 people received benefits. With these assistance packages, the UAE's

generosity is becoming increasingly familiar among the Indonesian people, in both urban and rural areas.

### **3.4. Street Naming and Cultural Events**

Another facet within the UAE's extensive soft power strategy towards Indonesia encompasses symbolic gestures such as street namings and dynamic cultural engagements. Notably, the naming of the Jakarta-Cikampek toll road after MBZ in 2021 reflects Indonesia's profound appreciation for the resilient diplomatic ties that have flourished between the two nations over the past 45 years (Natasha 2021). This move not only commemorates the UAE leader but also symbolizes the strength of the bilateral relationship. In a reciprocal gesture, the UAE honored President Jokowi by naming a street after him in 2020, situated strategically between the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Center (ADNEC) and the embassy area, underscoring mutual appreciation and fostering positive growth in relations (Tifada 2020).

The strengthening of ties is further evidenced by the consistent invitations extended to Indonesia to participate in various events hosted in the UAE. These invitations serve as platforms for multifaceted cultural exchange while also yielding economic benefits for both nations. Collaborative initiatives, exemplified by the 2020 event at Bait Al Gharbi in collaboration with the Sharjah Institute for Heritage (SIH) and Indonesia's inaugural participation in the "World Heritage Week in Sharjah," showcased Indonesia's rich cultural heritage (Kemenlu n.d.). This not only fostered cross-cultural understanding but also generated tangible economic outcomes, with the event at Bait Al Gharbi contributing to trade transactions amounting to AED 110,000.

Furthermore, Indonesia strategically promotes its non-traditional food and beverage offerings on the global stage, exemplified by its presence at the Gulfood exhibition held at the World Trade Center, UAE, in February 2021. The Gulfood Exhibition, an annual event, attracts participants and visitors from around the world. Indonesia's active involvement in such global showcases not only underscores its recognition of the Middle East's immense potential but also provides a prime opportunity to exhibit its diverse and high-quality

products, thereby enhancing their international visibility and market value. The success of these promotional efforts is reflected in the notable increase in the value of Indonesian exports to the Middle East in the food and beverage sector, reaching US\$89.42 million in 2020 (Uly 2021).

Moreover, the promotion of Indonesian products and culture continued on a grand scale at the Dubai Expo held from October 2021 to March 2022. Originally slated for 2020 but postponed due to the global challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dubai Expo served as a significant platform for Indonesia to showcase its cultural richness and economic potential. The attendance of Indonesia's President at the event further underscored its strategic importance in enhancing bilateral relations (*ibid*). In essence, Indonesia's active and strategic participation in these international events, despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the global health crisis, attests to its unwavering commitment to leveraging cultural and economic exchanges for mutual benefit and fostering enduring ties with the UAE.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that the Look East Policy has brought the UAE to strengthen its foothold in the Southeast Asian region, one of which is in Indonesia. In conclusion, the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) soft power strategy towards Indonesia exemplifies a dynamic and thoughtful approach to international relations, emphasizing cultural, religious, and aid collaborations. Through cultural initiatives, such as promoting Emirati arts and traditions in Indonesia, the UAE aims to build bridges and foster mutual appreciation, thereby creating a strong foundation for lasting relationships. Educational, aid, and religious partnerships showcase the UAE's commitment to contributing to Indonesia's development while simultaneously enhancing its own global image as a reliable partner and a staunch promoter of moderate Islam.

Firstly, religious collaborations are likely to remain a focal point in the UAE's soft power strategy towards Indonesia. The UAE

may continue to explore opportunities to collaborate in promoting its concept of moderate Islam. In addition, the UAE's humanitarian assistance could also deepen, contributing to the long-term sustainability of their partnership. Cultural exchanges may also intensify, as the UAE seeks to enhance its soft power by promoting a better understanding of Emirati traditions, arts, and values in Indonesia. Joint cultural events, educational programs, and people-to-people interactions could become more prominent, strengthening the cultural ties between the two nations, and fostering a sense of shared identity.

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## Toward Post-Pandemic Sustainable FDI Workforce: An Examination of Factors Affecting the Well-Being of Migrant Workers in Ho Chi Minh City\*,\*\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Globalization and the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the post-pandemic context continue to play a critical role in shaping the workforce of emerging countries. In Vietnam, evidence obtained during the pandemic revealed that the well-being of employees, especially migrant workers, was extremely poor due to both work and non-work factors. This paper examines the most significant factors that impact the well-being of workers employed by various FDI companies in two Vietnamese industrial parks. The survey evidence (n=200) shows that worker well-being is influenced by seven

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key factors categorized in three dimensions, namely material stressors, social stressors, and human stressors. A further qualitative analysis of 60 participants provides an understanding of the ways in which each factor affects workers' well-being and how elements of well-being in the Vietnamese context are different compared with other countries. Low salaries, lack of social support, work-life imbalance due to job demands, and the interplay between these three determinants significantly affect the overall well-being of workers. In the current business climate, it is important to have well-targeted policies that encourage high-tech investments as well as persuade domestic firms to address low salaries and economic migration. To manage valuable human resources and keep competitive advantages, foreign firms need to authentically implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives focusing on workers' benefits, especially providing workforce housing. This will bring about win-win outcomes of improved employee well-being and business sustainability.

**Keywords:** sustainable workforce, FDI flows, well-being, migrant workers, Vietnam

## **I . Introduction**

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, developed nations have revised their global strategies (Simsek and Meciar 2021) to address mobility disruptions, especially logistics. Changes to post-pandemic logistics and manufacturing are not only implemented based on efficiencies but also security. Consequently, capital flows and labor forces have changed, which lead to the relocation of thousands of firms and manufacturing facilities. In Asia, there are signs of change in foreign direct investment (FDI) flows. China—the largest export-processing country—started to experience the initial impacts of the relocations as firms left, while emerging countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia which have advantages of cheap labor became new recipients of international investments (Nguyen and Pham 2020). In Vietnam, this trend has resulted in an increased demand for low-cost labor, especially in the country's largest economic hubs like Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong. In terms of

demand, there seems to be an increased need for migrant labor to accommodate new flows of investment.

From a supply perspective, the picture is rather unpromising. Non-pharmaceutical measures coupled with intermittent periods of manufacturing suspension during the pandemic caused severe negative impacts on the workforce. In Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), strict lockdown measures forced numerous factories to close. Only a relatively small number of foreign firms managed to keep their manufacturing in operation without interruption (VietnamPlus 2021). And those that were able to do so at the expense of workers' health. In large cities, long-term social distancing policies significantly reduced migrant workers' income and living conditions. During the most acute phase of the crisis, it was not uncommon to find workers crammed in small, rented rooms without food or basic necessities. Facing these challenging conditions, understandably, thousands of migrants chose to return to their hometowns once the lockdown restrictions were relaxed. This led to a severe shortage of labor when the economy returned to normal conditions. Without a reliable labor supply, international firms have faced difficulties in re-starting their businesses and devising long-term plans. In the aftermath of the pandemic, improving workers' mental health and well-being is critical to keeping individuals in the workforce.

As previous research has shown, workers' mental health and well-being are key determinants of labor sustainability (Kossek, Valcour and Lirio 2014). Psychological well-being may affect employee turnover, absences, and job commitment. In stressful work environments, the increase in workers' productivity is mainly attributed to social well-being (Mylek and Schirmer 2015). Covid-19 brought about a wide range of stresses and risks to workers and it is important to identify factors associated with well-being. However, in developing countries, studies examining worker well-being are limited. Much research has focused on analyzing migrant flows or working conditions (Kugler et al. 2023), but very few studies have explored the vulnerability of migrant workers during the pandemic or worker well-being. As none of the existing studies examine the well-being of workers employed in FDI firms, this paper aims to fill in the gap. Using the post-pandemic setting as a unique context, the

study assesses mental health statuses, factors affecting well-being, and everyday problems encountered by migrant workers. Findings of the study are rather timely since they may contribute to the formation of new strategies and policies responding to the labor crisis, especially in the emerging economies of Southeast Asia.

## **II . Literature Review**

### **2.1. Sustainable Workforce and Workers' Well-being in the Post-Pandemic Era**

Staying competitive in the post-pandemic context seems to be the greatest concern of business organizations across the globe. Studies show that to adapt to new business dynamics, global firms must develop appropriate strategies for supply chains, logistics, and most especially, labor force investments. Social distancing measures implemented in other countries have proved that production targets could not be met or sustained without a reliable and sustainable workforce. Yet, prior to the pandemic, during the 2000s, economic turbulence coupled with neoliberal policies have made working conditions more dangerous for workers in developed and developing countries. Longer working hours, job insecurities, and low wages have threatened employees' health and well-being and caused various labor issues (Baram 2009). Along with ongoing concerns about environmental sustainability, there are an increasing number of voices calling for the promotion of sustainable workforces that should be understood as a critical asset to every nation (Calvard and Sang 2017). Beyond a balance between labor demands and supply, a sustainable workforce requires working environments that support and care for worker well-being. A firm with sustainable resources is one whose employees have positive energy and capacities to cope with current and future demands (Kosseck et al. 2014). Against the backdrop of global competition and changing dynamics, especially in the uncertain time after the pandemic, building a sustainable workforce is the backbone of a firm's competitive advantage.

Regarding literature on human resource development, early studies (Stiglitz 2002; Sparks, Faragher and Cooper 2001; Cai 2010)

showed that workers' well-being greatly contributes to job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation which plays a critical role in forming workforce sustainability. As well-being not only influences workers' performance but also impacts a firm's productivity, the concept of employee well-being has been widely examined (Kowalski and Loretto 2017). Despite a rather long history of research, there still lacks a singular definition of well-being. In fact, each field tends to adopt a different set of constructs capturing different aspects of well-being. Defining and measuring well-being, therefore, mainly depends on research disciplines and methodological approaches. Two common distinctions are hedonic well-being—"feeling well" and eudaimonic well-being—"feeling good" (Huppert 2009). The former approach measures quality of life exhibited by outcomes and is classified as subjective well-being. This concept focuses on personal resources and capacities on which an individual draws to pursue pleasure and happiness (Diener 2006). In contrast, the latter approach is often defined as psychological well-being, which incorporates an individual's life satisfaction and self-realization (Ryff and Singer 2008).

The differences in definitions of well-being reflect the fact that employee well-being and its determinants are varied and complex. Empirical evidence shows that reaching a consensus on workers' well-being is not an easy task. Time spent in work domains or engaged in job-related tasks accounts for a large proportion of human life and therefore, work-related factors such as work environment, job characteristics, and work-specific personal factors are determinants of overall job satisfaction that indirectly affect employing well-being. In modern society, employment not only generates incomes and indirectly ensures a standard of living, but also brings about a sense of purpose and working pleasures. Basically, a decent job and its material outcomes have a close connection with status and recognition. Beyond the workplace, worker well-being is affected by a wide range of individual and social factors in employees' broader life experiences. Physical health and family relationships, for instance, might cause everyday life stresses, which in turn negatively affects overall well-being. During a time of crisis, a network of support is essential to provide

resources on which an individual can rely to ensure personal well-being. Since there is an imbalance in employee well-being research, which up until now tends to focus on at-work well-being and job satisfaction, and considering the current climate of increasing job flexibility, it is time to pay more attention to well-being in nonwork domains.

## **2.2. Foreign Investments and Worker's Well-being in the Contexts of HCMC**

Labor resources have been a key determinant of FDI flows in developing countries. During the 2000s, low-income countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam successfully leveraged their young demographics to attract international investments (Noorbakhsh, Paloni and Youssef 2001). In Vietnam, FDI flows grew significantly from an initial figure of \$40,000 in 1986 to a high of \$16 billion in 2019 (WB 2021). In Ho Chi Minh City, most of these investments were realized in manufacturing sectors, leading to the formation of 19 industrial zones with an overall area of 4,532 hectares in the periphery of the city (DautuOnline 2022). These industrial parks employ nearly 200,000 workers, most of whom live in rental houses near their workplaces.

In the past, the abundance of migrant workers coupled with a lack of employment opportunities in the domestic sector provided a sustainable supply of cheap labor for the FDI sector. However, in recent years, as the population passed its golden point and the service sector which accounts for 39% of the total workforce has developed, the employment market for the FDI sector began to see early signs of labor shortage. Attracting and retaining sufficient workers has become an increasing concern for FDI businesses (VietnamPlus 2022). In fact, sick-absences and turnover rates in the workforce have been increasing over the years, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Within this context, well-being, which is closely connected to workforce sustainability, has become a significant issue for business owners. In terms of business climate, fierce competition associated with the changes brought about by globalization has forced FDI firms to adapt and strengthen their competitive advantages. Given the fact that well-being is closely

related to organizational outcomes such as productivity and human resource advantages, it is imperative for FDI firms to improve workers' well-being.

### **2.3 Significance of Study and Research Questions**

Employee well-being, particularly migrant worker well-being, has been studied broadly before and during the pandemic. Different aspects and dimensions of well-being have been examined, including determinants (Alessandri et al. 2023; Ewers et al. 2020), stressors, and coping strategies (Bhandari et al. 2021; Young, Pakenham and Norwood 2018). However, in Vietnam, studies on worker well-being remain at a nascent stage which requires further development. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies on well-being that closely look at the FDI labor force, nor research that explores key vulnerability factors that affect workers' well-being after the Covid-19 crisis. Other Vietnamese authors focused on cumulative risk (Bui et al. 2021) or exclusively on living conditions (Nguyen et al. 2016). Worker well-being in these studies is indirectly measured by socio-economic figures or proxies such as income satisfaction, which provides a rather incomplete picture of worker well-being.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature on well-being by identifying the most significant factors that determine the well-being of workers employed by various FDI firms in HCMC. Empirical findings of the research allow for a better understanding of which factors most shape workers' well-being and how elements of well-being in the Vietnamese context are different from those in other countries. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has the Covid-19 crisis impacted the well-being of workers employed in FDI firms?
2. Beyond the work domain, what are major stress factors which impact worker well-being? Particularly, in which ways do they influence the workers' welfare and health?
3. What role do overtime practices and income constraints play in shaping workers' social and private lives? How can a better understanding assist in improving worker well-being and contribute to workforce sustainability?

In the current business climate characterized by highly competitive markets and uncertain supply chains, it is critical that global firms have strategic plans to manage their valuable human resources. Thus, these research findings might help in devising better strategies to promote employee well-being, productivity, and sustainable workforces, which are critical for a firm's long-term success and sustained competitiveness.

### **III. Methods**

#### **3.1. Study Design and Data Collection**

This study employed a mixed approach to understand everyday activities and perceptions of FDI workers offered through their own perspectives, which are embedded in larger physical and social environments. Reliant on both interviews and questionnaire surveys, mixed strategies can improve the validity and reliability of results (Creswell 2009). The data collection was carried out in two phases, which complied with Covid-19 social distancing requirements in Vietnam. In phase 1, at the height of the pandemic, the authors employed remote methods to collect the preliminary data. During this time, first-hand experiences and perceptions of workers were examined against other secondary resources and literature reviews to obtain an initial understanding of factors affecting employee well-being. The insights obtained also helped to design and fine-tune questionnaires. In the survey, workers' life satisfaction and mental health statuses were used to measure subjects' well-being. Also, there were questions related to employee characteristics, working conditions, income, living conditions, social networks and other factors related to a workers' private lives.

In phase 2 of the research, performed from February to April 2022, digital and paper versions of questionnaires were sent to workers employed in two industrial parks in HCMC, namely Linh Trung Export Processing Zone (EPZ) and Saigon High-Tech Park (SHTP). These parks house the largest FDI firms in Vietnam, represent old and new models of foreign investment and employ many migrant workers. Companies located in Linh Trung EPZ focus



on manufacturing products while SHTP hosts high-tech firms. After analyzing initial results of the survey (n=200), qualitative data was collected in the next step through a combination of semi-structured interviews and field observations (n=60). A group of six well-trained assistants, young anthropologists actually, and the authors went to workers' rental homes and conducted interviews after obtaining consent from the owners. The interviews aimed to clarify unclear points in the surveys as well as provide supplemental information. Moreover, the triangulated practice helped in providing satisfying answers for the research questions. The participants were recruited based on two criteria: working at an FDI firm and living in HCMC as temporary residents (*tạm trú*). Samples for both the survey and the interviews were recruited using non-probability and snowball techniques which utilized the researchers' networks.

While limiting the scope of the research to rural-to-urban migrants working in the FDI sector, the study underlines the fact that many FDI companies kept operating at the height of the pandemic. The reasons why these foreign companies could avoid disruption of production whereas most domestic firms had to suspend operation are beyond the scope of this paper. However, the continuation of FDI companies amid strict lockdown periods has important implications for workers' well-being which are elaborated in the following sections. This focal theme of foreign companies also enables us to deeply understand the extent to which FDI firms were concerned for Vietnamese workers' well-being. Although data was collected at two industrial parks with distinct FDI characteristics, processing and manufacturing in EPZ compared with hi-tech in SHTP, the study was not designed to compare operations and working practices of these two FDI types. Surveys and interview data were examined as a whole since most foreign firms followed the same safety procedures during the pandemic. Similarly, living conditions and the well-being of two groups of FDI workers were not examined separately since field observations revealed differences among the groups were insignificant. Monthly incomes of FDI employees, however, were compared with workers employed in other sectors namely, state-owned and domestic firms, by utilizing governmental data and official reports.

### **3.2. Data Analysis**

Data from the survey were translated into frequency tables <Tables 1 and 2> and diagrams <Figures 1 and 2>, providing a basis for thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed in Vietnamese and processed using a six-step thematic analysis (Terry et al. 2017). During the first three steps, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, identified initial patterns, and searched for common themes. After being grounded in the theoretical lens of well-being, themes were compared and discussed. Disagreements among the authors were reviewed until consensus was reached. Final themes and key quotes were translated into English and reported in the last step. During transcription, the names and identifying information of participants were replaced by ID numbers. To increase reliability, interview transcripts were examined independently in preliminary steps and the results were presented to two external experts to check for validity.

## **IV. Findings and Analysis**

### **4.1. Characteristics of Study Participants**

Of the total 200 participants, 50% were migrants from the Mekong Delta, 26.5% from the Southeast Region, 15.5% from the Central Regions, and 8% from the North of Vietnam. Most workers (74.5%) were below 35 years old, and the proportion of female workers (55%) was higher than the figure for male (45%). About 56% of participants had high school education and 20% had a higher level education, while less than a quarter of workers only graduated from secondary school. Nearly three fourths of participants or 72.5% were single, 17.5% were married, and 10% were divorced. Majority of the participants (57.5%) had 3-5 years of working experience, most of them (80%) having worked as laborers. Over one fourth of workers or 27.5% have worked more than five years, while the newcomers, those who have worked less than three years were at 15%. A small proportion or 5.5% worked as supervisors and 14.5% as group leaders (Table 1).

<Table 1> Demographic Information of Migrant Workers Collected in the Survey

<b>Background Characteristics</b>	<b>Number (n=200)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
<i>Males</i>	90	45.0
<i>Females</i>	110	55.0
<b>Age range</b>		
<i>18-25</i>	83	41.5
<i>26-35</i>	66	33.0
<i>&gt; 35</i>	51	25.5
<b>Education levels</b>		
<i>Secondary school</i>	47	23.5
<i>Post-secondary</i>	113	55.5
<i>Vocational education</i>	29	14.5
<i>College/University</i>	11	5.5
<b>Marital status</b>		
<i>Single</i>	145	72.5
<i>Divorced</i>	20	10.0
<i>Married</i>	35	17.5
<b>Job tenure</b>		
<i>Less than 3 years</i>	30	15.0
<i>3 - 5 year</i>	115	57.5
<i>More than 5 years</i>	55	27.5
<b>Position</b>		
<i>Supervisor</i>	11	5.5
<i>Group leader</i>	29	14.5
<i>Laborer</i>	160	80.0

#### **4.2. Impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis on the Workplace and the “Three On-site” Initiatives.**

In early 2021, with the advent of new Covid-19 variants, new confirmed cases increased rapidly across Vietnam’s industrial parks and many companies had to close due to Covid-19 infections (WHO 2021). Beginning July 9, 2021, Ho Chi Minh City implemented a wide range of lockdown measures that disrupted mobility and non-essential activities. Since many of the migrant workers lived

outside the factory sites and could not commute to work, most labor-intensive firms including foreign-based companies had no choice but to suspend their operations (VietnamPlus 2021). However, several FDI firms, especially high-tech companies at SHTP, continued to operate thanks to the “three on-site” (*3 tại chỗ*) model. The phrase “three on-site” literally means that three activities of working, eating, and resting were arranged inside the factory. Hence, to fulfill the City’s strict conditions, employers had to provide safe accommodations for workers inside or near their firms. On the other hand, workers were required to work, eat, and rest at their workplaces. The model resembles the dormitory labor regime implemented in Chinese factories (Pun and Yu, 2008), except for the fact that workers’ sleeping spaces were patchy and temporary, as a male worker recalled:

Each of us worked on 12-hour shifts, night-shifts for one or two weeks, and then turned into day-shifts, depending on the companies. Each worker had a tent to sleep in. Sleeping areas, though not fancy, were not too hot or too cold. We managed to sleep well and keep working.

ID #46

Beyond taking regular tests for Covid-19 infection, on-site workers were provided quality meals and spaces for exercise. Yet, the most attractive feature of this model was extra payments workers could earn during four months of the lockdown. This also explains why the “three on-site” model, although being criticized in terms of infection risks and psychological effects, was supported by most of the participants. As migrant workers often want to maximize income during short periods working in the city, dwelling in the factory site well aligned with their desire to earn:

Working 12 hours per day, my salary rose sharply in those months, from 9 million to 13-14 million Dong; some got 15 million Dong. Workers got more money, everyone liked the model. They forgot the hardship. No one made a complaint! Compare that to those who live outside, doing nothing during the lockdown. We are migrants, if we just stay put without working, without incomes, how can we survive? The three on-site model made us feel secure.

ID #39

Further, compared with rather chaotic situation outside the industrial zones, staying inside the “green zone” of the factory seemed to be a better choice:

Living conditions and mental care were not sufficient but I didn’t feel bored. Maybe because people were back in the rental rooms, those who lived outside the hi-tech park couldn’t find food, deaths rose day by day. Inside, we were tested every three days. The company has its own quarantine area, as well as a medical team to assist workers.

*ID #36*

To some extent, the pandemic’s threats overwhelmed migrant workers’ concerns. In fact, while many laborers in HCMC had to stay at home and lose their jobs, a number of FDI workers enjoyed a relatively safe environment with stable incomes. This came at the expense of employers, yet months of three on-site models provided an alternative of living and working conditions from which workers could benefit. These short-term experiments were of course not without pitfalls yet they provided a glimpse of an alternative housing model where shelter security is provided by employers. In fact, what mattered for workers’ well-being is not the working conditions during the lockdown period but its immediate consequences.

**4.3. Workers’ Employment Status, Income, and Expense After the Pandemic**

Data from the survey shows that many workers experienced job difficulties after the lockdown, varying from job changes to overtime work. While 22% of workers reported that there were no changes in their jobs, over 68% workers had to work longer hours. A small number of workers (at 4%) had to find a new job, and 5.5% experienced a reduction in workload <Table 2>.

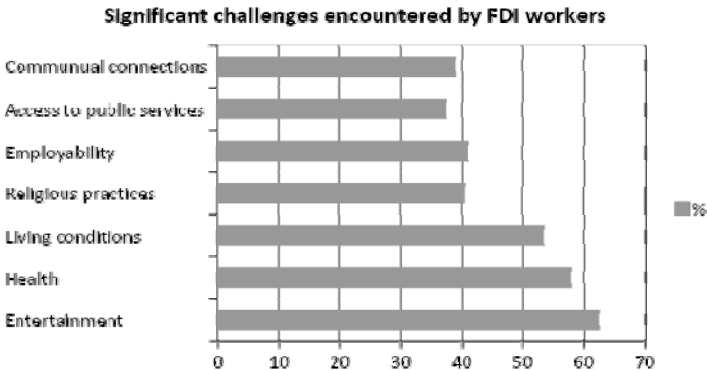
<Table 2> Employment Status after the Lockdowns

<b>Employment Status</b> (n=200)	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Remained the same	44	22.0
Change	8	4.0
Smaller workloads	11	5.5
Longer working hours	137	68.5

The pandemic, particularly the stringent lockdown period, had mixed impact on the workers' financial status. Many workers reported significant changes in salary and spending. Increases in monthly expenses were noted by a large proportion of participants at 89.0%, while only 5.5% workers said their spending was unchanged. Interestingly, nearly 70% of the study participants reported a rise in income after the lockdown, obviously a result of overtime hours. It should be noted that the survey was conducted in the first three months of 2022, when the surplus of contracts coupled with the shortage of workers resulted in long hours and night shifts. However, from April 2022, the number of contracts started to fall and workers no longer had to work overtime.

**4.4. The Most Pressing Issues and Concerns and Subjective Well-being**

Data analysis revealed seven significant challenges faced by FDI workers in various aspects of their lives. Three of the most prominent issues were personal health (58.0%), leisure and entertainment (62.5%), and living conditions (53.5%). Similarly, religious practices, employability, and connecting with communities constituted a high level of concern <Figure 1>. In terms of overall well-being, data suggests that the pandemic and its related stressors adversely affected workers' life satisfaction. There was a significant reduction of subjective well-being for all age groups. Over 45% of participants experienced constant pressure while 45% reported their well-being was stable. Out of 200 workers, only one tenth or 9.5% were satisfied with their lives.



<Figure 1> The Most Pressing Concerns and Issues by Migrant Workers after the Lockdowns

#### 4.5. Key Stressors and Worker Well-being

In line with the survey’s results, thematic analysis based on interview results suggested seven factors that affected workers’ well-being. These factors can be categorized into three groups: material stressors, social stressors, and individual stressors (see <Table 3>).

<Table 3> Themes and Sub-themes of Stressors

Themes/Factors	Sub-themes
<b>Material stressors</b>	
	- Work-related demands
	- Low salary and financial burdens
	- Housing and living environment
<b>Social stressors</b>	
	- Networks of support and obligation
	- Access to public services and amenities
<b>Individual stressors</b>	
	- Leisure and everyday social life
	- Personal relationships

Due to intrinsic features, each stressor had a distinct way of impacting workers' living environments, which in turn affected their overall well-being. In the following sections, each factor is elaborated with quantitative data from the survey, as well as quotations from the interview transcripts.

##### 4.5.1. Material stressors

###### *Work-Related Requirements and Stressors*

Both job access and conditions were frequently mentioned during the interviews. Workers commonly reported that access to jobs was easy and convenient because there were year-round vacancies. Information regarding employment or vacant positions is sufficient on social media as well as other channels. However, in contrast with the recruitment process, working conditions in FDI factories were strict and unreasonable. Most firms expected their employees to dedicate themselves fully to the factory. Internal regulations applied during working hours were extremely rigid as described by a young female:

The supervisor watched you all the time via CCTV and in person as well. We barely have enough time to go to the toilet, around 10 minutes per time, and only three times per day on specific hours: 08.30 to 8.40, 12:00 to 12:10, 2:30 to 2.40. During night shifts, from 18:15 to 6:25, we only have three times for personal needs. Each time lasts around 10 minutes. Time for lunch is only 30 minutes.

ID #10

Physical environments in the workplaces were modern and acceptable but the labor itself was hard. Most tasks were related to highly exact procedures dealing with small objects, so the working environment was dangerous and sometimes hazardous. Workers had to wear face masks and focus closely on their tasks. Employees reported that their tasks were without end during the shifts and there was no time for relaxing.

I was so tired that I just wanted to go to bed when I came home [in the rental room]. I didn't have any energy left for other tasks. Sometimes, for weeks I didn't call my parents via Zalo.

ID #11

When I was accepted to work for the company I also gave up my temptation for coffee and smoking. The task was so rigid that you didn't have enough time to speak with the person standing next to you. How could you have time for a cup of coffee or a cigarette? One can only do that at home.

ID #15

To discipline their employees, firms' managers often employed a mixed approach of piece-rates, minimum wage, overtime payment, and a bonus structure which was based on workers' attendance. This was to prevent labor absenteeism and to maintain discipline in the factory. In fact, the overall income of a given worker was divided into small parts which were subject to deductions if the person breached internal regulations. For example, one female worker stated:

I had an important event, the wedding of my sister. Normally, attendance was a must. But I dared not to have a day-off because the fine was too high. I would have lost a million VND, one fifth



of my income if I were absent for just a single shift.

ID #10

To ensure high productivity, age requirements that typically required workers to be under the age of 40 resulted in practices of age discrimination.

I'm 40 years old. I am not that old, but I feel drained. I just want to return to my hometown, find another job. But I know that it would be difficult to earn a living back home.

ID #19

Most jobs had 12-hour shifts and the similar systems among FDI firms provided fewer choices for workers. Technically, the basic income was barely enough to keep up with living standards, so workers had to accept overtime. In theory, working longer hours was voluntary, but in practice, owing to uneven power relations between the company and its employees, workers were forced to take overtime. Analyzing qualitative data shows that the word “overtime” (*tăng ca*) had a high rate of occurrence, which reflects the issues related to long working hours and a lack of individual autonomy. During the interviews, workers stated that they often faced stress and mental disorders due to overtime and strict regulations at work. The common symptoms expressed by participants were fatigue, nervousness, and depression. For example, a 32-year-old female shared:

When I started to work here, I began lacking sleep. Whenever I left the factory, I just wanted to go to bed, so that I could regain my strength for the continuous tasks tomorrow. Sleeping is the best medicine for us, workers; helping our body and mind to recharge, to fulfill the next day's tasks.

ID #5

### ***Insufficient Incomes and Financial Burdens***

The survey results show that although the working hours in FDI factories were longer in comparison with firms in other sectors, the overall income workers received was well below market levels. <Table 4> gives a glimpse of workers' income and expenses.

<Table 4> Average Earnings and Expenditures of a Typical Worker (over 3 years of experience) with 9-12 hours per day, 26 days per month

Payment	Single worker/month (VND)	Two working parents with 1 child/month (VND)
<b>Income</b>	<b>9,000,000</b>	<b>16,700,000</b>
<i>Basic wage</i>	5,000,000	10,500,000
<i>Shift and overtime hours</i>	4,000,000	6,200,000
<b>Expense</b>	<b>7,600,000</b>	<b>15,700,000</b>
<i>Rental cost including utilities</i>	1,700,000	2,500,000
<i>Food and basic needs</i>	2,600,000	6,400,000
<i>Spending for social relationships</i>	800,000	1,000,000
<i>Remittances (to family in hometown)</i>	2,000,000	-
<i>Child care</i>	-	5,000,000
<i>Others</i>	500,000	800,000
<b>Possible savings per month</b>	<b>~ 1,400,000</b>	<b>~ 1,000,000</b>

In comparison with national levels, average monthly wages at FDI firms were not competitive than laborers in other sectors. In 2020, for instance, monthly income of FDI workers was 10.5 million Dong while the figure for those in state-owned and domestic enterprises were 15.3 and 8.3 million Dong respectively (MPI 2022). If overtime earnings are excluded, FDI employees’ incomes are just above the 2022 national level of 4.6 million Dong (GSO 2022). Considering the high cost of living in HCMC, the biggest economic hub of Vietnam, incomes could barely cover survival needs. Owing to inflation after the pandemic, many workers experienced difficulties in balancing their monthly budgets. When asked about his budget plan, a young participant shared:

Yes, my friend. I think everyone faced a big change in living costs, it was more or less insufficient.

ID #25

Financial hardships also occurred during the lockdown period from June to September 2021, when workers had to stay at home without pay. Although some received support from local authorities,

many workers had to borrow money from friends and relatives in order to survive. After the lockdowns, paying back the loans turned out to be a heavy burden. Previously, savings could only be realized at the expense of other basic needs such as leisure activities, high quality food, or clothing. With the loan burden, there was little ability to amass savings. Most workers or 70% shared a room with friends and nearly 80% avoided entertainment venues during their free time. This underscores the fact that savings can only be sustained if the workers choose to reduce their living spaces or give up the enjoyment of social activities.

In terms of remittances, the pressure for monthly provision sent to families back in hometowns seemed to be an onerous issue for FDI workers, especially those who are migrants from less-advantaged provinces. Since FDI workers were the healthiest and most skilled laborers in their households, they had to fulfill expectations for family members back home. They were expected to be responsible for the education of younger siblings and/or health expenses of parents. Remittance was expected to be used for the family's expenses, social relationships, and even housing upgrades. If their children lived with grandparents, workers had to send money to raise their offspring. For example, a young mother explained her savings plan:

I had to be wise when eating and drinking. I bought afternoon groceries from the street vendors because it is cheap. I had to save a little money in case of illness, pay in installments, or send money for grandma back home to buy milk for my child.

ID #2

Financial hardships were also impacted by regular trips back to hometowns, which most workers did at least once per year, typically during the Tet Festival (Lunar New Year). Expenditures during such trips were relatively excessive, particularly for those who live far in the north. These hometown visits greatly affected the savings of migrant workers. In the best scenario, a hardworking employee could save up to 15 million VND (~\$600) per year. However, these savings were mostly spent on return trips and large family events. Therefore, hardly any savings remained. The

situations would be worse if their children lived with grandparents or their offspring accompanied them on the trips. These financial responsibilities seemed to adversely affect workers' budgets. In fact, data analysis showed that the word "insufficient" (*thiếu*) was consistently repeated by the participants. This suggests that workers were obsessed with the current and previous shortages which popped up in their stories, as a young migrant from Dong Nai described:

When I was young, I thought when I grew up, traveled to Sai Gon, worked in a company, I would have lots of money. Living here, I experienced the pressure and chaos of everything, unlike in the countryside. Joining the company, working means living; when I stop working, I'll starve right away.

ID #15

In such a fierce competitive environment as HCMC, workers often calculated the number of years living in the city against their overall savings to gauge their success. Hence, the lack of savings or no savings at all due to financial burdens might generate mental stress which threatens their well-being. Furthermore, the connections with relatives back in their hometowns often went hand in hand with loans and unexpected expenses such as hospital costs or wedding events. The unplanned expenses cause permanent stress that affects workers' well-being. Some even planned to return permanently to their hometowns in the future:

I have been working for more than 12 years in the company, feeling old but haven't had any accumulations. A given year's income was just enough for that year. I might have to stay in rental rooms all my life if I don't change my jobs. I want to withdraw my social insurance so that I would have savings to start up my own shop.

ID #29

### ***Poor Housing and Living Environments***

Current salary conditions for FDI workers are not sufficient to maintain an adequate living space. As of June 2022, the average rental of a one-bedroom apartment near SHTP was 6,000,000 VND (~ \$ 250), which means they were beyond the budgets of most of

the workers at nearly 70% of their overall income (see <Table 4>). Hence, living in crowded rental rooms in self-built houses was the only realistic option. In fact, the survey showed that many workers (80%) lived in rental rooms near their workplace. Sharing a room with one or two colleagues was commonplace <Table 5>.

<Table 5> Housing Status of Workers

Housing status (n=200)	Number	%
<i>Renting, living alone</i>	60	30.0
<i>Renting, living with colleagues</i>	75	37.5
<i>Renting, living with family</i>	28	14.0
<i>Renting, living with friends</i>	37	18.5

Field observations and interviews further explained workers' housing choices and deteriorating living conditions:

Rentals keep increasing, a newly built room costs nearly two million. I had to live with others to share the rent. I accepted this complicated situation because the block was crowded, and I had to put up with those whose habits were different from mine. Even our sleeping times were different.

ID #39

Living conditions were rather harsh because small rooms were without auxiliary spaces for basic needs or private activities. An elderly worker recounted his room's conditions:

Rooms in this block vary, some are old, some, new. Old rooms are cheaper but the quality is low, electricity and water are adequate but I am afraid people will see you naked or something like that. This room and that room aren't soundproof. Whatever a person in that room says or does, I can hear them all.

ID #12

Due to budget restrictions, most workers chose to live in the lowest sector of rental housing and rental choices mostly depended on marital status and number of children. Interview data reveals many technical and safety issues in the rental blocks, in which

lighting and noise were the two most serious problems.

This rental block consists of three floors consisting of 75 rooms. My room is in the middle, so the wifi signal is weak. I have to go out when I want to make a call. The air is a bit stuffy and it always smells of food.

ID #21

Two blocks of rooms face each other, the corridor in the middle is for parking and clothes are hanging above us. There is no sunlight, and inside the room, lights must be turned on. Every time a renter moves out, they leave tons of rubbish in the corridor.

ID #26

Participants echoed the views of many which compared their sleeping and living space to a bunker. In other words, workers felt uncomfortable in their own places. Fieldwork conducted in various rental blocks confirmed that a 12-square-meter room for two persons was rather like a cell stuffed with everyday objects, from cooking equipment to motorcycle parts to household gadgets and bedding sets. Due to the economical practice of maximizing rooms on a plot of land, there were neither places for social needs such as hosting friends or meeting relatives, nor spaces for religious practices which greatly affected workers' well-being. These harsh living conditions might partly explain why workers wanted to work overtime since the conditions in the factory were significantly better than those in their rental rooms.

#### **4.5.2. Social Stressors**

##### ***Networks of support and safety***

Data shows that the relations between landlords and the renters were rather limited. During the pandemic, tenants rarely saw the owners in person. Most necessary transactions were made via online platforms. Hence, workers felt unsafe and confused when there were problems in the rental block. This led to many stressful issues such as lack of trust, neighbor conflicts, and little social interaction. A typical rental block with 20 rooms might house over 30 renters who do not know one another. The weak relations among neighbors resulted in a low level of social interactions. Workers seemed to talk

to their neighbors only when they faced a health problem. In other cases, the data <Table 6> suggested that connections were not a concern for the majority of respondents.

<Table 6> Workers’ Social Networks and Their Concerns

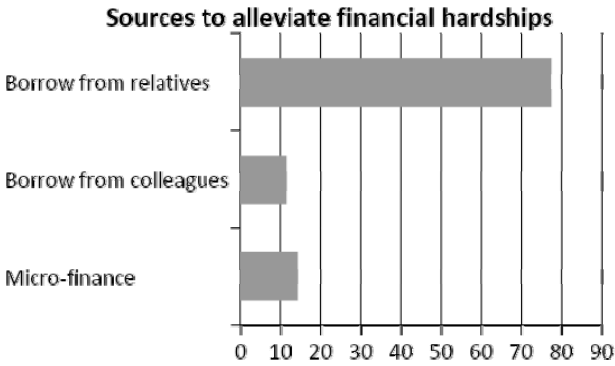
Type of Connections	Number	%
<b>Finding health information</b>		
<i>Talk to neighbors</i>	103	51.5
<i>Talk to friends and colleagues</i>	89	44.5
<b>Concerns about neighbor relationships</b>		
<i>Worries about lacked connections</i>	30	15.0
<i>No worries about connections in the rental blocks</i>	67	33.5
<i>Haven’t had concerns about these connections</i>	103	51.5

A young husband stated his family’s views of the rental neighborhood:

We don’t want to make an assumption but this is a working block, sometimes it is also complicated. We work all day and just come back to sleep, so we rarely interact with others. It seems each household only minds its own business.

ID #24

In some cases, workers tried to reduce these kinds of connections to prevent financial troubles. Earnings and savings were sensitive topics in the rental blocks since borrowing between neighbors might lead to loss of friendships and even conflicts. In a few extreme examples, a neighbor borrowed money and never returned it, resulting in severe mistrust. This shortage of communal relationships promoted independence but had adverse implications when workers faced emergency situations or health problems. This dilemma of social networks influenced the long-term well-being of the workers. As a result, workers relied on relatives rather than neighbors when they had problems. <Figure 2> shows that when workers had financial difficulties, borrowing from relatives was the primary way to balance deficits.



<Figure 2> Main Sources of Borrowed Money When FDI Workers Face Financial Difficulties

Conflicts between renters and living conditions affected mental health. Without other means of entertainment, workers tended to rely on cheap types of leisure such as drinking and karaoke, which greatly affected worker’s well-being. One single participant complained:

Apart from fear of robbery, everything is fine. The neighbors are friendly, but there are drunkards gathering at the end of the alley which makes me feel uncomfortable. They often sing on a karaoke so I cannot sleep. I’m really annoyed but I dare not to complain.  
ID #28

His views were supported by a young worker:

Because most people living here are workers, everyone has to work overtime to earn one or two bucks more, so we hardly see each other. I also work all day, then sleep during the night so I don’t talk to the others that often. But there were times the neighbors got drunk and then had arguments, sometimes it was a bit disorganized.  
ID #23

Arguments between young couples were rather common in the rental blocks. Security was a serious issue since many workers were concerned about motorcycle thefts or had their clothes stolen. As a result, everything was kept inside the rooms, which significantly reduced the size and state of their living spaces.



Ah, one more thing, the security is not that stable. Sometimes there were thefts and burglaries nearby, mostly motorcycle or mobile phone thefts.

ID #29

### ***Access to Public Services***

Data reveals that a large portion of these workers were migrants from various regions, especially from the Mekong Delta. Due to the residential registration system (*hộ khẩu*) and other prevailing cultural norms, migrant workers faced a wide range of difficulties and hardships, especially matters of institutional exclusion. In fact, most public services were closed to the migrants because of their temporary residence statuses. Thus, to obtain necessary paperwork, workers had to rely on their landlords. When their children started school, for instance, workers had to rely on their landlords to obtain residence statuses. This was a one-way relationship and in some cases the workers could not claim their rights due to conflicts with the owners. An old worker recalled the hardships during lockdown periods when support policies privileged the permanent residents and ignored temporary dwellers:

On one occasion, the government had policies to support residents with money, but workers like us were not supported. Only when the policy stated that each household, regardless of permanent or temporary status, old or young, gets the support did we feel that the support was guaranteed.

ID #21

In terms of education, workers living with children faced difficulties in finding appropriate schools for their children. Apart from paperwork requirements, high costs were significant barriers to education access. One young mother explained her choice:

Education here is very expensive, almost twice as much as in the countryside. In addition, there aren't any spaces for the kids to play and run, so I left my kid back in my hometown and had my mother look after him/her.

ID #58

Her solution was not uncommon as a large proportion of migrant workers sent their offspring to be raised in the countryside. Although monthly remittances were sent to grandparents, being separated came with the cost of reduced well-being. Relationships between parents and their children might have been strained, and most importantly, separations resulted in sadness and loneliness for both parents and children.

#### **4.5.3. Individual Stressors**

##### ***Leisure and Everyday Social Life***

Data shows that a relatively high proportion of workers preferred to stay inside after work, which can be explained by their unique working schedules. Typically, workers only had one or two days off per month due to overtime practices. Most days of the month, they had to start early in the morning and return to their rental rooms after ten o'clock in the evening with no energy left for other daily tasks. Hence, these precious out-of-factory hours were often utilized for chores or simply sleeping. Unsurprisingly, most migrant workers had poor social life or fell into solitary habits. Some participants expressed initial expectations for having a vigorous life in the cities, but overtime work and financial pressure limited their social activities.

At first, the job was good and the salary was OK because I didn't need to buy anything. At that time, due to my young age and good health, I felt happy to go to work. Every time I worked overtime, I was delighted because I would earn more money and I would be able to make a living for both my mother and daughter. I also saved a bit to buy gold and dared not to eat or drink anything. In recent years, my health has gradually deteriorated. I often have pain in my back, I ached, and felt tired with work. I was no longer as enthusiastic. Later, I noticed a shortage of goods. I needed to buy more stuff but the salary was inadequate, wholly insufficient.

ID #31

This situation might partly explain the reason social media was the most common means of entertainment for the workers. Thanks to the popularity of cheap smartphones and internet services, most

workers owned at least one smart device and used it as their main source of entertainment. Apart from chatting and video calls with family members, the handy gadgets provided different kinds of games. A participant depicted his evening time:

When coming back to the room, the first thing everyone does is take turns to have a shower. Those who finish first will go out with their smartphones and entertain themselves. Sometimes, when eating, people still look at their phones and chat with each other.

ID #47

Family chatting via social media seemed to be important to workers' social lives and entertainment. The interview data suggests relatives' visits and meetings were the greatest support for workers. However, workers experienced many difficulties in hosting their family members or relatives due to the small spaces inside the rental blocks. Hence, when guests arrived, workers had no choice but to meet them in a café or a public place nearby. Inconveniences adversely affect workers' social lives, which in the long term causes mental stress and further strengthens solitary practices.

### ***Personal Relationships***

The quantitative data shows a rather distinct feature of workers' relationships with nearly three quarters of participants being single, at 72.5%. In cross-checking with the age groups, being single in their early twenties suggests that most workers had trouble finding a partner. The qualitative analysis reveals that job characteristics, lack of opportunities, and financial constraints were the three key reasons for the low rate of marriages. A young man explained how daily tasks affected his opportunities:

The team leader often criticized and scolded us. Tasks in the factory were mostly irrelevant because each team works in different areas. My department is separated from the others, so I hardly talk to them, I don't know anything about other departments.

ID #15

As mentioned in previous sections, overtime work occupied most of workers' free time. In fact, irregular shifts coupled with high

concentration demands exhausted workers. This depletion of energy further reduced opportunities to find suitable partners. A worker explained his constraints:

Whenever we had money, we would go to a café and drink with friends, otherwise I would sit outside and chat with neighbors. But most of the working days, I would feel exhausted, so I would have a quick shower, eat dinner, and then go to bed.

ID #19

The hours after work shifts were often used for group meetings. Workers had the habit of eating in groups to share the food costs. In theory, these occasions should have increased chances of meeting a partner. Yet, in practice, such outcomes were rare due to financial constraints and the fact that workers tended not to date those who worked in the same company. Low incomes and remittance responsibilities tended to limit workers' spending on parties and gathering. Further, workers often found colleagues who had the same working routines and incomes were unpromising partners. As a result, social occasions with colleagues were not successful in facilitating personal relationships. Young people who lived in the same rental blocks were also considered inappropriate partners due to safety reasons. A female workers expressed her feelings:

I have stayed alone since then. I don't even think about sharing the room. People said that when sharing, they were afraid their roommates would steal their valuables, then some were dirty. I prefer living alone.

ID #22

To those who were lucky enough to find a partner, balancing work, life, and savings for the future could become a daily burden. As landlords often relaxed restrictions on the number of persons allowed in a single room, workers who had a lover tended to share a room to reduce rental costs. However, that does not guarantee that there will not be any problems. A young male voiced his concerns:

I feel living alone is more comfortable. If you have your friends, a lover, or a girlfriend come over, and then you have an argument, it would be troubling.

ID #36

Due to proximity and low-quality rental room structures, problems of a shared room for young couples might greatly affect the neighbors' mental health. Under the constraints of narrow spaces in rental blocks and strict time controls during working hours, it seems there was no place for workers' private relationships.

## **V. Discussion**

In Southeast Asia, FDI inflows have often been attributed to the low cost of labor and the potential of local markets. In the last 20 years, as foreign investments shifted toward technology-intensive manufacturing, the role of human capital and skilled workforces have been brought into the spotlight (Noorbaksh et al. 2001). Indeed, human capital is one of the most important determinants of FDI attractions. However, the findings in this study suggest that foreign firms in Vietnam seem to neglect this precious resource. This study, although it has limitations in terms of sampling sizes and approach, partly addresses the gap by identifying its significance and detailing how different factors shape workers' well-being, which has important implications for workforce sustainability.

### **5.1. Insufficient Resources and the Vicious Cycle of Stress and Poor Well-being**

The results in previous sections highlight the fact that workers' resources, both in terms of financial and social resources, are significantly low which led to negative loops of permanent stress and vulnerability. Most workers start to work for an FDI firm as soon as they leave high school at the age of 18 and due to age discrimination, they have around twenty years to obtain necessary capital. Before the pandemic, migrant workers would plan to use this accumulated sum for either settling down in the city or returning to their hometowns at an older age. The pandemic has

changed their perceptions and attitudes and consequently altered their thinking. In fact, qualitative data shows that participants shared two distinct viewpoints. In the first group, the pandemic and its related shocks have sped up their return processes. Due to poor welfare policies implemented by FDI firms (Tho and Tri 2022), there are no incentives to attract workers, especially those with children, to come back. This partly explains the prevalence of labor shortage across industrial zones in HCMC. In addition, the combination of strict regulations in the factories, hardships, and poor living conditions lead to a strong desire to have more autonomy and peaceful environments, which include owning a small shop or continuing farming activities back home. This phenomenon seems to counter current urbanization strategies because workers refuse to become permanent residents in the city. Their children who gain little resources back home will likely repeat the same vicious cycle of migration and impoverishment.

Concerning the group who choose to stay in HCMC, the pandemic has severely affected their long-term plans. Because of the excessive price of housing, their savings are too small to make their dream of living comfortably in the city realistic. Understandably, without a concrete life purpose, some might adopt a negative lifestyle or lack commitment to work. For those who are over 40 years old, due to low levels of education and skills, livelihood changes are very difficult. Hence, elderly workers will pledge to stay in the city and must resort to illegitimate means to make a living. On the one hand, they might help to solve the labor shortages for low-skilled jobs in urban areas but on the other hand, this poses a threat to the sustainable process of both urbanization and industrialization.

In both scenarios, resources play a critical role in shaping the workers' lives (Tung 2022; Bui et al. 2021). However, the amount earned by FDI workers was rather inelastic, which is attributed to many factors, including quality of foreign investments which currently are labor-intensive. In other words, the race-to-the-bottom among FDI companies coupled with productivity in the sector has resulted in vicious cycles of low-paid jobs and inadequate incomes. To eliminate these downward loops, there is a need to attract

up-value FDI flows as well as support the domestic sector to boost productivity and increase workers' salaries. Further, national private firms can leverage their intrinsic advantages, linkages, and spill-over effects (Ha, Holmes and Tran 2022) to compete with international corporations in terms of working conditions and incomes. The success of place-based approaches with small-firm networks in Europe (Boix and Vaillant 2010) and other OECD countries suggests that regional authorities can provide better environments for domestic firms and make rural areas more competitive. This in turn will help utilize the local workforce, especially those who return from the cities.

## **5.2. Influence of Overtime Work on Work-Life Balance and Workers' Well-being**

In line with early studies of workplace well-being (Diego-Rosell Tortora and Bird 2018; Alessandri et al. 2023), findings of this study confirm that both work and non-work factors are critical to the health and wellness of workers. However, in the Vietnamese contexts, overtime expectations and lack of social relationships are the most significant factors affecting workers' well-being. Consistent with previous studies, working overtime to earn extra money and attendance bonuses (*tiền chuyên cần*) were common practices in FDI firms. This point echoes previous findings of Tran (2011), which highlight the fact that workers faced the dilemma of being exhausted with working extra hours for survival. Working long hours not only resulted in physical and mental health problems but also negatively affected workers' private lives. The findings reveal that most participants faced difficulties in finding a suitable partner and having sufficient time to maintain sound relationships. Due to financial constraints, some chose a lonely lifestyle, sacrificing their youth to support their families back home. These practices go against natural processes and social norms and come with a cost of chronic stress and dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, workers experienced a lack of private space and means for social interactions such as relative visits or religious practices. Obviously, the absence of social connections from immediate communities and private lives led to loneliness and

exclusion. In line with past research on work-life balance (Kossek et al. 2014; Wong et al. 2021), the findings suggest that in the context of Vietnam, work-life balance in FDI firms is an extremely serious issue, which has deteriorated the psychological well-being of migrant workers. These work-life imbalances might be partly explained by the prevailing power asymmetry between FDI workers and their employers, foreign corporations. Previously, owing to the abundance of labor supplies, FDI employers often had higher ground in the recruitment process, and workers' well-being was the last thing they were concerned with. In managerial practices, inferior positions had no right to negotiate. Now, in the current climate of labor shortages, local authorities have strengthened their mediation roles to level the uneven relationships between workers and FDI owners. Well-targeted policies that consolidate employee rights will help migrant workers to have a say in critical issues related to working environments, incomes, and benefits.

To some extent, Vietnam's welfare system reflects the "productivist regime" that operates in East Asia countries (Holliday 2000). Within this framework, the states tend to sacrifice residents' well-being for economic growth objectives. Considering urban facilities, FDI workers seemed to face a wide range of difficulties in access to public services. The Vietnamese residential registration system, although less strict than the Chinese system (Siu and Unger 2020), continued to be a barrier for workers to integrate into urban settings. In fact, Vietnamese migrant workers, who have a very low priority in the State's caring system, cannot have meaningful approaches to improve their status. Nevertheless, interview data shows that migrants found their own ways to mitigate inequalities induced by markets and the state. Participants' solitary lifestyles, for example, might not be their first choice but harsh conditions in the city forced them to eschew social interactions. Similarly, neither sending their children back to the country nor accepting split-family is an easy decision but most workers chose that solution to make ends meet. Having fewer children or marriages without children are increasingly common in migrant communities. These phenomena echo the Polanyi's (2001) implicit resistances on which marginalized groups rely to withstand rising inequality.



### **5.3. Releasing Housing Burdens and Enhancing Corporate Social Responsibility**

One feature that distinguishes Vietnam's workers from those in other developing countries is the absence of dormitory labor regime. This is reflected in the cases of two industrial parks in this study, EPZ and SHTP, whose laborers are mainly housed by private rental housing. Compared to China, where up to 38% of workers' accommodation were provided by employers (Li, Duda, and An 2009), very few companies in Vietnam built dormitories for workers. Likewise, social housing or rent subsidies are also popular alternatives for low-income laborers in the Global South, whereas equivalent options are virtually absent in the Vietnamese housing market. Broadly speaking, in terms of housing choice, rural-to-urban workers in HCMC have no option but to live in sub-standard rooms provided by private landlords. As shown in previous sections, housing costs account for the largest expense of an employee's budget and housing security is one of the key factors that determine workers' well-being. Hence, mitigating housing burdens should be the priority of the State in the aftermath of the pandemic. Likewise, as workforce housing has been neglected, employers are required to take responsibility for housing security. Given exorbitant land prices in HCMC and low profit margin among FDI firms, there are limits to what foreign corporations can provide. However, with the State's power and successes of land-based financing instruments proven in Asia (Abiad et al. 2019) elsewhere (Blanco et al. 2017), improvement in workers' housing can be achieved.

In Southeast Vietnam economic hubs, the largest concerns for FDI firms are productivity and profits. Fierce global competition forces manufacturing firms to drive down costs to win contracts. Eventually, the cost burdens result in low salaries and reduced accommodation benefits. Due to insufficient incomes, workers must work long hours to make a living, not only for themselves but also for their families. As noted earlier, the daily routines of workers are rather tedious and repetitive, without any chances for social interactions. Technically, a young employee can cope with these loops to earn money but an older worker might find them unbearable. In terms of housing, living conditions in rental blocks

are too harsh for workers. Similar to the notions of Nguyen et al. (2016), the findings in this study show that most rental rooms were inadequate, which induced various kinds of stress and anxiety. Mature workers tend not to cope with these working and housing conditions, so they voluntarily left the factory. Unintentionally, these early-retirement practices align well with the investors' interests, because FDI firms always want to hire young laborers who will accept low payment and high-demand tasks. This practice might bring about advantages in the short-term, but it has an adverse effect on workers' mental health, and consequently their well-being.

In light of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices which have been broadly implemented in developing countries (Zhang, Shang and Liu 2018), and considering the poor well-being of migrant workers in Vietnam, it is imperative for FDI firms to review CSR frameworks and further integrate social concerns into their operations. Contractual stakeholders (Albareda, Lozano and Ysa 2007) should bring workers to the forefront and consider employees' well-being as an important indicator of social contribution. Past studies also highlight the fact that CSR activities might help a FDI firm to realize win-win outcomes in which performances and competitive advantages of the company can be increased at the same time as the well-being of its workers (Lins, Servaes and Tamayo 2017). In recent years, CSR activities carried out by foreign firms in Vietnam were classified as marketing elements (Vu and Buranatrakul 2018) which means their outcomes were aimed at serving the employers only. Evidence elaborated in previous sections suggests that salaries, housing burdens, and work-life balance are the most significant areas that impact worker well-being. An integration of these into the CSR framework can help to improve workers' well-being as well as ensure the adaptation of FDI firms to the post-pandemic world.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The study of employee well-being has been in the spotlight of developed countries for the last several decades. This rapid

expansion of well-being literature is not only because workers' welfare and health are important determinants of a given firm's competitiveness and success but also due to a growing interest in improving quality of life (Ilies, Aw and Pluut 2015). However, in developing nations, owing to many factors, particularly the influence of cheap labor strategies, studies on workers' well-being have been neglected. This led to many serious issues for workforce sustainability in FDI sectors, including high turnover rates and low productivity. The pandemic and the adjustments from globalization have made these labor issues worse. Hence, it is imperative for large organizations to consider their strategic plans regarding human resources, especially policies related to workers' well-being. Yet, improving workers' well-being is not a simple task because it is neither the sole duty of firms nor the responsibility of government systems alone. In fact, beyond the workplace, workers' well-being might be positively or negatively shaped by other factors, which are not fully understood. This research contributing to well-being literature should be joined by a close examination of well-being determinants in non-work domains.

This study reveals that the well-being of laborers employed by FDI firms in Vietnam, particularly in HCMC, was rather poor in the aftermath of the pandemic. Various factors are considered significant in shaping their overall well-being. Three main dimensions of stressors can be identified, including material stressors, social stressors, and individual stressors. For the first category, insufficient income is the most critical factor which leads to other financial burdens and poor housing conditions. The survey evidence shows that indebtedness due to the lockdown and remittent responsibilities caused permanent stress and concern, resulting in low levels of subjective well-being. In terms of social relationships, access to public services and relationships with landlords were among the most common concerns of migrant workers. Weak social networks in the rental blocks resulted in insecure and unsafe feelings, which in turn had negative impacts on mental health. In the last category, job demands and lack of free time left workers with no space to find balance in their private lives. In addition, financial constraints limited entertainment choices and opportunities to find suitable

partners, eventually resulting in loneliness and sadness. In fact, all these factors woven together had a collective impact on workers' overall well-being.

The findings also point out broad social consequences of unjust practices currently employed by FDI firms across the two industrial zones. The poor well-being of migrants in juxtaposition with the continuous growth of FDI factories reveals uneven power relationships in which employers hold absolute authorization. This unequal situation is currently supported by a cheap labor approach and the abundance of migrant laborers. As FDI inflows evolve to a technology-intensive approach, it is important for all stakeholders to make necessary adjustments which emphasize the workers' well-being. Place-based approaches and supporting mechanisms for domestic companies are necessary to create competition between sectors, which will increase workers' income as well as firms' productivity. Further, policies that specifically target migrant workers' housing needs play a central role in liberating workers from housing stress, leading to well-being improvement. As evidenced in past studies on CRS (Lins et al. 2017), an alignment between firms' social responsibility and workers' needs, especially workforce housing, might bring about win-win outcomes, in which the target of sustainable development can be achieved together with the flourishing of employee well-being.

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# ***SUVANNABHUMI***

Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

## **Text and Manuscript Guideline**

### **1. TEXT STYLE**

#### **1) Language**

The manuscript should be written in English.

#### **2) Length**

The manuscript should be between 5,000 to 10,000 words in length, including references, appendices, tables and figures. Book Review or Research Report submissions must be between 1,000 to 2,000 words.

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All pieces must be encoded in a Microsoft Word file, 1.5-spaced, in Times New Roman, Font Size 12.

#### **4) Spelling**

The Journal uses US spelling, and the author should therefore follow the latest edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

#### **5) Abbreviations**

In general, terms should not be abbreviated unless they are used repeatedly and the abbreviation is helpful to the reader. Initially use the word in full, followed by the abbreviation in parentheses. Thereafter use the abbreviation only.

#### **6) Sections, Tables and Figures**

Sections and sub-sections should be divided by "I, 1.1., 1.1.1." And tables and figures should be numbered by <Table 1>, <Figure 1>. The Journal prints papers in black and white but upload PDF files in full color at the journal homepage.

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References should be in Roman script and placed at the end of the manuscript in alphabetical order.

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All source references are to be identified at the appropriate point in the text by the last name of the author, year of publication and pagination where needed. Identify subsequent citations of the same source in the same way as the first. Examples follow:

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Wong (1986)
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Freeman, Michael and Claude Jacques. 1999. *Ancient Ankor*. Bangkok: Asia Books.

- In case of an edited book, it shall be written in ed.

Steinberg, David Joel, ed. 1987. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

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Coedes, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Susan B. Cowing, trans. Honolulu: An East-West Center Book. The University Press of Hawaii.

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Egreteau, Renaud. 2008. India's Ambitions in Burma. *Asian Survey*, 48(6): 936-957.

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- In case of the text in a compilation, it shall be in the order of author, year of publication, compilation name, compiler, related page and publisher. If there is no compiler, then it can be omitted.

King, Victor T. 2006. Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region. *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben, eds. 23-44. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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- In case of a thesis or dissertation, the following form shall be followed.

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Hadar, Leon. 1998. U.S. Sanctions against Burma. *Trade Policy Analysis* no. 1. <http://www.cato.org/pubs/trade/tpa-001.html>. (Accessed May 07, 2008).

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Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies

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