

## Introduction

Asia is at the heart of an increasingly interconnected world. The most populous and the largest of continents, it has long been the busy global crossroad where centuries of migratory flows of people, ideas, commodities and fashions have enriched diverse cultures, syncretic traditions and booming economic trade. As connections between Asia and the world grow at an unprecedented speed and scale, it becomes ever more urgent to make sense of the complexity and diversity that underpins its spectacular political-economic emergence in the early twenty-first century. The current moment, sometimes euphorically called ‘the Asian century’, has been amply written and analyzed in breathless, sweeping popular accounts. Yet what is required to understand this transformative moment, in Asia as well as far beyond its borders, is critical engagement that allows us to ground the contemporary within the *longue duree* of history.

*Asia in Focus* is precisely such a timely scholarly project that draws our attention to the event and the ordinary that constitute everyday life in Asia. What marks out this journal from a number of other scholarly journals is that it offers exclusive and generous space to early career researchers to present their work. In its second volume, the journal brings together a rich collection of essays that showcase the exciting research that the early career scholars are engaged in. John Hennessey’s essay ‘Creating a Colonial Consciousness’ delves into the theme of industrial expositions at the turn of the last century that became powerful forms of mass mediation. The expositions were deployed to signal technological advancements, and to mobilize and accumulate political and financial capital that followed these. Though Hennessey takes the 1912 Tokyo exposition to explore the audience reactions, the theme echoes the contemporary mediations of commodified nations, or ‘emerging markets’, in the global publicity through spectacular displays and campaigns a century later.

A second theme in the volume is that of urban transformations. Here Kees Krul’s ‘Preserving Bangkok’s Green Space through Agriculture’ and Arve Hansen’s ‘Motorbike Madness’ presents accounts of everyday negotiations around environmentalism, pollution, economic growth and chaotic traffic in two bustling urban locations of Bangkok and Hanoi. The last two articles draw our attention to the political mobilizations and violent contentions that have come to surface in the recent past. Sara Ellegaard Nielsen and Camilla Jane Standhart in their article ‘Myanmar activists in the Making’ describe the emergence of youth activist movements in Myanmar at a moment when the military Junta makes way for a democratically elected government. Erich Molz’s ‘Accident or Agenda’ picks up a different thread of the same problematic, namely, the state strategies improvised by the military junta in Thailand to consolidate its internal power and external reputation. Molz shows how the Cambodian migrant workers employed in shadow economies became pawns in this game as the military state’s anti-human trafficking crackdown was more geared to weaken the rival police force.

What the articles collectively offer are empirically rich and grounded accounts of transformations that continue to reshape Asia today. More than anything, this new critical scholarship seeks to disclose the nuts and bolts, the apparatus of everyday life, the contentions and contradictions that constitute a part of the world that still remains the bustling global crossroad.

Ravinder Kaur, PhD

Associate Professor of South Asian Studies

Director of the Centre of Global South Asian Studies

Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen