

Editor' Introduction: Agency, Aspiration, and Social Transformation in Contemporary Asia

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Contemporary Asia is often described through the language of acceleration: accelerated digitalisation, accelerated urbanisation, accelerated mobility, accelerated geopolitical change, and accelerated social uncertainty. Yet acceleration alone does not explain how people actually live through these transformations. A more revealing question is how individuals and communities exercise agency under constraint: how students learn under pressure, how migrants build lives in precarious urban spaces, how marginalised regions confront conflict, how neighbouring societies remember shared histories, how language learners encounter other cultures, and how women educators persist under authoritarian and patriarchal conditions.

This issue of the *Journal of Asian Social Science Research* approaches contemporary Asia through this question of agency. Amartya Sen's capability approach is useful because it shifts attention from formal resources or opportunities to people's substantive freedoms: what they are actually able to do and to become within specific social, economic, and institutional conditions (Sen 1999). Arjun Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" is also relevant because it treats aspiration as a culturally shaped capacity that is unevenly supported by social position, recognition, and access to navigational resources (Appadurai 2004). Read together, these perspectives help us see the articles in this issue not as separate studies of education, migration, conflict, history, language learning, and gender, but as connected inquiries into how people pursue dignity, learning, security, recognition, and hope amid unequal structures.

The timing of this issue is significant. Education systems are confronting the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence; urban communities continue to face insecure settlement and uneven access to services; protracted conflicts reveal the limits of security-centred responses; regional cooperation requires renewed attention to shared histories; language learning increasingly mediates intercultural awareness; and the exclusion of Afghan girls and women from education remains one of the most urgent crises in the region. UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023* emphasises that technology in education must be evaluated

not only through novelty, but also through access, governance, regulation, and teacher preparation (UNESCO 2023a). Its guidance on generative AI similarly calls for policies that protect data privacy and support ethical and pedagogically meaningful use (UNESCO 2023b). These concerns resonate throughout the articles in this issue.

The issue opens with Aida Mehrad, Mohammad Hossein Tahriri Zangeneh, Meriem Bouzedif, and Neema George Rweramila's "Educational Stress and Artificial Intelligence Tools: A Study of International Students' Experiences in Spanish Higher Education." The article examines international students at C3S Business School in Barcelona and explores how AI-powered educational technologies shape their experience of academic stress. Its findings are deliberately nuanced: many students benefit from personalised support, easier access to learning resources, more efficient assignment management, and reduced academic pressure, while others express concern about overreliance, ethical issues, privacy, academic integrity, and the weakening of critical thinking (Mehrad et al. 2025).

The contribution of this article lies in its refusal to treat AI as either a threat or a solution. Instead, Mehrad et al. situate AI within the actual pressures faced by international students. These students often navigate unfamiliar academic expectations, linguistic adjustment, institutional rules, and performance demands across cultural boundaries. AI tools may expand students' capabilities when they support comprehension, confidence, and participation. Yet they may also narrow those capabilities when they encourage dependency or shift the burden of adaptation from institutions to individual learners.

The article therefore contributes to a broader debate on technology and higher education. The question is not simply whether AI should be used, but how it should be governed, taught, and ethically integrated. For Asian social science, this matters because Asian students are deeply embedded in global circuits of educational mobility. Their experiences show how digital transformation is not only technological, but also emotional, ethical, and institutional.

From the digital classroom, the issue moves to the precarious edges of urban life in the Philippines. Inero Ancho, Gabrielle Louis David, Ferlynn Recto, Sue Liza Saguiguit, and Daisy Pelegrina's "Home Along the Railway: Understanding the Migration and Settlement of Informal Settler Families Living Along Railway Lines in the Philippines" investigates informal settler families residing along the Philippine National Railways

tracks in Barangay San Antonio, Los Baños. Using narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, and field observations, the study examines residents' migration histories, unmet basic needs, and aspirations amid uncertainty. The article finds that economic vulnerability is a primary driver of settlement along the tracks, while the persistent threat of eviction discourages housing improvements and access to essential services remains limited. At the same time, strong social ties and barangay support contribute to community cohesion (Ancho et al. 2025).

This article is important because it treats informal settlers not as anonymous urban problems, but as social actors with histories, needs, strategies, and aspirations. Migration is not presented as a single event, but as a continuing process of negotiating livelihood, risk, family responsibility, and urban belonging. The article's call for inclusive and sustainable relocation programmes is therefore not merely administrative. It is an argument about urban justice.

The study also contributes to our understanding of contemporary Asia by showing how vulnerability and resilience often coexist. Informal settler families endure insecure tenure, limited services, and economic fragility, but they also build forms of solidarity that help sustain everyday life. Yet resilience should not be romanticised. The persistence of community ties does not absolve institutions from the responsibility to provide safe housing, participatory relocation, and development policies that recognise the voices of the urban poor.

The third article, Shanta Barman's "The Enduring Challenge of Naxalism in India: Roots, Realities, and Responses," revisits one of India's longest-running internal conflicts. The article traces the emergence of Naxalism from the Naxalbari uprising of 1967 and examines its ideological foundations, geographic spread, structural causes, and state responses. Barman argues that Naxalism has been sustained by radical ideology, entrenched socioeconomic inequalities, governance failures, and developmental vacuums in affected areas. While the state's approach has often been security-focused, the article calls for a comprehensive strategy that integrates security, development, and political dialogue (Barman 2025).

The contemporary relevance of this argument is clear. The Government of India's own policy framework recognises the need for a multi-pronged response to Left Wing Extremism, combining security-related measures, development interventions, and the protection of local communities' rights and entitlements (Ministry of Home Affairs 2024). Barman's article

therefore does not deny the security dimension of the conflict. Rather, it insists that security alone cannot produce sustainable peace if the deeper causes of alienation remain unresolved.

This contribution matters beyond the Indian case. Across Asia, internal conflicts are often interpreted through the language of stability and order, but such language can obscure questions of land, livelihood, representation, and trust. Barman's article reminds us that democracy is weakened when citizens encounter the state primarily through neglect, extraction, militarisation, or broken promises. Peace, in this sense, requires more than control. It requires legitimacy.

Questions of history, legitimacy, and regional imagination also shape Yanuardi Syukur's "From Shared Past to Common Future: A Historical Review of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations." The article traces historical ties between Indonesia and Malaysia through the spice trade, colonial encounters, the strategic role of the Strait of Malacca, Ternate's spices, and the broader Malay world. It argues that shared cultural, linguistic, historical, and religious ties constitute social capital that can be used to foster deeper regional collaboration (Syukur 2025).

This article is valuable because it asks readers to revisit history not only as a source of grievance, but as a resource for cooperation. Indonesia–Malaysia relations have often been narrated through moments of tension, including cultural claims, migrant labour issues, border concerns, and environmental disputes. Syukur does not ignore the possibility of tension, but he shifts the emphasis toward shared historical narratives and the potential role of academic, civil society, and community-based initiatives in strengthening mutual understanding.

The timing of this intervention is important. ASEAN adopted its Community Vision 2045 in May 2025, committing itself to a "resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN" by 2045 (ASEAN 2025). Such a vision cannot be realised through institutions alone. It requires trust, historical literacy, shared identity, and the ability to transform proximity into cooperation. Syukur's article contributes to this task by treating historical memory as a form of soft infrastructure. Roads, ports, and trade agreements matter, but so do the narratives through which neighbouring societies understand why cooperation is meaningful.

The fifth article, Ummul Hasanah, Fatmawati Djafri, and Nur Endah Nugraheni's "The Influence of Language and Culture Learning on Students' Perception of Social Issues in South Korea: Insights from Indonesian Learners of Korean," turns to language learning and intercultural understanding. Based on an online survey of twenty-eight

students enrolled in Korean language courses at Universitas Gadjah Mada, the article finds a significant positive correlation between students' Korean language and cultural proficiency and their awareness of social issues in South Korea. The authors argue that language and cultural education can enhance international awareness, empathy, and cross-cultural competence (Hasanah, Djafri, and Nugraheni 2025).

This article contributes to Asian studies by showing that language learning is not merely instrumental. It is not only a path to employment, travel, entertainment, or academic certification. It can also become a way of entering another society's debates, anxieties, values, and contradictions. In this sense, the article aligns with intercultural approaches to language education, which understand language learning as engagement with meaning, identity, and cultural difference rather than the acquisition of grammar alone (Byram 1997; Kramsch 1993).

The article is especially useful because it avoids treating cultural interest as superficial admiration. Students with deeper linguistic and cultural knowledge may also become more aware of another society's social issues. This is a significant point in a region increasingly connected through education, migration, tourism, digital media, and popular culture. Cross-cultural learning at its best does not produce uncritical fascination. It produces more complex understanding.

The final article, Sadiyah Ehsan Fjellrik and Marte Blikstad-Balas's "Paths to Resilience and Success: The Role of Male Support in the Professional Growth of Female Teachers in Afghanistan," offers a powerful narrative study of twelve Afghan women educators from urban and suburban areas in a western province. Focusing on the year following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the article examines how male family members supported women's educational and professional lives. Grounded in Freire's critical pedagogy, hooks's theories of becoming and self-actualisation, and Bourdieu's concept of social capital, the study identifies four key themes: male support in professional development, advocacy beyond the classroom, cultural and religious grounding, and resistance and resilience (Fjellrik and Blikstad-Balas 2025).

The contemporary context makes this article especially urgent. UNESCO stated in August 2025 that Afghanistan is the only country in the world where secondary and higher education is strictly forbidden to girls and women, and that nearly 2.2 million girls and women are barred from attending school beyond the primary level. UNESCO also reported that the Taliban had implemented more than seventy decrees violating the rights of girls and women, especially their right to education (UNESCO

2025). Against this background, the professional journeys of Afghan female teachers are not simply individual stories. They are testimonies to the political importance of education itself.

Fjellrik and Blikstad-Balas's article is powerful because it does not reduce Afghan women educators to victims. Nor does it offer a simple story of empowerment. Instead, it examines relational agency under severe constraint. Male relatives may act as allies by listening, affirming women's choices, engaging in dialogue, or challenging social expectations. At the same time, the article critically recognises that reliance on male support can also reproduce patriarchal norms. This tension is precisely what makes the study valuable. It shows resilience not as an abstract virtue, but as a negotiated practice shaped by family relations, gendered power, cultural legitimacy, and danger.

Together, the articles in this issue affirm the importance of studying Asia through both lived experience and structural constraint. International students using AI, informal settler families living beside railway tracks, communities affected by insurgency, neighbouring societies interpreting shared histories, Indonesian students learning Korean, and Afghan female teachers sustaining educational commitment under repression may appear to occupy very different worlds. Yet each case asks how people act when their choices are shaped by unequal institutions, unstable environments, and contested futures.

This issue also demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary social science. The articles draw on educational research, migration studies, conflict analysis, historical and international relations scholarship, language and cultural studies, feminist theory, and narrative inquiry. This range is not merely decorative. It reflects the complexity of contemporary Asia itself. No single discipline can adequately explain digital learning, urban informality, insurgency, regional cooperation, intercultural understanding, and gendered resistance. Each requires attention to structure and meaning, policy and experience, history and everyday life.

The broader contribution of this issue is to show that social transformation in Asia is not only produced by states, markets, technologies, or international institutions. It is also produced by students deciding how to learn, families deciding where to live, marginalised communities deciding whether to trust the state, neighbouring societies deciding how to remember one another, young people deciding how to understand another culture, and teachers deciding whether and how to continue educating under repression. These decisions are constrained, but they are not insignificant. They are the everyday sites where futures are imagined and contested.

We extend our gratitude to the authors, reviewers, and editorial team whose careful work made this volume possible. We hope this issue inspires critical reflection, scholarly dialogue, and practical insight for readers across disciplines and regions. More importantly, we hope it reminds readers that contemporary Asia is best understood not only through crisis or achievement, but through the persistent human work of learning, moving, remembering, resisting, and aspiring under constraint.

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