

POST-EVENT REPORT

Workshop on Health Infrastructure and Asia's Epidemiological Transitions: Historical Perspectives

13– 14 April 2022, ARI, Singapore

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How have human societies succeeded to or failed to cope with new and re-emergent health crises at epidemiological and other transitions in the twentieth century? While a vast literature centres on the role of health care systems—understood primarily as consisting of modern medical centres and a small core of professionals—their fragilities and limits have appeared more clearly than ever amid the contemporary syndemic of infectious diseases, chronic health conditions, poverty, rising heat, and the lack of access to education and information. In this workshop, we used the concept of “health infrastructure” to go beyond those normative objects of inquiry and examine the various infrastructural factors, or lack thereof, that fostered resilience or developed vulnerability in certain social groups and societies. Some presenters focused on the material forms of health infrastructure, such as hospitals, pop-up clinics, labs, pharmaceutical producers, medicinal supply chains, and residential buildings. Others directed more attention to the human infrastructure, interrogating the roles played by community health workers, medical officers, bureaucrats, businessmen, migrant laborers, and so forth in shaping disease concerns and finding control measures. Combined together, the two orientations cross-fertilized approaches to understanding health infrastructure and its evolution in ideas, ideologies, and practices. A holistic conceptual framing of health infrastructure—the interactions of various actors, beliefs, theoretical models with the complexities of the (built) environment—was what we endeavoured to initiate in this workshop.

The 2-day workshop (13–14 April) resulted from collaboration between NUS and the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo) through the joint Research Group on Borders, Mobility and New Infrastructures, which has been established in June 2017. It brought together cutting edge works in progress that examine how health infrastructure was historically understood and built in twentieth-century Asia and why its components were prioritized or marginalized at different historical junctures and places. Opened with a keynote speech by Professor Kavita Sivaramakrishan of Columbia University on situating disease, health, and marginality in Asia, the workshop accommodated 19 papers on various disease risks and management in the region, covering mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam, Japan, and Kazakhstan. Presenters were truly diverse in terms of disciplinary and geographic background. Scholars from the fields of history, sociology, public health, and political science participated. They were based in institutions from North America to Australia, but mainly in Asia (NUS, Yale-NUS, Columbia University, University of Huston, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, Chinese University of Hong Kong, University of Hong Kong, Jawaharlal Nehru University, German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, Akita University, Miyagi University, Ateneo de Manila University, Chulalongkorn University, University of Technology Berlin, University of Manchester, and Nazarbayev University.)