

Book review

Jenny Chan

Journal of Contemporary Asia

Published online: 17 March 2022

DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2022.2032281

Precarious Asia: Global Capitalism and Work in Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia

By Arne L. Kalleberg, Kevin Hewison and Kwang-Yeong Shin

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022

Precarious Asia is an admirable accomplishment. Arne Kalleberg, Kevin Hewison, and Kwang-Yeong Shin explain the rise of precarious work through a systematic comparative study of Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia. The methodological design aims to identify the historical trajectories as well as the similarities and differences in the contemporary transformations in the three nations. Utilising quantitative and qualitative data, the authors find that “the extent and consequences of precarious work reflect the relative strengths or weaknesses of transnational and domestic capital and labour in particular sectors of the economy” (175). As economic inequality and poverty have deepened across all three Asian countries in recent decades, they conclude that “class-based redistribution of income and wealth” is much needed to “reduce the inequality between nonregular and regular workers” (14). This trans-disciplinary research clearly informs a new direction in social policy debate, rather than prescribing barely adequate services or financial needs to the most adversely affected individuals.

The concept of “precarious work” refers to the nature of “uncertain, unstable and insecure” work in which “*employees bear the risks of work*” (2). Even when institutional protections remained limited to American and European white males in Western welfare states during the post-World War II decades through the 1970s (excluding women, immigrants, and much of the rural population), the ideal type of “standard employment relationships” (75) can be used for illustrative purpose, particularly in the cases of Japan and South Korea amid their industrial take-off. In Indonesia, from past to present, formal employment has only ever been available to a small group of employees.

Japan achieved rapid economic growth and export-led industrialisation in the 1950s and 1960s. Lifetime tenure for male employees in large firms reinforced and sustained the male breadwinner-female homemaker model in Japanese patriarchal capitalism. In South Korea, male urban workers similarly enjoyed full-time, well-paid positions in family-owned conglomerates in the 1980s. When Indonesia opened its door to Japanese and South Korean capital in the 1990s, newly found factory jobs were, however, concentrated in low value-added segments of globalised production. In contrast to its Northeast Asian counterparts, rewards tied to one’s loyalty or employment seniority were limited as manufacturing is underdeveloped in the Indonesian economy.

The interplay of global and domestic forces has eroded social protections and intensified precarious lives during recent decades. In Japan, the signing of the international fiscal pact of the

1985 Plaza Accord accelerated industrial reorganisation in the form of offshoring and outsourcing. Coupled with the collapse of an asset price bubble, Japan experienced the Lost Decade of economic recession in the 1990s. In 2018, non-regular workers (including part-time, dispatch, and other contract workers) comprised almost 40% of the labour force in Japan, more than double the figure in 1985 (82). In South Korea and Indonesia, the 1997–1998 Asian Economic Crisis gave rise to a recession and massive unemployment. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, new governments implemented neo-liberal reforms prioritising flexibility of national labour markets. In South Korea, the proportion of non-regular workers in the total workforce increased dramatically from 27% in 2002 to 37% in 2004 and then dropped slightly in the subsequent years before rising to 36% in 2019 (90). In Indonesia, the informal sector consisting of self-employed workers and casual labourers is very large. It is estimated that only 10–20% of the total workforce are regular workers with a contract (93). Although cross-national comparisons are complicated by different definitions of regular/non-regular or formal/informal employment, the authors meticulously present statistical data from multiple sources (including official national labour force findings, business surveys and household panel surveys) to show the unmistakable trend of the rise of precarious work in the three countries.

Labour market dualisms intersect with gender and age. In all three economies, the labour force participation rates for women workers hover around 50%, which are substantially lower than rates of male participation. In Japan and South Korea, female workers predominate in part-time work and in the service sector with short-term contracts. In Indonesia, gender disparity is reflected in “women’s higher rates of unpaid family employment, especially in agriculture” (104). Women – and increasingly men of younger and older groups – face formidable challenges to move socially upward from nonstandard to standard employment. Precarious work is becoming more pervasive.

Social policies are nonetheless shifting amid demographic changes. Public social expenditures as percentage of GDP doubled between 1990 (10.9%) and 2018 (21.9%) in Japan, a fast-ageing society characterised by low marriage and fertility rates (120). However, disadvantaged working youths may not be eligible for health insurance, old-age pensions, or other social protections. In South Korea, despite the introduction of government welfare reform in the mid-2000s, the coverage of family welfare programmes and other social benefits was still very limited as of 2018 (11.1%). In Indonesia, social policy spending was merely 2.7% in 2018, a slow improvement over the 0.7% of 2000. Taken as a whole, labour protections are insufficient, with contention between “social agendas (social protection, employment stability, and economic security)” and “neoliberal agendas (competitiveness, investment, and growth)” (147).

From the bottom up, trade unions and civil society organisations have attempted to defend worker rights and interests in the three capitalist democracies. South Korean activists, sometimes with support from students, union confederations and other concerned groups, have compelled the state to initiate pro-labour legislative reforms (such as capping the workweek at 52 hours under the 2018 Labour Law). Similarly, in Indonesia, despite the very low level of union representation and the tendency to return to an authoritarian state, non-regular workers have coordinated with their allies in campaigns to raise local statutory minimum wages and benefits, with partial victories. In both South Korea and Indonesia, political parties are interested in getting votes by appealing to workers, whereas the business-friendly Liberal Democratic Party in

Japan has hegemonic control and has closed off some political opportunities so that workers have failed to win significant concessions.

States and businesses share interest to promote liberalisation and informalisation of labour markets. While on-demand labour services regulated by digital platforms have been growing during the COVID-19 lockdowns of cities and countryside, food couriers and parcel delivery workers have been exposed to health risks, long and irregular hours, and low pay. Labour struggles, juxtaposed against the haunting tragedy of “death by overwork” that opens the book, demonstrate the urgency for legal reforms and employee protection.

Kalleberg, Hewison, and Shin are compassionate in addressing the difficult situation confronting working people in an age of increasing precarity. The forms of precarious work, in their perceptive observation, are expanding, with negative consequences spanning from the intertwined spheres of production to social reproduction such as childbirth, childrearing, and care for the elderly. Their comparative analytical framework will be very useful to scholars and activists who wish to further investigate and monitor the long-term development of Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia from the perspective of employment rights. The dynamism of Asian capitalism and labour politics, mediated by national states and other political actors across different levels, receives an insightful analysis in *Precarious Asia*.

Jenny Chan

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4980-4048>