



# THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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## Mapping the New Pandemic in Southeast Asia

*Revitalising ASEAN Economies in a Post-COVID-19 World: Socioeconomic Issues in the New Normal*, edited by Hooi Hooi Lean (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022), 284 pages, USD 98.

The novel coronavirus (Covid 19) pandemic was first reported by China in December 2019, and thereafter quickly spread to other countries. While the challenges of preventing and containing the virus was the top priority of all governments, it gradually became clear that the pandemic had also unleashed social and economic disruptions all over the world. Southeast Asian nations were immediately affected because of the geographical proximity and trade dealings with China.

The Asian Development Bank Institute (ADB I) conducted two studies in May-July 2020 (first wave) and in January-February 2021 (second wave) to examine the impact of the pandemic on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The study involved a computer assisted telephonic survey covering 7,089 households in seven ASEAN countries—Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam (Brunei, Myanmar and Singapore were not included). The studies showed that the pandemic resulted in a fall in demand because of

the overall uncertainty as well as policy interventions like lockdown, social distancing and travel restrictions, all of which “are having a severe impact on Asian economies and hence on Asian households.”<sup>1</sup> One of the striking findings of the survey is that “about 60% of households experienced financial difficulties during the first-wave period, and this ratio actually increased to 78% in the second-wave period.”<sup>2</sup> Around 66 percent of children stopped attending school physically during the pandemic and while online classes were arranged, not every child could attend because of internet connectivity or affordability, and those who attended could only participate partially, all of which are expected to affect human capital formation adversely.

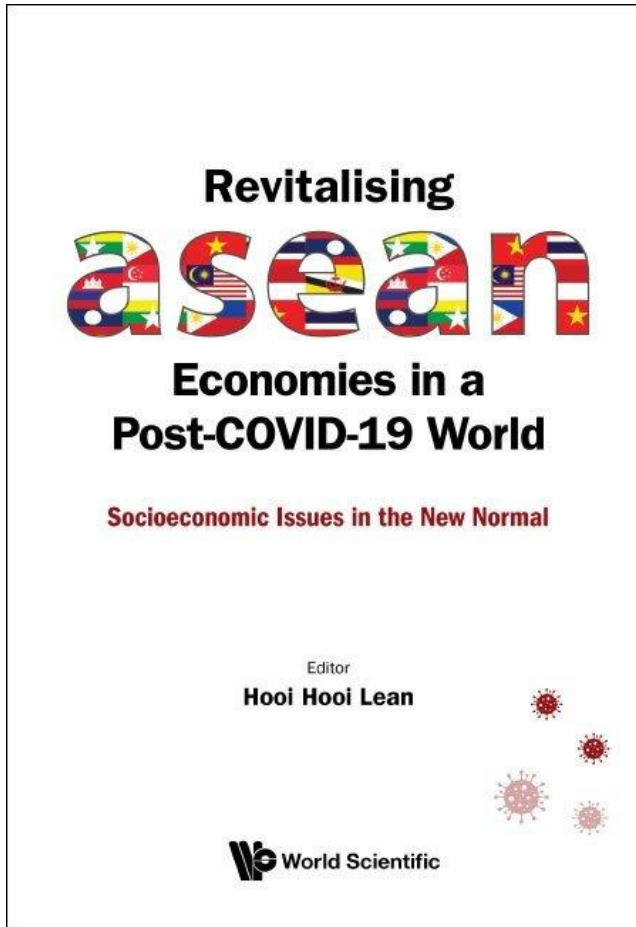
The book under review, *Revitalising ASEAN Economies in a Post-COVID-19 World*, looks at the social and economic impact and possible solutions to mitigate the adverse effects. Edited by Hoi Hooi Lean, a professor at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, the book consists of nine chapters written by academics, covering seven ASEAN member nations (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) while three ASEAN nations (Laos, Philippines and Myanmar) are not included in the study. The editor explains that these three countries “have not been covered in detail with an individual chapter of their own, due to various reasons beyond my control” (Preface, p. xiv). Each chapter ends with interesting policy prescriptions to revitalize the economies, which are based presumably on a 2021 perspective and could be of academic interest in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Morgan, Long Q. Trinh, and Kunhyui Kim, ADB Institute Working Paper 1312, page 32, March 2021, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/794036/adbi-wp-1312.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., page 32.

studying their actual implementation and impact, but are not being considered in this review as they would be well beyond its scope.



The first chapter, “Impact of COVID-19 on Brunei Darussalam Economy,” explains the outbreak in the country, when after the first positive case of Covid-19 viral infection was reported in March 2020 in Brunei, the number quickly rose to 135, of which 71 were related to the four-day religious congregation (Tablighi) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. There was one death in Brunei, but after this initial spurt, Brunei

controlled the spread of the virus by adopting stringent measures like the immediate 14-day quarantine. The authors (Gamini Premaratne, faculty member, School of Business, Universiti Brunei Darussalam; Aishath Shahudha Abdulla, PhD student, School of Business and Economics, Universiti Brunei Darussalam; and Farah A'liyah Haji Amer Hishamuddin, credit analyst at BIBD Asset Management) explain that the low population density would have helped, but the government also provided daily, transparent, and updated communication to avoid panic. The resultant public trust in the government's handling of the crisis helped businesses and the economy to recover swiftly.

Quoting from the Brunei Ministry of Finance and Economy (2020a), the authors highlight that “The country's economy has been comparatively resilient, with an annual positive growth of 1.2% (2020) although it is a drop from 3.9% (2019) due to a 9% increase in the non-oil and gas sector despite the 4.9% fall in the oil and gas sector” (p. 8). The negative impact of the pandemic was felt mostly by the services sector like hotels and restaurants which rely on mobility and face-to-face interaction, and air transport, too, showed sharp negative growth. The government introduced policy measures to support industries and individuals to enable a faster recovery. The authors argue, “COVID-19 has propelled various sustainable and structural changes along with its long-term economic footprint in Brunei economy, in terms of economic diversification, supply chain logistics, and altering consumer demand structure and lifestyle” (p. 25).

The next chapter, “Cambodia's Response to COVID-19 and its Socioeconomic Dimensions,” authored by Júlia Garcia-Puig, Strategy and Program Consultant, Open Development Cambodia, explains that while Brunei reported the first positive case in March 2020, Cambodia announced its first positive case on January 27, 2020 even before the

World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Although there were fears that the numbers would rapidly rise because of the country's proximity to China, prompt action by the government helped contain the spread and limit the cases to 13.36 per 100,000. Social distancing measures, the closure of leisure and entertainment venues and schools, the banning of religious gatherings, and restrictions on interprovincial mobility and international flights, helped in containing the pandemic.

But when it came to the economy, it turned out to be a different story. External demand shocks damaged the economy at the macro and micro levels, in spite of the government's relief packages, fiscal measures, and monetary policy initiatives. The biggest hits were suffered by the tourism and hospitality sector, the garment and footwear industry, and construction and real estate. This, in turn, resulted in a drop in incomes and increased household indebtedness. The author concludes that "despite social protection and contingency strategies being a priority in Cambodia, the government lacks the capacity and financial resources to provide a comprehensive, large-scale response that can be sustained in time" (p. 50). However contrary to these pessimistic expectations, the May 2023 report of the World Bank stated, "Cambodia's economy is firmly on a path to recovery, led by manufacturing exports and growth in services and agriculture. Cambodia's economic recovery solidified in 2022, when real growth accelerated to 5.2%."<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter 3, "COVID-19 and the Economy: How Indonesia Responded," the authors explain that the Indonesian government

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<sup>3</sup>The World Bank, News, Cambodia Economic Update - Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery, May 18, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/video/2023/05/18/cambodia-economic-update-post-covid-19-economic-recovery>

recognized the seriousness of the health and economic crises triggered by the pandemic, and set up a Committee on Managing COVID-19 Disease, reporting directly to the president of the country. This committee, in turn, was assisted by two task forces, one dealing with the response to the disease, the other with the economic recovery. The authors Aris Ananta, Professor, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Indonesia; Windhiarso Ponco Adi Putranto, Economist-Statistician, Statistics-Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik); and Ahmad Irsan A. Moeis, senior budget analyst, Directorate General of Budget, Ministry of Finance, Indonesia, explain that a lockdown was implemented from March 15 to June 4, 2020 but it was not a complete, stringent lockdown. People were asked to wear facial masks, wash hands, maintain physical distance/avoid crowds and stay at home. There was no strict penalty for violation.

The essay goes on to present an analysis of the number of infections, fluctuations from time to time, from one area/region to another, the age-wise distribution as well as mortality figures. This is followed by an analysis of population mobility using data from various sources including Google mobility index. It details the fiscal policies introduced by the government as well as the results of various online surveys conducted by different institutions to determine individual behavior—during shutdown and during relaxation of shutdown—and also business behavior. Finally, it presents an analysis of the macro-economy in terms of gross domestic product growth, GDP composition and employment. The conclusions from this elaborate analysis are that high population mobility can be correlated with the data on rising number of daily infections. Also, “some sectors of the economy, especially those with online activities may have flourished during the pandemic.[. . .]Civil servants with fixed income may have fared better



than those in private sectors with uncertainty of the future. [. . .] government expenditure (including social assistance) may have helped raise aggregate demand. [. . .] Application of health protocol among large firms, producing high value-added, may have maintained the economic activities too. [. . .] Yet, the pandemic has not changed the structure of national income very much, either by expenditure or industry” (p. 84).

A December 2023 report prepared by the World Bank confirms that “Indonesia’s economic growth remains resilient, with inflation on a declining trend and stable currency. [. . .] Private consumption is anticipated to be the primary driver of growth in 2024. Business investment and public spending are also expected to pick up as a result of reforms and new government projects.”<sup>4</sup> The report adds that inflation is expected to ease to 3.2% in 2024 from an average of 3.7% in 2023, within the target band of Bank Indonesia, the falling inflation reflecting the softening in commodity prices and a return to normal rates of growth in domestic demand after the post-pandemic bounce-back.

In Chapter 4, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Malaysia’s Economy,” the authors discuss the impact of the pandemic on the Malaysian economy. The authors Dzul Hadzwan Husaini, Economics Lecturer, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and the editor Hooi Hooi Lean, explain that the virus hit Malaysia on January 25, 2020 and after a brief respite from January 25, 2020 to February 16, 2020, continued in the form of two more waves until the end of 2020. The government responded by restricting movement in phases, flattening the curve of infections, but slowing down economic growth. Tourism was

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<sup>4</sup> “Indonesia’s Economic Growth to Ease Slightly in 2024 as Commodity Prices Soften, paras 1-3, The World Bank, December 13, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/12/13/indonesia-economic-growth-to-ease-slightly-in-2024-as-commodity-prices-soften>

the first to suffer, while small- and medium enterprises struggled with insufficient cash flow and supply chain disruptions as overall household expenditure declined. The authors have presented important economic indicators in 2019-2020 to show how GDP declined by -7.02 percent in the first quarter of 2020, followed by -15.86 percent in the second quarter, a turnaround of +21.34 percent in the third quarter, before declining again in the fourth quarter. Sectorally, the impact was greatest on the travel and accommodation sectors, followed by motor vehicles, transport, storage and construction sectors while agriculture remained unaffected. As regards international trade, the decrease in export growth coupled with an increase in import growth resulted in the trade balance turning negative for the first time in ten years. The study goes on to look at inflation, employment/unemployment, business climate and market sentiment during 2019-20.

The government announced four stimulus packages and these are discussed in detail alongside the monetary policy adjustments and Budget 2021. The authors conclude that while multiple offset policies were announced by the government in securing and recovering the economy from the pandemic, the reality was that the pandemic affected the investment and net export components in the economy, leaving it too weak to trigger the desired economic growth. This meant a high reliance on private consumption and government expenditure to activate economic growth. But this called for high fiscal commitment which could be a problem given the government's fiscal constraints.

The authors have suggested certain policy corrections to revive economic growth. When we look at the latest situation, it doesn't look so gloomy. A December 2023 press release by the International Monetary Fund states that "the Malaysian economy has weathered external



headwinds well and is projected to grow at 4 percent in 2023”<sup>5</sup> Private consumption remained the main driver of growth throughout the year, supported by a healthy labor market, and exports to major trading partners weakened markedly due to subdued external demand and the economic slowdown in China. It added that “headline and core inflation have been moderating, the latter more gradually, with headline inflation projected at 2.9 percent in 2023. Inflation expectations remained well anchored.”<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 5, “COVID-19 Pandemic and the Malaysian Tourism,” demonstrates that while the pandemic had a severe impact on the global tourism industry which recorded a 74 percent reduction in tourist arrivals, the impact on Malaysia was quite significant as tourism accounted for 5.7 percent of GDP in 2019 and employed 3.5 million people. The authors Tze-Haw Chan, Post-Doctoral Fellow, School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Jin Hooi Chan, Associate Professor of Sustainable Strategy, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Greenwich, United Kingdom, explain that the closure of international borders and movement control orders issued by the government affected national and domestic tourism. The authors present data according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation showing that the fall in foreign tourists’ arrivals in Southeast Asia was far more than the world average, while the decline of Malaysian foreign tourist arrival was slightly higher than the ASEAN average. By September 2020, Malaysia lost 78 percent of its foreign

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<sup>5</sup> International Monetary Fund Press Release No. 23/448 dated December 14, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/12/14/pr23448-malaysia-imf-staff-completes-2024-article-iv-mission>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

tourist arrivals. The decline was 36 percent in the first quarter, followed by almost 99 percent in the second and third quarters of 2020 (p. 126).

The authors present a detailed analysis of the impact on the tourism value chain, in particular the hotel and the aviation industry. They demonstrate that from March 2020 to January 2021, around 100 hotels closed operations affecting over 7,000 employees, the hotel industry alone losing RM 6.5 billion in 2020 (p. 133). In line with the severe setback suffered by the global airline industry in the worst year in aviation history, the Malaysian airline industry was brought to the brink of bankruptcy. The authors point out that major airlines in Malaysia, namely Malaysia Airlines Bhd, Air Asia Group Bhd and its long-haul affiliate Air Asia X Bhd, and Malindo Airways Sdn Bhd, shed thousands of jobs after grounding most of their planes following the Movement Control Order in March 2020 in order to preserve cash flow. Moreover, Malaysia Airports Holdings Bhd (MAHB) was also in dire business trouble. MAHB, which manages 39 airports in the country, swung to a net loss of RM 431.17 million for the cumulative 9 months ended on September 30, 2020, from a net profit of RM 507.53 million in 2019 (p. 135). While the outlook is not too optimistic, the actual situation does inspire hope. According to an article in the *New Straits Times* dated December 26, 2023, demand for business and leisure air travel should continue to recover throughout 2024, according to Kenanga Research. This is consistent with Tourism Malaysia's projection of tourist arrivals to return to pre-pandemic levels of 27 million in Malaysia, up 35 per cent from 20 million in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> S. Birruntha, "Malaysia's Business and Leisure Air Travel to Keep Recovering Throughout 2024," *New Straits Times*, December 26, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/business/corporate/2023/12/994237/malaysias-business-leisure-air-travel-keep-recovering-throughout>

In Chapter 6, “Financial Stress of Singapore in the Time of COVID-19,” the authors use the Financial Stress Index to assess the financial condition of Singapore during the COVID-19 crisis. The authors, Sook-Rei Tan, Economics Lecturer, James Cook University, Singapore; Wei-Siang Wang, Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; and Wai-Mun Chia, Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University, are of the view that beyond the impact of COVID-19 as a public health issue, which in turn impacts the financial, economic and social aspects of the country, there is also the impact of global financial factors on Singapore’s financial system and economy. They have, therefore, presented an outline of the COVID-19 health crisis as it unfolded, alongside the government’s response to it. Singapore’s first COVID-19 case was reported on January 23, 2020, spreading thereafter in various clusters and the number of cases surging in March 2020. After the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, all short-term visitors were barred from entering or transiting in Singapore. Mass testing, surveillance, restricted mobility and interactive social activities helped ensure that the COVID-19 curve plateaued since October 2020. The economy shrank by 5.8 percent, the unemployment rate rose to a record 3.4 percent, the worst hit sectors were construction and tourism-dependent services like accommodation and other services, wholesale/retail trade, transportation and storage. The government responded by introducing fiscal support packages that included cash payouts to all Singaporeans and payments to low-income and unemployed individuals, as well as affected industries like aviation, tourism, construction, transportation, arts and culture. The central bank announced various monetary measures to support the financial system.

Against this background, the authors propose a Financial Stress Index (FSI) to closely monitor the financial vulnerability. The FSI has six

components covering the banking sector, equity market and foreign exchange market. The authors elaborately explain the FSI and present the daily FSI for Singapore in the form of detailed tables and graphs. In their two-part study, the authors identify stress episodes in Singapore by comparing the FSI to its trend and confirm that a stress period had indeed occurred during March 9 to April 21, 2020. The FSI seems to stabilize towards the end of the sample period but is still higher than the pre-pandemic level. In the second part, the authors discover that Singapore's financial stress is attributed to global financial factors instead of a direct consequence of the domestic COVID-19 outbreak" (p. 164). This study has policy implications for the handling of the financial stress faced by Singapore, particularly the need to factor in the global financial aspects.

Chapter 7, "Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Thai Fruit: A Case Study of Longan Supply Chain," begins with an account of the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic as it unfolded and then looks at the economic depression that followed, particularly the impact of the pandemic on agriculture and food supply, in terms of restrictions on transportation, movement of agricultural labor and changes in consumer demand and purchasing power. The authors (Roengchai Tansuchat, Associate Professor, Faculty of Economics, Chiang Mai University, Thailand; Tanachai Pankasemsuk, Lecturer, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, Faculty of Agriculture, Chiang Mai University; and Chanita Panmanee, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Economics, Maejo University, Thailand), explain that Thai tropical fruits are considered an important economic crop in the country, generating billions of dollars each year (more than US\$3.6 billion in 2019) and popularly consumed at home and abroad. It is noteworthy to mention that Thai tropical fruits are economically

important and have high export value, especially longans, durians, mangosteens, mangoes, rambutans (p. 174).

Having defined the problem, the authors then present a literature review that looks at the impact of other global outbreaks, like H5N1, H7N9, H1N1, SARS, MERS and Ebola, on people in general, as well as the agricultural sector and the food supply chain. With this background the authors conducted research to study the impact of COVID-19 on the Thai fruit sector. The research methodology is discussed in detail followed by a discussion of the findings that focus on the impact on various stakeholders in the Thai fruit supply chain: fruit growers or farmers, harvest workers, wholesalers and retailers, fruit processing businesses and transportation and logistics. Finally, a Longan case study shows the impact of the pandemic on longan fruit in the Northern Thailand provinces of Chiang Mai and Lamphun, which are the principal longan cultivation areas. The authors conclude, based on their research study, that the lockdown and containment measures dwindled the fruit trading volume, on-season fruit export prices, farm-gate prices, leading to an increase in the shortage of skilled harvest labor, transportation and logistics costs, and higher food safety measures and requirements. The study also underlined the economic impact—lowering demand for fresh on-season longan, bringing about weaker prices, lower farmers' income, and reduced financial liquidity of longan-related businesses, especially farmers and merchants (p. 193).

In Chapter 8, "COVID-19 in Vietnam: Perception of Urban Workers and Compliance with the National Social Distancing Policies," the authors point out that like the other countries in the region, Vietnam too recorded the first case of Covid-19 in January 2020. The authors, Thanh-Long Giang, Associate Professor in Economics, National Economics University, Hanoi; Tham Hong-Thi Pham, Senior Lecturer,

Faculty of Mathematical Economics, National Economics University; Thi-Thu Do, Lecturer, Banking Academy of Vietnam; and Manh-Phong Phi, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Political Studies, University of Mining and Geology, Hanoi, explain that as a middle-income country with a long border with China, Vietnam introduced various strong measures to restrict the spread of the disease. The measures included strict home isolation and restricted travel, continuous dissemination of information by the government about infected cases, and important health policy messages to change healthcare behaviors by stressing hand washing and limiting direct contact.

This chapter looks at how the social distancing measures were perceived and complied with by urban workers. For this purpose, the authors conducted a web-based survey right after the first social distancing in April 2020, covering 700 urban workers. After discussing the methodology and detailed findings, the authors conclude that the respondents appreciated the government for the regular dissemination of information and the various policy measures introduced to contain the pandemic. The survey showed good compliance with social distancing policies, as people went out of their homes mostly for essential work only such as buying foods, drinks, and drugs, working and exercising (p. 224). However, it was noticed that there were differences in terms of age, gender, residential area and health status. Younger people, men, and urban people had lower rates of perception of measures to contain COVID-19 but higher rates for going out of their homes than their counterparts, due to possible work, study, and familial duties (p. 224). Finally, the authors acknowledge that their survey provided promising results on perception and compliance with national social distancing policies because it was restricted to urban workers, and the survey

sample was biased towards those who had higher education levels, lived in urban areas, and had formal jobs (p. 225).

The last chapter, “Successful Social Distancing to Contain COVID-19: Mapping the Readiness of the Vietnamese Households,” authored by Thanh-Long Giang, Associate Professor in Economics at the National Economics University, Hanoi, looks at how well the households were prepared to contain COVID-19 in Vietnam under the first national social distancing in late April 2020 by mapping the related indicators (p. 235). The author is one of the co-authors of the previous chapter on Vietnam, and the corresponding author for both the chapters. That Vietnam was successful in containing COVID-19 is accepted by research studies. This chapter argues that, along with timely information dissemination and social assistance policies, households’ readiness was a necessary condition for the success of the social distancing policies in Vietnam (p. 238). The research was conducted using already available data from Vietnam’s Population and Housing Census 2019 (PHC 2019), conducted by the General Statistics Office of Vietnam. The methodology was simple: the readiness of provinces/cities was evaluated by applying a “readiness or suitability index,” proposed by Jones et al (2020), which was based on five indicators within households: (i) access to electricity, (ii) access to clean drinking water, (iii) access to adequate sanitation, (iv) having a phone, and (v) the household head being employed. In addition, Jones et al simply defined a household as “fully ready” if all five indicators were met, and as “partially ready” if at least three out of five indicators were met” (p. 239). The results of the research are provided for each of the five indicators and a comparative table showing the readiness of various provinces/cities on this basis.

The author concludes that while all the provinces were generally ready for social distancing, some provinces in poorer regions showed

lower readiness levels than those in the richer regions. In spite of this variation, the author concludes that “the social distancing period in Vietnam was quite successful, and a part of the reason for this success was the readiness of households throughout the country” (p. 254). Finally, the author acknowledges that the PHC 2019 data was not adequate and the research could have been more comprehensive if additional details like social distancing compliance rates and household income for all the 63 provinces were available.

Overall, this volume is a compilation of serious research studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in seven ASEAN countries. Laos, Philippines and Myanmar are left out for reasons beyond the control of the editors. Each chapter puts down the timelines on the start of the pandemic and the subsequent developments surrounding the disease as well as measures by governments to control the spread. The impact of the disease, the lockdown and other measures on the economy are discussed followed by policy prescriptions. There are additional chapters on the impact specifically on Malaysian tourism and Thai longan fruit. The editors acknowledge that this is not a comprehensive, exhaustive study. The data, analysis and research pertains to 2020 and subsequent developments or insights on the impact of vaccines are missing. But the book does provide a valuable snapshot of the onset of the disease, government measures, public response, impact on the economies and policy prescriptions. As such, the book could be of interest to epidemiologists, economists, sociologists, public policy formulators and any serious student of pandemics, particularly COVID-19, and also academics interested in Southeast Asian studies.



### ***Note on the Reviewer***

**Vinod Kumar Pillai** is an independent scholar with an interest in literary fiction, development studies, popular science and short-story writing. He has published book reviews in *Rising Asia Journal* ([www.rajraf.org](http://www.rajraf.org)) on topics related to the literatures and politics of Southeast Asia, and is a reader for the Bengal Club Book Club. He holds a graduate degree in Agricultural Sciences, and worked for over thirty years in banking, specializing in industrial credit, training, behavioral science, and counseling. Besides literary fiction, development studies, popular science and training, he also devotes time to jyotish, podcasting and stock photography.

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