LIVING POLITICS
ideas and images
CONTENTS

4 Introductory Notes
   Tessa Morris-Suzuki

6 Self-Help Movements in a Taiwanese Local Community
   Shuge Wei

8 Informal Life Politics in a Japanese Rural Community
   Tessa Morris-Suzuki

10 Informal Life Politics in the People’s Republic of China
    Tom Cliff

12 Informal Politics, Formal Environmental Crisis:
    Fish, Fishing and Fishing Communities on the Korean Peninsula and China
    Robert Winstanley-Chesters

14 Informal Life Politics in South Korea’s Organic Farming Movement
    Yon Jae Paik

16 Informal Life Politics in a Mongolian Rural Community:
    A Spring of Water in the Steppe
    Uchralt Otede

18 Further Reading
At a time of major political transformations in the East Asia, citizens across the region are experimenting with alternative, self-help ways to address the profound social, economic and environmental problems which they face. These problems include resource depletion, unsustainable agricultural practices, ecological damage from radiation and other environmental pollutants, problems caused by large-scale population movements and lack of welfare support for vulnerable sections of the population.

For the past five years, with the support of the Australian Research Council Laureate scheme, we have been tracking a range of alternative experiments in informal life politics through which people in Taiwan, Japan, China, the two Koreas and Mongolia are tackling these problems.

In the pages that follow, we introduce the work of innovative groups across East Asia with whom we have exchanged ideas in the course of our project. Some of the key points which have been highlighted by our research are:

- **Networking** – Few of the groups we studied fall neatly into traditional categories of class or social status. Instead, they thrive by bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds – “locals” cooperate with “outsiders”, and people with diverse skills and life experiences come together to share ideas. In an age of global information technology, it is also possible for these networks to extend across national boundaries, as they do (for example) in the case of the organic farmers discussed by Yon Jae Paik.

- **Improvisation** – Precisely because they are small and informal, it is relatively easy for these groups to improvise, trying out new approaches to social problems, and then modifying their approaches as strengths and weaknesses become apparent. This improvisation is crucial in a world where social challenges are rapidly evolving, and where conventional political institutions often fail to keep up with the pace of change. Another aspect of improvisation is that individuals often find themselves stepping outside their accustomed social roles and taking on unfamiliar tasks: farmers take on some of the roles of scientists or of development planners; retirees and full-time parents create new currencies; entrepreneurs become providers of welfare, and so on.

- **Alternative value creation** – Informal life politics groups are generally engaged in a search for new values: both alternative values in the ethical sense, and different ways of thinking about economic value. They create new spaces in which aspects of life which are not necessarily highly priced in the conventional global market are given importance. The focus of
these new value systems may be on the quality of the local environment, the sense of connectedness felt by people living in a rural or urban community, or the safety of vital resources like air and water. Actions taken to address a specific local crisis therefore often generate a wider questioning of the values that are taken for granted in mainstream political and economic life.

✧ **Action into ideas** — As the last point suggests, the groups that we have studied do not start with a clearly defined ideology and act on the basis of that ideology. Rather, the process tends to work the other way around. They begin with the specific, and with action to deal with specific problems. But this action itself often becomes the starting point for developing new ideas about the society we live in.

We hope that the case studies introduced here will offer some insights into the ways in which the people of East Asia today are “living politics”, and may encourage further exchanges of ideas between people within the region and beyond who seek alternative solutions to shared social challenges in our networked world.

_Tessa Morris-Suzuki_
Gongliao district is approximately 40 kilometres northeast of Taipei city. With golden beaches, winding ocean roads and unbroken mountains, the district was proudly regarded by locals as a “beauty spot” of the eastern corner of Taiwan. In the mid-1980s, the central government began construction of a fourth nuclear power plant next to Fulong Beach. The decision broke the tranquillity of the local life. A “monster”, as the locals referred to the power plant, was being built in the local region, redefining the coastal scene.

In the late 1980s, local villagers developed a self-help group to resist the construction of the power plant. Through urban intellectuals, the locals formed connections with the newly established Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which had written an anti-nuclear agenda in their party guidelines. While the anti-nuclear campaign united the local community and overcame factionalism, it also entangled the community in a larger political struggle between the leading party Kuomintang (KMT), and the opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party. During the 1990s, anti-nuclear activities organized by local self-help groups became part of DPP’s party campaigns in local and national elections. Back then, the locals genuinely believed that the key to scrapping the nuclear power plant construction lay in the ascendency of the leader of DPP to the Presidency. The DPP won the national election in 2000, with Chen Shui-bian becoming the first non-KMT
Yet the victory of the party failed to end the construction of the fourth nuclear power plant. The bill to halt construction of the fourth power plant failed to pass the vote of the parliament, which was then dominated by KMT. After a hundred days of pause, the construction was reactivated.

The local self-help group was devastated by the government’s U-turn on its nuclear power policy, as well as DPP’s lack of solace to the local community. Having to swallow the sense of “betrayal” by the party, they also had to face local villagers’ criticism of their blind trust in politicians. Meanwhile, voices from outside and within the community loudly accused the anti-nuclear group for using the environmental cause to gain compensation. Anger, despair, and frustration captured the village. This was compounded by the aging and passing away of several key leaders of the self-help group. The group and their networks were falling apart.

While the anti-nuclear morale of the locals was low, external groups, particularly young artists and documentary makers, became intrigued by the locals’ long-term endeavour. They collaborated with the self-help group to devise new forms of anti-nuclear activities, which concentrated less on protests in the streets and more on restoring confidence in the local communities and on developing young people’s attachment to the land. Local newspapers started to thrive. Hiking and eco-tourism of the region became popular activities. By including the theme of anti-nuclear power in the national music festival held on Fulong Beach right next to the nuclear plant, the locals also successfully raised the public’s awareness of the environmental harm from the power plant. A decade of accumulation of anxiety towards the risk of nuclear power eventually came to a head after the Fukushima disaster in 2011. Anti-nuclear power movements reached their highest point in 2014, when tens of thousands of Taiwanese marched for the end of nuclear power in Taiwan.

Away from the coastal region, farmers in the mountains also struggled to deal with discrimination against local rice and the loss of local population to big cities. Assisted by urban activists who had long-term engagement with the local community, local farmers established the Hehe co-operative, hoping to revive rice terrace farming in Gongliao. Beneath their resistance to the use of chemicals and large machines in the farm land lies their distinctive view of the world—the focus on reciprocity and balance rather than maximization of profits at the cost of invisible harm to local environment and morality.

The Hehe cooperative turned the terrace farmland into an educational centre. It created an opportunity for local students, government officials and members of the NGOs to gain knowledge about the local way of farming. By advocating the preservation of bio-diversity, it further enhanced the idea of sharing, with the community and with nature.
This small and unimposing building on a hilltop in rural Nagano Prefecture, Japan (see photo above), was opened in 1996, and has since become the focus for a network of informal life politics actions whose history goes back much further: to the early part of the twentieth century.

We generally think of Japan as a country with a strong state and a centralised political system. But it is also home to a remarkable range of grassroots actions, many of them with long and vibrant histories. The building in the photograph is the Kobayashi Tatsue Folk Art Hall, named after local teacher, social educator, peace advocate and folk art collector Kobayashi Tatsue, whose long life spanned the entire twentieth century: Kobayashi was born in 1896 and died in 2001. His humanist vision inspired the ideas of a range of local self-help groups, whose shared theme is “endogenous development” (naihastuteki hatten).

The Mochizuki region, where the Folk Hall stands, is one of many areas of rural Japan which has been experiencing population aging and decline for the past several decades. The area has a dearth of job opportunities for young people, and suffers from a problem now endemic in much of Japan – the problem of “empty houses” (akiya): buildings that have been abandoned by their owners and are slowly crumbling into ruin. But schemes proposed by the prefectural government to revive the economy have often met with scepticism and
opposition from local inhabitants, because they commonly involve large scale, sometimes environmentally damaging, investment in structures such as toxic waste incinerators or golf resorts.

In response, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the community began to develop its own visions of a style of development which would be less likely to harm the environment, and would generate more benefits for local society. One forum for creating alternative visions of development is a monthly gathering, which generally takes place in the Folk Hall, allowing the community to share their ideas with each other and with experts such as the eminent environmental economist Miyamoto Kenichi, who has a house in the village. The group has published its own “White Papers”: the title echoes that of the white papers produced by government ministries, but these are written from a quite different point of view. Mochizuki people call their documents “Residents’ White Papers from a Rural Village”.

Over the course of the past twenty-five years or more, the local network has been successful in launching a number of innovative small-scale development projects, including creating a popular brand of sake which combines local organic rice with the traditional skills of an old brewery in the nearby village of Motai. One local farmer has built a guest house adjoining his farm which accommodates parties of schoolchildren who come from the city to experience rural life and learn simple farming techniques. Activities like these have encouraged some city dwellers to move to the area to set up their own farms or to open restaurants using fresh local produce.

Community schemes to support the elderly have been launched, and participants in the network have also created a flourishing alternative currency scheme in the city of Ueda, to the northwest of Mochizuki. The 200 or so members of this project use a “virtual” local currency called the ma-yu to exchange goods and services. (The name ma-yu is derived from the Japanese word for silk cocoon, because silk was once the backbone of the local economy). Individual holdings of ma-yu are recorded in pass books, which resemble those commonly issued by Japanese banks. As well as its exchange and market activities, the ma-yu network runs adult education classes and seminars, has a collective scheme to grow organic soy beans and make and sell soy bean paste, has refurbished an abandoned building to use as a café and community centre, and in 2012 held a major gathering of sustainable development projects from all over Japan.

During two decades when the Japanese economy has experienced a prolonged phase of recession or low growth, the informal activities of this rural endogenous development network, and of hundreds of others like it across Japan, have helped to address the entrenched problems of regional economy and society. In doing so, they have created inventive alternative approaches which are relevant, not only to their own everyday life, but to the challenges faced by other rural communities around the world.
It is hard to find informal life politics in China.

At the beginning of the project, I wondered whether it would even be possible, given that the descriptive definition of informal life politics ruled out protest and any other direct state-facing actions. Informal life politics actions are actions whereby people take matters into their own hands and do something for themselves, effectively ignoring the state. But in a polity such as China — where a pillar element of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule is having CCP branches in all medium- and large-sized social organisations and commercial enterprises, as well as throughout the entire, highly expansive, governmental apparatus — not paying due attention to the state can be seen as directly contravening state policy. It is certainly taken as an offence, and certainly involves the risk of state retaliation.

At the innocuous end of the scale push buttons and elicit crackdowns from state actors. Whereas in Japan informal life politics actions may go on for years and burn out internally, in China such actions rarely exist for long before provoking a state response. The response always aims at dissolving the societal action to remove its political risk to the authorities, or reshaping the societal action to provide political benefit to the authorities.

One example of a fairly innocuous informal life politics action began in rural Yunnan in 2009, and ended relatively quietly in 2016. It was mostly a movement of urbanites, including people from Hong Kong, who sought a simple communal life. It was utopian in that the group disavowed family, marriage, and private property: “Everyone can enjoy life and have everything freely” said the founder in an interview with the South China Morning Post⁴. They did not disavow electric power or the mains water supply, however, so the local authorities managed to dislodge many of them by simply cutting off the electricity and water, and backed this up with a slur campaign accusing the group of being a religious cult. This was not the utopia that people had envisaged and group numbers dwindled. These people were not doing anything particularly threatening to state power, but they were an embarrassment:

their dream did not align well with the state-sanctioned “Chinese Dream”.

Informal life politics actions, in China as elsewhere, can be situated on a conceptual scale from fairly innocuous to highly contentious. The difference between China and relatively open policies such as, say, Japan, is that in China even self-help actions that locate at the innocuous end of the scale push buttons and elicit crackdowns from state actors.

Local state authorities decided that they didn’t want people living in their area who had different ideas as to what constitutes a good
life, and whose practices of social morality were different to the officially-prescribed notions of civility and etiquette. This is entirely logical from the local authorities’ perspective: if higher levels of CCP authority began to see the utopians as a threat, local officials’ careers would be irreparably compromised.

Local officials face a more difficult decision when the informal social organization is doing something that directly benefits them.

Even the possibility of default, however, frightens local authorities, because default could lead to a protest incident by villagers; such an incident of “instability” could stop the local cadres’ careers in their tracks. Perhaps equally important, local authorities want to claim some credit for the fund’s actions and resent being ignored. Local cadres are now putting pressure on the funds to register with the county Civil Affairs Bureau, which involves accepting certain limitations on their borrowing and lending activities. Registration serves to reduce the political risk that the funds pose and redirect their attention—and the political credits for their welfare actions—towards state authority. However, unlike the utopians in Yunnan, local authorities in this area of rural China cannot press too hard: they are kin and fellow villagers of the fund managers and, importantly, depend on those fund managers/factory owners for both local economic development and the welfare and public goods that they now provide.

The well-respected former Party Secretary of the village addresses the assembled crowd at the celebration, while the head of the face fund looks on from backstage.

Since 2014, I have been investigating what I call “face funds”—village-based organisations run by factory-owning village elites that provide old-age pension subsidies, student scholarships, and emergency medical funds to their fellow villagers. Face funds collect money in the form of donations or interest-bearing deposits from villagers (mainly other factory-owners), then they lend all of this money out to village enterprises at a higher (but still reasonable) rate of interest. They use only the interest to pay benefits, so the principal can only increase, and the fund is indefinitely sustainable as long as nobody defaults on a loan. Personal connections are essential to doing business in this place, so there has only been one instance of default in the past four years.

Footnote:
Encountering fish and fishing communities on the Korean Peninsula has been my research focus within this project. Engaging with maritime space in North Korea, as with any other situation in that nation, was as challenging as always. Pyongyang’s very formal politics pressed in on my thoughts and plans at every opportunity. Equally challenging was the formal and informal politics of the art, science and practices of fishing and fishery technologies themselves. Riven by the politics of capital, growth-obsessed economics and the Cold War, fishing science had developed in the twentieth century into a dispossessor, destroyer and appropriator of worlds both human and non-human. The new landscapes of the ocean floor and the tidal margins, strafed and violated by ‘scientific’ and modern fishing produced a real emotional response in me as much as they developed my objective knowledge or conceptual analysis of the field of my research. I felt sickened as much at the amoral and neglectful heart of the development of statistical methods focused on fishing catch and maximum sustainable yield as I did by the sight of so many Pacific dolphins entangled and ensnared by the nets of factory ships. Ultimately it was not just North Korea’s opaque politics and fishing spaces which became part of the enmeshing of my work, my heart and my brain, but also the landscapes neighbouring that nation where I sought connections to contextualise the diffuse politics and fragile technologies of Pyongyang.

This project has taken me across the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Delving into the histories of North Korea’s fishing endeavours as represented by the Sindo cooperative at the mouth of the Amnok River was as challenging as expected. The geo-politics of Pyongyang’s engagement with the rest of the world were extremely heightened during my time within the project, however the complexities of these connections leach out even into its efforts in the deep sea. It seems no boat in Sindo’s history has ever
Elsewhere at the far end of the Korean Peninsula on the island of Kagōdo, formal political relationships during the 1960s and 70s had reconfigured not only the coastal infrastructure, but also the social fabric of the island. Leaders had supported a once extremely remote and peripheral place in its contest against Korean Kaekchu middlemen (or commission tradesmen) who had tied the community in exploitative bondage and prevented any real development for at least two centuries. Technology in the form of the mobile phone had broken the final shackles of the Kaekchu in the 1990s just as the arrival of liquid and available capital broke the various social and spiritual bonds which lubricated relationships in the past. When Kagōdo was discovered by sport fishermen, tourist cash appeared to be much more vital than local savings directed at local spiritual architecture, once believed to protect the fisherman in his dangerous work on and in the sea: Kagōdo’s main Buddhist shrine was demolished to make way for public washrooms near the harbour.

The people in Kagōdo’s through this network of informal and formal political connections and achievements, seem to have garnered a little more in return from the sea than those of Tong Shui Gou, or those in Sindo. But the impending formality of environmental crisis, even in South Korea’s most southwestern space, was obvious. During my visit, the island was subjected to the worst drought experienced there in living memory. Drinking water was shipped in from the mainland, and the island’s fragile agricultural economy was moribund and restricted. Informal politics and formal environmental disasters have deeply coloured my experience:

Fish, fish nowhere to be seen;  
Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.

left the continental shelf, but North Korea’s efforts to engage with Pacific fisheries, to join in with the transnational despoliation of the ocean’s deeps have been meagre. North Korea’s one success in joining the West Pacific Fisheries Commission in 2014 counterintuitively records the paucity of its technology and efforts. Three small purse seine and long liners extracting less than 400 tonnes of tuna will never endanger the fishing ecosystems of any waters, but neither will they support North Korea’s fishing communities in times of institutional, economic and environmental challenge.

In the People’s Republic of China, not too far from Sindo, I sat in Tong Shui Gou fishermen’s cooperative hut and observed the informality of social and economic relationships between those men, the women they employed to carefully sort their quarry and the blustering, exploitative insistence of the middlemen who purchased it, colliding with the formality of the environmental crisis and degradation so apparent in the sea and marine life from which the community derived a living. The sea off Tong Shui Gou and the Liaodong Peninsula near Dalian provides at best very meagre living, offering a tiny smattering of undersized shrimp, broken and infant fish and a vast mass of plastic and other wastes.

Sorting Shrimp and Waste in Tong Shui Gou ‘Fish, Fish Nowhere to be Seen’
My project on informal life politics in South Korea aims to expand our understanding of Korean politics from a narrow focus on the formal actions of government to a broader vision of people’s diverse collective efforts to improve their lives in ways that are not necessarily visible to the eyes of the state. Democratic participation is one way that people can achieve local autonomy, even in a country like South Korea where political and economic power is so centralised.

I am also motivated by my own Korean background to explore alternative social movements. Following events like the tragic sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, signs of dysfunctional government have encouraged people to look to informal life politics based on communal self-help as a way of creating an alternative polity of communal space, where people can solve the issues of livelihood by themselves.

Organic farming, which is widely practiced by contemporary community-based movements in South Korea, offers vivid examples of informal life politics. This form of agriculture is more suitable for small-scale farming than for large-scale and industrialised farming, and the production and distribution of organic produce can create a communal space with reciprocal relationships among people. Through my study of the history and present situation of the organic farming movement, I highlight the significant role of communal space in South Korea’s social movements.

My research started with Chŏngnonghoe, the first organic farming movement group in Korea, created in 1976 by Protestant farmers. Chŏngnonghoe is still active today, but has attracted little attention because of its small size, its religious character and the dearth of written sources on its story. In-depth interviews with older members...
and the discovery of old newsletters led me to realise the depth and international connections of the movement’s origins. This organic farming movement inherited the traditions of the rural development movement which emerged in colonial Korea during the 1920s, created by Christian nationalists. The 1920s movement was established by a transnational network linking Christian farmers in Korea and Japan, who drew on the Danish model of rural development as their shared ideal of communal farming, as opposed to chemical farming driven by the state development plans.

My second case study is the Hansalim Movement: the first organic consumer cooperative in Korea, which was founded in 1986, and helped to make organic farming a nationwide movement. Hansalim is now the largest organic consumer coop (in terms of number of members) and is one of numerous South Korean consumer cooperatives selling organic produce, but there is a clear distinction between Hansalim and the others: other organic cooperatives largely reflect consumer interests, but Hansalim emphasises the connection between consumers and farmers and the role of organised consumers in supporting organic farming. This distinctive approach reflects the movement’s origins in 1970s rural reconstruction initiatives in the Wonju area of Korea: initiatives which were led by prominent Catholics and local intellectuals. They developed a ‘Life Philosophy’ (Saengmyongsasang) inspired by Christianity and the indigenous ideals of Tonghak (Eastern Learning). This philosophical basis has ensured that Hansalim has remained a social movement rather than becoming a commercial enterprise. Communal autonomy is reiterated in Hansalim as it is in Chŏngnonghoe. The movement shows us how people can use a communal space to overcome the competitive relationship between farmers and consumers.

The past and present of the organic farming movement in South Korea reveal a tradition of community-based social movements which create a space autonomous from the state politics and the capitalist society. I hope this project can encourage a rethinking of community as a space to overcome the isolation experienced by so many citizens/consumers in contemporary society.
Shar-hoolai (see photo above) is a small community about sixty kilometers to the northwest of Ulanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. The word ‘Shar-hoolai’ in Mongolian means a yellow corridor leading to the mountains. Shar-hoolai used to be a beautiful place where both sides of the corridor were covered by forest, and a spring of fresh water provided drinking water for local herders and their livestock. However, after the collapse of the socialist planned economic system in the early 1990s, many people came to the corridor and started to log trees illegally. Within a decade, the forest had disappeared and eventually the spring dried up.

Environment degradation has had a significant negative impact on the everyday life and grazing activities on the herders. In response to the ever-deteriorating environment, five families set up a NPO named Yih Oboo Nuramt in 2012. The name of the NPO is a combination of the names of two nearby places- Yih Oboo and Nuramt. The NPO’s aim was to create an environment-friendly community and achieve a sustainable lifestyle. The logo of the NPO is an image of clear blue sky, mountains covered with trees, a spring of water and cows around it, which shows their aspirations for an ideal living environment. As Odonchimeg Rentsendorj, the founder of the NPO, put it: “we want to live in an environment like this. We want to get the spring water back again!” Their membership is family-based. So far eleven families have joined their NPO and approximately twenty individuals are actively involved in the NPO’s daily activities. The main activity of the NPO is planting trees.
The group hopes that trees will preserve the groundwater and bring the spring back to life again. Since 2013, they have planted some 3000 trees around the site of the dried-up spring. Some saplings were gifts from others, and some were bought by themselves. Initially the NPO lacked the funds to buy saplings and had to rely on gifts from others. For example, two individuals who heard about the NPO’s tree planting project donated 250 willow saplings (burgas in Mongolian), and the local government has also supported the NPO’s activities by donating 200 willows.

However, not all people understand and support these activities, and this has created challenges for the NPO. One local herdsman allowed his cattle to graze the site where trees are planted, destroying hundreds of saplings. After this incident, the NPO members collectively built fences to protect the planted area, allowing the small trees to survive and re-grow.

They have also erected signs at the entrance of the corridor to warn the outsiders that the area is protected and explain the purpose of their environmental activities.

Meanwhile, the NPO has been creating social infrastructure that benefits the surrounding communities. NPO members collectively built a playground for children and teenagers, containing slides and basketball stands, which are rare in remote grassland areas. There is also a park where adults can relax, and these facilities are freely accessible to herders from the surrounding area. A small community centre built by NPO members, initially to serve their own needs, has also gradually become a hub where neighbouring herders can collect all sorts of information relevant to their everyday life. Restoring water to the spring is an ongoing task, but, like a spring of water itself, NPO Yih Oboo Nuramt is already starting to bring new life to the local community.
FURTHER READING


CONTACT US

Informal Life Politics in Northeast Asia: from Cold War to Post Cold War
An Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship Project

HC Coombs Building 9
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia
(Attn: Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki)

tessa.morris-suzuki@anu.edu.au

survivalpolitics.org

ANU School of Asia & the Pacific

1800 620 032

asiapacific@anu.edu.au

asiapacific.anu.edu.au

ANUasiapacific

ANUasiapacific

ANUasiapacific