

# Introduction: Informal Life Politics in Northeast Asia

Tessa Morris-Suzuki

## Liberating Politics

A group of prewar Hokkaido farmers creating their own experiment in communal living; a Chinese village where artists and locals come together to reinvent tradition; fishermen in mercury-polluted Minamata creating a new philosophy of nature; two grieving fathers walking across South Korea in remembrance of children killed in an avoidable disaster; North Koreans setting up a market in the streets of their town, in defiance of official regulations. These are some of the people you will encounter in the pages that follow. None of these people is behaving in an overtly ‘political’ way, but the argument of this book is that their actions are part of an invisible politics that is quietly transforming aspects of life in Northeast Asia today. Understanding the emergence and nature of this invisible politics is important in order to make sense of contemporary Northeast Asia. Beyond that, it is important because these small experiments in ‘politics from below’ shed light on some fundamental global dilemmas of 21st-century political life.

‘Politics’ is constantly defined and redefined. A broadly recognisable definition, though, might be this, which draws on (but slightly rewords) the writings of British political scientist David Runciman: politics is about the collective choices that shape the way people live, and about the nature of the human interrelationships through which those choices are made.<sup>1</sup> In everyday speech we equate politics with the formal mechanisms of government: national constitutions, parliaments, cabinets,

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1 David Runciman, *Politics: Ideas in Profile* (London: Profile Books, 2014).

prime ministers or presidents, elections, party platforms. We include local institutions like city councils, and international bodies like the United Nations. We also sometimes consider the actions of lobby groups and of organised protest movements. But the activities of such formal and semi-formal political institutions are only a small corner of politics in the full meaning of the word.

For many people, none of the formal institutions of politics—whether local, national or international—seems able or willing to address the life crises that they face, or to assist them in making meaningful choices. In response, these people try to act out aspects of the change they seek in their everyday lives, through autonomous collective responses. The responses may be enacted by the local community of a village or urban area, but may also be enacted by networks dispersed across the boundaries of region or nation. This is ‘informal life politics’: an act of collected self-protection in the face of the profound deficits of institutional politics. Often, though not always, informal life politics is truly ‘survival politics’—an act of desperation in response to direct threats to the physical survival of individuals or the social survival of communities.

This book sets out to explore examples of informal life politics in Northeast Asia, building on the work of scholars like James C. Scott and Benedict Tria Kerkvliet, who have charted and made visible forms of political action embedded in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Such forms of politics have a long history, but there are impasses in the world of formal governmental politics today that make it particularly important to reconsider the past, present and possibilities of this less visible political realm. How can we reconceive politics to include that realm, and how might our understanding of politics in all its dimensions change if we broaden our vision in this way?

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2 See, for example, James C. Scott, ‘Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance’, in James C. Scott and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet eds, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 5–35; Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

## Northeast Asia and the Crisis of Democracy

Northeast Asia is a region in the throes of enormous and unsettling change. The opening of the Chinese economy and its subsequent phenomenal growth have brought prosperity, but also massive environmental and social disruption. Japan, following a quarter of a century of economic stagnation, faces profound problems of ageing and population decline, aggravated by the trauma of the 2011 triple disaster and its aftermath. North Korea, in the midst of one of the world's most prosperous regions, remains one of the world's poorest countries; and in South Korea, visions of democratisation and national reunification that captured the popular imagination in the 1990s and early 21st century seem to have given way to a deep sense of social malaise (vividly depicted by Cho (Han) Haejoang in Chapter Seven of this book).

If we take a global perspective, Northeast Asia may indeed be seen as encapsulating profound challenges at the heart of the political order worldwide. The region contains countries that share long-term historical and cultural traditions, but whose modern history has led them in radically divergent directions. Japan became an imperial power, but was then stripped of its colonies and democratised following wartime defeat in 1945. China pursued a path of revolution, becoming a crucible of communist experimentation and social engineering, but has since—without ever formally repudiating its communist past—been transformed into a powerhouse of global capitalism. Taiwan and South Korea both moved from an era of authoritarian dictatorship to democracy, while Hong Kong evolved from colony to 'special administrative region': a precarious hybrid of authoritarian and quasi-democratic political forms. North Korea, meanwhile, is the one communist country that has resisted the global transition towards 'post-socialism', remaining trapped in its own distinctive *Chuch'e* variant of communism. This is therefore a region that spans an unusually wide spectrum of political forms, and, for this very reason, is a region where the nature of the global 'post-democracy' becomes particularly visible.<sup>3</sup>

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3 See Obsolete Capitalism Collective ed., *The Birth of Digital Populism: Crowd, Power and Postdemocracy in the Twenty-First Century* (Rome and London: Obsolete Capitalism Free Press, 2014); Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, (London: Wiley, 2004).

The end of the Cold War in Europe, coinciding roughly with democratisation of a number of formerly authoritarian states (including the Philippines and South Korea) and the collapse of South African apartheid, promoted a widespread belief that liberal democracy had triumphed worldwide. As Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in the late 1980s, ‘a remarkable consensus concerning liberal democracy as a form of government had emerged throughout the world’. Democracy (according to this view) had ‘conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism’. Fukuyama famously went on to predict that, since liberal democracy was free from the ‘grave defects and irrationalities’ that marred other regimes of power, its triumph would mark ‘the endpoint of man’s ideological evolution’ and therefore also ‘the end of history’.<sup>4</sup> The Arab Spring of 2011 prompted a revival and reassessment of these ideas by those who argued that Fukuyama had been right to foresee the irreversible victory of democracy, even if he was wrong in failing to foresee how prolonged and complex the road to this victory would be.<sup>5</sup>

But by the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, the state of the world was starting to look very different. It is now clear that neither the collapse of communism nor the Arab Spring has ushered in universal liberal democracy. In many former Soviet republics and satellites, the end of communism merely paved the way to new forms of authoritarianism that proved very capable of coexisting with the rapid marketisation of the economy. In China, a fundamentally unreformed once-communist political system has proved to be a comfortable bedfellow of globalised capitalism. Meanwhile, in many countries (both longstanding and newer democratic polities), democracy itself, as Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy argues, is being ‘hollowed out and emptied of meaning’.<sup>6</sup>

Italian economist Lapo Berti, who also speaks of the ‘emptying’ of democracy, sees a core problem as lying in the deepening power of the globalised corporate system and the intermeshing of economic power and politics elites, which renders politics divorced from the everyday concerns

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4 Francis Fukuyama, ‘By Way of Introduction’, in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006), xi; see also Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’, *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), 3–18.

5 For example, Ewen Harrison and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6 Arundhati Roy, ‘Democracy’s Failing Light’, *Outlook India*, 13 July 2009, [www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/democracys-failing-light/250418](http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/democracys-failing-light/250418).

of citizens and ‘entirely self-referential’. One result is the estrangement of ordinary people from a voting system ‘that is more and more perceived as useless, if not ridiculous’:

When people start voting at random because there is no longer any hope of making your voice heard, something is irrevocably broken in the mechanism of representation. And when ... abstention reaches nearly half of those entitled to vote, the fracture is serious and it is very unlikely to be reversible in the short term.<sup>7</sup>

Berti is writing of Italian politics, but his words resonate powerfully in Northeast Asia, where all the main democracies have experienced sharply falling voting rates and growing voter cynicism in the past two decades. In South Korea, the voter turnout in the first democratic presidential election of 1992 was over 70 per cent, but it fell below 50 per cent in 2008, recovering only slightly to 54 per cent in 2012.<sup>8</sup> In Taiwan, more than 80 per cent of the electorate voted in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, but only 62 per cent in the 2016 election.<sup>9</sup> In Japan, where turnout in the three general elections of the 1980s averaged 69 per cent, and in 1990 reached 73 per cent, less than 53 per cent of voters participated in the 2014 election—the lowest level since the Pacific War.<sup>10</sup>

Voter estrangement from the political process goes hand-in-hand with populism, which (as Lapo Berti argues) emerges when:

citizens lose their hopes of being the protagonists in democratic life, and therefore search for a surrogate who can represent their aspirations. This person is usually seen as a saviour, a character who imposes himself/herself through his/her communicative skills, which are very often enhanced or made up by the media.<sup>11</sup>

Populist elements have long existed in democratic politics everywhere, but populism in Berti’s sense of the word has become an increasingly conspicuous part of political life in Northeast Asia (and elsewhere) since

7 Lapo Berti, ‘On Micro-Fascism’, in Obsolete Capitalism Collective ed., *The Birth of Digital Populism*, 45.

8 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘Voter Turnout Data for Korea, Republic of’, [www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/163/40](http://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/163/40).

9 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘Voter Turnout Data for Taiwan’, [www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/290/40](http://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/290/40).

10 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ‘Voter Turnout Data for Japan’, [www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/155/40](http://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/155/40).

11 Lapo Berti, ‘On Micro-Fascism’, in Obsolete Capitalism Collective ed., *The Birth of Digital Populism*, 45.

the end of the 20th century.<sup>12</sup> This populism combines an emphasis on personalities and slogans with nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and ‘anti-political politics’: its practitioners ‘claim to represent the democratic sovereign ... the united people ... as against the parties or factions that divide it’.<sup>13</sup> Populist leaders, as self-defined saviours and representatives of the democratic sovereign, are typically impatient with the constitutional restraints of traditional liberal democracy. This personalised emphasis on the leader—who is presented as being in direct communication with a homogeneous mass nation—creates elements of convergence between the political styles of democracies like Japan and South Korea (on the one hand) and post-communist (or quasi-post-communist) states like Russia and China (on the other).

Because it privileges media presence and headline-grabbing phrases over policy expertise and the disciplines of democratic process, populism often fails to deliver when confronted with practical crises that affect the everyday lives of citizens. This inherent flaw can create a spiral of disaffection, where one section of the population becomes ever more alienated from the political process, while another redoubles its attempt to find salvation from crisis through identification with the images of strength projected by the populist leader. So populism, despite its rhetoric of a united and homogenous national community, is commonly accompanied by bitter and deepening social antagonisms and competitive narratives of victimhood. These crises of politics in Northeast Asia are particularly clearly illustrated by the cases explored in Chapters Six and Seven of this book.

But if one response to estrangement from politics is a search for the leader as surrogate and saviour, another very different response lies in the search for autonomous and locally generated practical responses to crises. It is this response that we focus on in the pages that follow. The examples discussed in these pages are only tiny fragments of the immensely complex landscape of informal life politics in Northeast Asia today. It is important to emphasise, too, that these examples are not being put forward here as all-encompassing solutions to the profound crises of politics outlined in the previous paragraphs. The crises, of course, need to be addressed at multiple levels—through formal political processes at local, national and international level as well as through the informal politics of everyday life.

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12 See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Kosuke Mizuno eds, *Populism in Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009).

13 Margaret Canavan, quoted in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Kosuke Mizuno eds, *Populism in Asia*, 4.

But a focus on the world of informal life politics can, we suggest, enrich our vision of the possibilities of political action, and challenges us to rethink some preconceptions about the very nature of ‘the political’ itself.

## Mixed Economies, Mixed Polities

One challenge posed by informal life politics is that it impels us to reconsider the boundaries that we conventionally draw between ‘the political’ and ‘the economic’. In all the stories explored in this book, the economic and the political are inextricably intertwined; all actions are inescapably *both* political and economic. But over the past 50 years, while corporate capitalism and state power have become ever more deeply entangled with one another, the intellectual worlds of politics and economics have bifurcated. Integrated notions of political economy have dissolved, and are replaced by two distinct, specialised realms called ‘political science’ and ‘economics’, each working according to its own sets of rules. This intellectual bifurcation has given us an economics that rarely addresses underlying questions about the nature and purpose of our economic systems, and a politics incapable of confronting the political problems posed by global corporate capitalism.

In public discourse, ‘the economy’ is now commonly taken to mean ‘the corporate market’, and ‘politics’ is commonly taken to mean the actions of formal governmental institutions and the politicians and bureaucrats who run them. But in fact (as Thomas Picketty observes), ‘we live in a mixed economy, different to be sure from the mixed economies that people envisioned after World War II but nonetheless quite real’.<sup>14</sup> Substantial sections of the economy in most countries are operated by non-profit organisations, charitable foundations, household enterprises, and other institutions that work on principles very different from those of the capitalist corporation. A multitude of cooperatives, community and household enterprises, local non-commercial exchange networks and so

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14 Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

on play vital economic roles, particularly in the ‘majority world’ (that is, in the world inhabited by the 85 per cent of the global population who live in low-income countries).<sup>15</sup>

And we all inhabit not just mixed economies, but also mixed polities. Our world is not neatly divisible into good constitutional democracies and bad dictatorships. Though configured in very many differing ways, every country in the world today contains at least some corners where ordinary people make their own collective choices through reasoned debate, and every country contains at least some corners where power is arbitrary and unaccountable. The differences lie in relative weights of both ends of the spectrum, and in the diverse ways in which democratic and the authoritarian elements are configured. We need analytical approaches that do not simply treat the political systems of nations as single totalities: well-oiled machines whose parts all work in unison. Instead, we need to become more aware of the great diversity that exists within each mixed polity. It is important to understand the very varied ways in which collective choices that shape life are made, and the very varied human interrelationships through which those choices are made. This book seeks to contribute to an understanding of that diversity.

As we explore the examples discussed in this volume, we become more aware of the intimate interweaving of the political and the economic. Attempts to restructure village life in Hokkaido, the mountains of Honshu or rural China (see Chapters One, Two and Three) are inescapably both economic and political. Responses to environmental crisis in Minamata, Fukushima and beyond ineluctably weave together the political and the economic, as do responses to disasters like the *Sewol* ferry tragedy in South Korea (Chapters Four, Six and Seven).

In many of these cases a key underlying issue is the expansionary nature of the power of the corporate economy (which is itself inseparably intertwined with the power of the state). As Hannah Arendt observed in the 1950s, modernity is based on endless economic expansion: ‘what the modern age so heatedly defended was never property as such but the unhampered pursuit of more property or of accumulation’.<sup>16</sup> Or (to borrow Ellen

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15 J. K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); see also Shahidul Alam, ‘Majority World’ 2015 (website), [www.shahidulalam.com/#pi=38&p=-1&a=0&cat=0](http://www.shahidulalam.com/#pi=38&p=-1&a=0&cat=0).

16 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 110.

Meiskins Wood's words) modern capitalism is characterised by 'its unique capacity as well as its unique need for constant self-expansion'.<sup>17</sup> But the attempt to treat all things as potentially profit-generating commodities is doomed to disaster. If everything were a commodity:

human beings would perish from the effect of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime and starvation. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardised, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

A conscious or unconscious urge to 'push-back' against this encroaching commodification of life lies at the heart of many of the stories we shall explore here (and this is a point to which we will return in the epilogue). These stories help us to see commonalities and differences between informal life politics in various parts of East Asia, and to glimpse the possibilities and limitations, the creativity and the challenges, which drive diverse practices of informal politics in everyday life.

## Old and New Informal Life Politics

From the 1970s onwards, grassroots political activism generated much interest and debate around the world. The rise of environmentalism, feminism, alternative lifestyle movements, indigenous and minority rights movements, lesbian, gay and transgender activism and many other forms of 'lifestyle politics' (as they are often termed) has given rise to theories that have expanded the boundaries of traditional political research. Influential scholars like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck identified the rise of this new activism as a symptom of a new, reflexive, 'post materialist' world, transcending the old class-based politics that had been centred on questions of the distribution of material wealth.<sup>19</sup>

This book begins by digging deeper into the past; emphasising the historical roots of the forms of living politics that we are studying. Informal life politics is often (though not always) a politics of the poor.

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17 Ellen Meiskins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), 193.

18 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, original published in 1944), 76.

19 Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

Rather than simply emerging when societies reach a stage of development that transcends materialism, it has a history that stretches back at least to the start of East Asian industrialisation in the early 20th century. The cross-border links between cooperatist thought and action in Japan and Russia—carefully traced by Sho Konishi in Chapter One—are a reminder of this long history of grassroots efforts to create new social forms in response to the challenges of rapid, state-imposed industrialisation and modernisation. Small-scale local attempts to create ‘another modernity’ were inspired by the spread of ideas across the borders of nations and continents. Russian cooperatist anarchism, British and French utopian socialism, and non-Darwinian accounts of natural evolution were among the forces that shaped such social experiments in early 20th-century Japan, and indeed in many other parts of the world.

Chapters Two and Three show how these ideas and social experiments have crossed spatial and temporal boundaries. Ou Ning, himself actively involved in a village revival movement in China, traces the flow of ideas through which prewar Japanese images of the ‘New Village’ (themselves inspired by concepts imported from Russia and elsewhere) were in turn taken up and reworked in Republican China, where they played a part in shaping the rural reconstruction movement. This tradition has been rediscovered in China since the 1990s, providing inspiration for new efforts to reconstruct rural life from below. In Japan meanwhile, the same stream of ideas continues to feed informal life politics actions in rural areas affected by depopulation and ageing (see Chapter Three).

Informal life politics in Northeast Asia today draws on this long lineage of ideas and experiences, but reinterprets them in the light of a rapidly and radically changing world. By the 1970s, new currents of environmental thought were added to the mix of ideas. In Chapter Four, Simon Avenell explores the neglected way in which exchanges of environmental ideas in the 1970s and 1980s helped to extend ‘translocal’ links between the grassroots actions of communities in various parts of Asia threatened by industrial pollution. The creative intermingling of old and new ideas of nature and humanity is illustrated in Chapter Five by Shoko Yoneyama’s study of living politics in two areas devastated by environmental disaster: the Minamata region and the areas affected by the 2011 tsunami and nuclear meltdown. Other variants of that intermingling and reworking emerge in the critical rethinking of ‘development’ that followed the *Sewol* disaster in South Korea (Chapter Seven), and in the community arts experiments of Hong Kong’s Wooferten and Seoul’s Mullae-Tong (Chapter Eight).

While most of the chapters in this book look at specific local responses to crisis in particular countries of the region, Chapter Ten offers a broader comparative perspective on grassroots action in Asia from the perspective of the concept of social innovation. This final chapter draws on a large-scale study by Seoul-based The Hope Institute, which aims to encourage bottom-up sustainable approaches to addressing social problems. The Hope Institute's work highlights some common threads in emerging forms of Asian grassroots social innovation, and extends the story to encompass cases from South and Southeast as well as Northeast Asia.

## Common Themes in the Politics of Improvisation

When we place the diverse stories in this book together, connecting themes emerge. Fundamental to all of these grassroots experiments is an unease at the way that the modern corporate growth economy defines and shapes human beings and the natural world. The first chapters of the book trace a long history of critiques of the mechanised separation of humans from nature, the erosion of community cooperation by the pressures of economic competition, and the devaluing of spiritual and creative capabilities that cannot readily be turned into financial profit. Miyamoto Kenichi, whose work inspires the Miyamoto School (discussed in Chapter Three), reinterprets Marx's notion of 'immiseration'. In Marx's day, immiseration meant sheer material poverty. Today (Miyamoto suggests) it means phenomena like pollution, urban congestion and rural depopulation, the displacement of people and the destruction of social support systems etc., produced both by the rampant profit seeking of corporations and by state policies imposed from above to support this profit seeking.<sup>20</sup> Though the terms they use may vary, most of the grassroots groups discussed in this book share a critical perspective on the human and environmental burdens imposed by the ever-expanding global corporate economy.

The response to this immiseration involves efforts to revive local livelihoods and to find support and recompense for people whose lives have been disrupted by environmental damage or failed state policies;

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20 Miyamoto Kenichi, *Gendai shihonshugi to kokka* [Contemporary Capitalism and the State] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1981), 135–42.

but it also goes further than this. Many of the groups discussed in this book are engaged in a search for ways to reconceptualise the relationship between humans and nature, and to redefine notions of ‘development’, ‘prosperity’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘community’. One theme that repeatedly emerges is a re-evaluation of the significance of the human spirit. In conventional models of democratic state politics, formal religions often play an important role (since many political parties have explicit or implicit religious links), but the notion of individual spirituality tends to be treated with caution and even suspicion, as something likely to lead into the murky quicksands of superstition and irrationality. By contrast, several of the experiments in living politics discussed in this book challenge that approach by bringing notions of spirituality and ritual into the light of day. We find this in the ritual practices developed by cooperative farmers in prewar Hokkaido (Chapter One), in Japanese re-evaluations of animism following the Minamata and Fukushima disasters (Chapter Five) and in the use of shamanic and other religious rituals by the families of *Sewol* ferry victims (Chapter Seven).

At the same time, though, the actions discussed in this book cannot be slotted into any single clearly defined ideological framework. Rather, they challenge us to reconsider the very notion of ‘ideology’ itself. The classic 18th- and 19th-century political philosophies that still influence our understandings of politics were commonly based on visions of the social world as a closed system whose rules were derived from a foundational first principle, often seen as lying in the original state of nature. Such images of society provide fertile ground for ideological certainties about the solutions to our present-day human predicaments. But as philosopher William Connolly suggests, in our complex contemporary age it may make more sense to see the world as a multitude of coexisting partially open systems in a state of becoming; and if we do so, the ideological certainties dissolve. We are in the midst of an immensely complicated and changing nexus of existence, in which relatively small events may trigger large and unpredictable changes. There are no iron laws of historical evolution, and there is no pure unsullied nature into which utopians can withdraw to build ideal communities. We have to start from where we are, and this means that ‘when a new crisis of possibility emerges, you must often experiment to ascertain where and how to engage it’.<sup>21</sup>

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21 William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 37.

Some of the forms of living politics that we explore in this book arise from relatively well-articulated politico-social philosophies. But many begin as experiments in response to crisis—environmental crisis, the drastic restructuring of the social landscape or the failures of state policy. The participants in these projects, rather than starting out with clearly defined philosophies, grope their way gradually towards a deeper understanding of the forces behind the particular crisis that they are trying to address. Their lack of firm ideological framework may be seen as a liability and a source of vulnerability. But it can also be a source of flexibility and dynamism. The world of living politics—small in scale, grounded in everyday life, protean and often ephemeral—provides scope for a wide diversity of experiments. It allows for the multiplicity of ideas and practices that is lacking in the mental monocultures of institutional politics. And, even more importantly perhaps, it allows room for failure without triggering catastrophe. Informal life politics is a space for the action that Brian Massumi sees as central to biological and social becoming: improvisation—the ‘margin of manoeuvre’, the ‘power of variation’.<sup>22</sup> It allows groups of people, in responding to profound politico-economic challenges to try, and see what happens.

Informal life politics also impels us to think again about the notion of ‘community’. The term ‘community’ recurs in many of the chapters that follow. People in Bishan and Mochizuki, Minamata and Ansan, Yau Ma Tei and Wonju try to restore and re-create community connections eroded by rapid social and economic change. But it is important to emphasise that none of these communities is a self-contained or closed entity. In fact, a clear common theme of the stories in this book is the crucial importance of interaction between insiders and outsiders—between those who have spent all their lives in a particular location, and those who have arrived recently, bringing new ideas and experiences with them. These communities are therefore very different from the Weberian notion of *Gemeinschaft*. They are networks, linking people in diverse social situations and spatial locations, and sometimes linking people across the boundaries of the nation. The dynamics of interaction within these networks is a particularly important topic for future study as we explore the evolving world of living politics in East Asia.

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22 Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach us about Politics* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 12–13.

North Korea seems the outlier: the ‘outsider’ to all political and economic analyses of East Asia. It is certainly important to recognise the peculiarities that make North Korean political circumstances different from those of neighbouring countries. But although North Korea has absolutely no visible ‘civil society’ or independent ‘social movements’, Eun Jeong Soh’s analysis in Chapter Nine suggests that even in North Korea, types of informal life politics are quietly changing the way people make collective decisions that shape their futures, and interpret the decisions that they have made. Soh shows that networks linking traders to one another and to local officials become a vital part of informal livelihood creation, and state notions both of autonomy and collective effort are reinterpreted to justify the rise of survival strategies from below.

## A New Beginning

The chapters in this book do not, of course, speak in unison. They are written by historians, anthropologists and sociologists, by scholars and by those directly engaged in living politics actions in the region. The diversity of approaches adopted by the grassroots movements explored in the book is matched by the diversity of approaches taken by those who write about them. But, by placing these accounts side by side, we hope that we can create space for a conversation about previously neglected dimensions of the political life of Northeast Asia, and contribute to a wider discussion about the role of informal life politics in the 21st-century world.

If, as we have suggested earlier, all polities are mixed polities, then informal life politics is only one dimension of the mix. But it is an important, complex, and insufficiently understood dimension. The stories told in the following pages offer no conclusions, but we believe that they do offer starting points on a journey to a deeper understanding of the many ways in which people around Northeast Asia are (to borrow Davina Cooper’s words) ‘creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life’.<sup>23</sup>

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23 Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

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