Foreword

We present a new issue of our journal while still dealing with a global pandemic. This time, all Europe is engulfed in a deadly second wave, while a large part of East Asia is comparatively much less affected. Europe and East Asia have differed in the approach to contain Covid-19, with major variations in terms of policies and effectiveness in both continents. East Asian countries have typically adopted bolder measures of containment, made possible by the existence of strong governments and in some cases authoritarian rules. In Europe, and in the West more broadly, a part of society (and some political leaders, such as Trump, Bolsonaro and, initially, Boris Johnson) have denied the magnitude of the challenge posed by Covid-19 and have opposed policies that were perceived as a limitation of personal liberty. The different responses to the pandemic have once again demonstrated that globalisation was an overvalued concept. Cultures and societies have remained largely different and have allowed the adoption of policies that in other contexts would have encountered strong opposition. Once the pandemic is over, we will continue to study its history, to further understand the functioning of Asian and Western societies in a global comparative perspective.

This issue brings us back to another dark historical period: the Japanese occupation of China. This was the beginning of a wider Second World War but also represented one of the darkest pages of the global conflict. China suffered immensely. The livelihood of millions of ordinary Chinese citizens was devastated. War crimes and atrocities were committed by the invading Japanese army. Yet, somehow, life continued under the occupation. The special issue reflects on cultural life in China in this tragic period, documenting how different scholars and artists operated in ways that often escape the dichotomy between collaboration and resistance. An introduction and four articles analyse the complex forms in which artists and literati responded to the Japanese occupation, contributing to a wider effort to reassess this difficult phase of Chinese history.

The last article in this issue brings us back to a hot topic in contemporary East Asian life: the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). More precisely, this article explores how Chinese investments in Cambodia have become so important as to make the country highly dependent on Chinese capital. These large investment flows create rents that long-serving prime minister Hun Sen can

distribute to consolidate the support of the small coalition behind his regime. At the same, as in other Southeast Asian countries, the BRI, and more broadly Chinese investment, is seen negatively by large sectors of Cambodian society, thus transforming relations with China into a controversial theme in local politics.

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