Issue No.1 – 2015

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

ASIA RISING

Making a difference in the Asian century

Icy reception: Nepal struggles with democracy

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La Trobe Asia

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CREDITS

Cover photo
Julia Manzerova

Other photos
Gariel Britto, Tali C., Sharon Croxford, Ieniners, Keith Martin, Michelle McFarlane, Carlos Ugarte, Jasmine-Kim Westendorf, Ian Woolford

Text
Matt Smith,
Benjamin Habib

Design
Basil Pardo

With thanks to
Nick Bisley and
Diana Heatherich

WELCOME
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

La Trobe Asia was established in 2014 to oversee the University's strategic commitment making Asia the central focus of our international activity.

Our aim is to strengthen our research collaboration with Asia-based researchers, to build a small number of deeply rooted institutional partners, to make Asia a greater focus for student learning and mobility and to make strategic interventions in key areas of public debate.

The decision to focus on Asia was an easy one. Asia is vital to Australia's future in economic, strategic and social terms. Asia is where we are as a country, yet it is a place we still find challenging to research, work and study in. Accounting for nearly half of humanity and home to the world's most dynamic economies, Asia is the most important region in the world.

2015 marked another remarkable year in Asia. From the upheaval in the Chinese economy, and its knock on effects in Australia, to tensions in the South China Sea we can be in no doubt about the ongoing importance of this region to our country and our future. La Trobe's purpose is to produce and disseminate socially useful knowledge, and given both our depth of expertise in Asia and that region's significance, it is of crucial importance to our core mission.

Since our establishment, we have undertaken a wide range of activities from supporting New Colombo Plan-funded study abroad programs, hosting high profile public events such as our Australia-China relations panel, holding workshops and symposia, distributing research grants and developing University strategy toward Asia.

In these pages you will find stories of some of the Asia-focused research carried out using La Trobe Asia funding and support, including maternal health in Timor-Leste, building democracy in Nepal, researching the Indian diet in collaboration with partners in China, and examining the impact of northern Indian folk songs.

La Trobe Asia exists to support and promote the University's academic engagement with the region, don't hesitate to contact us to see if we can assist you in any way.

Nick Bisley

RESEARCH INFORMS TIMOR-LESTE MATERNAL HEALTH POLICY

Dr Kayli Wild
RESEARCHER
Institute of Human Security and Social Change

Maternal health is one of the key gender and human rights issues facing many low-income countries throughout the world. Improving access before, during and after childbirth has the potential to save the lives of many women and infants.

Maternity waiting homes are an approach to improving the problem of access, and have been implemented widely across African countries since the 1960s. It is a dedicated house set up next to, or as part of, a health centre. They provide pregnant women with a place to stay in the weeks leading up to birth where they can be cared for with emergency obstetric care close by if it is needed.

Soon after Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002, maternity waiting homes were proposed by the Ministry of Health as a way to help improve access to birthing services for women in rural and remote areas.

"Timor-Leste has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world," says Dr Kayli Wild, a researcher at the Institute of Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University. "It's estimated to be between 500 and 900 per 100,000 live births. Most women are not receiving skilled care at birth and serious barriers to accessing services remain. The Timor-Leste Ministry of Health, along with their development partners, are working hard to address this problem."

"The health of women in Timor-Leste is a huge issue," says Professor Nelson Martins, Timor-Leste's former Minister for Health. "With the limited human and non-human resources that we in the ministry have, we must utilise them in the most effective and efficient way. Maternity waiting homes are a good strategy on paper, but we must carefully assess the benefits against the costs before they are adopted widely and implemented across the country. We value Dr Wild's expertise and experience in conducting this evaluation in order to provide us with guidance and recommendations."

Dr Wild's PhD evaluated the first two maternity waiting homes to be established in the rural areas of Same, Manufahi district and Lospalos, Lautem district of Timor-Leste. Her research tracked the development of the policy and analysed health centre data over one year in each site.

Her analysis showed that the maternity waiting homes were not improving access for women in remote areas, and that most of the women who made use of the facility lived within 5 km of the health centre.

As a medical anthropologist, Dr Wild's research also examines the socio-cultural aspects of birth. She spoke extensively with

expectant and new mothers in remote areas about the issues they face, in order to understand and map the factors which affect access to services.

"Many women, particularly those who have had previous home births and uncomplicated pregnancies, did not perceive a need for hospital birth," says Dr Wild. "Others preferred the safety of birthing in a facility, especially first time mothers or if something had gone wrong in a previous pregnancy, so women's needs are diverse. Underlying circumstances such as transport, preference for home birth and the need to improve quality of care weren't addressed by the maternity waiting homes."

She also found maternity waiting homes may be having unintended outcomes and their implementation may have actually reduced the medical care available to some women.

"When the new maternity waiting homes were built some midwives said they would no longer help women who were giving birth at home," she says. "This is a problem because it could reduce access to medical care for women living in the mountains. Incorporating the voices of women is critical for developing good maternal health policy and responsive systems into the future."

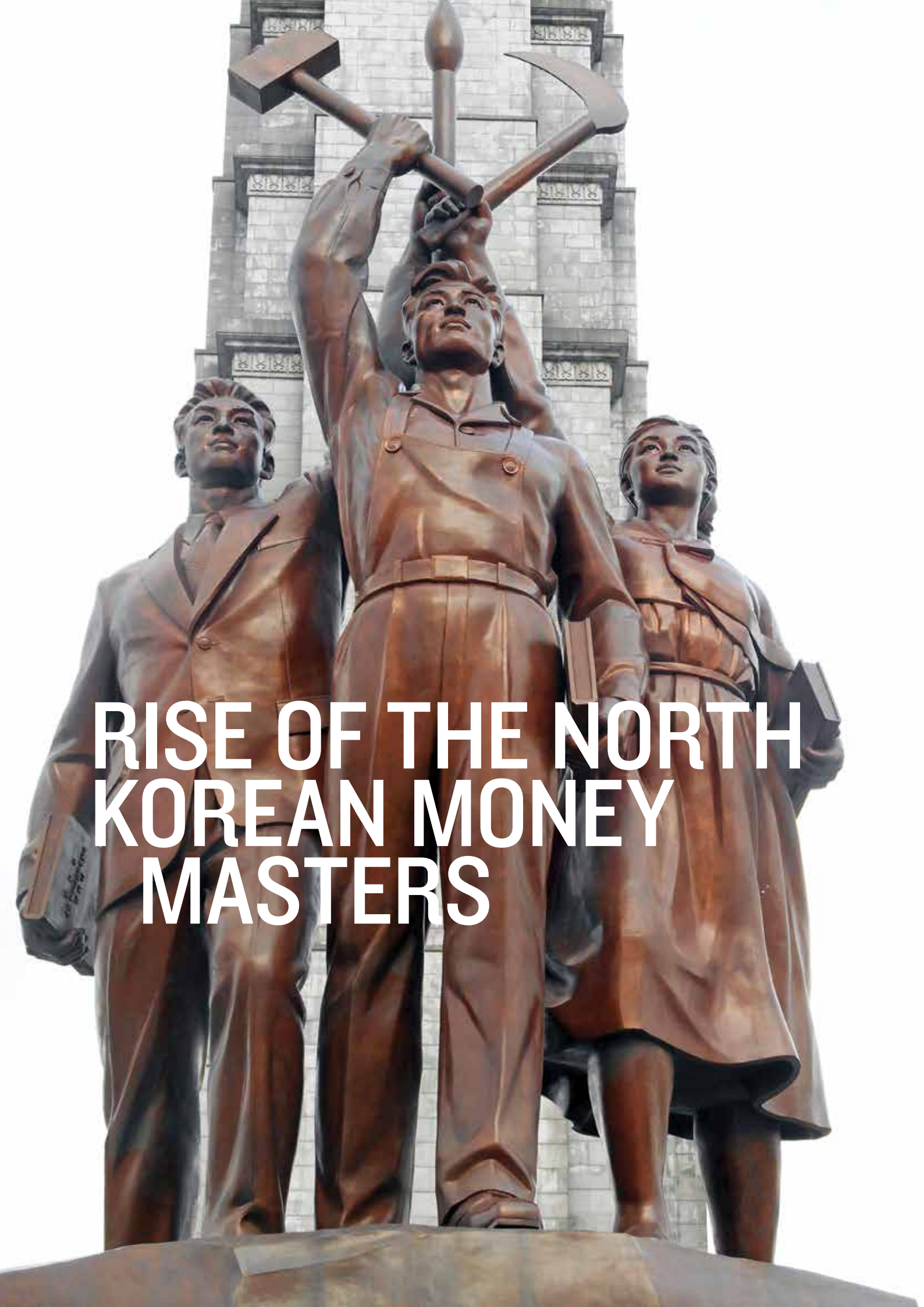
Dr Wild's findings contributed to a change in policy direction by the Ministry of Health, who have now invested in community-based health services, through the Servico Integrado Saude Communitaria (SISCa) program, to increase their reach in rural and remote areas.

"Through recommendations from various health research evaluations conducted in Timor-Leste, including Dr Wild's work, we have learned that we must find good strategies and with less cost to address both access and quality of health services to rural and marginal communities," says Professor Nelson Martins. "We have developed the SISCa program, with six main activities delivered at the village level."

"Maternal waiting homes will never solve all the problems of access to maternity care in Timor-Leste," says Dr Wild. "A flexible and adaptive health system that responds to the needs of women and families is required so that they can access the care appropriate to their situation." •

With the limited human and non-human resources that we in the ministry have, we must utilise them in the most effective and efficient way.

Professor Nelson Martins



RISE OF THE NORTH KOREAN MONEY MASTERS

Recently the North Korean government announced that its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon are fully operational, producing enough plutonium for approximately one bomb annually.

North Korea's nuclear weapons program continues to be a captivating meme, however it represents only one part of a broader narrative of the socio-economic transformation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

A story of great significance in this transformation is bubbling up at street level. This story is about the rise of a class of nouveau riche North Koreans—the *Donju* ("money masters")—who are changing the dynamics of the North Korean economy and reshaping the relationship between the Kim government and the North Korean people.

The story of the *Donju* began in the mid-1990s during North Korea's period of famine and economic collapse. Grassroots entrepreneurialism sprang up at this time as a coping mechanism through which people were able to access food and other important consumables at a time when the State was unable to provide.

The *Donju* evolved from the grassroots entrepreneurial activity that arose during this time. They started out as people trading consumable goods in private markets, who then built up enough savings to invest in more substantial business ventures such as billiard halls or karaoke rooms as restrictions on such activities relaxed through the 2000s.

In the past, every time this nascent middle class has risen to a certain level, the government's interpreted a potential political threat from this group and tried to strip their economic power. The infamous 2009 currency revaluation was one such attempt by the government to devalue the currency holdings of this group and try and mute their political power. However, the *Donju* class has now reached a size where such interventions are not quite so practical.

Today, the *Donju* have acquired a degree of wealth where they can invest in larger enterprises. There is now an alignment of interest between the government and the *Donju* to finance some of the development activities that the government is struggling to finance itself.

As part of its Byungjin Line policy of parallel economic and nuclear weapons development, the North Korean government has shown increasing interest in emulating the special economic zones (SEZ) development model pioneered in China under Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s. Wherever you find accumulations of money and wealth in the DPRK you are likely to find *Donju*, particularly now around the SEZs where development activities are taking place.

North Korea established their first SEZ in Rason during the early 1990s, which is a joint port facility based around the cities of Rajin and Sonbong near the tri-border area with China and Russia. At the time the North Korean government liked that because it was a long way away from Pyongyang and they thought they could isolate any marketization and restrict the threat of capitalist contagion to the rest of the country.

It is only in the last few years that the Rason SEZ has really started to take off. There is significant Chinese and Russian investment activity in Rason, which require joint venture partnerships with local entities.

The Rason SEZ is linked to Russia's Far East development strategy and is also helping the Chinese government realise their development goals in Jilin Province. The interaction here between the North Korean government, foreign investors and private capital from within North Korea is a significant departure from the Stalinist command economy model that predominated in North Korea during the Cold War.

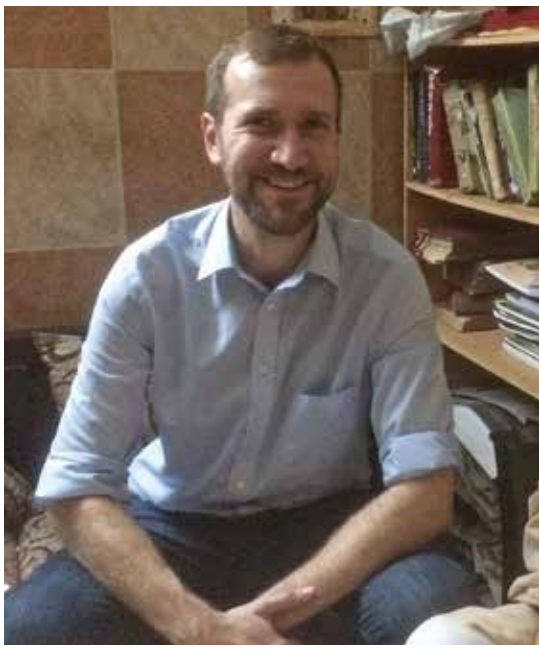
The political impact of the *Donju* class does not end there. Pressure for political change in North Korea may grow when the size of this nouveau riche class reaches a size where they may become an agitating force if their newly acquired social position becomes threatened, either by government interference or an unforeseen shock event.

It is a distinct possibility that North Korea will undertake another nuclear test and further long-range missile launches to operationalise its nuclear weapon capability, to perfect the security half of the government's Byungjin Line policy of simultaneous nuclear weapons and economic development. Nonetheless, if we focus obsessively on the nuclear weapons issue, we risk failing to notice the transformative social forces that are changing North Korea from below, under the radar of high politics. •

First published on The Conversation *19 October 2015.*

Dr Benjamin Habib
LECTURER
Politics and International Relations
La Trobe University

The message within
a north Indian folksong



A group of women congregate in a field as dusk approaches in Banpurwa Village, south of Varanasi in India. They are performing a *maṭṭikor* ritual during a family wedding. They use a hoe to dig up a piece of earth key to their rituals. As the sun sets, they dance, and sing verbally abusive *gālī*—a song genre in which women berate their family men with a mix of affectionate joking and explicit language.

Adult men rarely accompany women for this ritual, but those that are allowed—such as percussionists and videographers—will find themselves targets of this light-hearted type of song. Indeed, many consider it auspicious to be targeted. This was the case in the Banpurwa field, where Dr Ian Woolford was allowed to watch and record as part of his research. For the past decade he's been travelling through northern India, documenting rituals, songs and poems of small villages.

"This type of song can convey the most deep and important cultural sentiments of communities and of individual performers," says Woolford. "What performance accomplishes can rarely be expressed by words alone. A few minutes of a performance is so packed with meaning, it can open up years of interpretation."

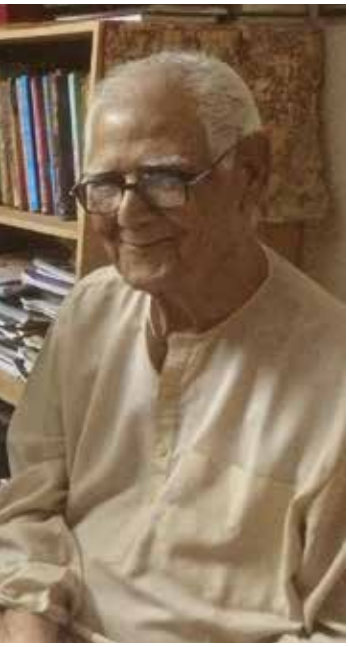
Woolford is the director of the Hindi program at La Trobe University. His recent study has focused on how village song texts have appeared in the work of Indian novelists, and how these songs have a power over the reader beyond their literal intentions.

Many examples can be found in the pages of *Sea of Poppies*, a novel by best-selling Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh. Within the pages Woolford recognised many of the songs he had recorded in North India. He even recognised a Hindi devotional song he had learnt as a child, whilst sitting in the classroom of a Hindi school in Trinidad, where he had been sent to live by his musicologist mother. As he read the passages it evoked a vivid memory of his youth.

"Every performance in Trinidad was a teaching tool, in which we learned through constant repeat and refrain. The performance style was predicated on language loss," says Woolford. "In a Trinidad Indian community that was fast losing knowledge of Hindi and Bhojpuri, this structure allowed groups of young children, including

myself, a British boy with limited knowledge of Hindi, to sing entire Hindi songs on philosophical topics."

Ghosh isn't the only author using village songs, and Woolford is completing a study of song in Hindi fiction. He has matched literary examples to those in his recording collection made while travelling through northern India for the past decade. Woolford believes that by using traditional songs in this fashion the authors intend to encode experiences into their works rather than just repeat them directly. The fictional works become an important part of the performance tradition.



An example of this is a *bidāī gīt*, a 'departure song', in Ramdarash Mishra's novel *Pānī ke prāchir*, in which a bride and her family members weep as she leaves her birth home. Woolford was familiar with the song, and had recorded many examples of it during his fieldwork.

He recently had the opportunity to interview Hindi poet and professor Ramdarash Mishra, and asked him about how he used the departure song in his novel. Mishra has childhood memories of women singing this song in his village in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh.

"Professor Mishra first started to explain the song from an academic standpoint, but what really struck me was that after a moment he choked up about it – it started to have a visible emotional impact on him," Woolford says. "It is amazing that, after so many years a song can have such a hold over a person. It was a very powerful moment."

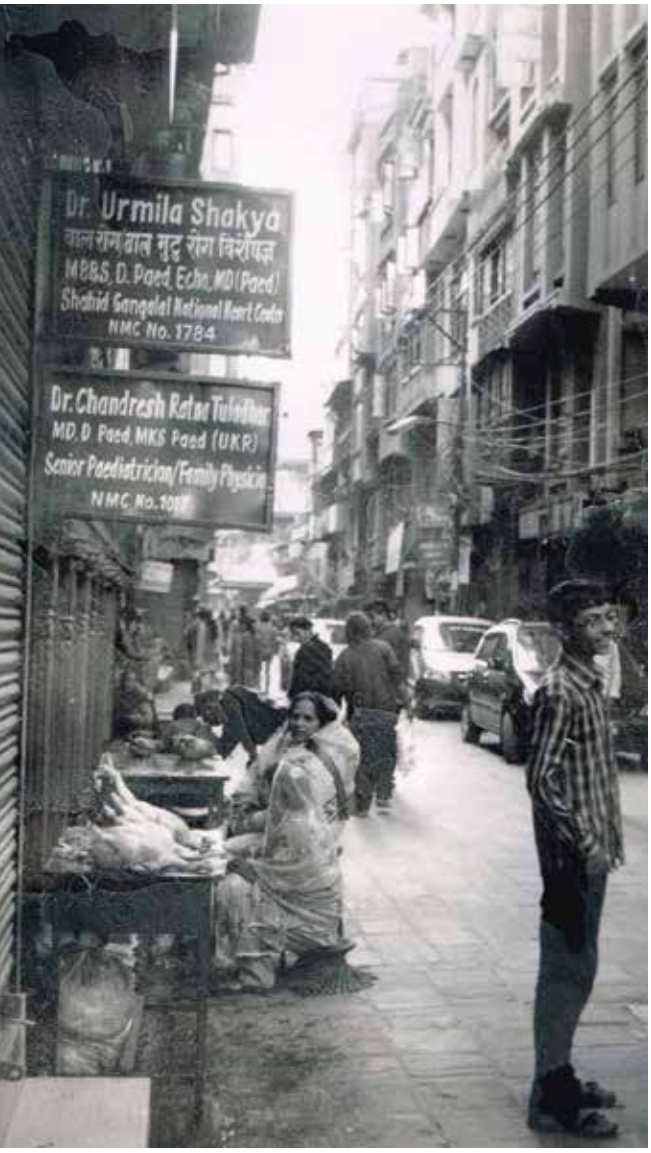
The songs in Mishra's writings are associated with ritual activity, specific festivals, and specific domestic and agricultural tasks. By writing these women's songs into a Hindi novel, Mishra has taken them from one performance and linguistic context and refashioned them within another.

"The north Indian village song tradition, of which repetition is the most prominent element, encodes emotions that are at times impossible to discuss," says Woolford. "It takes an entire novel, written by one of Hindi literature's finest, to explain why memory of a village song brings tears to the eyes of a ninety-four-year-old Hindi professor sitting at his home in Delhi." ●

L-R
- Dr Ian Woolford with Professor Ramdarash Mishra, Delhi
- Family women dancing at wedding in Banpurwa Village (Varanasi district). Accompanied by Surendra Kumar's kurkuriya ensemble
- Video Recording bidapat nach performace (Aurahi-Hingana Village, Araria, Bihar)

NEPAL STILL FRAUGHT WITH TENSIONS AFTER DECADE LONG CIVIL WAR

Peace processes in civil wars are notoriously difficult endeavours, and often fail to establish lasting peace despite international community involvement and the investment of significant resources.



An example of a recent peace process is the south Asian country of Nepal. In 1996 its long-established monarchy finally gave way to a call for democracy, but fractures within the Communist Party saw the rise of the Maoists and a civil war which lasted a decade.

When the democratic government of Nepal was established in 2006 it marked the official end of a decade long civil war and a long drawn-out peace process with heavy involvement from the international community.

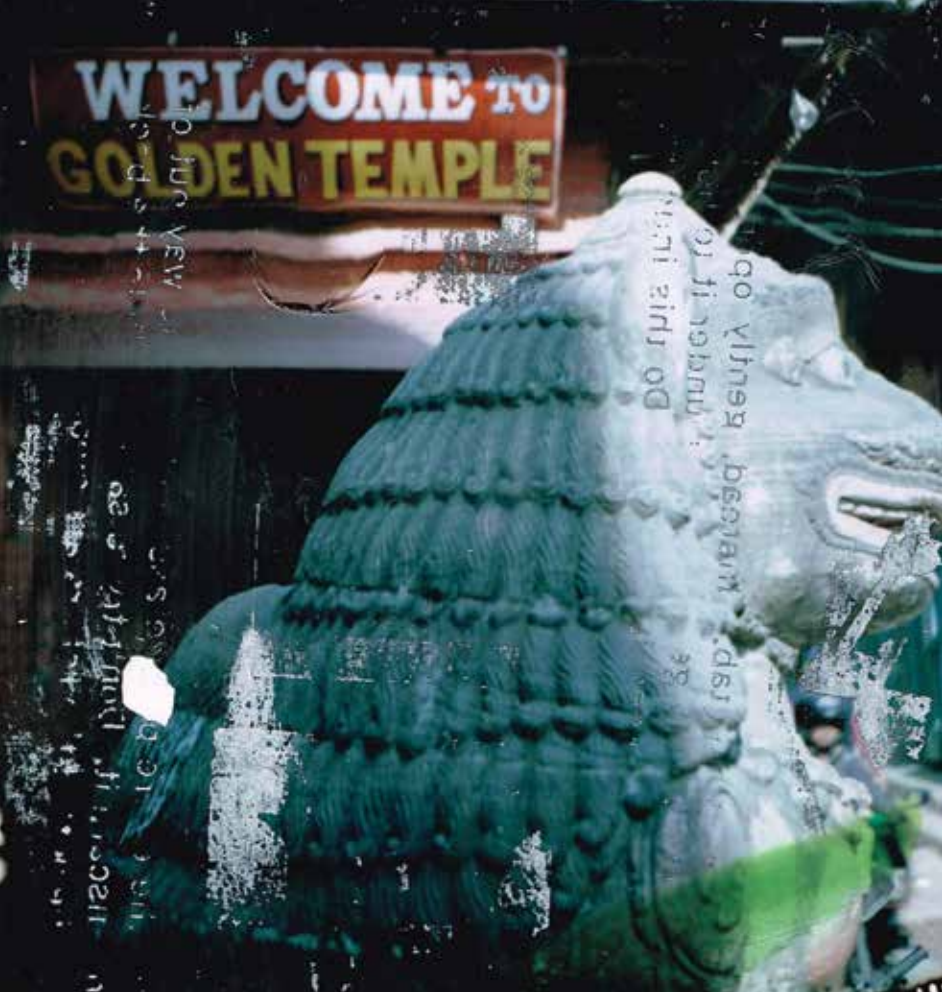
Dr Jasmine-Kim Westendorf, a lecturer in international relations at La Trobe University, has been examining international involvement in peace processes. She finds the case of Nepal to be of particular interest, as the underlying tensions that caused the civil war are not addressed and remain unresolved.

“The peace process in Nepal was complicated by competing factions and a monarchy reluctant to relinquish control,” she says. “There was also a real impoverishment of a lot of Nepalese citizens, as wealth was concentrated on the Kathmandu valley. Many people in Nepal felt they had little capacity to influence the decisions that were affecting their lives.”

“Nepal had a particularly violent civil war in the context of a democratisation attempt,” says Dr Westendorf. “15,000 people died and there was a lot of displacement. It’s not the kind of conflict that can be forgotten overnight.”

Dr Westendorf’s research involved interviewing people who were key in Nepal’s peace-keeping operation and peace building process, including those in the United Nations, government departments, international NGOs and Nepali civil society.

She found that while the international community supported the establishment of democratic governance, the peacekeeping operation was a very ‘light’ mission, with a limited number of peacekeepers deployed. Little was done during this process to address the underlying tensions between the major parties in the conflict.



"While Nepal now has a democracy in place, almost a decade later there are still significant unresolved issues," Dr Westendorf says. "For instance, many ex-combatants haven't been effectively reintegrated into civilian life, remaining unemployed with few economic prospects. In addition, there's no constitution in place, and the writing process has been fraught with conflict. The most recent attempt has led to widespread violence, the worst seen in the country since the end of the war. Nepal is still trying to decide what a post-war democracy should look like and how the power should be divided between the various groups in the country."

Ultimately, while the international peace process was effective at bringing about disarmament and running a smooth election, little has been done to address the underlying conflict between groups in the country.

"Tension and inequality runs deep in Nepal and governance is undermined by bickering and individualised politics," says Dr Westendorf. "I don't think there's the risk of war breaking out again, and it doesn't need massive international intervention. But this sort of political instability could cause conflict on a local level."

A further event disrupting democratic development was the earthquake of April 2015 which killed 9,000 people and injured more than 23,000. Recovering from this event has been a gradual process, marred by underlying tension as to how relief funds are being distributed.

The Kathmandu district was the hardest hit and is receiving the most funds, but it is also the wealthiest area, and there are many places in Nepal which are still awaiting relief after being hurt by the civil war.

"There's some evidence that earthquake relief funds have been distributed unequally," says Dr Westendorf. "There is evidence of preferential treatment based on ethnic groups or political allegiances."

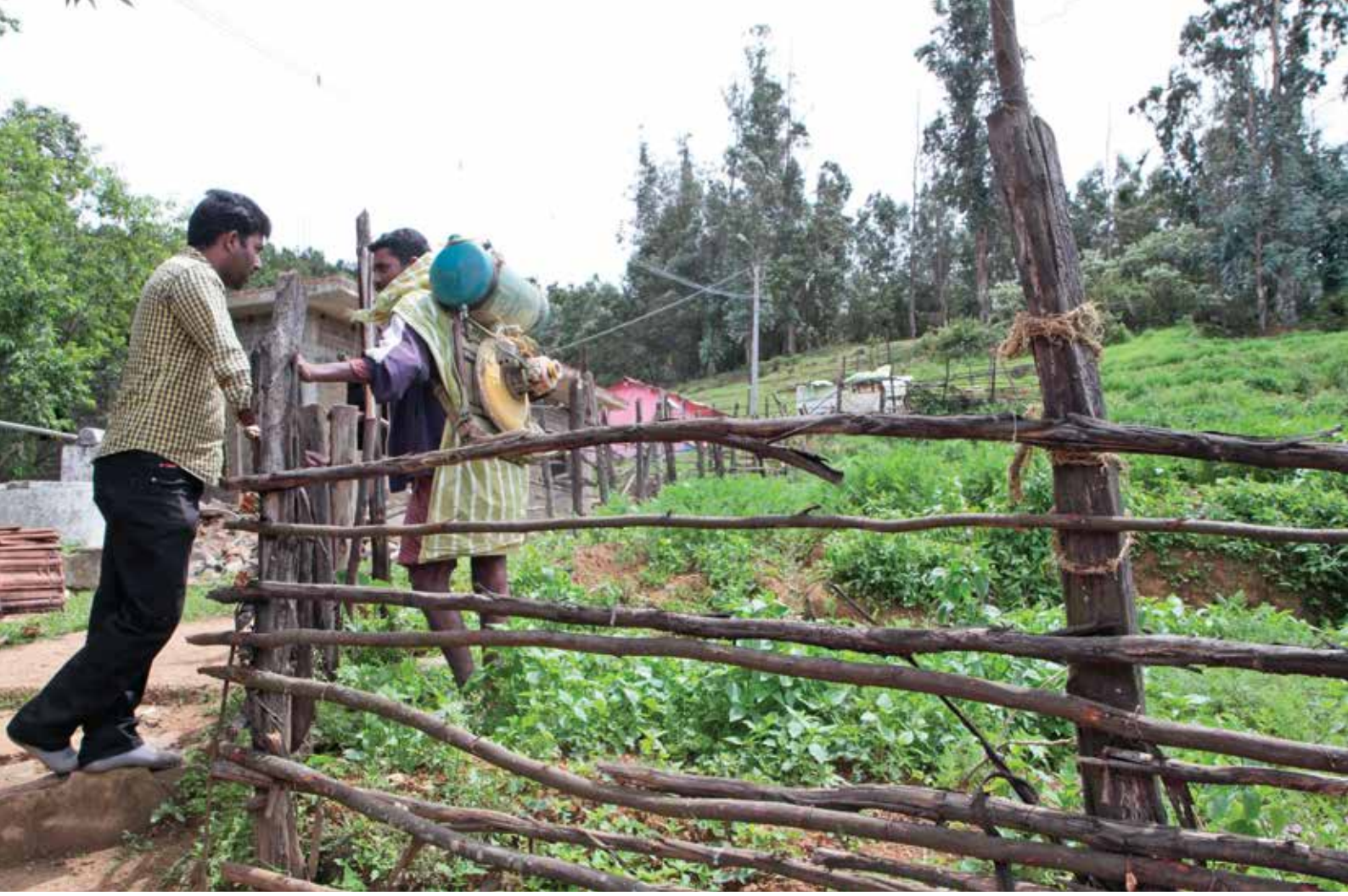
"The weaknesses in the peace process have left many in Nepal reluctant to re-engage with the international community in a post-earthquake context. The government in particular is quite fatigued with international involvement."

Dr Westendorf's research has examined the peace process and emerging democracies of a number of other countries, in particular Timor-Leste. As in Nepal, the underlying conflict in Timor-Leste has been mostly ignored by the international community, and Dr Westendorf sees there being a risk of civil unrest and violence breaking out again.

"I felt safe when I was in Kathmandu, it's by and large a peaceful country but the situation is different on the local level in disadvantaged areas," she says. "Timor-Leste is completely different. The tension and conflict are very much still at the surface and there's no easy solution. There could easily be violence in the streets again." ●

Dr Westendorf's photos taken with a vintage Polaroid camera and film.

Dr Jasmine-Kim Westendorf
LECTURER
International Relations
La Trobe University



USING A WORM TO RESEARCH DIABETES

Dr Markandeya Jois has set up a series of experiments in his new lab at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Worms with the unassuming name of *Caenorhabditis elegans* are living on a custom-made chip cut with channels and programmed with feeding schedules. They are fed a nutrient-rich diet through a series of tubes.

C. elegans are traditionally used for genetic research, but Jois has seen a new application in them and is trying to work out how to control their diet.

"Controlling the diet of these worms is a difficult process, but if we can work it out the payoff would be enormous," Jois says. "*C. elegans* is the perfect model organism for humans, and you can conduct an experiment on its life-cycle from start to finish in three weeks. Human testing and diet trials have their place, but it's very time consuming. But once we can automate feeding *C. elegans* we can use it to test the effectiveness of different nutrients."

Jois is a bioscientist working on a project that has become a life-long passion. All these experiments are the latest in a long and varied journey his research has taken him in an effort to find a credible prevention for Type II Diabetes.

"When I left India in 1983 no one there had even heard of diabetes," says Jois. "Now it seems like every second person has it. It's not just in India – in other countries all over the world diabetes is a real problem."

Jois initially looked at pharmaceutical solutions, but as these require human trials before a product can reach the market he changed tactics, and focused on a dietary solution instead. A dietary approach can be preventative by treating conditions that lead to Type II Diabetes, such as metabolic syndrome, hypertension, and obesity.

By approaching a nutritional solution with scientific rigor, Jois hopes to cut through the misconceptions of diet knowledge and the poor lifestyle eating habits we have developed.

"The problem with nutritional information is that there's a lot of claims without proof," says Jois. "Foods can be called super, celebrities can endorse products, but there's no regulatory body asking for scientific evidence."

He began initially by looking at where Type II Diabetes and obesity occurred in lower incidences than amongst the overall population, and examining different diets around the world. He found six tribes in southern India who were generally healthy, but consistently experienced poor health whenever they moved closer to a city.

"Living near a city can bring a very sugar-filled diet without variety,' says Jois. "Humans can eat 250 types of plants, but with a city comes processed foods, limiting the biodiversity of our diet. When these tribes are not harvesting wild plants they lose the benefits."

Dr Jois identified eight different herbs and spices which had promising impacts on diet – amongst them cinnamon and turmeric – but how much should be eaten and how often are unknown variables which required testing. This is where his current research with the *C. elegans* worms comes in.

"These worms really are the new rat of scientific testing," says Jois. "Since the 1970s six Nobel prizes have been won based on research involving these worms."

Using a funding grant from La Trobe Asia, Dr Jois travelled to the Shanghai Institute of Biological Sciences where a team led by Professor Jackie Han has a laboratory dedicated to developing chips cut with channels for worm farms of *C. elegans*. These chips could be programmed to feed the worms a controlled nutrient-rich diet at specific intervals. The experiment is automatically photographed at regular intervals.

> *Humans can eat 250 types of plants, but with a city comes processed foods, limiting the biodiversity of our diet*
>
> Dr Markandeya Jois

"Our work with Professor Han has been a useful collaboration," says Jois. "My team brings the research and experience with diet and biology, and hers lies with the chips and programming. Professor Han will visit La Trobe University later in the year to see how our work has progressed."

Dr Jois' research is done in collaboration with colleagues in the department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, School of Molecular Sciences and School of Psychology and Public Health demonstrating that a strong research link can exist between a number of fields. He is currently assisted in his work by five PhD students from different backgrounds including animal science, biomedical science and clinical practice.

Dr Jois is hopeful for positive results in his experiments, which in the future would lead to human trials and screening tests. Ultimately, he is focussed on his target of preventing Type II diabetes, and for his findings to be applied to help people around the world.

"Public education will be a real challenge, but clear science and a transparent methodology needs to be behind all this work," says Jois. "I'm not in the business of finding a secret recipe." ●

L-R
Devin Benheim, Markandeya Jois, Surafel Tegegne, Serpil Kucuktepe, Matt Flavel

Caenorhabditis elegans

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

Asia Rising is also the name of the podcast from La Trobe Asia, focusing a spotlight on the news, views, and general happenings in Asia's states and societies. Subscribe now on iTunes or SoundCloud to hear interviews with La Trobe University academics and guests on a diverse range of Asian countries and topics.

RECENT EPISODES

CHINA'S FRAGILE ECONOMY

China's economy is in a state of transition, and its success and failure has an impact on a global level.

Dr Geoff Raby (Australia's Ambassador to China from 2007-2011, director of his Beijing-based business advisory company – Geoff Raby and Associates Ltd) speaks to Professor Nick Bisley (Executive Director, La Trobe Asia) about how the Chinese economy is transitioning and the changes it needs to make.

NORTH KOREA'S EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS

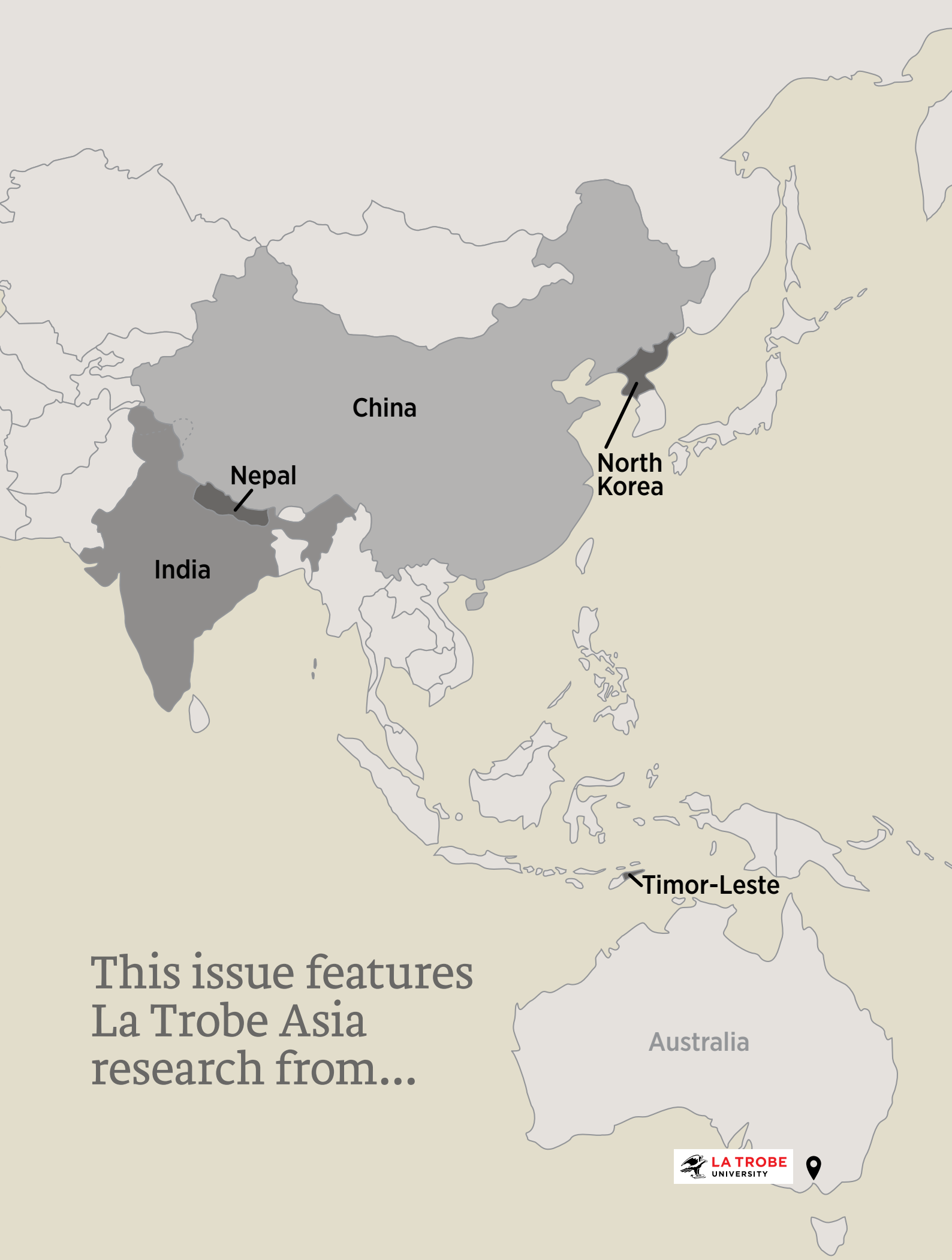
North Korea has an image of dire poverty and famine, but thanks to trade with Russia and China the economy is a dynamic space and fast developing.

Dr Benjamin Habib (Politics and International Relations, La Trobe University) speaks to Professor Nick Bisley (Executive Director, La Trobe University) about the impact of North Korea's development and the emergence of the 'donju', the money masters.

AUSTRALIA'S ASYLUM SEEKER DILEMMA

Australia has made refugee and asylum seeker issues a cornerstone of this political debate and excessive lengths have been taken to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Australia by boat.

Julian Burnside (Barrister and human rights advocate) speaks to host Matt Smith about Australia's perceived asylum seeker problem and how there might be a better solution.



This issue features La Trobe Asia research from...

CONTACT DETAILS

La Trobe Asia
La Trobe University
Melbourne Victoria 3086
Australia

T +61 3 9479 5414
E asia@latrobe.edu.au

DC31601B 11/15

latrobe.edu.au/asia