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The Developmental Social Policy Standstill: Cash Payout Schemes Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic in Four East Asian Economies

Daniel Chi Fung Yeung[1] | Yu Wai Vic Li[2] | Ka Ki Lawrence Ho[3] | Tsan Yin Peter Cheung[4]

[1]Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan | [2]School of Languages, Arts and Societies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK | [3]Department of Civic Education and Leadership, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan | [4]Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Correspondence: Yu Wai Vic Li (yu-wai.li@sheffield.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the governments of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea implemented direct cash disbursements to citizens in 2020 and 2021. This paper assesses whether these near-simultaneous universal cash payout schemes presage a broader transformation in the welfare paradigm of these East Asian economies, traditionally viewed as minimal-welfare developmental states. Our analysis finds that economic stimulus, rather than social protection, was the primary objective in all four cases, even amid the public health crisis. This reflects a strong continuity with the policy responses adopted following the 2007/8 Global Financial Crisis. The underlying "productivist" welfare regimes remained largely unchanged and firmly rooted in the developmentalist, pro-growth paradigm that has shaped these economies for decades. Accordingly, the adoption of universal cash payouts is best understood as a pragmatic policy adjustment to evolving political-economic conditions, rather than evidence of a paradigmatic shift in welfare governance.

1 | Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, policy interventions to address socioeconomic challenges were at the top of the public policy agenda across different regions. The governments of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea (hereafter Korea), and Japan introduced universal cash payout programs as an integral part of their relief policy in response to the pandemic's socio-economic fallout in a near synchronous fashion, offering direct cash support or launching consumption voucher schemes for all eligible residents or households.

Despite the different socioeconomic contexts, their welfare models have been described as "developmental welfare model," "productivist welfare regimes," or "East Asian welfare model," in which the state evades responsibility for and avoids the delivery of universal welfare schemes to its citizens (Gough 2004; Holliday 2000, 2005; Choi 2013). As such, the universal cash payouts following the Covid-19 pandemic have come as a surprise to those believing in the continuity of the developmental welfare model and shall be considered as an important "testing case" whether they presage a departure from the developmental welfare paradigm. Though the cash payout schemes were arguably "time-limited" responses, as policy interventions unparalleled in East Asia, it is analytically important to consider the episode against the larger context that would shed light on the literature of the East Asian welfare regime. Moreover, they have remained underappreciated by researchers that our analysis would also contribute to studies of comparative social policy that have devoted particular attention to the post-pandemic welfare support governments provided their publics.

To be sure, cash transfers are not a novel policy instrument. However, much of the social policy literature has focused on their role in developing countries, where such schemes are primarily designed to reduce poverty and address structural inequality (Bastagli et al. 2016; Leisering 2019). In developed economies, cash transfers have also been deployed, but typically as targeted, conditional measures in response to exceptional circumstances. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, countries such as Germany and France introduced conditional transfers aimed at supporting vulnerable groups and mitigating the social impact of the downturn (Seemann et al. 2021; Béland et al. 2021; Aidukaite et al. 2021). In contrast, the experiences of the four East Asian economies examined in this study were more exceptional: their governments implemented nearly unconditional, universal cash payouts, offering a rare and noteworthy departure from the region's typically selective and productivist welfare practices.

This study, therefore, poses the question: why were universal cash payment policies implemented in East Asian developmental welfare states? To answer this, we examine the welfare responses of four economies during the 2007-08 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), which marked the first major exogenous shock they faced since the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC). By tracing the responses during both the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic, we illuminate how developmental welfare states respond to contingent crises with a consistent underlying rationale. During the GFC, the four governments primarily favored targeted stimulus measures aimed at economic stabilization, such as infrastructure investment, credit support, and industrial development. In contrast, the Covid-19 crisis saw the unprecedented deployment of universal cash transfers to individuals and households. Crucially, although the form of intervention differed, we argue that the underlying rationale has remained the same: these measures were conceived as demand-side stimuli to sustain economic growth and public confidence in consumption, rather than as steps toward long-term welfare expansion. By comparing these two episodes, we demonstrate that while the exceptional nature of the pandemic prompted the use of previously untested policy tools, the developmental welfare regime in East Asia has remained largely intact across crises of differing natures.

To assess whether the Covid-era cash payouts represent a continuation or a departure from the East Asian welfare model, we draw on the insights of the gradual institutional change framework developed by Streeck and Thelen (2005) and further elaborated by Mahoney and Thelen (2009). This perspective helps illuminate how institutional change can occur incrementally through mechanisms such as layering, drift, conversion, and displacement, allowing for adaptation without wholesale transformation. For instance, Galik et al. (2023) demonstrate that institutional continuity and change can coexist, as evidenced in the cases of environmental governance across different national contexts.

This study employs a qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources, including official policy documents, government press releases, legislative records, and reports issued by public agencies in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. To contextualize and corroborate these materials, we also reviewed media coverage from reputable domestic and international news outlets published during the Covid-19 pandemic. Source materials were collected between 2020 and early 2023 through keyword searches on official government portals, legislative databases, and media archives. Where necessary, documents in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese were translated into English by the authors. This approach enables us to examine not only the content and structure of the cash payout schemes, but also the policy rationales and official discourses that accompanied their implementation.

While this qualitative approach provides a rich account of official rationales and the context of policy design and delivery, we acknowledge certain limitations. First, our reliance on published materials may introduce selection bias: governments tend to foreground particular achievements and downplay challenges during policy implementation. Second, the absence of interviews with policymakers means we cannot fully capture the decision-making processes. Despite these constraints, our systematic cross-case analysis offers valuable insights into the strategic deployment of cash payouts within East Asia's developmentalist welfare regimes. Future research incorporating stakeholder interviews and survey data could help triangulate our findings and complement the exploratory insights offered here. These insights make important and timely contributions to better understanding the challenges facing the region's welfare model, while shedding light on the larger social policy literature on cash payout initiatives (which has mostly focused on Western contexts). We also stress that the paper could not assess the impacts of cash transfer schemes on society since these schemes often result in unintended policy outcomes and have multiple impacts on society beyond what was anticipated by policymakers (Bastagli et al. 2016).

2 | East Asia's Welfare Systems and Cash Payouts

2.1 | Characterizing East Asian Welfare Regimes

The East Asian welfare model is often described as a "developmental welfare state" (Kwon 2005, 2009) or as reflecting "productivist" welfare regimes (Holliday 2000). Rooted in the logic of developmentalism, where the state's primary objective is to promote industrialization and rapid economic growth, and policies are expected to support that trajectory (Stubbs 2009), developmental welfare measures are designed as long-term strategic investments, rather than as mechanisms to promote social equity or comprehensive social protection. Meanwhile, the concept of a "productivist welfare regime" suggests that states place a strong emphasis on economic output and competitiveness. Social spending is justified only insofar as it enhances labor productivity or meets the skill demands of key industries. While both concepts highlight the subordination of equity and welfare concerns to growth objectives in East Asian welfare systems, setting apart from the Western welfare regimes outlined in Esping-Andersen (1990) typology, they differ in important ways. Developmentalism implies an active and strategic role for the state in shaping welfare provision as part of a broader developmental agenda. Productivism, in contrast, conceives social policy more narrowly as a functional instrument to attain growth objectives of the states (Choi 2013). In this sense,

productivist welfare measures are more reactive and technocratic, whereas developmentalist approaches are more proactive and embedded in state planning.

In practice, the developmentalist and productivist logics are not mutually exclusive; rather, they often operate in tandem, reinforcing one another in shaping East Asian welfare policies that prioritize economic competitiveness over social protection. The primary responsibility for social security is placed on families and markets rather than the state (Aspalter 2006). This is reinforced by the relatively low public social expenditure in the region, except for education, which is considered essential for cultivating human capital and ensuring long-term economic growth (Gough 2004). As prescribed by the developmental welfare model, social policies in East Asia primarily serve the state's commitment to growth, with welfare programs designed to enhance productivity—closely aligning with the productivist logic (Holliday and Wilding 2003, 162–165). For example, Holliday (2005) argues that education and certain social security programs are intended to facilitate the smooth operation of the labor market and maintain social order, rather than to promote equity or redistribution. Another notable feature of developmental welfare states in the region is the relatively limited funding for redistributive social security measures compared to their counterparts in the developed world. Public welfare schemes such as social insurance in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Hort and Kuhnle 2000; Ku 1998), occupational benefits, and family support programs are often financed through fragmented and diverse sources, reflecting the absence of a comprehensive or unified roadmap for social protection (Jacobs 2000; P. H. Kim 2010).

This model has not been immune to challenges over the years. Many scholars have argued that it fails to fully capture states' adaptive responses to long-term structural trends such as democratization, ageing population, and economic globalization, all of which have pressured governments to reform and expand social welfare provisions for their citizens (Kwon 2005; Y.-M. Kim 2008; J. Wong 2017). In addition, contingent events, such as the 1990s AFC, have exposed the limitations of the developmental welfare paradigm in addressing unemployment (Kwon 2005, 480) and revealed the inadequacy of low-expenditure welfare models in meeting the needs of rapidly growing East Asian economies (Wah and Lee 2010, 25). In response, some governments introduced new "protective elements" for vulnerable groups in their welfare systems, often under pressure from civil society, to move beyond reactive, productivist measures (Y.-M. Kim 2008).

Nonetheless, scholars remain divided on the extent to which East Asia's welfare regime has undergone transformations. Reflecting his earlier research, Holliday (2005) maintained that despite the noticeable expansion of welfare coverage after the AFC, the core principles of the productivist model remain intact. Similarly, Hwang (2012) argued that welfare reforms in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan were designed to "correct dysfunctions" over the fast-growing economy and "to lay new foundations for future growth" (197–198). More recent scholarship suggested a more varied picture: while Hong Kong and Singapore have largely maintained their productivist orientation (Wilding 2008; Yang and Kühner 2020), Korea and Taiwan appear to have moved toward more inclusive and redistributive welfare arrangements, giving rise to divergent subtypes within the broader productivist category (Kwon 2009; Nam 2020; M.M.S. Kim 2015). In this paper, we use the term developmentalist to describe the broader welfare paradigm embedded in the state's economic planning and strategy, while productivist refers more specifically to the design and implementation of welfare measures that foster economic competitiveness and enhance growth.

To make sense of the patterns of change and continuity across the four East Asian cases, this study adopts the institutional change framework of the historical institutionalist approach. Notably, Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2009) have distinguished several change mechanisms. In brief, *layering* refers to the addition of new rules or programs atop existing institutions; *drift* occurs when existing rules remain unchanged while the surrounding environment evolves; *conversion* involves reinterpreting or repurposing old rules to serve new goals; and *displacement* entails the outright replacement of existing institutions. These modes of change all suggest that continuity through adaptation is possible, allowing core policy goals or institutional logics to persist even as surface-level reforms take place—making this framework especially useful for assessing both the persistence and variation within East Asia's welfare states.

Before we present our empirical evidence, we offer some brief background on cash payouts.

2.2 | Cash Transfer as a Social Policy Response to the Pandemic

Different models of social cash transfers have been used worldwide since the 20th century (Bastagli et al. 2016; Leisering 2019). These programs, including social pensions, family allowances, conditional cash transfers (CCTs), and general household assistance, have been widely adopted as blueprints for aiding the vulnerable population. In particular, CCT schemes have become prominent for developing countries due to the notable effectiveness in shaping recipients' behaviors, such as conditioning payments on children's school attendance (Kabeer and Waddington 2015; Millán et al. 2019).

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, non-means-tested cash transfer schemes were relatively rare globally, but East Asian governments accounted for a sizable share of the few making use of universal cash payouts. The four regions aside, only eight other countries (e.g., Israel, Morocco, and Serbia) adopted similar programs, comprising just 1.5% of all implemented cash transfer measures (Leisering 2021). Among Western developed economies, only the United States issued one-off payments to every citizen, while Sweden, Germany, and Italy offered CCTs or in-kind subsidies to those unemployed (Headey et al. 2023, 157–161).

Notably, while European and North American responses were consistent with their established welfare regimes (Seemann et al. 2021; Aidukaite et al. 2021; Béland et al. 2021), the East Asia governments' unconditional cash transfers presented an apparent contradiction since they were beyond their typical developmental welfare paradigm. This raises questions about whether these cash payouts mark a break from the established welfare regime and reflect an exceptional circumstance in the state's consideration of welfare policies.

3 | The Four Cases and Responses to the GFC and Covid-19 Pandemic

The following section highlights the key welfare responses of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea during the two crises. Table 1 offers a comparative snapshot of these cases, linking crisis responses to institutional change mechanisms and illustrating patterns of continuity across the region. While welfare has often been subordinated to economic goals in East Asia, this does not mean social policy responses are merely routine extensions of economic strategy. Instruments like cash payouts and tax credits show how social policy is mobilized, reinterpreted, and layered in response to crisis. It is precisely this dynamic interaction between economic imperatives and institutional welfare logics that we examine through the lens of gradual institutional change.

3.1 | Hong Kong: The Minimalist Welfare Economy

Hong Kong's welfare system has long been characterized as "minimal" or "residual," with a focus on self-reliance and limited state intervention (Chow 2003). Following the AFC, the government, constrained by the fiscal pressure, adopted a more "exclusionary" and "selective" welfare approach that involved stringent criteria, which was also reflecting the public's resistance to welfare dependency. This retrenchment

TABLE 1 | East Asia's welfare responses to crises: Continuity and institutional change.

Region and welfare context	GFC responses and change mechanism	Covid-19 responses and change mechanism	Resilience/continuity in welfare paradigm
Hong Kong Minimalist welfare regime, provision closely tied to fiscal conservatism and economic competitiveness	Layering: One-off tax rebates (2009), temporal utilities subsidies (2009)	Layering: Cash payout scheme (2020), consumption vouchers (2021)	• Fiscal prudence, devoting resources to new industries support, promoting economic growth and competitiveness, rather than direct subsidies. • Cash payouts framed as temporary fiscal measures for consumption stimulation.
Taiwan Pragmatic welfare state with selective and gradually expanding provision, social priorities shaped by growth-supportive rationales	Layering: Shopping Voucher Program (2009), short-term cash support (2008), sponsored internships (2009)	Layering: Triple stimulus voucher (2020), quintuple stimulus voucher (2021)	• Relying on existing occupation-based social insurance schemes, such as employment insurance and the NHI. • Limited appetite for institutionalizing broader welfare entitlements.
Japan Constrained welfare system, with expansion limited by high public debt, and social spending linked to productivity	Layering: One-off payments (2008) Drift and conversion: expansion of unemployment insurance (2008) Conversion: subsidies for companies to retain workers (2008)	Layering: Special Cash Payment (2020), targeted aid (2021)	• Incorporation of welfare response in growth-oriented economic planning, and maintaining existing welfare schemes. • Subsequent retrenchment of the cash transfers (e.g., no renewal of one-off payments), and reluctance to further welfare expansions.
South Korea Productivist welfare model, with emphasis on labor activation, social investment, and macroeconomic goals	Drift and conversion: Temporal expanding (2008) the coverage of Employment Insurance and Minimum Living Standard Guarantee, both introduced in the mid-1990s Conversion: Long-Term Care Insurance for creating more jobs (2008) and Earned Income Tax Credit (2008)	Layering: Rounds of Emergency Relief Payment (2020 and 2021) Drift: targeted aid (2020 and 2021) Conversion: "Korean New Deal" (2020)	• Support for new industries and industrial transition. • Maintaining existing welfare schemes, with a continued linkage between welfare provision and employment.

Note: Layering = Introducing new schemes in response to the crisis, without replacing existing ones; Drift = Keeping the existing frameworks in place; Conversion = Deploying non-welfare measures as a response to the crisis.

was evident in the introduction of self-contributory pension Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) and the outsourcing of social services through a quasi-market mechanism in place of direct granting by relevant agencies (Lee 2005). Tackling the economic downturn, the government's approach leaned heavily toward facilitating long-term economic adjustments through investment in manpower training, education, and employment support (Chui and Ko 2011). This developmental welfare model was firmly rooted in the belief that economic growth, not welfare expansion, was the solution to social and economic challenges.

In the face of the GFC, the Hong Kong government maintained this developmentalist stance, prioritizing measures aimed at bolstering the economy rather than expanding welfare provision. It introduced short-term, stop-gap welfare measures, such as one-off tax rebates, increased ceilings for taxable income, temporary utilities subsidies, and additional payments to recipients of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (which was strictly mean-tested), as well as those receiving disability and old-age allowances (Fung 2014). These initiatives aligned with the government's broader economic recovery strategy, which centered on promoting competitiveness and infrastructure development. They demonstrated piecemeal, temporary additions to the existing welfare framework, an example of layering that added relief measures without altering the underlying institutions. Significant resources were devoted to supporting financial institutions and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through credit support schemes, deposit guarantees, and the development of new industries such as innovation technologies and green sectors. The government also sought to strengthen Hong Kong's role as a global financial hub by introducing new business opportunities like renminbi business. Job preservation and creation were another focus, with various programs and massive infrastructure that promised to generate 60,000 new jobs, to mitigate the adverse effects of unemployment while ensuring that Hong Kong's economy remained competitive for longer-term growth once the crisis subsided (Ngan 2010).

These measures highlight how Hong Kong's welfare response toward the GFC was predominantly developmentalist, with a focus on stimulating private consumption and promoting economic vibrancy, and the belief that economic hardship could be alleviated by economic growth. This view has resulted in precluding considerations of structural changes to the city's welfare system, leading government's welfare response remained minimalist and maintained its pro-market stance while avoiding major expansions of the welfare state (Lee and Cheng 2011; Chui and Ko 2011). One notable exception to this pattern occurred in 2011 when the government issued a one-off HKD 6000 payment to every citizen in response to intense public debates following nine consecutive years of budget surplus after 2004. However, the payment was perceived more as a concession to public pressure rather than a fundamental shift in welfare policy, underscoring the government's deep-seated reluctance to expand welfare even endowed with fiscal surpluses (Fong 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, posed a significant challenge to Hong Kong's approach to welfare provision. Mirroring its strategy during the GFC, the government initially prioritized fiscal prudence and economic resilience, rejecting calls for direct cash payouts. Officials argued that maintaining fiscal discipline was crucial for the city's long-term recovery and stability— even though the government ran surplus budgets for years after the GFC and the city still held a substantial financial reserve equivalent to 28 months of spending and had an extremely low level of government debt (0.3% in 2019) underscoring the government's conservative fiscal approach and commitment to maintaining minimal borrowing (Legislative Council Secretariat 2019). This cautious stance persisted for months despite mounting political pressure from across the political spectrum, including both the opposition Democratic Party and pro-establishment parties such as the New People's Party and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), all of whom urged the government to provide more direct financial assistance to ease citizens' economic hardship (Hong Kong Economic Journal 2020a; 2020b; Sing Tao Daily 2020).

In February 2020, right before finalizing the annual budget for the fiscal year 2020–2021, the government made an unexpected announcement, introducing a territory-wide cash payout scheme. This decision apparently marked a significant shift in the government's welfare posture by directly addressing the immediate financial needs of citizens rather than relying solely on long-term economic measures. Financial Secretary Paul Chan described cash payout as "an exceptional measure taken in light of the current unique circumstances" and emphasized that it would not undermine Hong Kong's long-term fiscal position, citing the substantial fiscal reserves as a buffer (Financial Secretary, Hong Kong SAR Government 2020, 14). Under the scheme, every Hong Kong permanent resident aged 18 or older was eligible to receive a one-off payment of HKD10,000. According to government estimates, the scheme would incur a nonrecurrent expenditure of HKD 71 billion, including all relief measures, and result in a total deficit of HKD 59 billion, equivalent to approximately 2% of the city's GDP. Financial officials emphasized that the cash disbursement would stimulate the local economy by boosting consumption among local businesses and service providers (News.gov.hk 2020). Accordingly, the payout was created with explicit goals to stimulate the consumption and support local economic activity; the scheme did not signify a shift from the developmentalist-oriented response, despite being universal and nonselective.

To further revitalize the local economy, which had avoided the large-scale lockdowns as in other societies with high Covid infection rates, the government introduced another payout in 2021, universally distributing vouchers worth HKD5000 through four digital payment platforms, including Octopus, Tap & Go, AlipayHK, and WeChat Pay HK. The estimated cost amounted to HKD 36 billion, and when aggregated with additional expenditures and revenue shortfalls, the total projected deficit exceeded HKD 101 billion, representing approximately 3.6% of the region's GDP (Financial Secretary, Hong Kong SAR Government 2021). This initiative not only sought to stimulate local consumption but also aimed at advancing the city's fintech sector by using electronic vouchers, reflecting the government's persisting pro-growth stance.[1] The vouchers were designed to be spent within a specified period of less than a year (by early 2022, depending on electronic platforms), thereby directly boosting local consumption.

Unlike the GFC response, which was characterized by a focus on long-term economic competitiveness, the Covid-19 response involved more immediate and direct fiscal support. The consumption voucher scheme was estimated to have increased consumption by 63% for nondurable goods, such as groceries and dining, and 31% for durable goods (Geng et al. 2022). The government deemed the program effective in boosting private consumption and revitalizing the economy (Hong Kong SAR Government 2022).[2]

The cash payout schemes introduced by the Hong Kong government during the pandemic appeared to depart from its usual welfare approach, but in fact exemplified an instance of layering within its welfare model, adding one-off payments atop existing targeted welfare programs without altering the underlying framework. While the GFC response primarily focused on fostering economic growth and competitiveness, the pandemic response featured direct fiscal intervention aimed at providing immediate relief. Nonetheless, the government continued to uphold its commitment to fiscal prudence, maintaining a relatively low deficit-to-GDP ratio, a minimalist approach to welfare, and adherence to the developmentalist mindset. These suggest little movement away from the developmentalist core toward more inclusive welfare measures, despite the universal coverage of the cash payout schemes.

3.2 | Taiwan: Welfare With Pragmatism

Social welfare expansion has occurred alongside Taiwan's democratization, especially during the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, the government introduced landmark programs, which defined Taiwan's welfare paradigm, namely the National Health Insurance (NHI) in 1995 and the Employment Insurance in 2002 for the general public, and the Social Assistance Act of 1997 for the vulnerable groups. However, Taiwan's welfare regime has remained firmly anchored in the developmentalist framework and has persisted across the rotation of power between the Kuomintang's (KMT) or the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) regime (Ku and Hsueh 2016). Even in the economic hardship of the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic, Taiwan's welfare system continued relying heavily on employer-led social insurance, although with some practical measures for the reality needs.

As an export-oriented economy, Taiwan was not immune to the global recession in the GFC. In response, the Taiwanese government introduced a series of measures aimed primarily at stabilizing the financial system, such as blanket deposit protection and loan provisions for individuals and SMEs. On the social welfare front, the government introduced several short-term schemes as part of its broader fiscal stimulus package, including the Shopping Voucher Program (SVP), which distributed one-off vouchers worth TWD3600 to every citizen. In addition, the Subsidy for Near-poor and the Families with Full-time Workers Programme provided short-term cash support to the borderline poor households, as well as the College Graduate Internship Programme, which funded 33,000 internships for fresh graduates in private firms (Kan et al. 2017; Hsueh and Chang 2016). These schemes represented instances of layering, adding temporary measures atop existing welfare arrangements. While these initiatives provided temporary relief, they did not lead to further expansion or structural changes in Taiwan's welfare system. The short-term cash benefits for near-poor families, for example, lasted only 1 year, while the SVP's primary objective was to encourage private consumption rather than sustained social relief (Hsueh and Chang 2016). Even though Taiwan's economy steadily recovered following the crisis, there were no substantial efforts to deepen or broaden welfare coverage. Instead, Taiwan continued to rely on its existing occupation-based social insurance schemes, such as employment insurance and the NHI, which remained as the pillar of its welfare system (Huang and Ku 2011). The Ma Ying-jeou government (2009–2016) also prioritized economic growth over welfare expansion, specifically by strengthening cross-strait economic relations with China, showing the belief that economic growth would increase the average income of the population and hence lower the expectations in welfare, further underscoring Taiwan's development-first approach to welfare policy (Ku and Chang 2017).

The developmentalist nature of Taiwan's welfare regime was similarly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the global economy declined sharply due to the pandemic, Taiwan's DPP-led government followed the previous paths, introducing a series of measures to stimulate the economy. Enabled by a relatively low debt-to-GDP ratio compared to its regional counterparts and sound public finances, as evidenced by a modest fiscal deficit of just −1.8% of GDP, the Taiwan government did not expect significant long-term fiscal strain by implementing cash payouts as a stimulus measure. Notably among these was the "triple stimulus voucher" (TSV) scheme launched in June 2020. Unlike the 2009 SVP, which provided full-value vouchers directly to citizens, the TSV scheme required individuals to pay TWD1000 upfront in exchange for TWD3000 in vouchers, literally "tripling" their spending power. This design reflected the government's rationale of amplifying consumption to stimulate the local economy, with the government covering TWD2000 of the cost for each recipient. Low-income groups were exempted from the upfront payment to ensure inclusivity, but the program remained primarily focused on encouraging consumer spending as a way to drive economic recovery (Department of Information Services, Executive Yuan 2020).

The TSV program had broad eligibility, covering all Taiwanese citizens from newborns to seniors, as well as their foreign spouses and dependents with residency permits. This was later extended to permanent residency permit holders and diplomats and their dependents. To facilitate territory-wide delivery, paper vouchers were available through various distribution channels, including post offices and convenience stores. And for those who chose the electronic format, when their accumulative spending amount through registered credit cards or electronic platforms reached TWD1000, they would receive a top-up of TWD2000 from the government, which was for the government's intent to incentivise digital consumption (Executive Yuan 2020). The distribution of printed or electronic vouchers commenced on July 15, 2020, and must be spent by the year's end.

The program proved highly effective in stimulating local consumption. With a budget of TWD 51.5 billion, accounting for

83% of Taiwan's special budget dedicated to the Covid-19 response, the scheme spurred consumption of more than TWD 100 billion by 98.4% of eligible individuals, or over 23 million recipients. On average, each consumer spent TWD5785 or 92.8% more than the voucher's denomination, resulting in a very positive opinion of the program by the government (Ministry of Economic Affairs, Taiwan 2021). The program's economic impact was also notable, with estimates suggesting that it contributed 0.22% to real GDP growth (Hua et al. 2022).

Building on the success of the TSV, the Taiwanese government launched a successor program in 2021, the "quintuple stimulus voucher" (QSV) program, to deal with the economic downturn following Taiwan's partial lockdown in May 2021. With the previous experience, the government increased its contribution to TWD4000 per recipient, expecting further economic stimulation (Central News Agency 2021a, 2021b). The upfront payment was controversial and eventually abolished under pressure from the opposition KMT and the negotiation within the ruling DPP, hence becoming a de facto payout. The implementation of QSV was very similar to the precedent TSV; paper and electronic vouchers were available and with an expiry date, which the arrangement had proven to have a multiplier effect in boosting consumer spending in previous programs (Department of Information Services, Executive Yuan 2021; Liberty Times Net 2021).

Despite their universal coverage, both the TSV and QSV programs reflect Taiwan's continued adherence to a developmental welfare model. They represented instances of institutional layering, adding temporary and consumption-focused schemes onto the existing welfare system even amid the challenges posed by the pandemic. Their primary goal remained to stimulate private consumption, as evident in the use of time-limited vouchers rather than direct cash payments, underscoring the government's belief in boosting economic activity through increased spending. Moreover, the Taiwanese government has consistently emphasized economic growth as the key to addressing social issues, demonstrating strong continuity in its developmental welfare posture across crises. While Taiwan has expanded its social welfare system in some areas, such as healthcare and unemployment support, the productivist logic endures. Policy responses like the consumption vouchers have functioned as adaptive measures to shocks without fundamentally altering the developmental welfare framework that would expand the scope of welfare entitlements.

3.3 | Japan: The Constrained Welfare System

Japan's welfare policies have long been shaped by its developmentalist economic paradigm, where growth takes precedence over expansive social security programs. While limited expansion was observed during the 1990s and early 2000s, such as the introduction of the "Angel Plan" in 1994 to support families with children and the 1997 Long-Term Care Insurance Act for elderly care, those reforms were cautious and selective. Even after political crisis and electoral reforms, Japan has remained committed to neoliberal economic beliefs and the developmental welfare paradigm with a strong focus on stimulating the economy. Furthermore, the collapse of the bubble economy, subsequent financial crises (the AFC and GFC), and the disastrous 311 Earthquake in March 2011 have undermined the state's capacity in welfare reforms (Peng 2012; Takegawa 2013).

During the GFC, the Japanese government launched a series of economic stimulus packages that included welfare measures to cushion the effects of the global recession. Key initiatives included a one-off payment of JPY 12,000 to every individual (added to JPY 20,000 for those under 18 and over 65) as a form of layering. The government also expanded unemployment insurance and direct subsidies for companies to retain workers—examples of drift and conversion where existing schemes were adapted or repurposed to cope with policy challenges. In addition, the government introduced targeted initiatives such as credit support for SMEs, subsidies for childcare and education to households, and incentives for low-carbon-emission products (mainly home appliances and vehicles), aiming to address the immediate economic needs of individuals and households, while aligning with Japan's transition strategies toward a greener, more sustainable economy.

Still, it is apparent that Japan's welfare response during the GFC largely followed its developmentalist approach. The top concerns remained on economic revitalization through private-sector support rather than significant social welfare reform funded by the public sector (Takegawa 2005). While there were plans for pension reforms and increased resources for medical and long-term care services, they were hampered by Japan's constrained fiscal situation. Any increase in welfare spending would have required higher taxes, which the government feared could derail the broader economic recovery agenda in the wake of years of deflation (or near-zero inflation) (Katada 2013). As a result, post-GFC welfare measures were temporary, growth-oriented, and focused on revitalizing the economy rather than addressing the aging population or other structural challenges in the social security system.

The continuity of Japan's developmental welfare model was evident even when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) gained power in 2009, breaking the decades-long rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The DPJ campaigned on promises of welfare expansion but soon recognized the fiscal reality that was impossible to deliver without raising taxes, and would certainly backfire on its new regime. Thus, despite initial hopes for a shift in welfare policy, Japan continued to adhere to its economy-first approach, with social welfare programs viewed as supplementary measures to stimulate economic activities, rather than as a priority in government fiscal planning and decisions (Jennifer Sejin Oh 2013).

The Covid-19 pandemic posed new challenges to Japan's economy and social welfare system. Faced with extreme fiscal duress—marked by a substantial public debt burden of 237% of GDP and a persistent fiscal deficit—the government was initially reluctant to implement large-scale cash payouts. In response to the consequent economic recession, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced two rounds of stimulus packages in February and March 2020, primarily aimed at supporting businesses rather than individuals (Nikkei Asia 2020a). As the pandemic worsened, Abe declared a state of emergency on April

7, 2020, after postponing the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the sharp rise in infections across the country (Fujita and Nagumo 2020). As part of a broader economic stimulus package, the government initiated direct cash payments to affected groups, such as freelance workers and employees in hard-hit sectors like tourism and catering. However, the aid applicants must prove themselves by submitting documentation proving their loss of employment status and income, reflecting Japan's tendency to ensure targeted welfare support to specific groups (Miki 2020).

This closely circumscribed plan faced strong criticism from the public and even from Abe's own party (LDP), as well as from its ruling coalition partner, Komeito. Senior LDP figures, including Fumio Kishida, who later became Prime Minister, and the opposition counterparts insisted that the cash payout should be universal under such a national emergency (Asahi Shimbun 2020). In the face of mounting pressure, the government eventually agreed to amend its initial selective plan into a universal payment that every citizen, regardless of income, could apply for a JPY100,000 payment, marking a departure from the typical selective welfare response (Nikkei Asia 2020b). This Special Cash Payment program covered every resident registered in municipal resident records by April 27, 2020, and would cover foreigners with residence status of over 3 months. However, due to a lack of central coordination and the different handling capacities of municipal governments, less than 30% of households had received their payouts by early June, which was expected to commence in May 2020 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Japan 2020).

Nevertheless, the program, which cost JPY 12,880 billion, had a limited immediate impact on Japan's economy (Ando et al. 2020). While private spending saw a brief uptick following the payments, the effect lasted only 6 weeks, and Japan ended 2020 with a 4.8% contraction in real GDP. Disappointed by the weak stimulative effect, the government hesitated to implement another large-scale cash payout even though economic situations worsened in 2021 (Kobe Shimbun 2021). Instead, the Japanese government reverted to its established developmentalist approach, which aided specifically the vulnerable groups, such as single-parent households and those who experienced significant income loss, notwithstanding that the pandemic became protracted (Hamada 2020; Ishikawa 2021).

Only after facing strong political pressure did the newly elected Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agree to introduce another round of cash support, despite his own skepticism about the effectiveness of the payouts (Kyodo News 2021). In November 2021, the Kishida's government announced to offer JPY 100,000 for every child under 18 in households earning less than JPY 9.6 million annually (Nikkei Shimbun 2021). The program's limited scope and income restrictions underscore the government's ongoing reluctance to embrace more expansive universal welfare measures and could be seen as a concession of Kishida to his ruling partner Komeito, which had advocated for additional cash assistance during its campaign.

From the GFC to the Covid-19 pandemic, Japan's welfare responses reveal the continuity of its developmental welfare regime. Welfare reforms have remained constrained, in large part due to persistent concerns over the government's fiscal capacity—concerns that intensified following the GFC (Ando et al. 2020; Katada 2013). The Special Cash Payment program introduced during the pandemic represents an instance of layering, adding one-off initiative atop the existing welfare framework. Though exceptional in scale and coverage, it remained embedded within a broader economic stimulus strategy, reinforcing the government's growth-oriented policy approach. Rather than marking a structural shift, new instruments were introduced in response to the crisis while preserving the foundational principles of Japan's developmentalist welfare regime, reflecting the state's continued reluctance to institutionalize universal social protection beyond economic imperatives.

3.4 | South Korea: Welfare With Productivist Strings

South Korea (hereafter Korea) initiated social welfare reforms in the 1990s along with the democratization and the consequent prospering civil society and political competition, such as the introduction of employment insurance. However, these reforms provided limited benefits and were far from the universal claims made by the government. Facing the impact of the AFC in 1997, coupled with international financial institutions' pressure to limit welfare spending, the Kim Dae-jung administration introduced the concept of "productive welfare" in 1998 as a response to the dilemma. The strategy tried to balance economic development with limited social welfare reforms by linking the welfare benefits to employment and maintaining a cautious approach toward welfare expansion (Hwang 2012). Between 2001 and 2005, the slow economic growth had curbed the government's capacity for further social security expansion. In fact, Korea had the lowest social spending level among OECD countries, hence maintaining a high employment level was vital for the governments to manage the public's rising demand for expanding welfare delivery in the 2000s (Pirie 2016).

Korea's developmentalist posture became even more evident during the external shocks of the GFC to the economy. Korean policymakers perceived the domestic economy as fundamentally sound and viewed the crisis as an exogenous challenge. Rather than innovating new, large-scale, and general welfare programs, the government leveraged pre-existing schemes to buffer the economic impacts. The Employment Insurance Programme (introduced in 1995) was temporarily expanded to increase unemployment benefits, and the Minimum Living Standard Guarantee (introduced in 1997) was utilized to assist those affected by the crisis (Kwon et al. 2010). These actions illustrate drift and conversion, where existing programs were adjusted or repurposed to meet new policy demands.

The Korean government also implemented measures for specific vulnerable groups, such as Long-Term Care Insurance and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), both launched in 2008. The former created jobs and improved the elderly care services, and the latter offered cash supplements to low-income earners. These initiatives reflect

conversion, as social policy tools were designed not primarily for redistribution but to promote labor market participation and support economic recovery. While effective in mitigating hardship, these measures were embedded within a broader strategy that linked welfare provision to employment. The continued reliance on social insurance mechanisms, rather than direct public spending, reinforced the government's preference for a model of minimal welfare burden while fostering job creation and economic resilience.

Even as the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country, the Korean government's responses remained consistent with its developmentalist stance, and it was hesitant to expand welfare coverage considerably amid the emerging infectious cases. This was partly attributable to the country's moderate debt level (around 40% of GDP) and a fiscal deficit of −1.9%, which was expected to widen considerably due to expanded government spending in the pandemic. Accordingly, the Emergency Relief Payment, announced by the Moon Jae-in's government in March 2020, was aimed at supporting households affected by the pandemic. Initially, the scheme was designed to exclude the top 30% of income earners and involved eligibility testing, which was primarily determined by individuals' contributions to the National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) (Cha and Shin 2020). This reliance on employment-linked criteria implicitly reflected the government's emphasis on productive welfare.

Nevertheless, under the pressure from Moon's party, the Democratic Party, which had just won the general election of the National Assembly by campaigning for welfare expansion, the government adjusted the Emergency Relief Payment to include all households, regardless of income (Ministry of Health and Welfare, Korea 2020) in this emergency situation. The KRW12.2 trillion supplementary budget approved for the scheme allowed households to receive payouts based on their size: KRW400,000 for single-person households, KRW600,000 for two-person households, KRW800,000 for three-person households, and KRW1 million for households with four or more members (Ministry of Economy and Finance, Korea 2021b).

This marked a temporary shift toward more universal welfare coverage, though principally it was still designed to be selective and stimulate domestic consumption and economic activities, illustrating a layering approach where new policies were added alongside existing measures. Except for the 2.7 million lowest-income households, in which cash was transferred directly to their bank accounts, the majority of households would receive the payout in various cash-equivalent formats, such as prepaid municipal government cards, credit and debit card points, or gift vouchers. These forms of distribution were designed specifically to benefit SMEs within local communities. The vouchers would also expire by August 2020 to encourage immediate spending (Ministry of Interior and Safety, Korea 2020). Importantly, these vouchers could not be used at large franchised retailers, department stores, or online platforms, further reflecting the government's intention to target welfare spending as a tool for economic revitalization (M. Kim and Oh 2021). This approach clearly revealed the consistency of the developmentalist paradigm since the 1990s, which links welfare provision with broader economic objectives, as well as with employment and local economic growth.

As the pandemic continued, another round of large-scale relief was announced in June 2021, with more targeted, direct payments to individuals instead of households. Every citizen in the lower 80% of the income bracket would receive KRW250,000, and those in the lowest would receive additional KRW100,000, which involves approximately 3 million recipients (The Korea Times 2021), exemplifying policy drift as adjustments were made within the existing framework to better address emerging needs. A supplementary budget of KRW34.9 trillion was approved to back the scheme, and stipulated recipients to use by the end of the year (Ministry of Economy and Finance, Korea 2021a). The scheme's expiry date and the similar distribution channels were as its precedent (e.g., municipal vouchers and credit card points), underscoring the economic expectations through a welfare tool. Simultaneously, eligibility was largely determined through employment-linked NHIS premiums (Jung 2021), which also demonstrated the government's underlying continuity of employment-based welfare distribution, even as the scale of the crisis necessitated broader welfare measures.

From the GFC to the Covid-19 pandemic, Korea had been leveraging welfare policies as a mechanism to serve the broader strategies for economic stabilization and job creation. Following the GFC, the Korean government promoted the development of green industries and energy conservation technologies, which aimed at creating new job opportunities while reinforcing the social safety net through existing employment-based welfare (Guellec and Sacha 2009; Jung and Park 2011). These measures not only supported the manufacturing sector's resilience but also further linked welfare schemes with economic growth and industrial upgrading. Similarly, the “Korean New Deal,” launched in 2020 in response to the pandemic, intended to create jobs and facilitate the country's structural transition toward a future-oriented economy through digital transformation and promoting green industries, reflecting conversion by deploying economic policy tools for social purposes. The New Deal reinforced the government's commitment to productivist welfare that “minimise the economic shock by creating ... not only government-supported jobs for low-skilled workers, but also jobs that support the structural transition towards a digital and green economy” (Ministry of Economy and Finance, Korea 2020, 4).

Thus, during both the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic, South Korea's welfare policies continued to reflect a strong adherence to the developmental welfare paradigm. While instances of institutional drift (targeted aid) and conversion (the New Deal) occurred, they largely leveraged existing developmental policy frameworks to serve dual purposes: social relief and economic stimulus. Even when political and socioeconomic pressures prompted temporary expansions of welfare programs, these measures remained closely tied to employment and economic objectives, deviating little from the government's long-standing tradition. The conceptualization of welfare—as a means not only to mitigate social hardship but also to promote economic growth—represents a clear case of

policy conversion. This continuity highlights the enduring influence of South Korea's developmental welfare legacy, even in times of crisis.

4 | Concluding Discussion: Continuity of the Developmental Welfare Regime Across East Asia

4.1 | The Deep Commitment to Developmentalist Principles Amid Exogenous Shocks

The welfare responses of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea to both the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic reveal the states' deep commitment to their developmental welfare models with strong continuity, despite external pressures and domestic political demands for more inclusive welfare interventions during crisis times. By comparing their responses to both crises, some temporary deviations are noticeable, particularly those responding to the pandemic; however, the underlying developmentalist logic has remained largely intact.

As Table 1 illustrates, a common thread across all four cases is their primary focus on economic recovery and growth, responding to the crises with measures that were geared toward stimulating domestic consumption, bolstering employment, and supporting specific industries, rather than implementing a broad welfare expansion or structural changes to their welfare systems, during both the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Hong Kong, the temporary cash payouts were designed primarily to stimulate domestic consumption while maintaining the territory's longstanding commitment to fiscal conservatism and economic competitiveness. In Taiwan, the distribution of cash-equivalent vouchers served as an exceptional, short-term measure to boost private consumption and support economic recovery during periods of crisis. However, these interventions did not signal a broader shift toward welfare expansion. In both cases, social welfare provision remained anchored in earlier institutional frameworks—particularly in Taiwan, where the current welfare system was largely shaped in the 1990s and there was limited political appetite to expand welfare entitlements beyond these established boundaries. A similar pattern can be observed in South Korea, where social policy has remained closely aligned with a productivist welfare model promoted by the government since the 1990s, tying welfare provision to employment and economic growth rather than social entitlement. As a result, expansive or universal welfare reforms have been resisted, with welfare interventions largely justified through their contribution to productivity or labor market participation. This orientation was evident in Korea's policy responses to both crises, where fiscal stimuli were primarily channeled through job creation programs and temporary income support. Japan has adhered to its developmentalist welfare legacy and is constrained by high public debt burdens. In moments of crisis, Japan's welfare response has typically involved targeted, time-bound interventions that subsidize specific vulnerable groups, rather than introducing structural reforms.

Another notable similarity among the four economies was the retrenchment of welfare measures following the initial round of cash payouts, which reversed some of the relatively generous, near-universal provisions. In all four cases, subsequent rounds shifted back to more selective and targeted interventions. For example, Korea imposed income caps on its later payout schemes, Japan returned to targeted interventions, and Hong Kong reduced the size of its cash payouts with a policy agenda of stimulating specific sectors like fintech. Furthermore, the use of digital payment systems and vouchers with expiration dates (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea) highlights these governments' focus on economic stimulus and agendas (N. W. M. Wong and Ho 2022).

Despite these broad similarities, it should be noted that each economy approached welfare during the crises with its unique political and social contexts. South Korea and Taiwan demonstrated a more active approach to welfare reform during the 1990s and early 2000s, which shaped their crisis responses with more policy leeway. Taiwan's NHI and unemployment insurance systems, introduced before the crises, helped diffuse the pressures for large-scale welfare expansion during the pandemic. Korea's experience with welfare reforms in the wake of the AFC led to a more structured social safety net, allowing for targeted expansions of welfare without fundamentally altering the government's developmentalist agendas.

Japan's welfare to both crises was characterized (and in fact hampered by) a high degree of fiscal conservatism that resulted in targeted and selective welfare interventions, as evidenced in the return to targeted cash payout after the initial universal scheme. This conservative stance reflects Japan's ongoing concerns about its fiscal sustainability, compounded by decades of economic stagnation and a rapidly aging population (Katada 2013). Curiously, Hong Kong stands out as the most reluctant economy to engage in welfare expansion. The government's reluctance to broaden welfare coverage persisted through both crises. When cash payouts were introduced during the pandemic, they were framed as one-off interventions aimed at stimulating consumption. Even under different contexts, similar measures were promoted with similar beliefs.

4.2 | Adaptation as Partial Institutional Change With Strong Continuity

Driven by increasing economic openness and mounting political pressures, the productivist welfare models in East Asia have undergone variations and gradual evolution at the country level. Our findings indicate that political pressure was a key driver compelling states to respond to socioeconomic challenges by introducing new, albeit temporary, policy measures—some of which had no precedent. Even in Hong Kong and Japan, where governments operate within relatively low levels of political competition, authorities were compelled to adopt policies that diverged from long-standing traditions. This responsiveness highlights the adaptive nature of these welfare regimes in managing prolonged crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and suggests that such adaptations may evolve further as situations develop. While the introduction of universal cash payouts played a role in alleviating public anxiety, governments

remained cautious to ensure that these schemes did not become permanent fiscal commitments.

It is for such reasons that the gradual institutional change framework offers a valuable lens through which to understand the nature of welfare responses in East Asia during moments of crisis. The introduction of universal payments during the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, can be interpreted not as a break with developmental welfare logic, but as an extension of it through selective and temporary adaptation. As Kwon (2005) notes, Korea and Taiwan historically exemplified selective developmental welfare systems, largely oriented toward workers in strategic, growth-oriented sectors, and only expanded coverage incrementally under the external shock of the 1997 AFC. Similarly, the cash transfers implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic across the four cases took the form of crisis-induced, fiscally bounded interventions. Rather than signaling a shift toward universalism, these payments functioned as temporary stimulus instruments framed as necessary for national economic recovery. They were implemented as exceptional, one-off tools for boosting domestic consumption. In this sense, these measures preserved the primacy of growth-oriented and state-led developmental imperatives.

As Table 1 shows, among the mechanisms of institutional adaptation, layering emerged as the most prominent mode of change across all four cases and both crises. New elements, such as universal cash payments or consumption vouchers, were introduced without dismantling or changing the core institutional logic. This layering preserved the existing systems while allowing governments to demonstrate responsiveness in times of crisis. In Korea and Taiwan, for instance, temporary income transfers were layered atop selective systems originally designed for labor markets. In Japan and Hong Kong, crisis payouts were implemented as supplementary measures without institutionalizing new entitlements.

While layering was most prevalent, drift and conversion also played important roles. Drift occurred where pre-existing frameworks were left in place but gained new significance in the context of crisis, such as Taiwan's reliance on its 1990s welfare infrastructure to channel crisis benefits without expanding structural commitments. Conversion was evident in the repurposing of existing policy instruments for new economic functions. For instance, when employment subsidies or family allowances were reoriented toward stimulus or household liquidity goals during the crises.

Together, these modes of change enabled East Asian governments to temporarily extend social assistance while maintaining fidelity to their developmental welfare models. Importantly, there has been little evidence of displacement, where existing institutional arrangements were replaced outright. This underscores the adaptive resilience of the productivist welfare paradigm in the region. Even under extraordinary pressures, social policy interventions remain largely instrumental, provisional, and shaped by economic and fiscal imperatives rather than redistributive or rights-based commitments.

Hence, the cash payout schemes introduced across the four East Asian economies underscore the enduring influence of developmentalism. Welfare continues to be viewed by governments primarily as a means to an end—namely, economic growth—rather than as a goal in its own right. As Holliday (2005) aptly observed, welfare policies in the region have served to support economic recovery and growth, maintain social stability, and reinforce state legitimacy, rather than to advance social equity or redistribution as independent objectives. This reflects a strong path dependency, whereby past policies and institutional frameworks shape current policy choices, making fundamental reforms to welfare systems unlikely—even during moments of profound crisis. Our findings are consistent with recent social policy research suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic offered limited opportunities for substantive shifts in global welfare paradigms (Leisering 2021). In contrast to cash transfer programs in many developing countries, which have demonstrably contributed to reducing income inequality and improving socioeconomic outcomes (Bastagli et al. 2016), the cash payout schemes in East Asia were largely shaped by a pro-growth policy orientation and political pressures emerging from the pandemic crisis. Rather than representing a departure, these responses extended the developmentalist tradition already evident in the policy reactions to the GFC.

We acknowledge that this study focuses on cash payout schemes during the pandemic, which may not fully capture long-term welfare transformations. While our analysis offers valuable insights into how East Asian welfare states respond to crises and adapt within existing institutional frameworks, further research, such as process tracing studies or large-scale surveys on the usage and outcomes of cash transfers, is necessary to evaluate the effects of these initiatives. This could include longitudinal studies tracking post-2023 welfare measures, particularly to assess whether voucher or cash-transfer schemes become permanent fixtures within policy communities and test the durability of the policy adaptations we have identified. Public opinion surveys and in-depth interviews with policymakers and stakeholders could also complement our document-based approach by revealing how episodic payouts influence citizens' expectations of social rights and inform political debates on welfare expansion. Finally, comparative process-tracing across East Asia and beyond would further unpack the contextual conditions under which productivist regimes either entrench incremental adaptations or pivot toward more universal welfare commitments. Together, these avenues will deepen and triangulate our findings, advancing a more nuanced understanding of how developmentalist welfare logics evolve in response to crises.

Indeed, while there is a growing trend of cash transfer initiatives across the region, these remain primarily tied to economic, political, or targeted social relief purposes. For example, Hong Kong introduced similar consumption voucher schemes in 2022 and 2023, while Taiwan issued "universal tax refunds" in response to public criticism over surplus government revenues. Japan and Singapore have offered conditional payouts to assist vulnerable groups in coping with inflation, and South Korea has provided transfers to families with newborns to encourage fertility and to young people to promote savings. Whether these cash transfers will become institutionalized and influence broader welfare reforms remains an open question. For now, the developmentalist paradigm and the productivist welfare approach have stood still.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Statement

No human or animal research participants in this study.

Data Availability Statement

All data are collected in open sources or openly published materials, and they are properly cited in the bibliography of the manuscript.

Endnotes

[1] Octopus has been the city's most popular digital payment platform for transport and retail. AlipayHK and WeChat Pay HK were developed by Chinese IT giants, and Tap & Go was operated by a local telecom firm.

[2] In 2022 and 2023, the Consumption Voucher was issued again in a similar format. However, in the latest budget of 2024, the government rejected a proposal to issue it again due to the worsening government income.

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