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The provision of sign language interpretation in Asia

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Introduction

This paper offers an overview of sign language (SL) interpretation provision in 20 cities/countries in Asia, covering issues such as the availability of services, institutional support, and the challenges confronting the hearing and deaf interpreters. Our discussions are based on published studies, online information, questionnaire findings as well as individual interviews. Cities/countries covered in this paper include: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Macau, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.[1] Overall, these cities/countries vary a great deal in the quality and accessibility of SL interpretation. Our findings suggest that financial support and the active participation of governments in terms of promotion and legislation are pivotal in the provision of SL interpretation in Asia.

This paper is organized in the following way. The Overview presents previous studies on SL interpretation in Asia. This is followed by Critical Issues and Topic, which includes our methodology and findings of individual countries. In Emerging Debates, we discuss the challenges confronting Asian SL interpreters in general. In Conclusions and Future Directions, we summarize our findings, and point out several areas that call for further efforts and international collaborations for a better provision of SL interpretation services in the region. The final parts are the Questions for consideration, and a list of further reading.

Overview

Literature review

WASLI-Asia presented on its website a brief report on the SL interpretation situations in 19 cities/countries in Asia in 2015, with basic information such as the number of interpreters, the signed and spoken languages used, availability of SL interpretation training, relevant legislations, and the associations of SL interpreters. The information was contributed by the members of WASLI-Asia, which sufficiently showed the diverse stages of SL interpretation development in these places.

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Japan

Eiichi and Shin'ichi (2009) reported that by 2001, there were approximately 3,000 certified interpreters in Japan. Among these certified interpreters, however, only 16% worked full-time due to insufficient job opportunities. Shimotani (2015) compared the head nods produced by hearing monolingual Japanese speakers, native deaf signers, and the hearing JSL interpreters in narratives. She found that while deaf signers consistently used head nods as prosodic markers for intonational phrase boundaries in JSL, the head nods produced by hearing monolingual Japanese speakers were less consistent. Hearing non-native JSL interpreters, despite their high proficiency in signing, used head nods in a way that was closer to the patterns of the monolingual speakers. This finding provided evidence that spoken Japanese head nod behaviour affected the signing of JSL interpreters to a significant degree.

China

Xiao and Yu (2009) reported two surveys conducted in China, one on SL interpreters and one on the deaf community. The survey questions covered five areas: the profile of the interpreters, the features of the interpretation market, professional issues, interpreting difficulties and directionality, quality issues, and the role of the interpreters. Feedback was obtained from 106 interpreters and 259 deaf signers, and their data suggested that the vast majority (96.3%) of SL interpreters were special school teachers, and the remaining were employed by the associations for disabled or deaf persons. Less than half of these interpreters had received some form of training, and only about 20% received formal training. Most of the interpreters were not offered reasonable payments. Due to a shortage of interpreters, two-thirds of the deaf informants found it hard to look for an interpreter for their needs. For those who had access to interpretation services, nearly half were not satisfied with the interpreters' performance. In the face of these challenges, the authors called for concerted efforts from the stakeholders to improve the quality of SL interpretation in China and increase deaf signers' access to information.

Liu, Gu, Cheng, and Wei (2013) carried out a large-scale survey on sign language use in China with over 10,000 deaf signers (including adults and students) and around 2,700 hearing teachers working in special schools across different provinces. It found that while most deaf adults preferred using local sign languages, deaf students and hearing teachers used both local sign languages and Chinese Sign Language, the official sign language promoted and used by government bodies, education sectors, and TV broadcasting. In China, over 170 TV channels aired news and other programmes with SL interpretation. In their survey, over 90% of the deaf informants watched TV news with sign interpretation, yet less than 10% could understand it. Similar results were reported by Xiao and Li (2013) and Xiao, Chen, and Palmer (2015). Xiao and Li (2013) conducted a survey specifically on how Deaf signers in China received TV news interpreting, and most of their respondents reported difficulty in comprehending the interpreters.

To find out what contributes to the incomprehensibility of the news interpretation, Xiao et al. (2015) conducted an experiment with hearing and deaf individuals viewing the same set of TV news clips with SL interpretation. Although the deaf participants viewed the clips twice, they still scored unsatisfactorily in the comprehension test. Xiao et al. (2015) concluded that the interpreters' insufficient signing proficiency, lack of training, and the stressful interpreting environment in a media setting all contributed to the interpreters' sub-optimal performance.

Bangkok, Thailand

Torsuwan (2003) reported on the situation of deaf people and the SL interpretation in Bangkok and the vicinity. There were 11 organisations providing interpretation services to Deaf people. Among the 46 interpreters in the study, more than half were special school teachers. Most of the payments for interpreters were supported by the government, and nearly half of the interpreters and deaf signers were satisfied with the service provision. However, SL interpretation still fell short in relatively remote regions, and services were not always available in important places such as the airport. The study concluded with an urge for training up more interpreters to meet the communication needs of deaf signers over broader regions. Khumpoka (2007) attempted to develop an 'Electronic Sign Language Interpreter System' for translating English sentences into Thai Sign Language. The project included setting up a sign language dictionary database using the codes from the Hamburg Notation System, a search function and algorithms that help adding vocabularies and tense conversion. Machine translation techniques were employed to translate English into Thai signs, and animation was used for creating avatar signers for the translated Thai outputs.

Hong Kong

Fung (2016) investigated how Hong Kong Sign Language–Cantonese interpreters approach sentence structures which required different word orders. She specifically looked at modals, auxiliaries, and negators, which are pre-verbal in Cantonese but occur sentence-finally in Hong Kong Sign Language. She found that, when presented with these structures in Hong Kong Sign Language, the hearing interpreters adopted a range of strategies in their Cantonese outputs, including repairs, focus shift, topic-comment structure, quantifier adverbs, coordinators, and right dislocations.

As one can see from this literature review, only a few studies have been conducted on the provision of SL interpretation in Asia. Most of these studies reported insufficient interpreters, variability in the interpretation qualities, and limited access to such services. In the following sections, we will present the latest information on SL interpretation services in Asia.

Critical issues and topics

Methodology

Data collection

We invited hearing and deaf informants from 20 Asian countries to fill in an online questionnaire and participate in individual interviews with our researchers cum interpreters. The questionnaire consisted of a set of questions that solicited information on various aspects of SL interpretation:

- How many Deaf people are there in your city/country? How many of them use sign language?
- How many interpreters are there in your city/country?
- Please rate the availability of sign language interpretation services in the medical/educational/legal/religious/government and public affairs/community/conference settings in your city/country. What types of interpretation services are available (e.g., face-to-face, video relay service, etc.)?

- How many distinct sign languages are there in your city/country? What are the common spoken languages in your city/country? To what extent do sign language interpretation services cover all these sign/spoken languages?
- Is there any legislation in your city/country that supports sign language interpretation services?
- Are there Deaf interpreters in your city/country? How many? What are their roles in interpretation?
- Are there sign language interpretation organisations in your city/country?
- Is there any sign language interpretation research in your city/country? How much do you know about their research? To what extent does their research help you as a sign language interpreter?
- What is the role of the Deaf community in the development of sign language interpretation services in your city/country?

The individual interviews were conducted through Zoom by a deaf or hearing researcher experienced in interpretation at our research centre. During the interviews, the informants were asked for clarifications on the answers they provided in the online questionnaires, and their views on the issues and challenges they faced in their own cities/countries. Their sharing was recorded and analysed.

Participants

Table 28.1 shows the number of hearing and deaf informants participating in the questionnaires and interviews. In total there were 56 informants (20 deaf, 36 hearing) from 20 cities/countries. Most of them were SL interpreters. Most completed both the questionnaires and interviews, but some only participated in just one of them due to arrangement issues.

Findings

In this section, we will first present the factual information from the questionnaires and interviews, including the size of the deaf population, the number of interpreters, and the corresponding legislation in support of SL interpretation. Such data offer an overview of the current stages of development of the individual cities/countries. We will then briefly discuss the SL interpretation provision in individual Asian cities/countries. The last part presents the challenges confronting these places.

Factual information from the questionnaires and interviews

The information in Table 28.2 is based on the data provided by the participants, and the latest available information we found on the internet. Sometimes, the informants of the same cities/countries provided different figures. For these cases, we provide a range instead of an exact figure. In addition, we give priority to figures supported by official documents, such as census reports, academic papers, or newspaper articles. Sources of such information are provided in the endnotes whenever possible. Table 28.2 provides the demographic information of the deaf population and the number of interpreters.

As shown in Table 28.2, these cities/countries vary substantially in the numbers of SL interpreters. We do not know what the ideal ratio for SL interpreters and deaf people should be.[2] However, from our interviews and questionnaire findings, the informants from Japan, Macau, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea in general find the coverage of

Table 28.1 Deaf and hearing informants in this study

Cities/Countries	*Total no. of informants (56)*	*Online Questionnaires*		*Individual Interviews*	
		Hearing	*Deaf*	*Hearing*	*Deaf*
1. Bangladesh	1	1		1	
2. Bhutan	1	1		1	
3. Cambodia	3	3		2	
4. China	2	1	1	1	1
5. Hong Kong	4	2	2	2	2
6. Indonesia	3	2	1	1	1
7. Japan	4	2	1	2	1
8. Macau	3	2	1	2	1
9. Malaysia	3	2	1	2	
10. Mongolia	3	1	2	1	1
11. Myanmar	3			2	1
12. Nepal	4	4		4	
13. Pakistan	1	1		1	
15. Singapore	3	1	2	1	2
16. South Korea	3	1	2	1	2
17. Sri Lanka	4	2		2	2
18. Taiwan	3	1	2	1	1
19. Thailand	4		1	3	1
20. Philippines	1	1		1	
20. Vietnam	3	2	1	1	1

services (not necessarily the quality though) satisfactory. The ratio of interpreters and deaf people of these places ranged from 1:24 to 1:595. If this range represents the benchmark for 'sufficient' services in Asia, then apparently most of the remaining places suffer from an acute shortage of SL interpreters. In addition, out of these places, only 13 have legislation that supports the provision of SL interpretation for deaf people.

Brief descriptions of SL interpretation provision in individual Asian cities/countries

This section provides brief descriptions of the provision and accessibility of SL interpretation in individual Asian cities/countries.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, due to a lack of government funding and legislation support, deaf people have little to no access to interpretation services in the education, medical, and legal sectors (e.g., reporting or interrogation at the police stations, court cases) unless they pay themselves. Paid interpretation service can be sought from the Bangladesh Association of Sign Language Interpreters (BASLI).

According to the association, there are now around 30 interpreters in the entire country, most of whom provide freelance or volunteer services. The majority of these interpreters are special school teachers. Due to a lack of funding, there has been no increase in the number of interpreters in the past five years. SL interpretation is sometimes offered by volunteers in Muslim mosques, yet interpretation for other religions is not available.

Table 28.2 Deaf population and the number of interpreters in Asian countries

	Deaf population[1]	*No. of Deaf signers*	*No. of hearing interpreters*	*No. of deaf interpreters*	*Legislation that recognises the communication needs of deaf people*[2]
1. Bangladesh	1,600.000	1,280,000[3]	30	0	No
2. Bhutan	20,752[4]	No data	0[5]	0	No
3. Cambodia	61,000	4,000[6]	<20	10	No
4. China	20,540,000[7]	No data	~200[8]	7	Regulation on the Construction of Barrier-Free Environment (2012)[9]
5. Hong Kong	155,200[10]	3,900	66 (on list), 100+ (not on list)[11]	<10	No
6. Indonesia	3,024,271[12]	No data	102 – 200	33[13]	The Law No.8/2016[14]
7. Japan	297,000[15]	20,000	Nationally certified SL interpreters: 3,832[16] Prefectural district certified SL interpreters: 8,093[17] Employed interpreters: 2069[18]	Certified deaf interpreters: 1 Deaf Relay interpreters: 5 Deaf interpreters: 5[19]	As of Dec 2010, 373 sign language ordinances have been established in different prefectures and cities.[20] Act on Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons. Act No. 283 of 1949. Act on the Comprehensive Support for the Daily and Social Life of Persons with Disabilities. Law number: Act No. 123 of 2006, revised in 2013.
8. Macau	3,495[21]	200–300	17–20	<3	(1) Article 29 and 30 of Civil Registration Code of Decree No. 59/99M. (2) Article 89 and 91 of the Civil Procedure Code of Decree no. 55/99M. (3) Article 82 and 83 of the Criminal Procedure Code of Decree No. 48/96/M[22]
9. Malaysia	34,447[23]	No data	50–200	5–10	Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, Laws Of Malaysia Reprint Act 685 Persons With Disabilities Act 2008 as at 1 October 2018.[24]
10. Mongolia	8,696[25]	No data	~15	Deaf: 10 Hard of hearing: 3	The Law of Mongolia On Human Rights of Person with Disabilities 2016[26]
11. Myanmar	1,224,000[27]	No data	9	No[28]	The Rights of the Persons with Disabilities Law (2015)[29]
12. Nepal	79,307 (deaf/hh) 9,436 (deaf-blind)[30]	No data	20–40	1–3	The Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2074 (2017)[31]

(*continued*)

Table 28.2 Cont.

	Deaf population[1]	*No. of Deaf signers*	*No. of hearing interpreters*	*No. of deaf interpreters*	*Legislation that recognises the communication needs of deaf people*[2]
13. Pakistan	10,200,000	No data	30	0[32]	The Sindh Empowerment of 'Persons with Disabilities' Act 2018 The Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, No II of 2017 Various Policies including the Accessibility Code 2006.[33]
14. Singapore	6,969[34]	~2,000[35]	26–50	> 5[36]	No
15. South Korea	377,094[37]	~226,000[38]	1,817	769	1. Anti-Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act[39] 2. The Act of Welfare of Persons with Disabilities.[40] 3. Korean Sign Language Act[41]
16. Sri Lanka	~400,000	~350,000	8 hired by government 7 hired by the Central Federation of the Deaf[42]	A handful	No[43]
17. Taiwan	124,485[44]	80,000	465 (category C); 52 (category B)[45]	27[46]	People with Disabilities Rights Protection Act (Article 61) and a list of legislations that stipulate the provision of sign language interpretations in different situations.[47]
18. Thailand	391,785[48]	No data	552 (as of 2018)[49]	Deaf interpreters (99), Hard of hearing interpreters (8)	Sign Language Interpreting Service Law[50]
19. Philippines	186,000	No data	~200	No data	The Filipino Sign Language Act[51]
20. Vietnam	2,500.000[52]	No data	10–30	Yes, but no data	No

1 'The deaf population' includes all people who have hearing loss of a varying degree. This is usually the kind of overall figures reported in census. For some cities/countries, the census figures provide further sub-divisions. For example, the national census of Bhutan classifies deaf people as 'completely deaf', 'a lot of hearing difficulty' and 'some difficulty'. The census of Macau uses four degrees of 'hearing disability', including mild, medium, severe, and extremely severe. The census of Hong Kong groups deaf people by whether hearing aids are used. Since these labels vary from place to place, we chose to report the overall figures only, and listed out the number of deaf signers if such figure is available from the informants.

2 Some of these legislation only recognises the need to support the communication of deaf people, and does not necessarily recognise that sign interpretation is a human right for deaf people.

3 Our hearing Bangladesh informant said around 80% of the deaf population use sign language.

4 In the 2017 census report of Bhutan (www.nsb.gov.bt/publication/files/PHCB2017_national.pdf), the numbers of people with 'some hearing difficulty', 'a lot of hearing difficulty' and 'cannot hear at all' were 15,758, 3650 and 1,344 respectively. We list the sum of these three figures (i.e., 20,752) in Table 28.2.

5 According to our Bhutan informant, around seven teachers from the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf provide interpretation for deaf people who are the current students, graduates or staff members of the school. These special school teachers also provide news interpretation on the national channel once a week. During the interview, our informant emphasised several times that they are not interpreters per se, and they cannot interpret for other deaf people not related to their school. Hence, we put down 'zero' for the number of hearing interpreters in Table 28.2 for Bhutan.

6 These 4,000 deaf signers are those who graduated from the two-year adult programme, the Deaf Development Program (DDP), and from Krousar Thmey, which is a K-12 deaf school based in Phnom Penh. Deaf people who do not have access to these two education institutes are mostly illiterate home-signers scattered across the country. They are less likely to use a full-fledged sign language as their primary means of communication.

7 This is the figure for deaf population in China in 2010 according to the China Disabled Person's Federation (www.cdpf.org.cn/sjzx/cjrgk/201206/t20120626_387581.shtml). This information was provided by the informants and we could not find more updated statistics.

8 Our informant found around 200 serving SL interpreters in China in her own survey. However, according to a news article released in March 2019, there are 2,000+ SL interpreters. We speculate that '2,000+' is the total number of students that have graduated from SL interpreting programmes over the years, and this does not represent the number of interpreters who are actively providing the services at the moment. According to this article, among these 2,000+ interpreters, only around 20 are proficient sign language interpreters recognised and trusted by the Deaf communities across China. In addition, most of them are part-time interpreters (www.cndcm.cn/html/hot/news/14513_1.html).

9 Information of this Regulation can be found here: www.gov.cn/zhengce/2012-07/10/content_2602605.htm.

10 The data on the deaf population and the number of deaf signers came from the 2014 census report released from the HK Government (HK Government 2014).

11 Hong Kong does not have an assessment and certification system for SL interpreters yet. The Hong Kong Council of Social Service has a website for sign language interpreters, full-time or part-time, to list their qualification, expertise, and contact information. To list their names on the website, interpreters need to provide proof (e.g., letters or records from employers) that they have provided at least 200 hours of sign language interpretation in the past two years. As of August 2020, there are 66 hearing interpreters on the list. However, there are 100+ interpreters who, for a variety of reasons, prefer not to list their personal information on this website (www.hkcss.org.hk/upload/reh/20200805_SL%20Interpreter%20List%20(Full).pdf).

12 According to the census data of Indonesia in 2010 (https://sp2010.bps.go.id/index.php/site/tabel?tid=275&wid=0), there were 2,568, 224 people with some degree of difficulty in listening, while 456,047 people had severe difficulty. We added up these two figures to come up with the total number of deaf people.

13 The Centre of Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter Service (Pusat Layanan Juru Bahasa Isyarat, PLJ) carried out a country-wide survey in 2019. It found that there were 102 hearing interpreters in 15 provinces (out of 34 in total), and 33 deaf interpreters in 11 provinces in Indonesia.

14 In April 2016, the Indonesian government passed Law No.8/2016 that contains provisions in line with the country's commitment stipulated under CRPD. Under the Article 9, 'Accessibility', it is stated that actions will be taken to 'ensure that accessibility is in place in various aspects such as infrastructure, transportation, as well as information and communication'. By early 2020, there has not been any concrete measures or regulations to support sign interpretation in the country yet. The information can be found in a document entitled 'First report of the Republic of Indonesia on the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', which can be accessed via https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRPD/Shared%20Documents/IDN/INT_CRPD_ICO_IDN_27065_E.doc.

15 The data on the deaf population and the number of deaf signers in Japan came from a report released in 2018 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW 2018).

16 This figure of nationally certified SL interpreters in Japan came from the Information and Culture Centre for the Deaf. Their website has a sign language interpretation list (手話通訳士名簿) (latest update on 31 October 2020) (www.jyoubun-center.or.jp/slit/list/). Interpreters of this category have passed the national exam, known as The Sign Language Interpreter Certificate Examination (SLICE) ('手話通訳士' Syuwa-tuuyaku-si). This examination started in 1989 by this centre.

17 The number of qualified SL interpreters came from an online PowerPoint document entitled 'About communication support under comprehensive support law for persons with disabilities' (障害者総合支援法に置け得る意思疎通支援等について) released by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2015. (www.jfd.or.jp/iaf/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/7d0f5f63a89bee6a88f48f23ed39e4c2.pdf). This prefectural-level examination began in 1970s. Originally each prefecture had its own examination. In 2001, the National Centre of Sign Language Education set up a unified examination, which has been adopted by more and more prefectures (see the NCSLE website; www.com-sagano.com/about/hojin/igi).

18 The number of employed sign language interpreters in Japan is based on a report on the employment status of interpreters released by the National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation (Zentsuken) (www.zentsuken.net/data/pdf/research_20200306_1.pdf).

Table 28.2 Cont.

19 In general, deaf interpreters are not yet allowed to sit in the national-level and prefectural-level examination in Japan. At present, the Okinawa Prefecture and the Edogawa City are the only two local governments in Japan that allow registration of certified deaf interpreters (CDIs) and deaf relay interpreters (DRIs).
20 Information of sign language ordinances in Japan can be found in the website of Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD): www.jfd.or.jp/sgh/joreimap.
21 The data on the deaf population size is based on the government record of disability assessment registration certificates released in September 2020. The document can be accessed at: www.ias.gov.mo/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/2020-10-12_181648_60.pdf.
22 These laws in Macau can be found at (1) https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/99/42/codregcivcn/codregciv001.asp#a29; (2) https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/99/40/codprocivcn/codprociv0001.asp#l2; and (3) https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/96/36/codpropencn/codpropen0001.asp#l2a75
23 The deaf population figure in Malaysia is based on the Social Statistics Bulletin Malaysia 2018. According to this website, the registered Person with Disabilities (PWD) at the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia in 2017 were 453,258 persons, of which 7.6% had hearing impairment. (www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=152&bul_id=NU5hZTRkOSs0RVZwRytTRE5zSitLUT09&menu_id=U3VPMldoYUxzVzFaYmNkWXZteGduZz09)
24 The document of this Malaysian law can be accessed at: www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%20685.pdf.
25 The 2020 Mongolian census data can be found at www.1212.mn/BookLibraryDownload.ashx?url=Census2020-Main-report.pdf&ln=Mn.
26 The Law of Mongolia on Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be found at: https://dredf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Law-of-Mongolia-on-Human-Rights-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-02-05-16.pdf.
27 According to the 2019 government census report in Myanmar, the total population stood at 51.1 million, and about 2.4% have hearing disability. Hence the estimated deaf population is 1,226,400. (www.dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/ics_key_finding_en.pdf)
28 A handful of deaf signers in Myanmar may occasionally serve as interpreters in events in which foreign deaf guests participate. However, they have not received any formal training. Four to five deaf signers team up with hearing interpreters in a Catholic church.
29 The unofficial English translation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Law (2015) in Myanmar can be found at the following website: www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_isn=100494.
30 The figures of the deaf and deaf-blind persons in Nepal are based on the 2011 national census data (https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Details?tpid=5&dcid=1df4a80b-a520-4c62-ad49-4ae5e2acb33f&tfsid=1).
31 The Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be found at: www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Act-Relating-to-Rights-of-Persons-with-Disabilities-2074-2017.pdf).
32 Although there are no trained deaf interpreters in Pakistan yet, some deaf leaders in the community serve the role of a mediator when some deaf signers use a variety of sign languages the hearing interpreters do not know.
33 Further information of laws in Pakistan related to disabilities can be found in https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/pakistan-and-disability-law-the-dawn-of-a-more-inclusive-society/.
34 This figure is the number of deaf clients registered at the Singapore Association for the Deaf. The annual report of 2019/20 can be reached at: https://sadeaf.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/SADeaf-Annual-Report-2019-2020-31-August-2020.pdf.
35 According to the website of the Singapore Association for the Deaf, about one-third of their registered clients know sign language (https://sadeaf.org.sg/faq-on-sadeaf-and-about-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing/faq-on-number-of-deaf-in-singapore/)
36 One of our informants said she personally knows five deaf interpreters, but there should be more. However, there are no published data on their total number.
37 This figure is based on 2019 data released by Ministry of Health and Welfare of South Korea (https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=117&tblId=DT_11761_N001&conn_path=I2).
38 According to one of our informants, their survey suggested that around 60% of deaf people in South Korea knew sign language.
39 Information of the Anti-Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act can be found at: www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=91249&p_country=KOR&p_count=145.
40 Information on the Act of Welfare of Persons with Disabilities can be found at: www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Korea-Republic-of_The-Welfare-Law-for-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf.

41 Information on the Korean Sign Language Act (2016) can be found at: www.law.go.kr/LSW/eng/engLsSc.do?menuId=2&section=lawNm&query=sign+language&x=0&y=0#liBgcolor1

42 Among the eight sign language interpreters in the Sri Lankan government, six work for the Department of Social Services and two are registered at the Ministry of Justice. The Sri Lankan Central Federation of the Deaf hires seven full-time interpreters: two in Colombo, one in Matara, one in Kandy, one in Kurunegala, one in eastern Tamil, and one in Gampaha.

43 In January 2021, the Sri Lankan Cabinet approved to make sign language a recognised means of communication. This will pave the way for the introduction of further legislation that support sign language interpretation in the future (www.dtnext.in/News/World/2021/01/19153224/1272033/SL-to-make-sign-language-recognised-means-of-communication.vpf).

44 This deaf population figure is based on 2019 census data of Taiwan (https://dep.mohw.gov.tw/DOS/cp-2976-13815-113.html).

45 In Taiwan, hearing sign language interpreters are certified at two levels: Level B and Level C. There is Level A as well but according to our informants no one has reached this level yet and we could not find any relevant information of this level. Level C interpreters handle interpretation tasks related to daily activities. Level B interpreters can interpret in professional domains such as education, legal matters, and public affairs. The 2020 data can be found at: http://taslifamily.org/?page_id=1471).

46 The Taiwan Association of Sign Language Interpreters offered two rounds of training courses for deaf interpreters in 2018 and 2019 (http://taslifamily.org/?page_id=4791). A total of 27 deaf signers participated. However, it is unknown how many of them are actively engaging in interpretation work.

47 A detailed list of legislations related to sign language interpretation can be found in the website of the Taiwanese Association of Sign Language Interpreters (http://taslifamily.org/?p=5016).

48 The information on deaf population in Thailand in 2020 came from a census document released by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Thailand (http://dep.go.th/images/uploads/files/situation31dec6 3.pdf).

49 The numbers of the three types of interpreters in Thailand were provided by our informant, and a web-based news article confirmed the total number (https://thaiedunews.net/dep-9/).

50 The Thai version of this law can be found at: http://web1.dep.go.th/sites/default/files/files/law/*ระเบียบฯ*%20*ว่าด้วยบริการล่ามภาษามือ*%20*พ.ศ.*%202561.PDF.

51 The Filipino Sign Language Act 2018 covers the information accessibility issues of deaf people, but details on the implementation of the act are not yet available (www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2018/10oct/20181030-RA-11106-RRD.pdf).

52 The deaf population figure is estimated by two of the Vietnamese informants. The 2019 Census report in Vietnam does not contain keywords such as 'deaf', 'hearing-impaired', 'hearing' or 'disability'. It is quite likely that the category of 'disability' was not a matter of concern when the Vietnamese government conducted the census. (www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2020/11/completed-results-of-the-2019-viet-nam-population-and-housing-census/).

Bhutan

In Bhutan, there are no professional SL interpreters. A handful of hearing teachers at the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, the only school in Bhutan that caters for the education needs of deaf people, provide interpretation for the institute's deaf staff and students. In addition, their services are only available in Paro (where the school is located) and Thimphu (a nearby city). As these teachers are not SL interpreters per se, they do not offer services to deaf signers outside their school.

Since the International Week for the Deaf in 2019, the teachers have been required by the government to provide SL interpretation for the news programme in the national TV channel once a week. These teachers sometimes receive informal training from volunteer experts from Thailand and Australia. In general, there is no interpretation service for deaf people in education, medical, and legal settings. Deaf people need to resort to writing, gestures, or their family members for communication assistance.

Cambodia

In Cambodia, deaf education programmes are offered by two organisations in Phnom Penh: the Deaf Development Programme (DDP) and the National Institute for Special Education (NISE). The DDP offers a two-year basic education programme for deaf adults above 16 years of age and uses Cambodian Sign Language as the medium of instruction. The NISE—mostly composed of former staff members of Krousar Thmey—is a newly created department under the Ministry of Education that is in charge of technical aspects related to education for deaf children. Krousar Thmey is jointly working with the DDP to support the Sign Language Committee under the NISE to research and develop an official Cambodian Sign Language. The Ministry of Education, through five K-12 special schools transferred by Krousar Thmey, offers general education for age-appropriate deaf children. The DDP and NISE offer free interpretation services to deaf people, and send their staff to interpret TV news on different channels in Phnom Penh. Due to dwindling funding, the DDP is considering moving towards a pay-for-service model, or handing over their interpretation services to the NISE in the future. Overall, the interpretation services provided still fall short of the demands in the community, and there is basically no service coverage outside of Phnom Penh. The prime minister frequently promotes the use of sign language interpreters in his speeches but there is not yet any official government policy or requirements for the use of interpreters.

China

Although there is a fairly large number of interpreters in China, they mostly work in large cities, with some smaller cities or rural areas having little service coverage. When deaf people need interpretation services, they can contact the China Disabled Person's Federation (CDPF), other deaf organisations, or their family members and friends who know sign language. When government bodies, private companies, and business units request SL services, they usually pay the interpretation fees. In some cases, these organisations do not have a budget and need to look for volunteer interpreters.

Occasionally, courts and police stations ask deaf people to look for their own interpreters, which means the cost will be borne by the deaf signers. Most sign language interpreters serving in hospitals are volunteers, who may receive a subsidy from CDPF. In some cities, outpatient services with sign language interpretation are available for specific time slots in a week (e.g., one afternoon/week) and require advance booking. In case of medical emergency, it may be difficult for deaf signers to look for SL interpreters. If deaf

people need interpretation for their own personal matters, they need to bear the interpretation costs.

In Shanghai, there are now a handful of private companies offering on-site interpretation and video relay services. TV news interpretation is offered on the national channel and a large number of local TV channels, but their quality has been criticised, as pointed out by some previous studies. Government support for interpretation varies from province to province, and there are no standards for sign interpretation fees.

Hong Kong

Deaf people in Hong Kong can apply for free interpretation services from several government-funded organisations that hire full-time sign language interpreters (e.g., Hong Kong Society for the Deaf, Hong Kong Association of the Deaf, Silence, YMCA, etc.). However, advance booking is required and the service provision depends on the availability of the interpreters. It is almost impossible to request long-term, recurrent interpretation support for educational settings (e.g., post-secondary programmes).

In those cases, deaf individuals need to negotiate with the educational institutes to see if the latter agree to support the interpretation and note-taking costs partially or in full. It is not uncommon to see deaf students paying for their own interpretation when pursuing tertiary education. Paid interpretation services are available in SLCO Community Resources, a social enterprise recently set up by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Government-funded SL interpretations are available in courts, police stations, public hospitals, TV news, press conferences, and some of the meetings in the Legislative Council. However, emergency services (e.g., for urgent medical needs) are not always available. Some Protestant and Catholic churches provide volunteer sign language interpretations during their gatherings.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, deaf signers can request interpretation services from the Centre of Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter Service (Pusat Layanan Juru Bahasa Isyarat, PLJ) (www.plj.web.id/), which is run by deaf people under the Indonesian Association of the Welfare of the Deaf (IAWD). PLJ provides 24-hour services across the country, and at present it has 16 hearing interpreters and 4 deaf interpreters.

The major source of income of PLJ is providing sign interpretation on TV channels (with deaf-hearing term interpreting), and PLJ allocates the resources to support free or paid interpretation to deaf individuals depending on the latter's financial situations. Deaf people residing in Jakarta may also seek services from the Indonesian Sign Language Interpreters (http://inasli-jakarta.org/#layanan).

The courts and the police usually pay the SL interpretation fees. For conferences or public events, the event organisers or government units are willing to bear the interpretation costs. Access to interpretation services in education settings remains limited, though several universities have started to offer notetaking and SL interpretation services to their deaf students. Among the several religions in Indonesia, only Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims offer sign language interpretation for deaf people.

Japan

In Japan, deaf people can get free interpretation services for their daily needs (e.g., medical appointments) from the local community offices. These offices can fulfil most interpretation requests. They are fully funded by the government. Deaf people who

want more professional interpretation hire freelance interpreters. In recent years, more and more organisers of events, conferences, etc. are willing to pay for sign language interpretation.

At present, there are laws mandating the national and local governments to train and provide sign language interpreters, but this is mostly for communication support in daily life situations. Legal support for deaf people to receive interpretation in higher education and the workplace is still lacking. For legal matters, the courts have their own registry of interpreters and the service is not provided through local community offices.

Macau

Sign interpretation in Macau is mainly offered by the Macau Deaf Association and the Macau Association of the Hearing Impaired. Both organisations hire full-time interpreters with funding from the government, and the services are free. These services cover nearly all aspects of deaf people's daily needs, including 24-hour emergency calls for medical and legal matters.

Both in-person interpretation and VRS services are available, but the deaf clients cannot always choose their preferred interpreters. Accessibility to interpretation in education settings is gradually improving as well. Government departments and event organisers are now aware of the needs of SL interpreting and are willing to cover the interpretation costs. There is sign interpretation in daily TV news and emergency announcements (e.g., updates on typhoons).

Malaysia

In Malaysia, SL interpretation is provided by organisations such as the Malaysian Federation of the Deaf, Pusat Majudiri 'Y' for the Deaf of YMCA, RC Deaf Missions Malaysia, Society of Interpreters for the Deaf in Selangor and Wilayah Persekutuan, religious groups, Interpreters and Translators Association for Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Deaf Community (JUPEBIM), and other deaf-related NGOs. Due to a lack of government funding, deaf individuals need to pay for the interpretation services, or look for family members, friends, or volunteers for communication assistance. Most of the interpreters have not received any formal training, and very few of them work full-time.

In recent years, there has been growing awareness in the government towards deaf people's right of access to information. SL interpretation is now officially funded in public domains such as TV news, emergency announcements, parliament meetings, public activities, and court proceedings. However, there are still a lot of gaps at the community level. In the education sector, for example, only a few tertiary institutes are willing to provide interpretation support for their deaf students, and this needs to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

In order to support deaf individuals who cannot afford interpretation fees, RC Deaf Missions set up a project known as 'The Signing Angels Fraternity' in 2017, which aims at training hearing people to become volunteer sign language communication supporters.

Mongolia

Deaf people can contact the Mongolian Association of Sign Language Interpreters, funded by the government, for free services. It is also common for deaf people to seek help from family members, friends, or other freelance interpreters for better interpretation

and communication. There is only one deaf school in Mongolia. Some hard-of-hearing students are mainstreamed without sign language interpretation support. Sign interpretation is available in one university and two vocational training centres.

The government provides funding for interpretation services in courts, daily TV news, public announcements, and some important meetings. Nowadays, more and more international organisations and NGOs understand the needs of deaf people and have budgets for interpretation. However, access to interpretation in hospitals and police stations remains limited. Deaf–hearing team interpretation has become more common these days and this practice is very much welcomed by the Deaf community.

Myanmar

When deaf people need interpretation help, for example, for medical appointments, they need to contact the Social Welfare Department. If interpretation services can be arranged, the service is free. The interpretation is either face-to-face or using video relay services. For the latter, the quality may be affected by the unstable internet connection. Due to the shortage of SL interpreters (only three interpreters are hired by the government), it is difficult for deaf people to have access to interpretation services. The government also arranges SL interpretation in courts and police stations. If deaf people look for interpreters themselves, they need to bear the service fees. However, at present, SL interpretation is only available in Yangon. There are three other hearing interpreters working for TV news interpretation in Nyypidaw, the capital city.

Apart from Yangon, Mandalay is another city in Myanmar with a relatively large cluster of deaf population because of the Mandalay School for the Deaf there, which was founded in 1960s. However, currently there is no full-time sign language interpreter in Mandalay. If any deaf people need interpretation support, they need to seek help from the teachers of the deaf.

Across Myanmar, there is no sign language interpretation for mainstreamed deaf students at all academic levels. SL interpretation is available in at least one Catholic church (hearing interpreters teaming up with four to five deaf signers) because many Deaf people graduated from Catholic schools and learned about the Bible. Some of them continue to attend church gatherings after graduation. Overall, there is very little access to SL interpretation for deaf people in Myanmar.

Nepal

There is limited funding from the government to support SL interpretation for hospitals, school, and legal settings in Nepal. Deaf people in need of communication assistance hire SL interpreters, or seek help from friends, family members, or volunteer interpreters. Paid SL interpretation is provided by freelance interpreters and several organisations (e.g., The National Association of the Deaf & Hard of Hearing (NADH), National Federation of the Disabled Nepal (NFDN), National Federation of the Deaf Nepal (NDFN)(an umbrella organisation for deaf people in Nepal), National Association of Sign Language Interpreter Nepal (NASLI)).

There are not sufficient interpreters, particularly in some rural provinces. Most deaf people cannot afford the interpretation costs. Recently the government has started to fund SL interpretation on daily TV news and emergency announcements. To date, no deaf person has successfully applied for interpretation for university education from the government. Most deaf people hire their own interpreters when going to college.

In Kathmandu there are more than ten interpreters, but in some provinces there is hardly even one. Some courts in the cities began to hire SL interpreters. The Deaf community is now advocating strongly for sign interpretation in courts. Their initial goal is to fight for legal interpretation in 15 out of 77 districts in Nepal.

Pakistan

At present, there is no government-funded interpretation services for deaf people in Pakistan. Deaf people are expected to pay the interpreters but this is difficult as most of them do not have stable jobs. The federal government has begun to look into disability rights, including provision of interpretation services for deaf people. Video relay service has just been introduced at the time of writing. There is little provision of interpretation in educational and medical settings. The University of Management and Technology is the only university that offers a four-year degree for deaf people, with interpretation support.

The government is now trying to build up a list of interpreters who can serve in courts, though the courts do not always bear the interpretation costs. A lot of religious groups have dedicated interpreters though. Deaf-led organisations such as Media Deaf Interpreter and Danish Kadah are now advocating for interpretation services in the country.

Most sign language interpreters are part-time freelance interpreters who are CODAs, family members of deaf people, or special school teachers. In 2017, 'ConnectHear' was established by a CODA to promote SL learning and nurture potential interpreters. Since its establishment, several more sign interpreting organisations have been set up. An increasing number of hearing students in special education programmes are learning sign language to open up more career options for themselves.

Singapore

In Singapore, deaf people registered at the Singapore Association for the Deaf are entitled to 20 sessions (up to four hours/session, at most two sessions per day) of free SL interpretation per year. Services beyond the 20 free sessions are chargeable. Advance booking is required, and the availability of the service depends on the schedule of the full-time interpreters. If the interpreters are fully-booked, the association will dispatch community interpreters.[3] It is hard to look for interpreters after office hours. For deaf students attending publicly funded Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL), the institutes can make use of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) fund to support some of the SL interpretation sessions. For deaf students studying in private universities, however, they need to hire their own interpreters. TV news interpretation is only provided occasionally for emergency announcements. Deaf people need to arrange their own interpretation for medical appointments as interpretation is not available in hospitals.

The courts and police stations usually provide SI interpretation but there have been cases in which the deaf clients went through legal procedures without any interpretation support. Recently, a social enterprise called 'Equal Dreams' was established. It has started a small-scale mentoring programme for SL interpreters to help improve their skills. Some religious organisations have their own team of volunteer interpreters for their gatherings.

South Korea

Deaf people in South Korea can get SL interpretation services from the 240+ sign language interpretation centres across the country.[4] Services offered at these centres are free of charge as they are funded by the government, but deaf people may also hire interpreters out of their own pockets. Public institutions or private organisations can request services

from these centres as well. These centres hire hearing and deaf interpreters to provide services.[5] Sign interpretation is provided to support deaf students who study in mainstream schools.

The hearing and deaf interpreters are paid on the same pay scale, and there are increments basing on their working experience. Interpreters are regarded as well-paid jobs in South Korea. If deaf signers are not satisfied with the interpretation service, they can file a complaint to the sign language centre, which will conduct an investigation to see if the interpreter in question has violated the code of ethics. In the event of a violation, the interpreter may receive a warning or may lose their licence.

In court hearings, it is quite common to see deaf and hearing interpreters teaming up to help the deaf clients to ensure the accuracy of interpretation. The interpretation training includes knowledge of special domains (e.g., legal interpreting). Hospitals in bigger cities hire their own interpreters rather than requesting services from the sign language interpretation centres.

It is estimated that there are 2,000 deaf-blind people in South Korea. Efforts are now being made to advocate for the certification of tactile interpreters.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, access to sign language interpretation services is very limited. Deaf people can apply for free interpretation services from the six SL interpreters of the Department of Social Services, who serve the entire country and also interpret for the daily TV news. Requests need to be made in advance, and bookings are difficult to make as there is a huge demand. Deaf people can also seek help from the Sri Lankan Central Federation of the Deaf, which hires seven interpreters in six different cities.

The federation relies mostly on funding from foreign charity organisations, and whether payment for interpretation is needed depends on the financial situation of the deaf applicants. There are also a few volunteer interpreters. The federation has recently started to provide video relay services, especially for cities not served by any interpreters.

In general, it is easier to get interpretation services in the western provinces where major cities are located. Service coverage is much worse in the eastern and northern areas. Most of the skilled interpreters have deaf family members or work in special schools. Given the shortage of services, most deaf people rely on family members and friends for communication assistance.

The government has recently recognised Sri Lankan Sign Language as a means of communication for deaf people. This positive move is expected to bring some changes in the near future.

Taiwan

The Taiwan government sponsors all sign language interpretation services in the public domains, including education, legal, and medical settings. The services are provided by local government offices and organisations.[6] Deaf people need to submit their applications at least 20 hours in advance, but 24/7 emergency interpretation for hospitals and police stations is always available. Deaf people only need to pay interpretation fees for personal matters (e.g., attending a privately run yoga class or religious activities.

The government provides funding for interpretation training and job opportunities for the SL interpreters. Government statistics show that medical interpretation accounts for 80% of sign language interpretation services each month. In schools, note-taking and live

captioning are more frequent than sign language interpretations. Deaf people can make complaints to the government when their rights to get interpretation services are violated. Administration of Welfare for People with Disabilities is the main organisation to handle this kind of complaint.

Thailand

In Thailand, the government sponsors sign interpretations in five major areas: (i) legal matters; (ii) medical appointments; (iii) job interviews; (iv) meetings/seminars/workshops; and (v) public services by the government. Sign language interpreting service is provided by the Department of Empowerment of persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. The department has a website for deaf people in need of SL interpreting services to submit their requests online.[7] In case of medical emergency (e.g., injury resulted from a car crash), a 24-hour video relay service is available.

In addition, deaf people can easily reserve interpretation through the National Association of the Deaf in Thailand or deaf clubs in each of the 77 provinces. University programmes that target deaf students offer SL interpretation support. However, other university programmes do not always have budgets that cover interpretation costs.

The Philippines

In general, there is limited accessibility to SL interpretation for deaf people in the Philippines. In 2018, the Filipino Sign Language Law was passed (2018), but its implementing rules and regulations have yet to be approved by the government. A large proportion of sign language interpreters are special education teachers, who interpret for their students, graduates, and other deaf people in the neighbourhood.

Most interpreters engage in volunteering works for an extensive period of time and are occasionally offered tasks with payments. At present, there are no full-time interpreters hired by any deaf organisations. The Philippine National Association of Sign Language Interpreters and the Philippine Association of Interpreters for Deaf Empowerment offer paid interpretation services, without government funding. Deaf people need to bring their own interpreters, with or without payment, for meetings, medical appointments, job interviews, classes in schools, etc. The Department of Health claims that there are SL interpreters in 10 hospitals, but these people only know some basic signs.

For emergency situations, it is difficult for deaf people to look for interpreters. There are no interpretation services provided by police stations, either. If there is a deaf school nearby, the police officers may contact the teachers to help interpreting. A lot of abuses against deaf people are unreported because interpretation is not available. At times, the courts issue subpoenas to solicit interpretation services from the teachers of deaf schools, who cannot decline the requests even when they feel incompetent to handle the task because they will be charged with contempt of court. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there has been more sign interpretation on TV news.

Vietnam

In Vietnam, there is no government-funded SL interpretation service for deaf people to meet their daily needs. The national TV channel has sign interpretation for the news at 5 p.m. (funded by NGOs) and 10 p.m. (funded by the government). Sometimes event

organisers, including government bodies and NGOs, may pay for sign interpretation if they invite deaf people to participate.

Deaf people need to pay for SL interpreters for their education needs, legal matters, medical appointments, wedding, banking, and job interviews. In Vietnam, three organisations offer paid interpretation services: (a) Nang Moi Sign Language Interpreting Service (Dịch vụ phiên dịch Ngôn ngữ ký hiệu Nắng Mới) (for southern Vietnam) (www.facebook.com/NangMoiSLI/); (b) Sign Language Interpreter Company (Công ty phiên dịch Ngôn ngữ ký hiệu)(for northern Vietnam) (www.facebook.com/scDeaf.vn/); and (c) Psycho-Education and Applied Research Center for the Deaf (PARD). This is a deaf-led non-profit organisation. Their services can be free if the deaf clients have financial difficulties (www.facebook.com/pardvietnam).

Since most of the interpreters stay in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the two biggest cities in Vietnam, it is hard for deaf people in other provinces to access interpretation services. There are very few opportunities of paid interpretation tasks. Most interpreters have their own full-time jobs and provide volunteer interpretation assistance in their spare time. The current interpretation services are far from enough to meet the needs of deaf people.

Emerging debates

Challenges confronting Asian SL interpreters

This section discusses the challenges confronting the provision of SL interpretation. Based on the sharing of the informants, the following issues have been identified.

No or little accessibility of sign language interpretation services due to a lack of government support

Limited access to SL interpretation services is the most pressing problem reported by our informants in this study. In more than half of the cities/countries, deaf people have very little or even no access to SL interpretation services at all. For example, when asked how likely a deaf person attending a medical appointment can be accompanied by an interpreter, a Sri Lankan interpreter said a deaf person needs to be 'lucky' in order to be able to find an available interpreter to go to the hospital together, given that there are only 10+ interpreters serving the entire country.

An interpreter from China told us that in her city, there are over 100,000 deaf signers but only 20 active SL interpreters. Hence, interpreters in general have a heavy workload and she often has to work until late at night. For places facing this problem, the root cause is almost always the lack of committed support from the respective governments.

In places that have a better coverage for SL interpretation across settings (e.g., Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Macau and Taiwan), the salaries of the interpreters are invariably paid by the government. It must be recognised that limited accessibility to interpretation services is just one of the adverse effects of the lack of governments' financial commitments to subsidise or fully fund the provision of SL interpretation for deaf individuals. There are other repercussions that, in effect, suffocate the development of SL interpretation at its embryonic stage.

One such repercussion is a lack of career prospects for potential interpreters. Many of our informants lamented that it is extremely hard to attract people to join and stay in this profession because one cannot earn enough to maintain a decent living working as a full-time interpreter. An experienced interpreter in Malaysia who is near her retirement said:

> A couple of our local interpreters did try to become a full-time interpreter but they could not sustain…They got mortgages, car rentals…To the young people, the younger generation, becoming a full-time interpreter is very difficult, unless you work in a deaf organisation.

An informant from Nepal told our researcher:

> I want to mention you one point. It is very important. Here in Nepal many of the sign language interpreters have moved out of the country because their earning is not sufficient. I know at least five or six people who have moved out of the country.

What is even more worrying is that in some countries, owing to gloomy career prospects, SL interpretation students decide to pursue a different career path after graduation, despite the time and effort they have already invested in this field.

An informant from China told us the following:

> It is difficult to keep the SL interpreters because our pay is not as competitive as other jobs … From our own investigation, we learned that in China there are about 5 interpretation programs. Every year, in each of these institutes, from a cohort of 30 to 50 students, only one or two decide to work as interpreters after they complete their studies. The majority of these graduates turn to other professions. Some of them work as teachers in special schools. I asked them if they were teaching deaf children. Nearly all of them said they were actually teaching children with learning disabilities.

Because of this lack of job opportunities and income security, many SL interpreters in Asia have their own full-time jobs, and engage in volunteer interpreting in their spare time. While the contributions of these volunteers are highly commendable, this lopsided reliance on volunteer interpreters may unfortunately reinforce the already widespread misconception that sign language interpretation is a kind of social services that should be offered free-of-change. This inevitably hinders the professional development of SL interpreters.

One informant explained this vicious cycle in explicit terms:

> A lot of hearing people and organisations think that sign language interpretation or working for the deaf people is a good deed and should be done for free. This is why we have very very few interpreters because nobody sees this as a long-term profession. Interpreters who provide services for deaf people do it part-time. The full-time interpreters we do have, they do it out of their interest and hope the society will evolve and finally notice that sign language interpreters are an asset.

Another interpreter commented, 'to many hearing people, "sign language interpreters" is equivalent to "volunteers"'. For individuals or organisations misled by this misconception,

they are less willing to pay the interpreters at a reasonable rate, thus hindering young, talented people to join this profession.

Lack of recognition of sign language interpretation as a professional field

Many of the SL interpreters we interviewed felt that their professionalism is not recognised in the society. This problem is in part attributed to the lack of certification system and formal training programmes at the tertiary level, which creates a mistaken impression that SL interpretation is easy and that anyone who can sign can become an interpreter.

This situation is well reflected in whether the SL interpreters get paid for their service, and if they do get paid, whether the payment is reasonable. One of our informants made the following comment:

> People don't usually give respect to the sign language interpreters … For example, if you are invited to a programme, and then there are interpreters of other spoken languages, and workers that help organising the event … sometimes we don't get paid. I think this is because they don't respect what we do … Or we don't get an equal amount of payment.

This lack of recognition is not just found among hearing people. It may also run deep in the deaf community, as indicated in this comment from another interpreter:

> Not many people see a sign language interpreter as a profession. They often see us as a volunteer or charity worker … When companies or individuals want to hire interpreters, they expect it to be free. When they realise it needs to be paid, they are kind of reluctant for that … Even deaf people comment about the need of paying the service.

This kind of payment disparity is found in both developing and developed countries. Speaking on the unfairness of payment for interpreters, an informant from a pretty well-off country made the following comment:

> The salary of a sign language instructor was the same as that of an interpreter in the past…(Over the years) the hourly wages of a sign language instructor has been increased from $10 to $30, but the interpreter's wages start at $12. Why? Both types of work are professional work. [8]

According to a Japanese interpreter, there is a deeply rooted perception in Japan that sign interpretation is part of social welfare instead of being a profession:

> I am not satisfied with the sign interpretation situation in Japan. When compared to western countries, the salary of sign language interpreters is low … it may be because sign interpretation originated from the area of social welfare in Japan. Sign language interpretation is not really recognised as an interpretation of 'language'. It is more like a social welfare service. It's just recent that people start to recognise sign language interpretation is the interpretation of language, just like English–Japanese or French–Japanese interpretation. But at this moment, we are still dispatched to our workplace as a welfare worker. I hope Japan can get out of this situation, and sign interpreters become a profession with higher wages which young people aspire to as a career.

From our interviews, it was apparent to us that the deterrent effect of unattractive payment has discouraged talented signers to join this profession in many of the Asian cities/countries.

Little understanding of what sign language interpretation is in the community as a whole

In places where accessibility and visibility of SL interpretation are limited, the community as a whole may have relatively little understanding about what sign language interpretation is. A Pakistani interpreter, who is also a CODA, explained how this challenge impacted her work especially at the beginning:

> My biggest challenge was that I didn't only do interpretation for the Deaf, I raised people's awareness for the deaf community alongside. You know, like for example, one of the challenges is that when we go to organisations with deaf members and we're trying to tell them that you need to include the deaf community in your events, in your spaces, give them opportunities and stuff, I'm not only interpreting. I am also creating awareness, because they are asking me, 'Oh, how do you communicate with them?' And I'm like, 'We use Pakistani Sign Language' . 'Oh what is Pakistani Sign Language?' 'Okay, this is Pakistani Sign Language ….'… In this ecosystem, our goal was to provide sign language interpretation because there was nobody in Pakistan that provided sign language interpretation. But we realised that we could not only provide this service. We have to create awareness. We need to tell the hearing community what sign language is. The knowledge of it is very little. This is one of the biggest challenges.'

In a similar vein, another interpreter commented that interpreting and advocating very often go hand in hand because the society has little to zero knowledge about deaf people:

> You are supposed to be an interpreter, but then you become a warrior, a fighter, an advocator …Once there was a speaker hosting an orientation programme. He asked the participants to get into a group of four, or get into a group of six. Then the deaf people started to grab and touch one another to form groups …and then he was like, 'Oh, please don't touch, please don't touch.' (note: the country has a strong Muslim culture) You know I was doing the interpreting. At that moment I thought, shall I stop him? Shall I explain to him? I thought, okay, I would tell him. I stopped interpreting, turned to him and said, 'Sir, deaf people need to touch because they can't hear. They just touch others' hands to catch their attention.' And then he was like, 'Okay, then, please don't touch too much' … This kind of situations (where an interpreter needs to educate the hearing people when doing SL interpreting) is never ending.

Challenges faced by deaf interpreters

In this study, we were able to interview deaf interpreters from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Mongolia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. These deaf interpreters typically engage in the following types of tasks: Deaf–hearing team interpreting for better clarity in the signed messages, mediating between a hearing interpreter and a deaf person who relies mostly on gestures for communication, interpreting between two sign languages, interpreting in tactile signing for deaf-blind

clients, translating from texts to signs, and collaborating with hearing interpreters in situations where the deaf clients need extra personal support (e.g., in education or mental health contexts).

The challenges these interpreters face very much depend on the stages of development of deaf interpreting in their respective cities/countries. For places where deaf interpreting remains a novel concept, deaf interpreters have a hard time explaining to the public why they are important. As pointed out by several deaf interpreters in our interviews, even experienced hearing interpreters don't see the value of deaf interpreters, not to speak of the general public.

Most deaf people start off thinking that they don't need deaf interpreters, until they see with their own eyes that the deaf interpreters' signing in a team setting is way more natural and comprehensible than the hearing interpreters. A Japanese deaf interpreter who was pivotal in promoting deaf–hearing interpreting in various contexts in Okinawa, including TV news, explained this situation succinctly:

> For many years we made slow progress. It really takes lot of steps for people to trust that deaf people can do, and have a more positive view about deaf interpreters… People would not know that why there should be a deaf interpreter. People think interpreters must be hearing. So how do we make sure there is trust? Since I came back from Gallaudet University, I made slow progress and tried to make connections, gain trust and build relationships. There was one event where I was working as a deaf interpreter and people thought I did a good job. There was another interpreter who was also interested in doing this kind of relay. So we worked together for a common goal. People like our work. It was kind of like a slow progress. Now, people are starting to see some good results. There are some positive feedbacks, and now we can move on.

From our interviews, we note that the practice of deaf–hearing team interpreting, once known to the public, is usually welcome by the deaf communities. A Vietnamese deaf interpreter said:

> Deaf people pay more attention to the deaf interpreters. They tend to ask the speaker more questions when there is a deaf interpreter on stage.

The support from the deaf people themselves will then become a driving force for the further development of deaf–hearing team interpreting. Below is a comment from a Mongolian deaf interpreter:

> In the past, deaf interpreters were not known. Last year, a deaf interpreter appeared on a stage, and a hearing interpreter sat off-stage and fed the signing to the deaf interpreter. It was the first time. Deaf people were happy to see it. And they began to try more and more deaf–hearing team interpreting. We are not making giant steps, but we are make some progress bit by bit.

Although deaf interpreters in team interpreting can facilitate information access for deaf people, they are not welcome by deaf signers in all contexts. A deaf interpreter mentioned that some deaf people prefer hearing interpreters to deaf interpreters, especially for

personal matters, because the deaf community is small and they are worried about their privacy. This may limit their interpretation opportunities.

On the other hand, the payment issue was brought up by several deaf interpreters in our interviews. Deaf interpreters in most Asian countries are very often underpaid, or are not paid at all. In most cases, a deaf interpreter needs to split the income with the hearing interpreter for team interpreting. This may create a conflict between the hearing and deaf interpreters, and may result in hearing interpreters not willing to work with deaf interpreters any more.

A deaf interpreter told us:

> When deaf people look at my signing, they like it a lot. But hearing interpreters do not think this way because if I work with them as a team, they will earn less.

Another deaf interpreter pointed out that the government's regulations on the number of interpreters create barriers for deaf–hearing team interpreting. She said:

> According to government regulations, there can be a maximum of two interpreters for workshops and meetings. If deaf and hearing interpreters team up in the task, then two pairs will be needed. Yet the government only pays for two interpreters … the interpreters will need to divide the payment in two halves … the money is not enough to cover team work.

Having fewer interpreting opportunities is another major concern among deaf interpreters in Asia. In Thailand, for example, even though the government provides a wide coverage for interpretation services, there are limited job opportunities for deaf interpreters. According to our informants, some deaf interpreters could not earn enough to support their lives and had to change their jobs.

Language-related issues

In our interviews, several language-related issues were raised by the informants. First, in some of the Asian countries, multilingualism in the hearing community presents a big challenge for SL interpreters. That is because interpreters are few in numbers, and they don't always speak other spoken languages apart from their own native tongue.

In Sri Lanka, for example, most hearing interpreters only speak Sinhalese (the language spoken by 75% of the population), and very few of them speak Tamil (the language spoken by about 24% of the population). Hence it is relatively more difficult to look for interpreters for Tamil–Sri Lankan Sign Language interpretation. This situation is even worse in Indonesia, which is well-known for the large number of spoken languages across the archipelago.

Multilingualism also exists in the deaf community. In Vietnam, there are at least two distinct sign language varieties—Ha Noi Sign Language and Ho Chi Minh City Sign Language. Interpreters trained in one sign language cannot serve deaf signers who use the other sign language, because the two varieties are not mutually intelligible. The SL interpretation on the national TV channel, however, is done in Ha Noi Sign Language and cannot be understood by deaf signers residing in the southern part of Vietnam.

Another example is Cambodia. The two distinct signing varieties in Phnom Penh emerged and evolved from two deaf education organisations—Deaf Development

Program for uneducated adults, and Krousar Thmey for school-age children. As the signs are very different, deaf signers need to look for interpretation assistance at the education institute from which they graduated. In fact, the two institutes send their interpreters to different TV channels to interpret the news at present.

In Macau, apart from Macau Sign Language, which has closer historical ties with Hong Kong Sign Language, an increasing number of deaf immigrants from China are using Chinese Sign Language. There are constant debates within the deaf community about what sign language to use and promote.

Diverse language needs and linguistic backgrounds of deaf people are another challenge confronting Asian interpreters. Regional variation is one issue. How well deaf people understand sign language is another tricky issue. Not all deaf people can sign well—either because they never receive formal deaf education, or they grow up in oral deaf schools or mainstream schools. A hearing interpreter in Myanmar explained the difficulty she faced when interpreting for home signers who have never been to school:

> In our country, many deaf people never go to school. They only use home signs as they grow up. I feel very stressed when I need to interpret for them. I don't understand their gestures/signs … they could only communicate very basic things with their family members. It is very difficult for me to interpret for them. In those cases, we usually go to visit the deaf client several hours before the actual event to find out his/her communication style. We also need to seek help from family members or friends to figure out what the deaf people means.

SL interpreters need to be very adaptive and it takes time for an interpreter to develop a good understanding of the communication style and needs of a deaf client for effective interpretation to take place. An Indonesian SL interpreter describes this challenge in details:

> My challenge is, there are different kinds of deaf people, different clients. That's the challenge. Because here in Indonesia, based on my experience, we don't have only one type of deaf persons … some are sign language users, some deaf persons do not sign that much. They tend to use other methods to communicate, for example, verbally, or use initialised fingerspelling, etc. This is the challenge I face. For example, last night I interpreted for someone from another city. There was a misunderstandings because of the differences in vocabularies, and as interpreters we need to understand things from the contexts … when we meet a deaf person from another city, maybe he does not have much exposure to sign language in his own place … and I need to learn to read the deaf person's mind. That's a challenge for me.

The final language Issue concerns the use of signed spoken language. In China, sign interpretation training programmes mainly focus on teaching signed Chinese, and as a result many graduates find it hard to understand the natural signing of deaf people. Recently, there has been more and more discussions in the deaf community to urge SL interpreters to use natural sign language instead of signed Chinese, especially on TV news.

A similar problem is reported in Taiwan. The Ministry of Education has created a system of signed Chinese for educational purposes. If the SL interpreters use signed Chinese, deaf signers would find it hard to understand. In Singapore, some hearing

interpreters are only skilled in Signed Exact English but not natural sign language. The hearing interpreters are strongly advised by the deaf community to interact more with deaf signers in order to improve their knowledge of natural signing.

Other issues related to the system of service provision

There are a few more issues raised by our informants that concern the system of service provision. For example, when governments or organisations look for SL interpretation services they tend to favour large deaf associations or interpreter organisations, thus placing freelance interpreters at a disadvantage. Some governments put 'price' over 'quality' in their service tenders without any quality control in the service solicitation and provision.

When deaf people are dissatisfied with the interpretation service, there may not be a formal system for them to file a complaint. On the other hand, if well-intentioned governments expand the service provision too rapidly without the corresponding training system, the overall quality of interpretation will suffer.

Conclusions and future directions

In this paper, we have provided an overview of the SL interpretation provisions in 20 Asian cities/countries, and the challenges confronting hearing and deaf interpreters. Our findings show that most cities/countries suffer from an acute shortage of SL interpreters and insufficient financial support from the governments. Given these seemingly insurmountable difficulties, what sustains the provision of SL interpretation, however inadequate it might be, is the commitment and efforts of the interpreters and the deaf communities.

During our interviews, quite a number of informants offered us impressive testimonies of their efforts in setting up NGOs to provide and improve SL interpretations despite all odds. Some interpreters told us they choose to stay in this profession because they believe that their contributions cannot be measured only in monetary terms. There are also examples of hearing interpreters teaming up with the deaf communities in advocating for the right of information access via more interpretation services.

As this study was conducted during the ongoing global pandemic, many informants pointed out that COVID-19 turned out to be a turning point in their long fight for TV news interpreting, as the governments are now seeing the imminent need for up-to-date information for the deaf community. With the advent and increasing popularity of video communication apps, some interpreters found that service provision and interpretation training can now transcend geographical barriers, which was less accepted and therefore less common before the pandemic.

As we pointed out earlier, the financial commitment of governments is undeniably the most crucial factor affecting the development of SL interpretation in any country. The relatively successful examples are South Korean, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand. Their systems are not exactly the same, but all target at meeting the daily needs of deaf signers and information access in all public domains. They can provide useful references for other governments concerning how legislation recognising the linguistic rights of deaf people can be turned into practicable and effective policies for supporting the development of SL interpretation.

In our interviews, many informants highlighted the importance of deaf involvement in the development of SL interpretation services. Deaf people can serve as sign language

trainers, offer advice and support to improve the skills of the hearing interpreters, and organise campaigns to raise the public's awareness towards the importance of SL interpretation.

It may require years or even decades of efforts to see concrete improvements in SL interpretation in Asia, but it is a goal that is worth our dedication and commitment.

Questions for consideration

1. Most of the Asian countries reported in this chapter are developing countries. Their SL interpretation developments lag far behind many developed countries in the West. In what ways can Western expertise contribute to and support the development of SL interpretation in Asia?
2. What roles can CODAs play in the development of SL interpretation in Asia?
3. As mentioned in our chapter, the Centre of Indonesian Sign Language Interpreter Service (Pusat Layanan Juru Bahasa Isyarat, PLJ) in Indonesia is building a self-financed, sustainable system to provide free or affordable SL interpretation for the deaf community. To what extent can this model be feasible in other Asian countries?
4. Team interpreting involving hearing and deaf interpreters is still a novel idea in many Asian countries. What can SL interpreters do to promote this practice?
5. To what extent does the economical development of a country correlate to the stage of development of SL interpretation in Asia?

Notes

1 We issued our invitation to the Asian SL interpreters through the informal communication network of WASLI (Asia) and our own personal contacts. As the participation was voluntary, we still failed to make contacts with the sign interpreters of several countries (e.g., India and Palestine).
2 According to the federal sources, about 1,000,000 people over the age of five in the United States are 'functionally deaf' (www.gallaudet.edu/office-of-international-affairs/demographics/deaf-employment-reports). In 2019, there are 10,354 certified interpreters in the RID annual report (https://rid.org/2019-annual-report/). The ratio of certified interpreters and the deaf population would be 1:96.
3 In Singapore, community interpreters cannot interpret in courts and police stations.
4 Deaf signers in South Korea can find the locations of these 240+ centres by using this website: www.deafkorea.com/ver/_allserch/arealist.html?tb=dss&serch=etc.
5 According to our Korean informants, if a centre has both hearing and deaf interpreters, the ratio is usually 3:1.
6 Detailed information of local government offices and organisations offering sign language interpretation can be found at: www.bmsh.tn.edu.tw/df_ufiles/c/A10240000U0000000_0054270A00_ATTCH2.pdf.
7 The online request form for interpretation service in Thailand can be found at: http://sign.dep.go.th/public/requestSign.do?cmd=goRequestSign&ms=1610205200156.
8 The dollar sign represents the currency of that country.

Further reading

Crasborn, O., Bloem, T. (2009). Linguistic variation as a challenge for sign language interpreters and sign language interpreter education in the Netherlands. In J. Napier (Ed.), *International perspectives on sign language interpreter education* (pp. 77–95). Gallaudet University Press.
This paper describes the sign language interpreting situation in the Netherlands, with a specific focus on the variation in deaf people's (multilingual) language use, and how interpreters tackle

the situation. This paper provides insights that may be relevant to sign language interpreters in Asia as many Asian countries are multilingual, and regional variations in signing have been reported too.

De Meulder, M., & Haualand, H. (2021). Sign language interpreting services – A quick fix for inclusion? *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, *16*(1), 19–40.
This paper questions the general assumption that information access for deaf people is tantamount to the availability of sign language interpretation services. It urges readers to explore other possible strategies to facilitate deaf people's communication apart from relying exclusively on interpretation.

Stone, C., (Ed.). (2018). *Deaf interpreting in Europe*. Danish Deaf Association.
This book is an outcome of the Erasmus+ project *Developing Deaf Interpreting*, with contributions from deaf and hearing researchers. The chapters would provide useful information for deaf interpreters in Asia on how they can further develop their profession individually or in collaboration with hearing interpreters.

Related topics

Sign language interpretation, Asia, hearing sign language interpreters, Deaf sign language interpreters, disability laws

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