

Book Review

Higher Education in East Asia: Neoliberalism and the Professoriate

Gregory S. Poole & Ya-chen Chen (Eds.).

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This edited book is Volume 19 of a series “Global Perspectives in Higher Education” (series editor, Philip G. Altbach), and seeks to provide insights into higher education in East Asia (defined in the book as consisting of Japan, Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan, The PR of China, and the Korea’s). The genesis of the book was a Council of Anthropology and Education session at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in late 2006. The focus is on the lived experiences of academics in East Asia, the ‘professoriate’ - with their experiences tracked via series of narratives based on ethnographic research. Countries covered are Japan, PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The book finishes with a concluding chapter that attempts comparison between the UK and East Asia. This approach makes for an engaging tale, and consistent with such an approach the reader feels an immediate connection with these staff of some higher education institutions in East Asia. Such an approach by definition does not necessarily result in a representative picture of the professoriate in East Asia, but there is ample compensation in terms of depth of insight.

The book is dominated by the academics’ perceptions of the impact of a substantive shift from a more *laissez-faire* academic life, to one dominated by managerialism - traced to Thatcherism and derived from the UK and other Western nations. Of particular note, is the development and implementation of a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) process, and something similar for teaching. The postcolonial theme remains strong throughout, but does not intrude. We do sense the frustration of academics working in an environment in which local research and publication in local or regional periodicals is undervalued. Publishing *anything* in English is apparently considered more meritorious than publishing high quality work in the vernacular. One thus comes to appreciate an all-too-familiar story - increasing dominance of government, loss of academic freedom and over-emphasis on accountability. Whilst this is a bit depressing, it is interesting to read how scholars across the East Asia region coped with such changes, in sometimes quite dramatic ways (e.g., migrating!).

The key strength of this book then, is that it provides a fascinating picture of higher education in East Asia. As such, it succeeds in its mission. There is consistency of experience across the nations; pretty much each country had to deal with up skilling-qualifications of teaching staff, increased research output, and so on - typically over a very short timeframe. The ‘game playing’ that accompanied responses to RAE will be all too familiar to those in the UK, and many other Western nations. The book is dominated by the Japan experience (5 chapters out of 9), which makes for a skewed presentation of the professoriate in East Asia (the editors note the regrettable absence of a chapter based in South Korea). A common complaint is that Western, English language periodicals are not much interested in Asia. Having published numerous articles with colleagues from Asia and Turkey, I don’t find this very convincing. Yes, we too have found if we start our story with a focus on our own nation/context, international readers don’t much care. “Why would I care that you are having trouble teaching chemistry students in Thailand about atomic structure?” The truth is probably I wouldn’t. So a paper about problems to do with teaching difficult science

topics in Asia is not likely to generate much interest; *but*, a paper focussed on finding better ways to teach atomic structure, *based on an inquiry that happens to be contextualized in Thailand*, is likely of more interest to anyone who wants to know how to teach such topics better. We too failed miserably getting published when we started with the context, and tried to move to the topic; but were much more successful the other way around!

The book describes some interesting issues about work-integrated learning (WIL). First, and foremost, of surprise to many will be the emphasis placed on WIL in Japan. This is consistent with efforts in Japan to publish a Japanese-Language version of the *International Handbook on Cooperative Education*, a few years back. Translating an international book like this counts – a lot, and this happens to resonate with the widespread practice of WIL in Japan. There is also a clear distinction painted between ‘real’ research and teaching, and vocational education or *training*. As elsewhere, remarkable the latter, arguably of more actual use to new graduates, is undervalued.

The book is marred somewhat, by rather a lot of typographical errors, and lack of consistency in format. Hardly any of the chapters in text citations or bibliographical entries are in APA style, which is that specified by the publisher. These issues are distracting, but the book none-the-less provides valuable insights for readers who are interested in the higher education scene in a part of the world not much written about.

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