

BOOK REVIEWS

***Migrant Workers in Pacific Asia.* Edited by Yaw A. Debrah.** London: Frank Cass, 2002. Pp. ii + 166.

International labour migration has been an important facet of growth and structural transformation in Pacific Asian countries over the past two decades. Japan and other high-performing East Asian economies in the region have begun to absorb an increasing number of foreign workers mostly from countries in the region which are at the earlier stages of demographic and economic transition. The growing presence of foreign workers has sparked a continuing debate in these countries on the social and economic consequences of labour inflows and the policy options for dealing with the “foreign worker problem”.

There is a recurrent demand by employers in these countries for a more liberal and transparent approach towards the entry of foreign workers. They argue that foreign labour generally contributes to economic dynamism and flexibility of structural adjustment. The trade unionists, on the other hand, are concerned that unskilled workers were likely to suffer as jobs are lost to migrant workers or wages fall. The general public is frequently worried about the adverse social consequences of the presence of foreign workers. Policy-makers are concerned that high dependence on cheap foreign labour tends to slow down economic restructuring and productivity

growth in the domestic economy. This multi-faceted debate on foreign workers is going to gain added impetus in years to come in the context of rapid demographic transition and structural transformation in these countries. The volume under review, which brings together a set of country case studies examining the labour migration process and the related policy issues from a recipient country perspective is a welcome addition to the fledgling literature on this important subject.

The chapters on Taiwan (by Joseph Lee) and Korea (by Won-Woo Park) are by far the most important chapters in the volume. In these chapters, the emerging patterns of labour inflows and the national policy responses are systematically documented and assessed against the backdrop of rapid growth and structural transformation in these countries. The authors have done a commendable job in bringing together a wealth of information and statistical data from national sources (which are new to the English language literature) to bear on the issues at hand. There is convincing evidence from both countries in support of the proposition that increased reliance on foreign workers is a structural, rather than a passing, phenomenon that needs to be appropriately managed as an integral part of the overall national socio-economic policy. Furthermore, the Taiwan chapter comes up with the interesting inference that, contrary to the usual allegation by the trade unionists, foreign labour is by and large complementary to (rather than

competing with) domestic labour and hence labour immigration has the potential to speed up domestic economic expansion and employment creation for domestic workers.

The other four chapters are of uneven quality. Much of the space in the chapter on Malaysia (by Christina Chin) is taken up by an opinionated discussion of the political economy of development policy in the country. The section dealing with trends and patterns of migrant worker inflows and related policy issues has failed to meet the standards of a reasonable synthesis of the existing literature, let alone providing new material. The chapter begins with the assertion that “the politics of national economic restructuring in a larger context of uneven regional development contribute to growing presence of migrant workers”, (p. 20). However, the evidence presented in the chapter on sectoral composition of migrant workers are consistent with the alternative interpretation that Malaysia’s dependence on foreign workers is an economy-wide phenomenon closely related to economic transformation through rapid industrialization. The chapter by Linda Low provides a well-written account of the Singaporean experience with heavy reliance on migrant labour. However, unfortunately, it stops short of providing an in-depth analysis of the country’s success in managing migration while minimizing adverse socio-economic implications. The chapter on Japan begins by noting the emergence of Japan as a “New Immigration Country”, but the ensuing discussion would disappoint a reader in search of an explanation of this remarkable development. The chapter is largely an *ad hoc* compilation of material on policy shifts and trends and composition of labour inflows with little analysis. The final chapter on rural migrants in urban China by Kenneth Roberts, though interesting in its own right, is irrelevant to the theme of the book.

In a volume like this which brings together a set of studies with disparate design and focus, it is incumbent upon the editor to bringing together in the opening (introductory) chapter the key findings/inferences of individual chapters within a

unified analytical framework and to draw inferences and policy lessons of general relevance while relating them to the existing literature. Unfortunately the introductory chapter in this volume has by and large failed to meet this requirement satisfactorily. Moreover, the literature survey has overlooked a number of important recent publications in this subject area. The last section of the chapter on “approached for analysis cross-border migration” sits on its own without any link to the ensuing chapters in the volume. On page 12 (first paragraph) there is a glaring error of mixing world system theory of international labour migration by Sasaki Sassen and others with the centre-periphery theory of underdevelopment of Andre Gunder Frank and Semir Amin.

The manuscript seems to have been finalized for publication without the involvement of a decent copy editor. In many places the readability is hampered by clumsy sentences (for example, “the focus of this volume — the review and impact of migrant worker policies of the labour-receiving countries on migrant workers in Pacific Asia” (p. 4); “The development of the political economy of Malaysia reveals two major waves of international migration for employment to the country” (p. 22) and many more). There are also many text references bereft of page numbers. Given the extensive use of acronyms and abbreviation (most of which are country specific) in various chapters, a detailed listing of them at the beginning of the book (after the Contents) would have greatly improved the user-friendliness of the book.

Despite the limitations noted above, this book makes a substantial contribution towards broadening our understanding of an important, yet sparsely researched, aspect of the process of economic development in Pacific Asia.

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