

BOOK REVIEWS

DOI: 10.1355/ae25-3g

***East Asian Visions: Perspectives on Economic Development.* Edited by Indermit Gill et al.** Washington, D.C. and Singapore: World Bank and Institute of Policy Studies, 2007. Pp. 358.

The volume contains eighteen policy studies authored by twenty senior policy-makers, statespersons and scholars who represent eight Asian countries. The studies focus on an array of themes and questions related to them. First, what factors explain East Asia's growth and development, and will all of the countries that have experienced success continue to do so as the powerful impact of China either benefits them or crowds some of them out of markets and leaves them behind? Second, will the forces of integration build stability and efficiencies or will some East Asian economies be plagued with persistent inefficiencies and become both economically and politically vulnerable? Third, can East Asian countries avoid domestic disintegration given growing public concerns about increasing inequities, persistent poverty, environmental pollution and degradation, and official and private sector corruption and cronyism? Fourth, will East Asia find a new generation of leaders *and* willing followers who can set aside national myopia and internal differences in favour of more effective and widely supported view of regional cooperation and integration?

The authors discuss a generally shared vision that the answers to the above will be "yes" but only following a great deal of hard work that eventually will lead to sound economic structures and practices throughout East Asia, and they will be based upon effective regional integration and economic openness, able and corruption-free leaders and the influence of China. With this in mind, the opening chapter makes two telling points. The first is that the growth of production sharing networks (featuring horizontal and vertical linkages among firms) has meant that "East Asia's share of world trade has increased from 10 per cent in the 1970's to more than 25 per cent today. Intraregional trade ... has increased from 35 per cent to 55 per cent" (p. 11). Even with the rise of China, "[w]ith such a wide range of factors at play, so no single country within East Asia can dominate the production chain, but with much of the activity centered in China as the assembly plant of the world" (p. 11).

The second telling point is that finding effective change agents who will continue to lead this process both internally and externally is crucial. Effective leadership and management requires making "the important transition from paternalistic top-down governance structure to a pluralistic and open market economy structure since no small elite can no longer manage large complex market economies (featuring production sharing networks)" (p. 19).

Leadership in some form or other is a central feature of the book's many chapters because,

according to some of the contributors, leaders must also find ways to avoid domestic disintegration by dealing effectively within civil societies. Such societies flourish when market management is efficient and when public officials operate in the absence of corruption, when they practise responsive decision-making, and when they do not tolerate polluted cities, impoverished rural and urban areas and excessive inequities. Ambassador Tommy Koh's essay makes the point that corruption poses a massive challenge because it "distorts economic decision-making. It leads to injustice. Corruption undermines the integrity of public institutions. Asian leaders and thinkers should be united in condemning and combating corruption (and) ... in increasing transparency, accountability and integrity" (p. 143).

Haruhiko Kuroda echoes Koh's points by declaring that the avoidance of corruption is essential especially since the primary obligation of leaders is to eliminate, or at least substantially reduce, poverty which "remains the single most urgent challenge for many East Asian developing countries. Development gaps are widening across some countries and with some parts of countries" (p. 149). Kuroda goes on to contend that "regional cooperation and integration in East Asia are desirable and necessary to maximize the region's potential and achieve a vision of an integrated, poverty-free and peaceful East Asia" (p. 149).

The contributors to the book present a vision of the pursuit of progress for East Asian people that calls for East Asian to do a great deal, for China to play a significant role, for integration and cooperation to flourish and for leaders "to do the right things". Prior to getting to China and its role, let us note that the volume's contents stress the following themes. Openness throughout the region has come about largely due to economic integration and cooperation. This process has caused changes to take place in the form of production networks that focus increasingly on intra-East Asian trade. Adjustment to change has produced new production networks and less powerful and effective finance networks as well, and this has led to a continued reliance of access

to non-East Asian markets and global sources of finance. Diversity among East Asian economies has facilitated change and adjustment but these processes have created inequalities and left behind many East Asians. Effective and corruption-free leaders in both public and private sectors are essential if sustainable, broadly shared and poverty reducing progress is to be made.

Now to China: Mari Pangestu points out that any focus on China should not be exclusive because both China and India provide potential "growth poles" around which East Asian economic activity must take place. When China and India experience progress, their leaders must keep in mind that their continued robust expansion is a foundation upon which other East Asian countries' prosperity can be forthcoming. In order for this fortuitous economic symbiosis to occur in a regional environment where no giant is economically supreme, Pangestu makes the point that "Southeast Asia must develop into a third pole to rebalance the entire region... In essence, each of the ASEAN countries will have to raise productivity, find niches for specialization, and undertake reform to maintain competitive strength relative to China and also India" (pp. 232-33).

A significant focus on China is essential because the admirable goals articulated by Kuroda can best be reached without its economic strength and the position it holds within the East Asian regional economy. After evaluating the prospects for China's economic growth to be reasonably bright, though with problems yet to be confronted effectively, Zen Bijian turns to the other half of the equation — China's international environment. He argues that there is a strong trend towards economic globalization advances and deepens largely because "[s]cientific and technological progress is leading to changes by the day, and the mobility of factors of production and geographic shifts of industries are gaining in speed. As countries strengthen their cooperation in trade, investment, technologies and labour services bring into play their comparative advantages, the economic interdependence between China and the

rest of the world will become more profound” (p. 331).

He also states that East Asian countries, including China, “must bring into play their own comparative advantages and conduct exchanges and undertake collaboration with one another in a bid to learn from one another’s strong points” (p. 336). In the judgement of this reviewer, China can learn much about civil states’ principles including workers rights, press freedom, equitable treatment of minorities and toleration of political dissent.

This superb and enthusiastically recommended volume will find a diverse audience composed of university students and faculty, officials who are responsible for directing East Asia’s economic development, and general readers who are interested in the “field of vision” that is the book’s contents.

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DOI: 10.1355/ae25-3h

Vientiane: Transformations of a Lao Landscape.
By Mark Askew, William S. Logan and Colin Long. London: Routledge, 2007. Pp. 265.

Askew, Logan and Long have undertaken one of the most important works on Lao history in many decades. This book is an attempt to look at Laos through a new perspective, the rise and fall of the city, Vientiane, its historical past, while explaining it through the discourse of urbanism and within a context of changing political landscapes. The authors admitted that Laos, as a nation, has frequently been unjustly perceived as a marginal political and cultural entity in the eyes of its neighbours and even among its own populace. The core argument of this book counters such a traditional view on Laos, with a special focus on its capital Vientiane, by presenting historical

evidence unveiling the city’s glorious past, its political significance and Laos’s sustained culture which has provided a basis for the current regime to claim its legitimacy for what it has called “the defence of a national identity”.

Delving into the theme “urbanism”, the authors argued that the lack of population density and wider economic functions should not discount Vientiane as being a vibrant *meuang* among many in Southeast Asia (p. 6). One needs to pay a great attention to the spatial, temporal and social ordering of Vientiane, how it has been influenced by external forces, including today’s globalization, and how it has influenced them in turn. Therefore, Vientiane must not only be considered as a historical urban settlement, but also a political, social and cultural landscape on which a community was built for living and power play. The authors traced the subject from its first existential beginning, describing the conditions of the city before and after it was turned into the capital of Lan Xang Kingdom. As the subtitle suggests, the analysis was concentrated on capturing the transformation of Vientiane from a dense forest into an opulent city that housed many temples and palaces. The significance of Vientiane was not limited within the city wall, but transcended beyond the Middle Mekong region where the Lao and their principalities were acknowledged as a major presence for centuries (p. 20).

The transformation from the centre of wealth and power into a city under rubble took place when the Siamese troops totally ransacked Vientiane, one of Siam’s vessel states, in 1828 for fear of its disloyalty. The advent of French colonialism, the American occupation during the Cold War and the emergence of a communist regime in Laos deeply affected the destiny of Vientiane as the capital of the nation. The vulnerability of Vientiane has consistently been exploited by present-day leaders to spark Lao nationalism, to reject foreign influences, and ultimately to renew their legitimacy to govern.

What are the main takeaways of this book? First, although it has been widely accepted that