

Constructing Modern Asian Citizenship, edited by Edward Vickers and Krishna Kumar

Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, 365pp., £95.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-85578-5; eBook ISBN 978-0-203-73408-7; Adobe ISBN 978-1-135-00727-0

Asia has witnessed high levels of economic growth and significant political and cultural developments since the end of the Cold War. This has led to the coining of the phrase ‘Asian Century’, suggesting that the twenty-first century will witness successful stories about the rise of Asia and its potential to be the next world centre of gravity. There are parallels with the characterization of the twentieth century as the ‘American Century’, and the nineteenth century as the ‘British/European Century’ (Blumenthal *et al.*, 2015). Although it is not clear whether this vision will come true (Groff, 2012), the phrase has revealed the importance of understanding contemporary Asia as a whole and in depth. Edward Vickers and Krishna Kumar’s edited book *Constructing Modern Asian Citizenship* is an up-to-date volume providing such comprehensive and profound understanding.

The book is written within the educational field, although it incorporates a number of interdisciplinary investigations into history, politics, sociology, religious studies, and cultural studies. The main focus of the book is the construction of citizenship in a modern Asian context. As citizenship refers to the relationships between individuals and the state, it can help to distinguish Asia from Europe, or other societies, where citizens may identify and interact with their states very differently. The editors propose two initial questions (p.1):

- How has citizenship been constructed in Asian societies negotiating transitions to modern statehood?
- To what extent have such transitions, and associated citizenship discourses, been shaped by any distinctively ‘Asian’ ideas or conditions?

A team of international scholars was invited to answer these questions together, through their research into nine Asian countries. The editors and authors of the book reflect on the recent Asian history of pursuing ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’, before analysing various projects of citizenship formation across Asia. Their studies imply that the role of education is not only about ‘spreading literacy’ (p.2) – namely improving reading and writing skills – but also about ‘distributing opportunity, constructing orthodox historical narratives and fostering faith in the vaguely defined ideals of “modernity” and “progress” that underpin the nation-building’ (p.1). They further demonstrate how institutional education as a major political tool helps to establish national identity and strengthen social solidarity in many Asian societies (Lall and Vickers, 2009; Vickers and Jones, 2005). This encourages and enables citizens to be involved in the development of their countries and regions. In other words, such state-driven education programmes have successfully provided a kind of ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 2004) in support of constructing nationalism-based citizenship.

This book will benefit and enlighten readers in three main aspects: (1) in rethinking the notion of ‘Asia’; (2) understanding ways in which Asian citizenship is constructed; and (3) in appreciating key changes and challenges evident in education systems in different Asian countries. First of all, the editors emphasize the need to clarify ‘Asia’ (see Chapter 1). It is not only a geographic concept defined by ‘the West’, but a historical concept moulded since the nineteenth century by common memories, across many Asian countries, of such events as the ‘civilizing mission’ (p.1) and ‘modernization’ (p.7), anti-colonialism and national liberation, re-shaping identity, and regeneration. So in this sense, ‘Asia’ is not limited to East and South Asia – represented by India (Chapters 2 and 5), China (Chapters 3, 4, 10, 11, and 14), Japan (Chapter 4), the Philippines

(Chapter 6), Pakistan (Chapter 7), Malaysia (Chapter 9), and Singapore (Chapters 11 and 12) – but also includes the Middle East and Central Asia, represented by Turkey (Chapter 7) and Mongolia (Chapter 14). Moreover, ‘Asia’ is seen as an ethnic and cultural concept, as similar cultural traditions are shared across Asian societies; for instance, ethical commitments advocated by Confucianism; multiculturalism influenced by minority and migrant groups; and religious ideas like Asian Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as Christianity. It is therefore argued that when discussing modern Asian citizenship, both the pressure from Western colonialism and the process of Asia’s self-strengthened civilization should be taken into account.

The fourteen chapters are divided among five parts according to different educational modes of citizenship formation. The first part presents historical narratives of educationally shaped ‘modernity’ and ‘civilization’ in the two largest Asian countries. In India (Kumar, Chapter 2), education has contributed to dealing with the rural–urban relationship, ‘reconstructing village society’, while serving ‘ideological dissemination and state control’ (pp.45–6). In China (Vickers, Chapter 3), education has been adopted as the vehicle of fulfilling ‘a civilizing mission’ for the long term, especially since the fall of the Qing Empire in the 1840s (pp.51–2). The second part contains a comparative curriculum study between China and Japan (Rose, Chapter 4); a textbook study in India (Gupta, Chapter 5); and a case study on an education policy and programme in the Philippines (Maca and Morris, Chapter 6). These three chapters showcase how schooling is essential for building national identity as the younger generation experiences prescribed curricula, textbooks, and other education programmes. Citizenship education has been examined not as a single school subject, but in relation to four other subjects: history, civics, geography, and literature. The third part pays attention to religion and ethnoculture as forms of moral and spiritual education. A notable occurrence in Pakistan (Saigol, Chapter 8) and Malaysia (Ting, Chapter 9) is that religion-based and tradition-related identity have been secularized and intertwined with the modernization of nation states, ‘transmitting the dominant national ideology’ (p.191) and ‘instilling national cohesion and forming patriotic citizens’ (p.210). Also, in Turkey (Aschenberger, Chapter 7), schooling has gradually taken over identity-shaping projects since the Ottoman times. Although state-driven education has a powerful impact on citizenship construction, there is a tension between formal and informal education; this becomes evident in the last two parts, which focus on social organizations and activities, and young people’s agency. For instance, museums in Shanghai provide extra-curricular resources for civic instruction, particularly in local history and cultural heritage (Lei and Vickers, Chapter 10); and youth organizations in Hong Kong and Singapore facilitate young people’s active citizenship learning through online civic discussion and offline social and political movements (Han, Chapter 11; Sim, Chapter 12). The increasing experiences of intercultural communication, migration, and studying abroad also influence young citizens’ civic attitudes and identities, which is evident among Mongolian students (Damdin and Vickers, Chapter 13) and overseas Chinese students (He, Chapter 14).

It has to be said that this is an inspirational book, which will stimulate further questions and debates. As the authors have noted, although education for global citizenship and multidimensional citizenship have been approached in some Asian countries, primarily as a response to global competition, there are many more challenges that need to be taken into account. For example, to what extent should Asian identities and values be redefined and strengthened? Is there a mutually agreed ‘Asian’ identity, or many different national identities across Asia? In what ways could education in practice solve contradictions between local, national, and global citizenship? With similar or different questions in mind, academics working in the wider fields of education, political science, and sociology will find the book helpful because of its strong historical and theoretical discussions. They may be interested in comparing Asian-situated citizenship theories with classical Western-centred citizenship theories. Policymakers, school teachers, and youth

workers in citizenship-related subjects will benefit from the insights and ideas that the book provides for improving teaching and curriculum design. For those from Asia, it is a worthwhile read for promoting self-reflection and a critical review of their own national and social environments. Anyone who is interested in Asian education, political, and social systems will find the book interesting and thought-provoking. In this respect, the book provides a reflective narrative on the myth of a 'rising Asia'.

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