

Asia Journal of Global Studies

FOREWARD

Our world is hopefully, though tremulously, working itself free from last year's worldwide financial wreckage - an interlocked downfall that reaffirmed the truth, and the hazards, of globalization. As all commentators acknowledge, the extent to which today's nascent recovery will take hold remains uncertain. An even more pointed question asks when (or whether) "the end of the recession" will hold much meaning beyond the macro-formulae of economists or the resurgent fortunes of Wall Street and its global counterparts.

Appropriately, then, this issue of the *Asia Journal of Global Studies* features articles which, each in their own way, serve to remind readers just how disjunctive remain the realities of the powerful and the poor. At the same time, these four studies compel recognition that the world system cannot be reduced to financial flows and fractures. In the following pages, globalization is rendered as a multifaceted complex of perspectival and physical forces: economic, religious, ethno-cultural, nationalist, *realpolitik*, and technological.

In our first article, Riaz Ahmed Shaikh dissects the internal political struggles that have wracked Pakistan since its 1947 establishment as a parliamentary democracy. He relates how the state's military leadership has perennially thwarted the country's democratic advancement - either through coup d'états and dictatorships, or behind the scenes, in collusion with corrupt bureaucrats and politicians. The timeliness of such a history lesson in Pakistani politics need not be belabored. Shaikh's article, moreover, has even broader relevance. It serves as a harrowing cautionary tale for readers in any country with a growing neoconservative movement. The Machiavellian manoeuvres masterminded by Pakistan's military elites are disturbingly echoed by quickenings in other nations: Plotters everywhere are proving similarly adroit at fanning religious, ethnic, and "tribal" fervors, while dissipating democracy through co-optation of grassroots politics, and subjecting citizenry to surveillance by skilled intelligence apparatuses.

The next article illuminates other dilemmas that threaten to intensify over the coming years elsewhere in Asia. Kenji Kaneko turns our attention to East Asia, with a comparative analysis of policy stances towards migrant labor in Japan and Taiwan. These countries face a similar demographic and workforce challenge: ageing populations, low fertility rates, and young generations whose education and/or family wealth have moved them up the production chain. Faced with this attritional milieu, both countries have supplemented labor-saving automation with low-skilled labor from abroad. Yet Kaneko explains how the relevant protocols in these countries have proven similarly "ineffective and impractical," distorted as they are by mixed motives and inconsistent implementation.

Taiwan denies work visas to Chinese, in vigilance against China's threats to Taiwanese sovereignty. Instead, the island nation has formally welcomed workers from neighboring ASEAN countries, simultaneously answering labor needs and cultivating diplomatic outreach. Southeast Asians are employed as blue-collar hirelings and as maids - these women having been targeted partly so as to "push" Taiwanese wives/mothers into the workforce. However, Taiwan's official motivations work against the grain of ethnic prejudice. Non-Taiwanese Asian workers of both genders too often face discrimination, exploitation, isolation, and abuse.

Kaneko relates that migrant laborers face even greater assimilation difficulties in Japan than in Taiwan. He attributes this to an even more pronounced anxiety among the Japanese over perceived immigrant threats to social order and to reassuring (and relative) homogeneity. Japanese regulations are therefore more restrictive than Taiwan's. Foreign-labor needs have therefore been serviced surreptitiously, by those on educational and entertainment visas. Meanwhile, Japan faces continued workforce shortages - partly accounting for the country's notorious problem of overwork. Kaneko describes the relative failures of an attempt to bring in Brazilian laborers of Japanese descent, based on the mistaken supposition that their shared ancestry with locals would enable them to assimilate more naturally than other races. He points out that, despite political tensions between China and Japan, it is in fact Chinese newcomers who have established themselves most firmly, moving increasingly into middle-class positions such as managers and professors. In the final measure,

Kaneko argues that Japan's continued resistance to the mass importation of foreign workers - while not wholly unfounded, given the social tensions involved - bespeaks a failure to grasp the grim reality that is the graying of Japan.

Catherine Gomes directs attention to another wealthy Asian country, Singapore. She also illuminates present concerns over demographic decline and national identity. However, Gomes focuses not on transnational influxes, but on population outflows and resultant worries over the nation's brain drain. Gomes details government strategies to perpetuate a sense of national identification among Singaporean sojourners. These aim to shape the "memory" of such expatriates and to entice them back *home*. To this end, the foreign ministry and quasi-governmental agencies fund gala and nostalgia-nurturing Singapore Days abroad, operate web-portal virtual communities, and otherwise work to encourage and facilitate repatriation and/or transnational business networks.

The Singaporean government works no less intently to strengthen patriotism within the city-state. As a prime example, a My Singapore campaign was launched in the early 1990s, via national dailies and stump speeches, with a message branding permanent émigrés as "quitters." Gomes also describes the narratives of nationalism propagated through Singapore's government-sponsored museums, and through national education programs. These institutions essentially equate Singapore with the rise of its ruling party, while glossing over or erasing aspects of history that could detract from or even contravene this celebration.

This issue's final article is not regionally focused like the first three, but it tackles a problem plaguing all nations: poverty. Pertti Saariluoma, Sacha Helfenstein, and Johann Maksimainen outline a preliminary plan for empowering the poor by tapping open information and communication-technology principles. They propose development of PeopleNet, a virtual community service based on the "right to information" propounded by Article 19 in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The authors focus on the stubborn digital divide that continues to cut off lower-income social groups from the wealth of Web-based knowledge. As they point out, it is not enough to simply ensure public access to free Internet kiosks. An infinitude of inert data does not translate itself into emancipation-relevant learning - it must be designed and directed towards efficient, interactive, actualization.

With this in mind, the authors offer guidelines for rendering PeopleNet practicable. Its construction and operation requires a deep-reaching understanding of the psychology and ecology of poverty, and must address a full panoply of concerns: nutrition, healthcare, education, decent work, security, legal knowledge, and personal relations. The authors describe and allude to a host of operational challenges and solutions. For example, owing to problems with literacy among poorer populations, text-based communication should be deemphasized in favor of visuals, videos, and podcasts. Given the plenitude of such exigencies, potential users - the poor themselves - must be included in the very design of PeopleNet.

This article ends hopefully, highlighting the principles and priorities behind the emergent Web 2.0 paradigm - from enjoyability and ease of use to social networking and multi-user platforms. Such "apps" appeal to the basic physical and psychic needs of people, in a way that could catch on with the disadvantaged more readily than traditional media. However, the authors warn that this potential will not realize itself. Unless a "digital bridge" is consciously constructed, and soon, 4G virtuality will leave the poor ever further behind on the information turnpike.

The four articles in this issue - three critically-inflected explications of Asian (mis)governance, followed by a call to (digital) arms against poverty - remind us that global studies must focus attention on matters of economic import. Yet, as crucially, these researchers make plain that globalization cannot be reduced to mere financial data. In aggregate, the following articles forward the multidisciplinary (econo/politico/religio/ethno/socio/techno) quintessence of contemporary world-compression. As such, this issue will prove both informative and interesting for readers of *AJGS*.

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