Constructing modern Asian citizenship

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An intriguing comparative angle of Edward Vickers and Krishna Kumar’s edited volume *Constructing Modern Asian Citizenship* is its geographical focus: Asia. While the editors recognise the problematic Euro-centric and colonial implications of the term ‘Asia’, they maintain that ‘Asia’ has gained new meanings within various nation-states in the region. This Asian focus, I would argue, makes this book an important and timely contribution in the comparative citizenship education field. This is especially so at a time when social and political institutions in Europe have met unprecedented challenges and the European citizenship education project is at a volatile juncture, as is most recently evidenced in the ‘Leave’ result of the EU referendum in the UK. This book, therefore, offers precious reference points for scholars worldwide to understand how citizenship education fares in Asia.

This volume encompasses an impressive realm of national contexts, spanning from Turkey to Japan, from Mongolia to the Philippines and Malaysia, from China to India, and from Singapore to Hong Kong. This is further strengthened by its substantial thematic focuses, covering historic (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2) and contemporary investigations of citizenship, citizenship within (Chapters 4–9) and outside the school gate (Chapters 10 and 11), in daily life (Chapters 12 and 13) and the virtual world (Chapter 14).

The Introduction strikes me as succinct yet comprehensive, providing an overview of the key themes and making some bold offering of new conceptual angles, especially a fresh interpretation of colonial domination in Asia. Specifically, the authors argue that colonial practices are never alien to the Asian context. This is epitomised in Vickers’ Chapter 3 in Part I where he argues for conceiving of China as a colonial power through investigating its historic as well as contemporary discourse and practice of the ‘civilising mission’. This evocative perspective presents an unsettling account for the contemporary educated Chinese person’s national identity that champions China as exclusively a victim of Western imperialism and serves as a useful reminder for curricula-development in China with regard to its ‘minorities’ ethnic groups.

In Parts II and III, six distinctive chapters proffer a comprehensive understanding of how citizenship education is approached in Japan, China, India, the Philippines, Turkey, Pakistan and Malaysia. While the chapters in Part II are mainly concerned with curricula and textbooks, those in Part III engage in depth with the role of Islamic faith in constructions of national identities. Such thematic focuses prove fertile grounds for meaningful comparison. In Chapter 4, for example, Caroline Rose compares the often neglected role of post-national/global citizenship education in Japan and China, focusing specifically on their respective social studies curricula. Rose notes that despite the acknowledgement of a need to cultivate global awareness and connectedness among the youth, in both countries the global dimension of citizenship education becomes subservient to the ‘nation-state’ model in which challenges of a globalising world are emphasised. Meanwhile, no reference has been made to being Asians or East Asians. She argues that the ‘imagined effects’ of globalisation has been selectively played up in Japanese education debates, serving to buttress the legitimacy and role of the state and bolster Japanese identity. Similar tactics can be observed in the case of China. While Rose highlights that national and global citizenship education need not be mutually exclusive, her conclusion seems to portray a pessimistic picture of a binary between the two, not only present within Japan and China, but also in Europe and other parts of the world.
A notable thread underpinning these chapters is a sense of lack of ‘success’ in some nations-states’ citizenship education. While the reasons suggested are multifarious, I appreciate the critical understanding offered by Maca and Morris in Chapter 6. They maintain that the weak Filipino national identity allows its people comparatively more freedom from ‘the chauvinistic tendencies, state-induced ideological insanity, or aggressive, expansionist bent that nationalism has encouraged elsewhere in the region’ (143).

In Parts IV and V, the chapters move beyond textbooks and curricula, exploring museums in Shanghai, youth organisations in Hong Kong and Singapore, civic attitudes of youth in Singapore, Mongolia and among overseas Chinese students. The rich empirical details and penetrating accounts of individuals (e.g. Rowena He’s Chapter 14) have made these chapters an enjoyable read.

To my mild disappointment, a conclusion that ties all these chapters together is absent. I would have liked to read about how this extensive collection of work can be taken forward and see an attempt to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for a new understanding of the ‘Asian citizenship’ contexts and issues. Despite these, this book contributes substantively to uncovering traditional and newer forms of state technologies in legitimating elite ruling through citizenship formation projects across Asia. This volume will, therefore, appeal to students and scholars of Asian culture and society, Asian education, comparative education and citizenship.

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