

POSITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN THE REGIONAL AND MULTI-CULTURAL FRAME WORK

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Introduction: The Rise of East Asian Countries

Firstly, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Dr. Chuang Kuo, President of National Cheng Kung University for organizing this Forum and give me the honor as a panelist to address the challenges of our region is face in these coming years. The most important event that is taking place in the world today is the modernization of Asia: economically, politically, and culturally (Naisbitt, 1996: 18). The continent inhabited by more than half of the world's population is now rapidly and profoundly rising as a new center of global economy (see Ibrahim, 1996: 25). Besides that, an unprecedented technological rise marks as well the reawakened giant.

This phenomenon indicates at least two things. First, we are seeing a remarkable change from an old Asia to a new and modern region. The face of Asia is at present time decorated by important advancements in science and technology, Taiwan in computer and computer peripherals, South Korea in consumer electronics and telecommunications, Japan in automotive, high precision equipments and very recently animation and multimedia technology, and China this week has made remarkable achievement in space technology. Second, in the near future, a mega-shift is progressing as countries in Asia turn themselves to become dominant region of the world.

The rapid economic, societal and political development of the multicultural Asia, would possibly lead our countries to a new challenge, unfortunately, the asymmetrical relationships due to a combined factors of cultural backgrounds, narrow nationalistic mindsets and the widening economic gap.

In order for the Asian countries to respond properly and adequately to the threat of this relationships, an epistemic approach by enhancing the role of higher education need be develop. I hope the President Forum of Southeast Asian Universities organized by

National Cheng Kung University of the Republic of China take the lead in the mobilization of higher learning communities for solving the confronting problems.

The Challenges of Multiculturalism

The most evident fact that we see in Asia and that we cannot deny is the cultural diversity of the region. Asia is very obviously a multicultural region. If we perceive religion as the major factor influencing culture, Asia is the region of four main religions, namely Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, and Shintoism

These religio-cultural diversity is in one hand a sign of richness, but in the other hand could very potentially lead to misunderstanding and asymmetrical relationships among the communities. In this situation, one particular community might feel more superior and stronger than the other or others; and as a consequence, other particular community might feel deprived or suppressed. This situation could trigger intercultural and ever worse religious conflicts that will surely harm the process of the regional development. In fact, multiculturalism can only grow in an open civic culture where the political environment enables full participation and open interaction of all the diverse elements of society (Ibrahim, 1996: 24).

For that reason, Asia should make efforts to condition symmetrical relationships among communities. The region must prevent a predominantly single community. All communities must treat each other and be treated equally. In other words, the region must prevent injustice towards individuals and minorities. In order to realize the objective, we need heterogeneous dialogues. We believe that cultural dialogues, in all its forms and implementations, could minimize misunderstanding, mis-presumption, misjudgment, etc.

The Position of Higher Education

The possibility that asymmetrical relationships would develop in a region, which is multicultural in nature and with different level of development, is very high. To prevent such relationships to develop in Northeast and South East Asia, leaders of these countries agreed to enhance cooperation by enhancing the formation of East Asia regionalism. They believed that by the establishment of such a regional institutional cooperation, countries in the region would be able to overcome the adverse effects of

regional economic disparity and multicultural tensions, while to jointly encountering the effect of economic globalization.

Triggered by the experience of worst economic crises of 1997, countries in the region are more attentive in building cooperation mechanism by coordinating their economic policies at regional level. For these purpose, three of the Northeast Asia countries, i.e. China, Japan and South Korea, which are major economic player in Asia, collaborated with Southeast Asia countries, which are traditionally their strategic economic partners.

The idea of "Pacific Community" as a systematic way to foster symmetric relationships between Asian countries, could be traced back from early 20th century, but most of the ideas coming from "developed hemisphere", such as Japan, Australia and the United States. But, since 1990s a new surge for the idea come into surface with South Korea taking the lead. While Japan focus her effort to maintain symmetrical relationship with neighboring countries through economic aids, by proposing the Miyazawa Plan. South Korea takes different route and introduces an epistemic approach by fostering dialogues among Asian intellectuals to discuss the regional problems.

As a multicultural and rapidly develop region in an increasingly complexity of contemporary international system, due to growing number and kind of international actors – states, multinational corporations, international organizations, transnational alliances, etc – and more complicated international issues, country leaders of Asia encounter with rapidly changing situation. Within these circumstances, new knowledge and ideas are very much needed to be able to respond the challenge properly and correctly. The epistemic approach and the development of epistemic community is important in encouraging close relationship between Asian countries, a better and more symmetrical Asia, and in encouraging regional integration.

In order to reduce the negative effects of the problems, higher education should play a role as an effective vehicle to foster multicultural dialogues by including in its curriculum multi-ethnicity and multi-cultural issues. Thus, we could hope that potentials conflicts could be stifled. For this reason, regional cooperation is unavoidable, in order to share experiences, to face common challenges, and to jointly build a more competitive Asia.

As member of the epistemic community, the position of higher education in the development of symmetrical and peaceful Asia is highly strategic. Higher education should become a fertile nurturing ground for dialogues and therefore become a powerful instrument for building better understanding of the immense diversity and multiculturalism of the region. Such epistemic approach has evolved within Asian higher education system. ASEAN University Network which was formed by KASEAS and ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Foundation, and a growing number of epistemic community can play leading role and contribute to the creation of consensual norms as a strong foundation for symmetrical relationships between countries in this Asia region.

The role of higher education as vehicle for the development of symmetrical relationships and finally to encourage regional integration is extremely important. Higher learning institution could design their curriculum in such a way to allow students, the future leaders of the region, to study major cultures of Asia, and to be more conscious of the multicultural and the diversity of this region. This institute can also play significant role in the development of symmetrical relationships between Asian countries through organizing of twinning programs, encouraging student and staff exchange program, joint research on regional problems, joint seminar and workshops to encourage discourses on regional issues. These programs are designed to increase student and staff mobility that can become a fertile nurturing ground for the seeds for better understanding, better appreciation, and finally for building trust toward other culture and the neighbouring country.

Indonesia: Case in point

Indonesia is a miniature of the region in terms of its multicultural and economic diversity nature, and asymmetrical relationships become more apparent, reviving from the so-called multidimensional crisis. As at the regional level, there are pressing needs to build continuous dialogues and symmetrical relationships in the country, much more than in the past. There are strong signals that the national consensus "Unity in Diversity" is nowadays being challenged by problems of low tolerance and ethnic-bound policies.

In such a pluralistic country, again higher education can play a significant role and is very much expected to serve as a neutral driving force of a democratic, just and

prosperous nation. And it is the duty of Indonesia's higher education to respond to those problems.

Acknowledging the long term repercussions of the problems, Indonesia's Higher Education Long Term Strategy (HELTS) emphasizes (1) the importance of building a strong nation's character and civilization to foster nation's competitiveness, (2) the need of various new schemes in carrying out the education process in order to produce graduates with life-long learning capacity and to meet the challenges as well as the opportunities of globalization, (3) the role of academic communities as a moral force that guides the changes and unite the nation.

As major higher learning institutions of Indonesia, University of Indonesia, Bogor Institute of Agriculture, Bandung Institute of Technology and Gadjah Mada University, have a common responsibility to lead the development of the country's epistemic community to assist leaders of the in solving our national problems and in facing problems confronting the nation.

Conclusions

Higher education is a source of conscience and inspiration in the region's transitional period of transformation. With the inclusion of multi-ethnicity and multi-cultural issues in its curriculum and the promotion of regional academic cooperations, we believe that higher education could play very significant role in the regional development, for the sake of the sustainable human development.

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