Employment Relations in the Asia-Pacific: Changing Approaches


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Employment Relations in the Asia-Pacific: Changing Approaches is an edited volume, which studies changing employment relations (ER) in seven Asia-Pacific countries. The study is spread over thirteen chapters, with the countries in question being categorized into three levels of economic development: the industrialized market economies (IME) of Australia, Japan and New Zealand, the newly industrialized economies (NIE) of South Korea and Taiwan, and the up-and-coming economies of China and Indonesia. Four main units of analyses are given attention in this book – the nation-state, trade unions, companies and the case of APEC as a supra-state organization. An introductory chapter serves to collate and further analyze the data from the other chapters. The editorial team is composed of academics and practitioners in the field of labour relations – Greg J. Bamber, Professor and Director of the Graduate School of Management, Griffith University, Funkoo Park, President of the Korea Labour Institute, Changwon Lee, Director for Labour Policy in the Office of the President, Republic of Korea, Peter K. Ross, a PhD candidate and Associate Lecturer at the School of International Business, and Kaye Broadbent, Associate Lecturer in the School of Industrial Relations, Griffith University.

The main thrust of the book is analyzing the changes to ER in the abovementioned countries since 1945. Following the thrust of Japan, these Asian countries have seen impressive economic growth, for many, in the aftermath of colonialism. The changes to ER are also discussed in light of the recent Asian economic crisis, which arguably set in on 2 July 1997 with the devaluation of the Thai bath following the bursting of the property and stock exchange bubbles which were pumped full of transitory portfolio equity. Following the lead of Dore (1979), this book discusses the contexts for ER which are treated as reflections of the level of economic development in the various countries.

Conceptually, the book is directed by two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that as economies move towards becoming IMEs, they would tend to adopt ER practices and institutions that are found in already established IMEs. This follows the familiar Kerrian “convergence thesis”, based on the “logic of industrialism”, where technology is expected to bring about a similar set of structural and cultural features. Inputting national politics as a factor, the second hypothesis is that major political changes such as significant moves towards democratization would have a consequence on national perspectives on ER.
This book would be of good use to scholars in management, industrial relations, sociology and political economy. The data presented in the 13 chapters are rich, utilizing descriptive statistical data in the analyses of ER changes since the beginning of the modernization and industrialization projects of the respective countries. The deployment of various levels of analysis (organizational, statal and supra-statal) gives the reader the ability to tie micro, meso and macro perspectives on ER in the various countries together.

One conclusion that was derived from this study was that the stimuli for change in ER is “more than the product of a country’s industrialization” (Greg J. Bamber and Peter K. Ross, “Industrialization, Democratization and Employment Relations in the Asia-Pacific”: 18). Indeed, the other factors that were recognized as significant were local and global markets for products and labour as well as governmental attitudes and actions towards economic reform. Such recognition allows this book to escape the trap of technological reductionism. Yet, one factor that was not given enough consideration is the politics of the “world-system”. Economic development has often been defined and directed by the “core” countries, namely, those in the Western hemisphere (Esteva, 1992). In the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis for example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB)/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) came to the aid of many ailing Asian economies. Their insistence on certain reforms, however, led observers to argue that these supra-state organizations had a political agenda of “proselytizing” neo-classical economics (see Amsden, 1994). Such neo-classical reforms were often out of sync with the long-standing supporting structures in these Asian economies (see for example Wade and Veneroso, 1998), lending credence to claims by Asian politicians about the inherent differences in attitudes and behaviour between Asia and the West (see for example Mahathir, 1995). Seen in this light, an analysis of the changes in ER should also factor in the power and influence of these institutions as well as dominant trade partners like the US. As was mentioned in the book, South Korea’s ER system, for example, has been moving towards an “American” model, away from its original “Asian” one. This is a consequence of corporate reforms introduced as a condition of the IMF loan package which led to the introduction of elements of the American model, namely, the emphasis on corporate governance emphasizing shareholder rights and finance as determinants of executive-level decision making over and above human resources. It thus could be that while technology and industrialization themselves are not sole determinants of changes to ER, international political influence could indeed play a large role.

One direction for future research that may take its cue from this book is the placement of technology and politics and changes to ER as independent and dependent variables. The hypotheses running through the book were confirmed and disconfirmed at differing levels by the countries studied. A possible alternative hypothesis is that changes to ER would signal changes to political structure and democratization, following an observation made by (Greg J. Bamber and Peter K. Ross, “Industrialization, Democratization and Employment Relations in the Asia-Pacific”: 18) in the cases of South Korea and Taiwan. It could also be hypothesized that the adoption of ER models found elsewhere, especially in more economically successful countries would lead to changes to the economic structure and spur economic growth. This latter hypothesis follows from other models of development such as the “flying geese model”, where Asian countries have been said to imitate Japan by acting as the “follower” country which imports goods from more advanced countries, learns to produce them, protects its own infant industries and then exports the goods it has learnt to produce to other countries. The adoption of ER models found elsewhere could indeed be beneficial to the adopting countries, in the sense of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), foreign professional labour, as well as having a multiplier effect on other sectors related to the employment sector. Such economic benefits have indeed been identified elsewhere, specifically in Singapore’s arts industry (see Singapore 2000a, b).
References


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