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BOOK REVIEW

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Dongre and Seungkwon Jang (Eds.):
Waking the Asian Pacific Co-operative Potential

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“Is it possible to identify a regional cooperative model (or models) of the Asia Pacific region?”

With 23 case studies across 11 countries and four cooperative sectors (agricultural cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, credit cooperatives and worker cooperatives), the 44 authors of *Waking the Asian Pacific Co-operative Potential* boldly try to answer this question. This voluminous book with around 400 pages—a valuable fruit of a long and collective adventure of cooperative researchers in the Asia-Pacific region—was stimulated and constructed by dynamics around regional conferences of the International Cooperative Alliance Asia-Pacific Committee on Cooperative Research (ICA-AP CCR).

To answer the question, the book starts with historical and theoretical overviews to construct an analytical framework (Part 1) which guides the case studies (Part 2). In developing the analytical framework, the authors raise the concept of “Asian Pacific cooperative models” (Chapter 2) and

review the historical evolution of the cooperative movement (Chapter 4) and that of the public policies (Chapter 5) in the region. Some theoretical dimensions which contribute to constructing a framework are also examined (Chapter 3 and 9). As a result, an analytical framework is proposed to guide the case studies and also test a hypothetical relationship between the different business systems represented by some country groups (post socialism, advanced city, emerging Southeast Asian, Advanced Northeast Asian, coordinated market economy and liberal market economy) and various cooperative models in the region. The analytical framework is composed of macro factors (the State, civil institutions, and the market) and micro factors (governance and human relations management), which are supposed to influence the success (or failure) of individual cooperatives and specific cooperative movements. Although these factors are not strictly used in the case studies, they help to “understand the differences in cooperative type and formation across the Asia Pacific region (Chapter 9, p. 101)”.

However, in their conclusion (Part 3, Chapter 35), the authors agree that “it is difficult to establish a common set of values for the Asia Pacific region that is different from the rest of the world” (p. 371). Indeed, the Asia Pacific region is the biggest and the most populated region of the world which has many sub-regions with different cultures and very contrasting political and economy regimes. If we also consider the different economic sectors and types of cooperatives, it seems very difficult, if not impossible, to develop a regional model (or models). Based on the case studies, the authors also acknowledge that “the Asia Pacific region is highly diverse and the ‘one size fits all’ approach does not suit while understanding and analysing these economies” (Chapter 17, p. 196) and “the task of identifying a set of common factors is an unenviable task” (Chapter 35, p. 372). One of the interesting findings is that successful cooperatives are “driven more by micro factors than macro factors” so that “the best way to explain cooperatives in the Asia Pacific region is to develop models based on the factors internal to the organization” (Chapter 35, p. 374).

Is this gap between the ambitious objective (the construction of specific regional models based on a set of common factors) and the slightly unexpected finding (the impossibility of identifying the models) an inevitable conclusion? We might explore a more constructive solution by giving attention to some epistemological issues related to the research about the non-Western societies. It is undeniable that the construction of the modern world and its intellectual dimension has been driven by the Western society supported by the modern sciences including the social, political and economic sciences. Based on the accumulated knowledge and data about their own experiences first, the academic community of the Western society developed several concepts, notions, theories and their applied practices and tools, which have been used in a universal way across the world. Obviously, the transplanted of the Western-led scientific and knowledge system coincided with the political and economic expansion of the Western empires in the 19th and 20th centuries. We can wonder whether, in introducing (or being forced to introduce) the Western-led scientific and knowledge system, the Asia-Pacific region could reflect, with their own experiences and languages, on what the State, the market and civil institutions (which are mobilized as macro factors in this book) mean for them. Using these macro-level concepts related to the main institutions—which

are diverse, complex, and sometimes uncertain in the Asian-Pacific context—as the explaining factors for the success or failure of individual cases might filter only the information fitting to these predetermined macro-level concepts and evacuate other unfitted information, which might have played a more important role in practices, in putting them under somewhat vague but also mythicised concepts, such as “community”, “social capital”, “informality” and “grass-root”. This can mislead people to imagine that there are institutional actors like the State, the market and the civil society who forge and regulate people’s lives with their own normative orientations. Then, organizations including cooperatives might be considered as micro-level institutional spaces based on a set of rules which are regulated and influenced by macro institutional actors and but also, in their turn, framing members’ beliefs and behaviours. In this context, the role of leaders who have a capacity of understanding and anticipating these macro institutional logics becomes more critical. On the contrary, members might be considered as “following a leader when such a leader is found to be working for the betterment of the cooperative” (Chapter 35, p. 373) in a hierarchical relationship. To certain extents, this description is true in many cooperatives in the non-Western world and supposes some “politically correct” answers for the success of cooperatives, such as enabling government and public policies, committed leadership, democratic and participatory governance, and devotion to the *cooperative identity* and so forth.

However, are all these really what people in the Asia-Pacific region share sense of understanding? Don’t we use the Western prototypes in understanding only part of the reality in a selective way and in ignoring local people’s ways of making sense with their own languages and normative logics? In different contexts, not limited to the State and the market, there are various institutions and the power-balance among them varies. There are some institutions which cannot be easily understood by the Western prototypes, although they must have more direct influence on cooperatives, for example, Ho Chi Minh city People’s Committee (Chapter 18, p. 209) which is a local branch of the Communist party, traditional philosophical movements (*Vagbadanandha* for the Uralungal Labour Contract Co-operative Society-ULCCS in India, Chapter 30, p. 327, and the *Hansalim* philosophy in Korea, Chapter 20, p. 226, among others) and a concept of *Han* group in Japan (Chapter 21, p. 235). Instead of adopting predetermined conceptual prototypes, we might follow how people in the Asia-Pacific region make sense about their cooperatives in mobilizing different institutional and situational elements as well as different normative logics. In creating and developing cooperatives, some people must have followed what the State or the market dictated but some others must have refused the dominant way of structuring these institutions and created their cooperatives as an autonomous micro institutional sphere (Laville, 2016). As the French pragmatism sociology proposes (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), in following people’s interpretation about what they understand and what they are doing, we might reconstruct a different analytical framework composed of emerging concepts developed from local people’s viewpoint with their own language. This analytical framework based on the native’s own epistemology might allow to bring back different levels of “factors” in the situation of individual cases. Macro factors can be reintroduced not as predetermined independent variables but as different forms of institutions representing a

set of norms, rules and codifications that frame behaviours, beliefs, normative commitments and preferences at the individual level as well as at the collective level by shaping predictable patterns of interaction relatively independent of individuals, time and space. Micro factors should also be reinterpreted as well. They are not an automate with predetermined functions but devices (in French, *dispositifs*) that are at people's disposition. Therefore, in this analytical framework, individual or collective actors themselves can be at the centre of the analysis in a situation by understanding how they make sense of all the elements arranged in the situation and coordinate them in order to move forwards in a normative direction they consider appropriate. From this approach, the authors' proposal of "developing models based on the factors internal to the organization" might be reformulated as "developing models focusing on the actors in the organization". Probably, this approach can shed more lights on some interesting common elements found across cases but not dealt with properly because they are not covered by proposed factors, for example, an evolutionary trend towards the multipurpose/multiactivity cooperative model and a description style heroizing leaders, among others.

Of course, this epistemological turning needs a different research design and method and therefore, it will be of a totally different nature of research than this book, which has already its own values and contributions. However, it might make another trial to answer the initial question which will inspire many Asian-Pacific scholars continuously.

It should be noted that, besides its ambitious questioning, this book has remarkable merits as a collection giving a broader overview on cooperatives in different countries and sectors in the Asia Pacific region. It will be able to serve as an excellent map for those who want to know more about cooperatives and the cooperative movement in the Asia Pacific region. In reading this book, you will realize that the Asian-Pacific cooperative potential is already waken up and is making its own way to the future.

References

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