

Introduction

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The first issue of Volume 6 is our eleventh, but the first to be fully online. While this decision reflects the breaking of our tie with our publisher, Berghahn, made by our parent body the *International Association for Asia Pacific Studies* and the Research Office of APU at the end of the Association's start-up funding, it does not mean the demise of our successful journal. We are actively seeking to join another publisher's list in order to produce some hard copies as well as being online, while continuing as before with publishing the journal twice a year. So, please, continue to submit your articles, we remain a going, fully refereed, high quality journal. This year we shall be seeking citation listings in addition to our existing status.

In the present volume, the general articles are unsolicited manuscripts covering a wide range of topics (in our last issue we reported from IAAPS and other conferences). Our first article is *The Transformation of a Family Ritual in Interwar Japan*, by Melinda Papp, and deals with historical changes in a childhood ritual, *shichigosan*, that enjoys a big popularity in modern Japan. Its present form is shaped by an intense commercialization which is initially channelled to the ritual observers through the media. The article examines the early phases of the path that led to the development of the present pattern and reflects on the social and economic factors that heavily influenced the development of the ritual; among these we find the growing influence of print media, changing ideals in the Japanese family, and the beginnings of the commercialization of the ritual.

The second article continues the focus on Japan and its social and cultural *mores*. Entitled *Religion, Moral Values and the Ethics of Japanese Society*, it is by Nader Ghotbi. This contribution argues that at the societal level, following an organized religion may function as a 'proof of righteousness.' A certain religious affiliation can therefore be regarded as a 'compass' for taking a specific position in complex situations. Japanese society, however, is different in this regard; it commonly uses other 'social' mechanisms, but not religion, as the compass for making important decisions. Japanese society, therefore, acts as a secular society, and Japanese people may thus mistakenly be assumed not to be religious. This conclusion opens the next discussion about the peculiar 'moral values' that characterize the Japanese and the nature of the secular 'ethical compass' they use. The article argues that the 'ethics' of Japanese society are closely linked to its collective culture, and describes some of the contemporary issues that can be explained through this perspective.

Murguía, Christmas, and Nishibata continue the focus on Japan in our third article, with their take on the study of the monstrophy that has emerged in that country, *Ge-ge-ge no Kitarō and the Yōkai of Japan: A Case Study of Monstrophy in Japanese Popular Culture*. Japanese monsters, *yōkai*, and Japanese folklore are explored using a case study of the *Ge-ge-ge no Kitarō* series that explores Japanese *yōkai* folklore, one of the most successful anime series in Japan. Hours upon hours of anime watching were used to explore how creator Shigeru Mizuki uses monsters to entertain, educate, and introduce Japanese folklore to new generations. The *yōkai* are complex cultural expressions that traverse Western interpretations of monstrophy. The long running manga/anime series tells the story of monsters that fight to bring peace to a world embroiled in constant

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conflicts between humans and supernatural beings. This study uses content analysis to interpret its various uses of yōkai folklore. Additionally, three recurring themes that run throughout the series are discussed: (1) the functions of incorporating folly, (2) the cultivation of social conscience and (3) the preservation of traditional Japanese folklore.

For our fourth article we have chosen *The “Positioning” of Identity among Minangkabau Female Migrants in Indonesia* by Iman and Mani. These authors examine the society of West Sumatra in Indonesia, the world’s largest matrilineal society (Minangkabau). That society encourages its young males to undertake *merantau* (migration) for life experiences and economic opportunities. However, Minangkabau females were traditionally expected to remain within their matrilineal boundaries of their *nagari* (district) and *kampung* (village). In the twentieth century, single Minang women, too, began migrating in large numbers to the larger cities within Indonesia for education and work. This article reports on a study of the identity transition among Minang women who have migrated to the greater Jakarta region, which includes Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital, and the nearby Tangerang city. The findings indicate that Minang women in the greater Jakarta region have “positioned” their identity in the context of a combination of Minangkabau matrilineal culture, the expected Islamic identity in Jakarta and a cosmopolitan urban life among many other ethnic groups.

We follow this with *Higher Education in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic: A Profile and Some Contemporary Challenges* by Moxom and Hayden. This article notes that, to date, little scholarly attention has been given to the higher education system in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). It addresses this gap by providing a profile of the system and a review of its contemporary challenges. Particular attention is paid to issues of governance, finance and quality. Given the dominance within the system of the National University of Laos (NUOL), and the fact that there is so little data available generally about the system, much of the paper focuses on NUOL.

Our final article changes the focus on community social structures to a consideration of the Chinese economic “miracle,” in *The 21st Century World Economy In the Wake of the Rise of the BRICS: The Chinese Miracle Reconsidered*, by Shie, Chen, and Chuang. The articles demonstrates how developing countries are affected by the Chinese economy and a few other giant ones. The Chinese miracle has drawn considerable attention. But the article highlights three hidden dimensions. First, the Chinese “miracle” (as well as those of other BRICS members) squeezes the developmental space of late industrializing economies. Second, and unexpectedly, China will become an unstable force in the world-economy, for the distribution of wealth in China has been quite unequal. Third, the Chinese “miracle” may not be that extraordinary. This article questions whether China can win the upper hand in the 21st-century knowledge-based economy. Quantitatively, China has improved its competitive standing by increasing the number of patent applications closely related to its innovative capabilities. But qualitatively, high-value patents are largely controlled by industrialized countries. This fact makes the so-called miracle less glorious than it initially appears.

The Book Reviews

In the first of our book reviews for this issue, Paul Christensen assesses Wolfram Manzenreiter’s *Sport and Body Politics in Japan* (Routledge Research in Sport, Culture and Society, Volume 26, 2014, 330pp, \$140.00

hardcover). He notes that the book seeks to fill a range of gaps in the social science literature concerning the role and place of athletics within global circulations of bodies, capital, and expertise. The analysis is centered in Japan, with side excursions to Austria and South Korea as well as a focus on relevant global connections, and argues that a “comprehensive approach towards sport as a distinctive cultural sphere” is urgently needed. Christensen suggests that the book is at its strongest in the introduction and epilogue, when articulating the need and importance of sports as a necessary topic for intellectual focus, and recommends the book as a call to scholars across the social sciences to observe and consider sports in meaningful ways that further contextualizes their importance within contemporary life. Manzenreiter is successful in arguing why such work is needed.

Continuing with books on Japan, Jonathan Strand then looks at *The Rise of Asian Donors: Japan's Impact on the Evolution of Emerging Donors*, edited by Jin Sato and Yasutami Shimomura (Routledge, London, 2013, 197pp, £95.00 hardcover). This book notes that governments are motivated by a variety of domestic and external forces when deciding to allocate official development assistance (ODA). Most of the research in international relations has focused on the ODA programs of major donors, especially the United States, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe. The field of ODA studies is home to rich qualitative and quantitative studies addressing the motivations for giving aid. More recently, scholars have reconsidered the linkage of policymaking in international forums, such as the United Nations Security Council, to ODA disbursements. There is also increasing attention to so-called new donors, such as South Korea, China, and India. The research collected by Jin Sato and Yasutami Shimomura in the edited volume *The Rise of Asian Donors: Japan's Impact on the Evolution of Emerging Donors* contributes to our understanding of aid relations by considering how the historical experience of being a recipient of aid influences the ODA programs of new donors. Moreover, the evidence the book's authors provide points to how aid programs need to be understood within a specific historical context.

Our next review, one of two reviews in this issue from Xiaolong Zou, moves on to China. This review looks at the Chinese language only *Chinese Low-Carbon City Construction Report*, edited by Weiguang Huang, and Jun Wang (Science Press, Beijing, 2014, 313pp, RMB128 softcover), and provides readers with comprehensive reviews of China's low-carbon city developments in terms of theories and practices from regional, and cross-national perspectives. It consists of nine chapters, each addressing a different aspect of low-carbon city initiatives. The preface offers a general overview of China's urgent need for low-carbon transformation. The editors further illustrate the political background in which this book has been conceived and the sociopolitical significance this has. In summary, this book explains the current political framework of policies and regulations through case studies, and provides a SWOT analysis in regard to China's low-carbon urbanization practices from institutional, academic and industrial aspects. The contents of this book offer significant insights particularly for policy makers and practitioners of city planning and management. However, there are a few drawbacks regarding the structure and content of the chapters - overlapping reviews are seen in most chapters, and many of the best practices quoted from developed countries show little novelty. Very few cases and references are given for developing or less developed parts of the world where true inspirations and

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practical wisdom might be found. Regrettably, however, the book is currently only published in Chinese. I hope that this review brings it to a wider audience.

Moving into books from other parts of Asia, Viktor M. Stoll reviews *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People*, edited by David Armitage and Alison Bashford (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2014. xiv + 371 pp. GBP £60.00 softcover). Despite the geographic divisions of North-South and island-rim, the editors of this book believe that the Pacific Ocean “suggests a whole globe in a way that other oceans do not.” In exploring this unique region of contemporaneous isolation and connection, the book’s many contributors seek to “interrogate, but not artificially to integrate” the histories of the region through a fusion of broad themes over the *longue durée*, mapping a “four-dimensional Pacific.” Viktor Stoll includes comments on the works of each contributor to *Pacific Histories*, and believes that the book achieves the editors’ goal of reincorporating the “Pacific into the writing, and rewriting, of world history.”

Sayed Nasrat looks at *Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development*, by Chuck Thiessen (Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 2013, 208pp, US \$80.00 hardcover). In this book, the author cites emerging peacebuilding theories and rhetoric to suggest an urgent need for the revision of the Afghan ownership peacebuilding strategies and models. However, it is not clearly discussed whether such a revision will enhance Afghan local ownership, and any successful examples of this approach in other war-torn countries are missing. The issues of rule of law and good governance, which have a significant role in the peacebuilding process in Afghanistan (see United States Institute of Peace 2011), have not been discussed specifically in the book, either. Overall, though, these shortcomings do not undermine the weight of the author’s argument. Furthermore, the discussion is quite informative and provides useful insights on how appropriate peacebuilding structures and processes lead to increased local ownership of peace by involving the local Afghan citizens, within the dilemmas of outside intervention in Afghanistan.

Finally, civilization has entered into a pivotal yet delicate transition of epoch, where the “business as usual” model of living is deemed as not sustainable for future generations on this resource-finite earth we call home. Pursuing sustainability on almost every front of ecological, economic and social conduct has become the “new norm.” In his second review, Xiaolong Zou looks at *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*, by Karen T. Litfin (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2014, 223pp, US\$24.95 softcover). This book offers an inspiring perspective on upscaling the principles from the global ecovillages that she visited to “glean for lessons” that can be applied in our daily lives, and, more importantly, translates this thinking into action. Firmly convinced that the “business as usual” way of living has pushed people to the “edge of the end of civilization,” Litfin wants to empower her readers with more genuine responses by drawing lessons and inspirations from these ecovillages where everyday life strands of sustainability are seen in daily practices rather than academic discussions. She endeavors to seek a framework within these ecovillages and underlining principles to show the rest of the world what “reinventing life” really means and discusses the potentials for projecting these fundamental elements from communities into larger contexts such as towns, cities and even nations.

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