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The Cultural and Educational Face of Contemporary Asia

The omnipresent process of globalization characterizes the times we live in. We understand “globalization” mostly as “Westernization,” but also “Americanization.” Yet, it is worth paying attention to influences from other directions that possess great potential, even though they are not so obvious when considered from the perspective of the actual power of the influence. This exogenous source of change is Asia. Asia, therefore, corresponds to people, market, and natural resources.

Culture is a value that is hard to be overrated in this kind of discussion. On the one hand, it is tradition (customs that have been present for many centuries, the structure of social bonds, and religion with its strong reference to fundamentalism) that confirms the power of culture. But, on the other hand, the era of post-modernity, which has its roots in Western civilization, has brought about a totally different quality of life in which consumerism is dominant and the focus on the present time is important. When examined from the perspective of modern Polish society, the influences of the aforementioned culture can be viewed as a niche. Fascination with what Western culture is offering is something obvious and expected. In a sense, it can be explained by the many years of Poland’s isolation. Therefore, the systemic transformation, with its free market and democratically structured society, seemed to be the only possible solution. Nevertheless, after the experience of the last 25 years, Polish society is more critical and reflexive.

It is worth referring to studies that present alternative cultures for the previously mentioned reasons, among other things. The specific character of the humanities and social studies is the fact that it is difficult to indicate milestones in human development, a particular piece of work, or initiative. More attention is paid to the persistence and recurrence of the activities. A good example is the conference

entitled "Asia in the 21st Century: Challenges, Dilemmas, and Perspectives," which was coordinated by dr hab. Joanna Marszałek-Kawa. In 2013, the conference took place for the seventh time. Each year, the conference is expanding by taking on new challenges and seeing the number of participants rise. Its value is proven not only by the merits of its debate, but also the number of publications and its social reception. This year's conference saw approximately 300 Polish and foreign academics in attendance.

The fact that this event has been supported by Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek from the very beginning, as well as the fact that the collaboration culminates in a series of books entitled "Contemporary Asia," give the conference its exceptional character. Last year's edition was published prior to this year's conference. The dominant issues are of a political nature, but other academic disciplines are increasingly being represented. Diplomacy, security, geopolitical potential, superpower, relations with other countries and the EU, economic policy, the system of values, tradition and modernity, administration, local government, and media systems are the key terms that describe the conference and its themes.

One of the newest themes that were present in the debate is the subject of culture and education. Publications on this matter were collected in one volume entitled, "Cultural and Educational Face of the Contemporary Asia." The panorama of countries (China, Japan, Iran, India, Vietnam, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan) that were discussed in this volume shows that nearly the entire Asian continent is represented in the work. Equally characteristic is the variety of issues taken on by the authors. It is not difficult to find those reaching the roots of the culture, including, e.g., "Confucius vs. Aristotle: One idea, two legal cultures" by Aleksandra Brodecka-Chamera and Marta Dargas or "The problem of culture and politics in Taoism" by Ewa Kaja. Besides those, there are some essays on classical issues like the social studies of small social groups, which include "The problem of family traditions in the modern transitions of Eastern Asia" by Krzysztof Gawlikowski. There was also a space for greater structures: the image of modern China by Marta Mazurek and the issue of dignity in life in modern Iran by Magdalena Zaborowska. The category of "sensitive issues" includes topics such as Buddhist bio-ethics (Agata Strządała), the bio-politics of China in the context of abortion (Marcin Leźnicki and Aleksandra Lewandowska), and selective abortion in India (Ewa Liszkowska). There was also a space in the volume for the "classics," like "The Art of War in China," written by Stefania Skowron-Markowska; Samurai by Kamil Zeidler; and "The Structure of Physical Culture in China" by Maciej Szatkowski. Essays on systemic matters also appear in the publication: communism in India, which is discussed by Weronika Rokicka; mass media in the context of the democ-

ratization of Afghanistan by Magdalena Randall-Schab; and the press system in Turkmenistan, which is analyzed by Jacek Sobczak and Ksenia Kakareko. The publication also includes issues concerning the ethnic minorities; Paweł Górzny describes the Polish Vietnamese; Marta Wesołowska writes about Japanese ancient music; Marcin Lisiecki discusses social policy in Japan; and also Marcin Lisiecki takes on childbirth and funeral rituals in ancient Japan.

This wide range of problems is definitely not covered in the cultural studies field. One should also be very open-minded to consider that all of those issues are within the wider framework of the debate on culture. Nevertheless, a lot of different matters are presented under the aforementioned cultural studies. Education, as an equal title partner of the conference, is slightly omitted. Mirosława Cylkowska-Nowak, who writes about educating minorities in Japan, was the only person to present the literal “faces of contemporary Asia” in the report based on the conference. One can hope that in such a dynamically developing project, the issue of education will soon find its reflection as a separate volume. Education in Asia is reflected both in the original solutions of school education systems and the rich experience within the education of adult members of society. According to F. Znaniński, education is also connected with the influences of the educating society. The entire educational policy is visible as well: the state’s influences vs. autonomy, competition vs. cooperation, “free” education vs. commercial, etc. Because everything has a cognitive quality, we enrich our knowledge. It is hard not to appreciate the potential application values. We do not necessarily need to base exclusively on proposals that come from the West, especially since its implementation in our environment, and with a significant time gap, does not result in advancement.

A simple presentation of the leading analytical categories in the book shows the complexity of those matters. One can mainly find some identification with political studies. Nevertheless, some other disciplines (educational studies) are also represented. The same could be said about the authors of the essays. Only a few academic authorities in these disciplines participated in the publication. It is the young academics (i.e. those who are still looking for their position in science) that are dominant. Yet, it is the wide range of problems that are covered in the publication that are more important and unique. Next to the classical issues in social sciences, which have been explored for a long and persistent time, there are new problems that were consciously marginalized or tenuously exposed. It is not difficult to notice that, besides original and cognitively valuable texts, there are essays ‘on the subject’ which are based on the derivative sources. The meritorious competences that I possess result in the fact that I can speak in a responsible

way about only some matters; the others should generally follow some standard requirements (leading problem, scientific method, etc.), and the rest I perceive as little known or unknown. However, it is not my intention to prepare a classic review of a published book.

It is particularly important to highlight the fact that the Asian issues confronted in Poland are presented by Polish scientists. For everyone who is working on some particular issues in a professional manner (omitting those who aimed at preparing a short speech for the given conference), it is obvious that consecutive papers are situated on a higher substantial level. A critical perception of the available literature on the subject serves to explore the matter in the best manner. It is important not only to write literature in the English language, but also to publish papers in Asian languages. Equally important are research travels and contacts, not only virtual (i.e. on the Internet), but also a network of the collected face-to-face contacts.

It is a priceless asset – cultural this time – that we are dealing with a venture that is planned for many years into the future. This asset is an academic conference that has taken place, will continue to be organized, and the results of which are systematically published. The mere selection procedure results in a naturally increasing level of expectations and, simultaneously, the number of accidental participants is decreasing. The periodical character of the meetings has resulted in it becoming increasingly reputable and new people becoming interested in participating in a valuable venture. Therefore, the only thing left is to hope that the organizers maintain the determination to shape this original event into one that continues to distinguish itself from other major conferences.

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