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BOOK REVIEW

Waking the Asian Pacific Co-operative Potential

FIRST EDITION

■ Morris Altman, Anthony Jensen, Akira Kurimoto, Robby Tulus, Yashavantha Dongre, and Seungkwon Jan, eds.

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This book presents substantial evidence for refining the role of cooperative movements in the world economy, as it is now entering the era of post-capitalism. Under the initiative of the Asia Pacific Co-operative Research Partnership, founded during the 2014 International Co-operative Alliance

Research Conference in Bali, 44 researchers conducted large-scale literature reviews and case studies on the cooperative movements in the Asia-Pacific region over five years. This book successfully shows the potentials of cooperative movements and offers cooperative solutions as an alternative to the unsatisfactory liberal market or state-command models.

The preface of this book starts with the sentence “Cooperatives are enterprises capable of building a better world,” a quote from the United Nations’ (UN’s) declaration for the International Year of the Cooperatives in 2012, which reflects on increasing expectations for cooperative movements among major international organizations.

For years, cooperative movements have been regarded as a means of self-protection for consumers and/or small-size producers against the rule of “the strong devours the weak” in a capitalist economy. As far as capitalism maintains its powerful position in the world economy, this traditional view holds. However, after the global financial crisis in the late 2000s, world leaders have become more skeptical of capitalism. The emergence of new

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types of economic and social instabilities, such as speculation on the vertical money market and the increase in religious extremists' terror acts, implies the limitations of capitalism. However, it is uncertain what system will (and/or should) replace capitalism. In 2015, recognizing the limitations of capitalism, the UN proposed the new action plan for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the UN member countries should achieve within 15 years. The International Co-operative Alliance, which has played a leadership role in the international alliance of cooperative movements since its establishment in 1895, has now come to advocate the values of cooperative movements resonating with the SDGs.

The Asia Pacific Co-operative Research Partnership, a loose grouping of top researchers interested in refining the roles of cooperative movements in this changing world order, was launched in 2012. In nearly 5 years following its inception, large-sized studies on the cooperative movements in the Asia-Pacific region were conducted and their findings are compiled into this book.

The book uses an omnibus style. The 44 researchers joined this book project as contributors (of which six form the editorial board). This book consists of 35 chapters (including the introduction). The second to the ninth chapters form Part 1, which provide a theoretical framework on cooperative movements. The authors of these eight chapters conducted detailed literature surveys on how cooperatives have historically encountered various social problems. Part 1 also describes cultural and political backgrounds of the Asia-Pacific region, which are helpful in reading the remaining parts of this book.

Part 2 forms the main body of this book. It includes 25 chapters, grouped into four sections (each section ends with a summary chapter). Section 1, which consists of eight chapters, presents case studies on agricultural cooperatives in Australia, China, India, Korea, Japan, Nepal, and Vietnam, and concludes that the challenges faced by agricultural cooperatives do not differ among different political systems. Section 1 ends with the following sentence: "As the economies move

from agrarian to manufacturing/service-oriented economies, as the overall growth of the economy picks up and they move from a state, and as liberal market policies are pursued, the nature of the working of cooperatives seems to change from state control to greater autonomy and from single service to multipurpose orientation" (p. 200). This suggests that the status of the economy and changes in market dynamics affect the performance of agricultural cooperatives profoundly.

Section 2, consisting of five chapters, presents three case studies on consumer cooperatives in Vietnam, Singapore, and South Korea and gives a historical review of Japan's consumer cooperatives. In the Asia-Pacific region, the traditional wet markets and mom-and-pop shops have been largely replaced by modern store types such as supermarkets, hypermarkets, and convenience stores. Section 2 shows that, by reflecting different socioeconomic and political contexts in which they operate, the Asian consumer cooperatives have created unique models, which differ from the consumer cooperatives in Europe.

Section 3, consisting of five chapters, presents four case studies on the credit cooperatives in Australia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. This section describes people's efforts to overcome the adverse political and market conditions to create space in their countries' own financial system for those who have a strong desire to help themselves through collective action. This section highlights high expectations for credit cooperatives to act as a counterweight to the neoliberal ideology, which became the mainstream international politics in the 1990s.

Section 4, containing seven chapters, presents six case studies on worker cooperatives in the Philippines, India (two cases), Australia, South Korea, and Japan. This section concludes that worker cooperatives are able to offer solutions to the problem of securing good jobs.

Part 3 entitled "Towards an Asian Scholarship on Co-ops" consists of only one chapter, co-authored by all six editors. They affirm: "One thing that emerges by closely looking at the case studies of successful cooperatives is that they are driven more by micro factors than macro factors" (p.

374). This message implies that non-governmental organizations should play a key role in promoting cooperative movements instead of governments. However, there exists doubt whether this book presents enough evidence to support this proactive message. In particular, there is a gap between this message and the conclusions of Section 1 in Part 2. By adding more discussion on the role of non-governmental organizations, the book would provide more convincing evidence.

It should be noted that Russia (considering North Asia) and countries in the eastern coast of the Pacific Ocean are not considered in this book. By contrast, in international negotiations, such as those of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, these countries are included. In other words, this book focuses on areas where macroeconomic performance is relatively good (at least compared with the other areas in the world). Therefore, if case studies were also conducted in North Asia and on the eastern coast of the Pacific Ocean, macro factors could be shown to affect cooperative movements stronger.

One limitation of this book is that it only selects successful cases. There must be several cases in which cooperative movements failed to perform as expected. As such, a comparison between successful and unsuccessful cooperatives would provide useful information on the role of cooperative movements.

This book mentions: "There are more than 50 countries in the Asia Pacific Region. Cooperatives exist in almost all these countries, but only 33 countries are members of the International Cooperative Alliance" (p. 371). While the book does not extend this discussion, a discussion on the non-participation of the remaining 22 countries would be necessary to determine the robustness of its assertions. Again, case studies of unsuccessful cooperatives may be useful in understanding the reason for the non-participation of the 22 countries.

The exploitation of natural resources is a typical example of market failure and is widely recognized as one of the most serious problems worldwide. In fact, some countries in the Asia-Pacific region are infamous for overfishing, deforestation, and overuse of underground water. Seminal studies, such as those of Hayami (2009) and Saito (2009), pointed out the possibility that the community can present a solution for natural resource protection while creating economic growth. If this book focused more on environmental issues, its readership would widen.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the rich contributions of this book to the academic and political fields are obvious. This book successfully demonstrates the potential of cooperative movements. Using this book as a bridgehead, the international academia can further analyze the new role of cooperative movements.

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