Cornell University
ILR School

ILRReview

Volume 57 | Number 1 Article 85

October 2003

Transforming Gender and Development in East Asia

Esther Ngan-ling Chow

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview

Transforming Gender and Development in East Asia

This book review is available in ILRReview: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview/vol57/iss1/85

in need of integration and synthesis. Boxall and Purcell's *Strategy and Human Resource Management* provides a thorough review of this eclectic literature in a framework that makes it easy for the reader to grasp the field's evolution and current state of thinking. I see this outstanding book as distinguishing itself from other similar efforts in three important ways.

First, it fairly considers both U.S. and European perspectives on SHRM, which differ in important ways. Most researchers in the United States adopt an implicitly managerialist approach, focusing on how HR can benefit shareholders, while researchers in Europe emphasize the importance of balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders such as employees, unions, governments, and society. The European view tends to emphasize the importance of context; the U.S. view, "best practice." Boxall and Purcell do an outstanding job of accurately representing these different viewpoints, particularly in how they affect research and practice. When pressed, it seems clear that they, not surprisingly, adhere to a more European view, but their presentation is both fair and balanced. Chapter 1 makes a strong case for how HRM can affect business performance, and a recurring theme throughout the book is that properly managed human resources will benefit shareholders. The authors do not create an artificial either/or distinction, but simply focus readers on the fact that increased business performance is only one positive outcome from the effective management of people.

Second, whereas often the tendency in covering SHRM is to emphasize the current state of the art, focusing only on the most recent developments in research and thinking, Boxall and Purcell's treatment of the field dwells more on its evolution. Consistent with the European emphasis on understanding "context," these authors invariably present topics from the standpoint of how thinking and practice have developed over time, often exploring the critical factors driving that evolution, such as technological change, economic cycles, and government intervention. One clear value of this approach is the help it offers in answering a question the authors often pose: is the current state completely unique and never seen before, or simply the latest return of some phase in a recurring cycle? This brings the concepts of both dynamism and predictability to our understanding of how the whole SHRM knowledge base has evolved. In particular, Chapters 5–8 thoroughly cover the evolution and context of research and practice with regard to the concepts of work systems, models of employment, managing individual performance and development, and employee voice.

Third, satisfying the promise implied by the book's title, the authors do a tremendous job of discussing the basic concepts of strategy on their own merits. Too many presentations of SHRM begin and end with HRM, exploring strategy in shallow and superficial ways, and probably only insofar as the concepts directly link to HRM. I believe that it is impossible to study SHRM without a relatively deep knowledge of strategy, and the authors of this book demonstrate such knowledge. Chapter 2 discusses the strategic decision-making process, Chapter 4 presents a deep analysis of the resource-based view of the firm, Chapter 9 explores the dynamics of industry-based competition, and Chapter 10 does the best job I have seen of examining the distinct issues that arise from distinguishing between corporate-level and business-level strategy. In each case, the authors accurately represent strategic concepts based in the strategy literature. Only after presenting these concepts do they examine the implications for HRM. Clearly, this is a book about strategy and HRM, not simply about strategic HRM.

I find little to fault in Boxall and Purcell's book. It accurately and thoroughly reviews the evolution and context of both research and practice in the area of SHRM, and integrates and synthesizes the burgeoning literature on the subject. For those interested in understanding the current state of the field, this book is a must read.

Patrick M. Wright
Professor of Human Resource Studies
New York State School of
Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University

International and Comparative Industrial Relations

Transforming Gender and Development in East Asia. Edited by Esther Ngan-ling Chow. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 263 pp. ISBN 0-415-92492-8, $22.95 (paper).

The gender-blindness and androcentrism of mainstream scholarship on East Asian development is particularly shocking when women are

a majority of the industrial labor force. *Transforming Gender and Development in East Asia* brings women into the center of the discussion. These articles show that although it is predominantly women who constitute the massive flexible labor markets in emerging Asian economies, gender bias and norms continue to keep them at the bottom, and vulnerable to an increasing level of abuses at home and abroad.

This volume has a number of goals. The overall aim is to provide some kind of a baseline, to insert women into "the major socioeconomic transformation processes in East Asia and thereby to lay a foundation for other scholars, researchers, and practitioners to chart a new theoretical terrain for studying East Asian development, one that recognizes the salient analytical category of gender" (p. 3). Second, the authors show that gender is a dimension pervasively influencing normative rules, ideologies, institutional arrangements, and power relationships. Third, the contributors stress the links between power and knowledge, to demonstrate that social consciousness is the product of "situated knowledge." This aspect of the authors' and editor's project is part of a larger scholarly effort to capture "indigenous" knowledge—knowledge held by people who are integral participants in a cultural or economic system but whose voices are often unheard—that can help shape policy-making and thereby move social change in a more humane direction.

The book has eleven chapters under four headings. In Part I, Esther Ngan-ling Chow notes that the rise of the "Asian tiger" economies gave rise to waves of female migration that were without historical precedent either in their scale or in the complexity of the demographic adjustments they necessitated. While most male migrants tend to leave for destinations outside East Asia, female migrant flows shape flexible regional labor markets, where these job seekers are vulnerable to dangers and mistreatment in transit and at the worksite. The next chapter, by Chow and Deanna Lyter, gives an overview of sociological and feminist theories of development and proposes a hybrid approach based on "indigenous analysis and feminist praxis" (p. 53) that gives voice to the multitude of anonymous female workers and, at the same time, articulates development goals in terms of the building of a healthy and progressive society based on human rights.

Part II provides case studies of female workers in a variety of work settings where institutional control is often met by resistance. Yin-wah Chu presents a comparative longitudinal view of changes in female employment in East Asian countries. One thing she finds in most or all of the countries she studies is a readiness to accept the stereotype of Asian women as exceptionally patient and meticulous, which conveniently justifies assigning them to factory and clerical work. The chapter by Chow and Ray-may Hsung draws on ethnographic data from Taiwan factories to show that corporations are infused by "hegemonic masculinity," which favors male control and privileges at all levels of the work organization. Men's domination of high-ranked positions and better-paid jobs is linked to the perception that they possess superior technical expertise, a view influenced by their compulsory stint in the military. Furthermore, the qualities that are imputed to men—rationality, impersonality, and efficiency—reinforce, by contrast, the sexualization of women. Sexualization serves to include or exclude women for reasons unrelated to their merits as workers, as, for example, when pretty women are preferred for hiring over less attractive ones, or when attractive women are fired for stirring the interest of the married boss. Pregnancy and menstruation, too, are used to justify gender discrimination. Hyun Mee Kim's chapter looks at factory women in South Korea who have struggled against American factories and formed a union. Here, the politics of gender representation—defined in terms of the needs and demands of "working mothers," for example, or of Third World women—played a role in the transnational responses to capital-labor disputes.

Part III considers the impact of economic restructuring on female employment and the family, with cases drawn from mainland China and Hong Kong. Ting Gong describes the acute financial insecurity—stemming from, among other things, reduced support for childcare and family responsibilities—faced by laid-off (*xiagang*) women who, as a result of economic restructuring, are discharged and subsequently become self-employed. Ping Ping notes that there is a pattern of "bifurcated dependence" among skilled male and female workers, whereby unequal access to state resources compels women to depend on men for housing. Vivien Hiu-tung Leung provides a fascinating view of how gender dynamics in Hong Kong families shape strategies in coping with the transition from manufacturing to service economy. She contrasts households with patriarchal control of resources to families in which there is flexible negotiation over resources and gender roles.

Part IV returns to migration and its varied impact on household forms and gender rela-

tions. Anru Lee's study explores the reception of Thai workers in Taiwan, where they are perceived as a source of urgently needed cheap labor for textile mills, but also a threat to Taiwan workers. Sequestered in a so-called Treasure Island, migrant workers not only lack legal, political, and social rights, but also are under strict control and disciplined by threats of deportation. Christina Gilmartin and Lin Tan, scrutinizing demographic data in post-market-reform China, claim that internal migration is a distinctly female and rural phenomenon because of emerging markets not only in flexible labor, but also in flexible marriage arrangements driven entirely by economic opportunity. In the final chapter, Janet Salaff examines how migrant social networks often depend on women to perform what is largely invisible and unpaid work. She finds differences across three socioeconomic classes in the extent to which women mobilize different kinds of resources—money, kinship bonds, and social networks—when they migrate.

As a collection, the volume offers a wealth of useful concrete information on the situation of female workers in East Asian countries. Some of the contributors have a tendency to invoke macro theories, deploy statistics, and use the specific national economy under consideration as a structural framework for their analysis, but more than half of the chapters include specific women's voices. Those voices not only give us a flavor of the women's experiences, but also a keen sense of the gender bias that seems to have intensified over time thanks to the steady supply of women as cheap labor. Taken together, the chapters show that the gap between the so-called "global" and "local" levels of analysis has not been conceptually bridged. But the wide-ranging examples and materials presented in the book suggest that local studies, collected together and compared, can more accurately map the terrain of female labor markets across Asia than can broader economic surveys. Furthermore, while gender is the lens through which one reads development change here, gender as an analytical category remains incomplete without an assemblage of other factors. Finally, the key value of this volume is the views and work of Asian feminists in showing us what is at stake for ordinary women, men, and children—and for society—in the current transformation in East Asia.

Aihwa Ong

Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley

History

Immigration and American Unionism. By Vernon M. Briggs, Jr. Cornell Studies in Industrial and Labor Relations No. 33. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2001. 256 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3870-5, $37.50 (cloth); 0-8014-8710-2, $16.95 (paper).

Periods of mass immigration have been identified as a key contributor to the supply of unskilled labor in the United States. A simple supply and demand model suggests that if the impact of immigration on labor supply outweighs the impact of labor demand, the wages of native-born workers in low-skill occupations will be adversely affected in periods of large-scale immigration. If changing immigrant flows lead to changing conditions in American labor markets, the evolution of organized labor over time may well be linked to developments in immigration. This book is an exploration of the links that may exist between long-run developments in American immigration and the union movement across just over two centuries of American history.

The book opens with a brief introduction to the issues, and a statement of the author's principal thesis: periods of high immigration have led to declining unionization (and vice-versa) due to the downward pressure on wages caused by increases in the supply of unorganized workers who can serve as cheap substitutes for unionized labor. The implicit story is that if employers can readily substitute away from unionized labor, unions are less effective in obtaining attractive wage settlements for members, causing unionism to decline.

The following six chapters focus on well-defined periods of American history. Chapter 1 briefly discusses the early years of the American Republic (1788–1800). Chapters 2–4 focus on three waves of mass immigration: 1801–60; 1861–90; and 1891–1920. The first wave of mass migration, during which early craft unions were successfully established, featured migration primarily from Ireland, Britain, Germany, and French Canada. Following the interruption of the Civil War, immigration resumed at a greater rate from the same source regions as in the first wave. This period saw the emergence of national labor movements, such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. These organizations aimed to spread the organization of workers beyond the craft occupa-