

Adapting to the Asian Century

HERE IS A FAMOUS QUOTE from Confucius, "Some are born with knowledge, some derive it from study, and some acquire it only after a painful realization of their ignorance." With regard to my own knowledge of the vast and vibrant region of nations known collectively as East Asia, I will have to admit that I often have come to learning after realizations of my ignorance. I suspect the same may be true for many of us educated in the Western nations.

Commentators and historians have often spoken of the nineteenth century as the European century because of the vast empires and economic spheres of influence that the leading nations of that continent held. The twentieth century has come to be known as the American century, due to the emergence of the United States as an economic, cultural, political, and military superpower. And it is becoming clear in these early years

of the twenty-first century that this could well be the century of Asia.

For two days this past March, NAFSA, in collaboration with George Mason University, presented a symposium in Washington, D.C. that explored the current trends in social, political, economic, and higher education development in China, Japan, Korea, and the Middle East. Our cover feature in this issue, "Where the Students Are in East Asia" by Kyna Rubin, extends that conversation with regard to eastern Asia with its vast population and rapidly expanding economic power.

East Asia is a region of wide variation that simultaneously includes the highly developed economies and educational systems of Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and others along side the briskly developing systems in countries like Vietnam, China, and Malaysia. Demographic variation is also

extreme in some cases, with an aging population in Japan contrasting with booming younger populations in Vietnam and Malaysia among others. This creates significantly contrasting stresses on the higher education systems in each nation.

The shifting educational needs of East Asia vis-à-vis the West will have important implications for the international educators in both regions for much of the first half of this century and perhaps beyond, as China and other developing countries begin to be significant exporters of education opportunities, while potentially reducing their own need to send students abroad for high quality undergraduate and graduate education.

Hopefully, we in the West will take the initiative to learn quickly to adapt to the changing conditions so that we can avoid the consequences of learning only through 'painful realizations of our ignorance.' **IE**

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