

VSJF Annual Meeting 2009

Risk and East Asia

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Across the social sciences, the concept of risk has come to characterise the economic, political and social transformation of industrial societies at the turn of the 21st century. Most notably in the work of Ulrich Beck, the idea of a “world risk society” has opened a new perspective on transnational dimensions of change, challenging the tendency to view globalisation primarily as an economically driven process of market liberalisation. At the same time, the risk perspective highlights the ambiguities of contemporary modernisation processes, between the opportunities raised by the individualisation of lifestyles and the precarious consequences of the “individualisation of risk.” Moreover, the balance of opportunities and threats implied by contemporary social, political, economic and cultural changes are shaped by the changing logic of public institutions, as the responsibilities for risks are shifted from states to markets, from the public to private sphere and from collectivities to individuals.

In 2009 the VSJF conference undertakes a balanced representation of two contrasting cases of East Asian transformations: China with its large-scale mobilisation of rural populations to urban industrial centres and the rise of a middle class enjoying the opportunities raised by the individualisation of lifestyles; Japan as an example of “shrinking” metropolitan regions, a declining middle class, and rising livelihood risks. The rationale of understanding risk in China and Japan also goes beyond their structural particularities, given their important standing in the world: China is the most and Japan the tenth most populated country in the World, and after the USA, Japan is the second and China the fourth largest economy in terms of GDP. In the context of rapid industrialization in both countries, technological progress has generated a range of “manufactured risks” ranging from local environmental disasters, regional food security crises and transnational health and safety risks. The works of Ulrich Beck have received a wide reception in both China and Japan, yet little is known of what Asian scholars make of this perspective in the study of their own modernisation processes. The focus on the East Asian region is of high theoretical interest for an analysis of the “world risk society” precisely because this is a region of the world with a history of a different mix between public and collective protections and responsibilities for livelihood risks. A first aim of the VSJF conference in 2009 is to engage with the “world risk society” thesis from the perspective of East Asia and with East Asian social scientists, with an emphasis on the risks as well as opportunities raised by universal processes of individualisation and transnationalisation in the specific context of East Asia.

A second aim of the conference is to focus on major dimensions of risk from both a conceptual and an empirical perspective. In East Asian contexts, where central political elites have traditionally placed a focus on national security and social integration, the perception and projection of risks are increasingly used to frame attempts at enacting major political reforms and structural changes. The outcomes of these reforms increasingly involve the “management” or “governance of,” rather than “protection from” risks. A first panel will focus on the management and governance of risk in the political processes of central and decentral political actors, drawing in specific policy fields. Livelihood security in East Asia has relied mainly on provisions of “corporate welfare” through state enterprises in China and private firm

communities in Japan, rather than on the provisions of a welfare state. Changes in the employment and welfare institutions of these countries largely account for rising income inequalities, while other traditional safety nets (e.g. the family) are also eroding with lifestyle and demographic changes. A second panel will focus on livelihood risks in relation to employment and welfare institutions in China and Japan. Food safety has risen as a major concern, most recently in China, but also in Japan, as large-scale technological production increasingly replaces traditional forms of agricultural production in the region. A third panel will focus specifically on the generation and management of food and health risks with a specific focus on the transnational dimensions of such risks in the East Asian region. A final panel will focus on the “fictional commodities” land and money, and the risks posed for sustainable environments and capital formation in light of turbo marketisation in China and decades of foregrounding economic interests over the quality of life in Japan.