

Knowledge Matters: How do Asian Knowledge Societies work?

As scholars and interested observers, Profs Evers, Menkhoff, Chay and Meyer¹ are intrigued by the current transformation of Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and China towards knowledge-based economies. What is so unique about knowledge societies? What makes them tick? What needs to be done so that they can flourish? The following research outputs address these issues within the context of Asia and the rise of the knowledge society.

In a paper published in *Comparative Sociology*, Vol 2 (2003) "Transition towards a Knowledge Society: Malaysia and Indonesia in Comparative Perspective", Prof Evers sheds light on the motives and strategies of policymakers in both countries to reach the stage of a knowledge society. While Indonesia's political leadership only vaguely circumscribes the characteristics of this new stage of development, Malaysia's political elite has developed a clear vision (Wawasan 2020) when and how to reach the stage of a fully developed k-economy. The key hypothesis (based on the works of Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, Joseph Schumpeter, Peter Drucker and others) put forward is that the transition of both countries is driven by the emergence of a new innovative productivity factor which can be used by entrepreneurs and government bodies to drive prosperity and progress, namely actionable knowledge. With the help of k-society indicators such as no. of R&D researchers per million inhabitants and patents filed or expenditures for R&D as well as respective time series data, Prof Evers shows that both countries do trail far behind South-Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and other OECD countries. While progress has been made, the data clearly illustrate challenges such as disparities in the distribution of knowledge both within and between Asian and non-Asian countries, rapidly changing occupational

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cultures, the emergence of new strategic groups of knowledge workers such as researchers and consultants or the rise of powerful mega-companies who increasingly determine what knowledge is created and who will have access to it. A key issue faced by Governments and civil society organizations in Asia is how to utilize 'glocal' knowledge flows and to gain a competitive advantage while maintaining their cultural identity.

As a response to Singapore's rapid development based on export-led growth, the Government unveiled a new policy framework in 1991 that would take the dynamic city-state to the 'next lap' of its development trajectory by achieving a higher level of technological sophistication and a shift towards knowledge-intensive industries. The computerization and reform of Singapore's civil service, the development of Science & Technology Parks (STPs) within the new technology corridor, the systematic recruitment of foreign talents for new growth areas such as biotechnology and life sciences as well as the increasing number of Singaporean patents underline the achievements and commitment of Singapore's Government in terms of effective knowledge governance. As outlined by Profs Menkhoff and Chay (in collaboration with B. Loh) in their paper "Towards Strategic Knowledge Management in Singapore's SME Sector" published in the *International Quarterly of Asian Studies Vol. 35, No. 1-2* (2004), intelligent organizations which can leverage upon past experiences and intellectual capital assets do play a significant role in this transformation process. With the help of case study material and survey data, the researchers show that the usage of knowledge management (KM) concepts and tools can enhance the profitability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). "Economies and businesses are shifting towards a new world configuration of digital information and knowledge-based work. SME owners need to take on this challenge and to find out how business intelligence and knowledge management solutions as well as new economy related assistance schemes offered by Singapore's Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) or SPRING can assist them" said Prof Menkhoff.

Science & Technology Parks such as Singapore's Science Park I and II or the Zhongguancun Science and Technology Park in Beijing, PR of China, play a

crucial role in achieving k-economy status. They are expected to increase the wealth of its stakeholders by promoting a culture of innovation and the competitiveness of associated businesses and knowledge-based institutions. By definition, Science Parks are supposed to stimulate and manage knowledge and technology flows amongst universities, R&D institutions, companies and markets. They are tasked to facilitate the creation and growth of innovation-based companies through incubation and spin-off processes, providing other value-added services together with high quality space and facilities². As stressed by Profs Menkhoff, Evers and Meyer (in collaboration with Lim Meng Huat) in their research paper “Building Science & Technology Parks with Knowledge Management”³, knowledge management can help the management teams of STPs to create an organic (epistemic) culture of knowledge production with the ‘right’ ingredients of innovation. In the paper they introduce a framework (focusing on enablers such as *leadership, culture, processes, knowledge flows and hubs, knowledge marketing, people, human capital management practices as well as ICT*) that can be used by both STP management teams and tenant firms to ensure synergetic connectivity and knowledge generation within the park’s ecosystem. To build a productive culture of a pursuit of knowledge is one of the biggest challenges STP planners in Singapore or China are facing. “Ethnically and culturally diverse knowledge workers in STPs do not necessarily accept the modern architecture of STPs with their global corporate symbols as meaningful and relevant,” said Prof Evers. Effective R&D, the development of new ideas and outputs in form of patents is stimulated by a heterogeneous mix of alliance partners, diversity, contrasting life-styles and an ‘interesting’ environment. “By identifying the key cultural enablers of truly innovative knowledge work in different countries such as Singapore, China and Germany as well as relevant facilitation and collaboration tools, we will be able to enlighten STP developers and their clients on how to maximize the ROI of such

² We follow here the definition adopted by the International Board of the International Association of Science Parks (IASP) on 6 February 2002.

³ Invited Paper presented by Thomas Menkhoff at the International KM Challenge Conference (Theme: 'Driving Performance through Knowledge Collaboration') organized by Standards Australia International Limited, Sydney, Australia, March 30-31, 2004.

establishments,” said Prof Meyer. The ongoing research in Singapore and China suggests that pre-existing (transnational) social networks do play a strategic role with regard to knowledge flows and access to actionable knowledge as well as other resources. Especially in the People’s Republic of China, *small* entrepreneurial firms have to invest substantial resources into network-building before they can accumulate knowledge and do business successfully (this is much less the case for large, established firms).

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