'A SITUATION ON ASIA'S CHILDREN'
BY MINA M. RAMIREZ

HSIN-CHI KUAN

I am very pleased to be a new member of the Academy. There is a Chinese proverb to the effect that 'while walking together with two other persons, there must be one who can be my teacher'. This saying accurately reflects my feeling when I listened to the discussion yesterday. Today, I am rather nervous to serve, in front of so many learned scholars, as a commentator on Prof. Ramirez' paper 'A Situation on Asia's Children'. I must admit my ignorance of the subject matter of inter generational solidarity and the vanishing youth in Asia. I prefer to confine myself to rather general remarks and at the end add some reflection on China.

'A Situation on Asia's Children' is an extremely informative article, covering a wide – range of issues. I've learned a great deal from Prof. Ramirez. She has done an unenviable but marvellous job by weaving three papers into one, and it is about a vast region with great diversities. There is in the paper a general statistical map of Asia as a whole, insights from a focus group discussion, and a study of four well chosen cases. If I were asked to do the same, I would submit a nil return. I would have rather asked to be excused by narrowing down my scope of exploration in the first place.

In the first part of the paper, the social facts taken from HDR 2002 do speak for themselves. Prof. Ramirez rightly concludes that 'lack of income (monetary poverty) is a threat to the lives of a great many children in Asia, especially for the Low and Medium HDI countries'. She goes on by saying that in high HOI countries, 'What people suffer is isolationism and lack of quality of relationships'. Although this statement is not based on the statistical findings in the foregoing pages, it meets with my agreement. I just wonder what implications would arise if we put the two conclusions of Prof. Ramirez together. It seems to me that the continuous variable of income poverty and affluence works differently in countries with different human

development indexes. And it depends on the different dimensions that our concept of 'intergenerational solidarity' and 'vanishing youth' is meant to address. I may then submit that income poverty is not a very useful variable in our causal equation if the same level of income affects the lives of children and adults in an equitable way or when poor adults take a cut in their consumption of income to benefit their children. This speculation may call for the investigation of potentially more important variables, such as culture that informs our moral poverty that Prof. Donati has referred to.

The focus group discussion as reported in the paper has yielded some interesting information. Since the members of the focus group are graduate students, the same methodology might bring about better results if the discussion were more focused. We could ask for instance what the students themselves perceive or what kind of a relationship they have experienced with their parents, siblings, relatives and other adults. Since the students engaged in the focus group may be a biased sample, it is also useful to ask them to talk about the experiences of other kinds of youth they happen to know at home.

The third part of the paper, i.e. the four case studies, represents the strength of the paper. The choice of the cases seems to have been informed by a maximum- differences comparative design. The result however does not lie in the discovery of a general pattern or factor, but particular characteristics. Prof. Ramirez has impressed me with respect to the unique profile of each country, such as the stringent one-child policy in China, gender inequality in India, isolated and materialistic adolescents in Japan, and 'flourishing youth' in the Philippines.

Among the four case studies, I like, in particular, the discussion on the Philippines. It is rich and thought-provoking. Suffice to take a major issue here. It is gratifying to learn, on the one hand, that the Philippines have no vanishing youth, but a flourishing youth and that 'children occupy a privileged status under Philippine Law'. (p. 33). On the other hand, it is interesting to note that despite the high level of activism in national legislation, national strategic framework 'Child 21', the delivery of what the law and the 'Child-Friendly Movement' have promised at the grassroots still leaves much room for improvement. What emerges out of the analyses in the paper is a vague message that the governmental *system* matters, whereas other factors such as the democratic processes, globalization etc. seem to be neutral or double-edged. In other words, the central government proposes while the local government disposes. To the acquisitive readers, the paper owes some specifications as to why the child- friendly movement has not achieved its intended results.

Overall, Prof. Ramirez' paper has alluded to the impact of several factors on the place of youth in these four countries. They are the level of development including the issue of poverty, cultural legacies, religion especially the Catholic Church in the Philippines, attitudes and policies of governments, and the involvement of non- governmental organizations. It would be nice for further comparison if the relative influence of these factors could be specified in each case, leading ultimately to a general understanding of what are structural and more long-term and what are ad hoc and specific to each country.

Yesterday, someone among you suggested to me that I should say something about the youth in mainland China. Here I am to offer my five cents on a subject matter that you are very interested in. A caveat is in order before I do. I have neither statistics, nor information about the exact policies of the various levels of government towards the youth, nor qualitative case studies, nor impressive findings from the secondary literature to satisfy you. What I can tell is a macro view that I believe we should keep in mind while thinking about intergenerational solidarity and the vanishing youth in China.

Let me start with the overall developmental process of China over the past century and a half. It is a very much state-centered development in response to the global pressures of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and democratization. Various political ideologies and approaches have been tried to tackle with China's predicament. As reforms had failed, revolutions took over. When learning to adopt the hardware from the West didn't work, people turned to the issues of software such as democracy. The communist revolution in 1949 thus represents a grand project of development and utopia in which there is no place for society, but the Party-state. Every individual should serve the purpose of bringing China back on the map of the world. I recall how I was shocked in the early 1950s (I forgot the exact year) to learn that my young relatives back in Zhongshan of the Province of Guangdong had to recite a kind of a poem in the school: 'I need no father, I need no mother, and I need only my country'. The introduction of the people's commune in 1958 destroyed the fanning households and the family as an institution. When the revolutionary ideal reached its zenith during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, Chinese children became red guards, roaming around to fight against all kind of authorities, including the parents. Do we have a case of the vanishing youth here? At any rate, my lesson is that there is no place for intergenerational solidarity within a totalitarian framework where society is eradicated.

When the Cultural Revolution ended in late 1976, the state had learned a hard lesson. It proclaimed the end of utopia and vowed to concentrate on modernization only. It started to retreat leaving an expanding space to society in the following decades. The people's communes were abolished, farming was restored to the households, families were revived, clans resuscitated, the market introduced, and the country opened up to the outside world.

The transformation away from totalitarianism has been gradual, haphazard and punctuated by interruptions such as the Tiananmun incident in Beijing in 1989. The resurrection of society and the family as its key element has since been embedded in a host of changing conditions that are very different from those before 1949 or even the Cultural Revolution. The new circumstances include erosion of morality, lost of beliefs, ascendance of regional and local powers vis-à-vis the central government, rapid accumulation of capital through industrialization and commercialization, unplanned urbanization, integration of the Chinese market into the world capitalist system, and exposure to various aspects of globalization, and the rising expectation of a better, that is, materialistic life. All in all, we are observing a fundamental shift in terms of balance of power along the dimension of state-society relations at a scale of a huge population and a land mass with great diversity. Our understanding of the issue of intergenerational solidarity has to be put under the telescope and microscope of this paradigm shift. While general regularities and broad narratives are needed to characterize China as a whole, it is always prudent to bear in mind the varying patterns at the sub-national levels. To simplify the picture, let's argue that we have at least two Chinas, one urban and the other rural. The place of children and youth in the countryside is radically different from those in the cities, compounded by the discriminatory policies of the government, different patterns of the urban-rural relationship, the varying legacies of the people's commune, the strength of kinship, and so on. In short, there is a huge amount of studies to be done.