The theme of this issue is how the public and private spheres mix and perform in East Asia, especially Japan and Hong Kong, which represent the most developed economies in the region – both also serving as models or points of reference to their neighbors. East Asia truly matters globally and as East Asian societies and economies are increasingly interconnected regionally. In short, there is an urgent need to know more about East Asia and to overcome the mental and linguistic barriers that still can be found. There is a need to assess the importance of East Asian experiences to the rest of the world and to reflect whether East Asian societies really are so different in terms of orientation of value systems as so often has been claimed in Western research. Not necessarily. East Asia is already home to great social, cultural and political diversity and the need to change further is nowhere more evident than in Japan, which is going through a period of reflection after the ROTA FORTVNAE, wheel of fortune, demonstrated the extent of hybris (ű®) and delusion.

Many Asian governments have less direct financial commitment in welfare and health than, for instance, their European counterparts. Instead, one can see a general pattern of extending and exploring different forms of regulation to use the existing resources to solve new challenges created by expanding needs and expectations in these realms. The combination of such factors as the aging society, low fertility rate, political aversion to higher taxation and distrust of politicians leave little room for expansion of public sector. Furthermore, inequality in its different forms persists all too often without being seriously challenged in politics, society, everyday life and legal system. This issue has several articles illustrating how much still should done in the field of gender equality.

The Japanese model in health sector has been that the government takes care of those things that it can do best: regulation and setting up the systems of financing while it leaves the best part of service delivery to the private sector. Similar arrangements could be found in Taiwan and Korea, as well. This issue carries an article by Raymond Chan and Kang Hu, where they analyze the latest developments of the Hong Kong model, which can be seen to move towards new symbiotic forms between the public and private sector.

The Japanese social model developed gradually after the Japanese modernization (starting in the Meiji Period 1868-1912), which emphasized the need to have a strong national government, modern state and national unity. After disastrous wars Japanese society went
through a democratization of political and social institutions, but until these days, social activism and political participation has been rather ineffective, or to see it differently, politicians have not been particularly responsive to social activism when it has challenged the status quo. However, Japanese society did something unusual as it was the first Asian society to rise to an economic giant and, in principle, became able to better fulfill the needs of its people. The government never used much of the tax money directly to welfare and health and instead the Japanese politicians have been much more active funneling funds to infrastructure and construction projects, in the name of development and employment. Unfortunately, some of that spending is marred by collusive relationships between the politicians, bureaucrats and business. Much of the health funding is based on compulsory insurance schemes, which require cooperation between citizens, employers and the government. In short, there is no choice of plans or premium rate and people can freely access all the existing facilities (although there can still be problems with availability of care in specific fields of care, see Hara in this issue, or in rural areas). However, the life expectation at birth is the highest in the world (the second is Hong Kong), while both the public and private expenditure on health as percentage of GDP (6.9% and 1.6%) (OECD, 2010) are among the lowest in the OECD countries. The explanations for this miracle range from low levels of crime and drug abuse to comparative equality in income distribution (the point that many American researchers mention) or such factors as healthy diet or good genes (the points that many European researchers mention). However, also the health system works reasonably well and as a big contrast to most other places in the world one usually does not need to wait to get good care in Japan. It is also a small wonder how so many of the small clinics in Japan afford to have the latest high-tech gadgets.

The Great East Japan Earthquake on the 11th of March 2011 and the Fukushima nuclear crisis have tested the limits of Japanese social system. There was a huge amount of sympathy and volunteer work to help the victims as it was well understood that no system could effectively work with the sheer magnitude of the disaster. Also the government and public sector tried to do their best to manage the chaotic situation. However, the first instinct of the public sector was to avoid panic and transparency was not very high on the list of priorities. Serious issues about the responsibility were left unanswered: why was Japan so unprepared to a tsunami in a region where there was a clear pattern of similar magaques and why Japan has been promoting nuclear energy while deciding to turn a blind eye to the issues of nuclear safety? When the risks became a reality the politicians were quick to tell that it is important to think about future, not past. Also the Japanese public was remarkably slow to change its ideas about the wisdom of nuclear plants next to the most earthquake-prone areas in the world. In the weeks after the disaster still about 80% of Japanese people in surveys expressed the view that nuclear energy was needed in Japan – this at the time when the Japanese government was secretly studying how it must evacuate whole the Kantō region. Yes, situation has changed one year after and more and more voices questioning nuclear power are emerging. However, most politicians, opposition and governing coalition alike, carry on almost as nothing has happened and, while talking about the need to ensure safety, still seem to believe in nuclear power and are pushing for nominal improvements to make nuclear power acceptable enough to restart closed nuclear plants. It is quite telling that Japanese government at the same time is promoting the export of nuclear technology to such countries as Vietnam and Mongolia. For a person living in Japan it was frustrating to notice that one could often get more reliable information about the domestic crisis from foreign sources than from the Japanese media or authorities.

2011 was in many ways the year zero for Japanese society. Most people never expected to see such a disaster in their society
and many expected that wealth, prosperity and modern science had made modern Japan somehow better equipped to face natural and man-made disasters. The lesson of reality was harsh and smashed into smithereens any false security that there had been. After the crisis, which is far from being over, it is difficult to trust authorities or specialists, who have so blatantly promoted their own interests while failing to serve the people. What is alarming is that instead of trying to clean Japanese politics and create a more equalitarian and just society the Japanese voters seem to be turning to populist politicians, such as the Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Tôru, promoting small government and fiscal reforms, which basically would leave people on their own and largely accept the social status quo.

This issue’s Japan-focused articles and research notes give voice to alternatives and explores policy solutions. Andô Yoiko tells about the current Japanese crisis from the point of view of people of Fukushima and analyzing the situation from a gender perspective. Hara Hiroko introduces and analyzes the rise and obstacles of gender and sex-specific medicine. Marjory Fields analyzes the situation of Domestic Violence laws and services in Japan. Mika Merviö introduces risk society discourses and their significance for the Japanese situation. Finally, Takahashi Mutsuko tells about the problems in family relationships in Japan and how that affects the children and comments on the current debate of joint custody.

Japan is now facing the big choice how to rise from ashes and what kind of society people will have. According to Herodotos, phoenix visits only rarely, at intervals of some 500 years (Herodotos 424 B.C. Book II Euterpe, 73:1). In Japan it is known as fushichô (不死鳥, immortal bird) and its appearance goes together with great events. Sacred is the bird that rises from ashes.

Note on Conventions

Japanese names in this issue are written surname first, followed by the given name. Japanese words are Romanized using the Hepburn system.

Mika Markus Merviö  
Guest Editor  
IJPPHME

REFERENCES


Mika Markus Merviö is Professor of International Relations at the Kibi International University, Okayama, Japan. Previously, he has been working at the Shimane Prefectural University, Miyazaki International University and the University of Tampere, Finland. His research interests include political and social issues, history, art and environment. He acts as the Associate Editor of the International Journal of Public and Private Healthcare Management and Economics.