

News and Themes from East Asia

CHINA AND TAIWAN

■ CHINA TO GAIN ENTRANCE TO THE WTO

No significant barriers remain to China's joining the World Trade Organization sometime early next year, although currently several minor issues have arisen. The American government, while repeatedly praising China for opening its markets, continues to question whether China can fulfill its promises. Moreover, there is concern over China's regulation of Internet content. Also, the American government remains skeptical that China will firmly enforce intellectual property laws. On the other hand, to underscore their independence, Chinese leaders have been slow to accept American and European demands.

Despite this symbolic foot-dragging, China's leaders remain committed to joining the World Trade Organization as quickly as possible. They recently agreed to grant nine new licenses to European insurance firms and to further open China's automobile and retail sectors. China has also agreed to enter the WTO under intellectual property rules that would ordinarily apply to developed economies. At present, the most difficult issue preventing China from WTO membership is reconciling the more than forty bilateral trade agreements China has reached with other countries. American domestic politics may represent another obstacle to China's becoming a WTO member in the next several months. It is possible that the new American President and Congress may seek to delay the membership process to prove that they aren't "soft" on China. However, as long as China's leaders hold firm in pursuing WTO membership, current barriers will most likely prove temporary and easy to overcome.

■ COUNTRYSIDE LEFT BEHIND BY NEW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

China's rural population has been left behind by the rapid economic growth that has driven the coastal cities to relative prosperity. Per capita disposable income in urban China will soon pass one thousand dollars, a record in a country once characterized by mass poverty. However, the economic benefits, which have allowed for this landmark, have not spread beyond China's four hundred million strong urban middle class. Today, an urban worker in China makes 2.85 times more money than a rural worker. According to one of the United Nations' key indicators of relative wealth, consumption in China's cities is "comfortable," while rural consumption remains "barely sufficient." In the last few years, there has been an increase in the difference between urban and rural wages, with urban incomes rising 8.5 percent while rural incomes rose a scant 2.5 percent. The growing divide between China's prosperous cities and still underdeveloped rural areas has led to massive urban migration, creating a "floating population" of more than one hundred million peasants.

■ RESPECTED HONG KONG JOURNALIST OUSTED

Editor-journalist Willy Wo-Lap Lam's decision to leave the South China Morning Post has raised concerns of censorship among Hong Kong human rights activists. Lam's decision came after he was relieved of his duties as the Post's China page editor, a position he had occupied for ten years. Lam was often an outspoken critic of the close relationship between Hong Kong elites and the Chinese leadership, and his articles caused Jiang Zemin to chastise the Hong Kong media. The Post has claimed that Lam's loss of duties was part of an attempt to expand and diversify the China section. However, many people in Hong Kong are deeply skeptical because Lam's dismissal followed closely after a bitter public exchange with the Post's majority shareholder Robert Kuok. The exchange centered around an article criticizing China's encouragement of Hong Kong's businessmen to support Beijing's handpicked chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa. Lam's article resulted in Kuok

publishing a letter to the editor in the Post attacking Lam's story as "distortion and speculation." Lam's replacement is a mainland journalist who once was employed at the official government newspaper China Daily. Many Hong Kong journalists fear that Lam is an example of increasing Chinese pressure that will eventually lead to the end of Hong Kong's free press.

■ CHINA'S INTERNET UNDER SIEGE?

Foreign companies are scrambling to sell China the newest products in law enforcement technology. Even U.S. companies, such as brand name corporations Cisco Systems and Sun Microsystems, are competing to fill China's demand for security and policing software. At a November 8th Beijing trade show, Cisco and Sun marketed their "firewall" technology to crowds consisting of police and security officials. The demand for law enforcement software has been driven by Communist Party officials who seek to counter the Internet's potential for political dissent. Recently, the Chinese government strengthened its crackdown on Internet content, saying that "sham" news might "mislead the masses, confusing public opinion and creating chaos." The foreign companies' software will be used as part of the "Golden Shield Project," the Chinese government's plan to construct a computer network linking national and local police agencies. The Golden Shield would consist of both a database and surveillance system, and allow quick access to records on every citizen as well as decrease police reaction time to public protests.

■ SPY PLANE INCIDENT CAUSES HEIGHTENED TENSIONS

The United States and China are set to begin negotiations to determine the fate of a U.S. EP-3 Aries II that made an April 1st emergency landing on a military airfield in Hainan province of China after a mid-air collision with a Chinese jet. After securing the release of the 24-member crew through a letter expressing regret for the incident, the American government has adopted a harder line, blaming China for the mid-air collision. China, however, continues to blame the U.S. for the death of fighter pilot Wang Wei, and has demanded that the U.S. end surveillance flights in the South China Sea. As discussion begins, China's bid for WTO membership and the 2008 Olympics is potentially at stake. Several members of the U.S. Congress have proposed ending China's most favored nation status, although the crew's return has diminished calls for economic punishment. China's holding of the EP-3 and crew threatens to further undermine relations between Washington and Beijing, and comes at a time of heightened tension caused by U.S. criticism of Chinese human rights and proposed American weapon sales to Taiwan.

■ NEW TAIWANESE PRESIDENT RELAXES CHINA RHETORIC

The inauguration of President Chen Shui-bian on May 20, 2000 ended over a half century of Kuomintang (KMT) rule on Taiwan. President Chen of the Democratic Progressive Party has since tried to distance himself from his party's pro-independence stance in an effort to ease Taipei-Beijing tensions. Beijing considers Taiwan a renegade province and threatens to attack the island if Taiwan declares independence from the mainland. The U.S. endorses the "one-China" policy, which accepts Beijing as the one government of the Chinese people and does not support Taiwan independence. The outspoken Taiwan Vice President Annette Lu rejects this policy because it commits Taiwan to eventual reunification with the mainland.

Due to a fiasco involving Chen's shelving of a fourth nuclear power plant started by the previous KMT administration, the opposition has taken the opportunity to lobby for a recall of the president. In addition, KMT officials demand that dealings with China should be handed over to the Nationalists (KMT). Although Chen's popularity has declined since his inauguration, it is not likely that the public will approve an impeachment. Taiwan could not withstand the resulting turmoil. While internal turbulence in Taiwan politics continues, it is important to keep in mind that official talks with China broken off last year have not resumed. Analysts say there is only an 18-month window of opportunity for talks to resume before China becomes embroiled in its 2002 Communist Party Congress.

■ TAIWAN'S ECONOMY SUFFERS

The Chen administration has been attacked for the mismanagement of Taiwan's economy, as the stock market has been

slumping and the level of consumption has fallen since his inauguration. Subsequently, Taiwan's economic growth rates are expected to be readjusted downward. Partly to blame is recent political uncertainty, news of bad loan problems, depreciation of the New Taiwan dollar against the greenback, and a waning of investor confidence. A poll by the United Daily News, a national Taiwan newspaper, found that 29 percent of respondents expect a financial crisis, though 41 percent deem it to be impossible. Analysts say that chances of an economic meltdown are slim as long as the government makes the necessary financial reforms to restore investor confidence.

— by Dan Kliman and Chuan-Mei Lee

JAPAN

■ JAPAN'S ECONOMY STILL IN THE DOLDRUMS

Haunted by growing concerns over deflation and moribund domestic growth, Japan's economy remains in a slump. Despite signs of accelerating economic growth in 1999 and 2000, worries about the troubled banking sector, mounting government debt, rising oil prices, and corporate bankruptcies are dragging down Japan's economic growth potential. Faltering confidence has driven Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 Stock Average down by a significant margin, and the unemployment rate hovers at record levels. With the notable exception of the high-tech sector, which is doing well (thanks to healthy domestic demand for mobile phone handsets and computers), corporate Japan is still plagued by overcapacity and the massive debts it ran up during its economic growth period more than a decade ago. Such high-profile bankruptcies as Chiyoda and Kyoei, Japanese life insurance companies that collapsed with \$26 billion and \$42 billion of debts respectively, have damaged consumer confidence and aggravated the financial industry's non-performing debt burden. The government has been largely ineffective in carrying out financial reforms necessary to overcome its public sector debt crisis and to bring about corporate governance in the private sector.

■ JAPANESE FACE POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

Japanese politics is once again in turmoil after its Prime Minister finally gave up a lethargic struggle to cling to power. Mori Yoshiro (last name first), the widely unpopular premier of Japan, officially expressed his resignation on April 18, 2001. For a year, Mori had weathered a stiff challenge from many including those within his own party to step down. Mori's premiership was tainted by countless verbal gaffes and a lack of vision. His remarks that Japan is "a divine nation with the emperor at its center" and that voters not willing to vote for his party should sleep in on the Election Day were met by a plunging job approval rate and uproar from neighboring nations. The Parliament under his leadership remained sharply divided and unable to produce meaningful reform measures to resuscitate Japan's ailing economy. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which Mori himself belongs to, increasingly exhibits signs of internal fracture. A more liberal segment of the LDP is confronting the old, conservative leadership that upheld Mori. Although an earlier revolt by the reformist faction of Kato Koichi was effectively quelled, young members of the LDP continue to call for greater transparency and accountability. The next leader of the LDP will be chosen from among Hashimoto Ryutaro, Koizumi Junichiro, Kamei Shizuka, and Aso Taro. Party conservatives support Hashimoto, the former Prime Minister and chief of the largest faction, but the reform-minded and widely popular Koizumi appears to be garnering significant support.

— by Keun Lee

KOREA

■ SPECIAL: NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA RAPPROCHEMENT

Last June 13, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung stepped off the plane in Pyongyang, North Korea, to greet his North Korean counterpart, Kim Jong Il, with a two-handed handshake. The gesture marked the beginning of a historic three-day summit, which was the first official contact between the two countries since the end of the Korean War. The groundbreaking talks effectively ended what had been a half-century of protracted hostilities, and touched off a wave of excitement about the possibilities for the opening of relations between the North and the South.

The Korean War ended in July 1953 in a truce and not a peace treaty, leaving the divided Koreas technically still at war, and on either side of the most heavily guarded border in the world. Many scholars saw the summit meeting as the symbolic end of the war, and by extension the first tentative steps towards reconciliation and reunification. Others warned against such heady optimism, pointing to fifty years of divergent history, that will make real reconciliation between the two countries a slow and perhaps decades-long process. Nonetheless, expectations were raised to new heights by what Kim Dae-jung called “the most important day in Korean history.” At the summit the two leaders agreed to promote South Korean investment in the North, facilitate the reunification of separated families, and to work towards reunification. The following month North and South Korea held Cabinet-level talks in Seoul and made plans to reunite separated families. Beginning in August, dozens of Koreans began crossing the border for four-day reunions with family members on the other side. It is estimated that there are as many as 10 million separated family members on both sides, many of whom have not seen each other since the Korean War.

At the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in September, athletes from the two Koreas marched onto the field together in what seemed to many to herald the unambiguous beginning of a new era in North-South relations. In the months following the summit, the North and South remained in close contact, beginning plans for the reconnection of a cross-border railway line, and holding a first meeting between the countries’ defense ministers. The result of these steps was that, on October 13, 2000, President Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In its announcement the Nobel Committee lauded Kim for his work on democracy and human rights in South Korea and East Asia, and most notably, for his so-called “sunshine policy” of working towards reconciliation with North Korea.

The thawing of diplomatic relations between North and South seems to signal the end of the long-time international isolation of North Korea as a pariah state. Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok, a top aid to Kim Jong Il, visited the U.S. in October, followed by a reciprocal visit of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang. Britain, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain all subsequently announced plans to begin opening diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Despite the lack of serious progress between the two Koreas, the momentum, which has gathered after the recent summits, promises that great changes are afoot. There are many who see the rapprochement between North and South Korea as one of the final chapters in what has been the long and tumultuous end of the Cold War.

— by Amy Chen

SOUTHEAST ASIA

■ ASEAN PLEDGES TO FACILITATE REGIONAL INTERNET DEVELOPMENT

During its fourth informal summit in Singapore, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) drafted a major agreement regarding regional Internet access and e-commerce. The eASEAN Framework, signed on November 25, 2000, by the organization’s ten member states, addresses online security, tariffs, and the creation of an “online marketplace for . . . goods and services.” The agreement is also designed to remedy Southeast Asia’s sharp digital divide: ASEAN, which includes the member states of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, has some of the world’s most technologically advanced nations as well as some of the world’s most technologically underdeveloped nations. Accordingly, the eASEAN Framework allows for the organization’s more advanced nations share their resources. Computer giant IBM will also serve as a technological advisor. ASEAN’s Internet agreement came a week after an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting where that organization sought to triple the number of people within the region with individual and community-based access by 2005.

■ INDONESIA – BEYOND EAST TIMOR: TROUBLE IN IRIAN JAYA, ACEH, AND THE MOLUCCAS

While East Timor has dominated headlines over the past few months, a handful of other Indonesian provinces have seen increased violence due to religious conflicts and separatist sentiment. Rocked by the recent Asian economic flu and still trying to form a democracy in former President Suharto’s wake, the Indonesian government has been struggling to deal with

these new conflagrations.

The eastern-most and poorest Indonesian province, Irian Jaya has a culture markedly different from the rest of the nation: its native population is of Melanesian descent and much of the island remained unknown to the outside world when it was incorporated into the Indonesian state in 1963. In order to integrate the province into the rest of the nation and ease overcrowding on other islands, the government encouraged Indonesians to resettle in Irian Jaya; by 1996, 200,000 people had moved to the island. Nevertheless, a strong nationalistic spirit persists amongst the native Irians. Tribal militia groups such as the 15,000-strong Task Force Papua have increased demands for autonomy since the end of the Suharto era. For Indonesia, maintaining control over Irian Jaya is a matter of economic importance. The province has offshore natural-gas deposits, an enormous supply of timber, the world's third-largest copper mine, and the world's largest deposit of gold. President Wahid is presently working toward expanding Irian autonomy, but his previous efforts have backfired: when he funded the First Papuan Congress in February 2000, the body convened and speedily passed a resolution to declare independence.

— by Dinyar Patel

COMMENTARY
by Ryan K. Louie

The Walking Ware of Science

A step into a Japanese laboratory, and one typically performs a daily ritual upon entering the world of academic research in Japan. A series of laboratory slippers neatly lined up in the lobby provides the first hints of a cross-cultural experience for the visitor. The exchange of walking-ware highlights elements of Japanese culture; shoes from the outside are placed inside a hierarchy of shoe lockers bearing the owner's names. The president's locker is at the top, followed by the lockers of the head professors, then assistant professors, and continuing down the ranks. A small plastic window in each locker reflects a curiosity of where these wares might have walked on the various paths leading up to this front door of science.

Science walks far and near, and it is often recognized as a universal discipline – a “one-size-fits-all” field. Ideas from the mind of an individual thinker transforms into the material fabric of our everyday lives. From one end of the Pacific to the other, we can now take our digital doggies with us on sidewalk scooters to make a pit stop at the next Play Station II machine. But in our exchanges of the “what's new” in science, are we quick to kick off the shoes of science culture in the name of creating technological universality?

Science revolves around the world and is particularly united every year as all eyes look for the year's Nobelists. Focus on Japanese academic research has enjoyed a new recent spotlight, with the awarding of the 2000 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Hideki Shirakawa of the University of Tsukuba, along with American colleagues Alan Heeger of the University of California - Santa Barbara and Alan MacDiarmid of the University of Pennsylvania, were honored with the prize for their great scientific achievements in creating plastics that can conduct electricity. With what started out in the 1970's as a Shirakawa lab student's serendipitous experiment of adding too much catalyst to a mixture of plastic, a reaction arose to give rise to a new silvery film. And this silvery film served as the world's silver lining, which leads Shirakawa to join his two American colleagues in the United States to develop these new electronic materials for the future.

As for many Japanese scientists, the West has often been looked upon as the model majority – the shoes for which everyone else should attempt to fit into. Prestigious scientific journals are in English. Academic meetings are often held across the Pacific. Such are the views of many scientists who travel from Japan to become post-doctoral researchers in American laboratories. Cited as being some of the reasons for this cross cultural experience beyond the chance to join a cutting-edge lab, are social reasons spanning beyond the technical science details: building fluency in English, experiencing American freedoms of creative thought, having more equal opportunities regardless of gender or age. And meanwhile back at home Japanese scientists who have done research abroad in a Western country are hailed somewhat as being a step above the rest or being more forward-thinking.

But at the same time, perhaps our current multi-ethnic society might become even backwards thinking if we become desensitized to the notion of different cultures. Similar stacking of names on lockers might be setting the trends of which nation becomes the model, despite all serving equally valuable functions. And there may be self-complacency in the West

that “everything needed is right here.” But culture exists. And so does the science in every land. A look to countries such as Japan may lead to solutions on how to integrate an analogous science education into K-12 curriculums. Or perhaps a study of the strong cohesive network of social dynamics, which keeps a Japanese lab driving together, can reveal details about teamwork and leadership. Or even to a more basic degree, the sheer data of newly generated science can invite further discoveries. A Western admiration for the achievements in the East can go beyond the few words of Japanese language that come across the media, such as the “Pikachu’s and Pokemons” for kids and the “Wassup – Wa-saaaa-bi” beer commercials for sushi-loving grownups. Shirakawa has performed outstanding lifelong achievements with contributions resonating around the world. The case is a fine example of the West reacting with the East. The bi-directional walk creates a path benefiting both sides that attempt to reach out. New vistas of technology are created, as well as a greater appreciation of the talents of all people, in an increasingly globally diverse society both abroad and here at home.

It is without doubt that there are many curious inner workings of the academic science culture in Japan. Not all labs may have the same slippers. And the lockers may be arranged differently. But realize that a quick glimpse through the tiny plastic windows only gives a slightest notion of the paths traveled. The road of science starts out in many directions, from both the East and the West to be recognized. And the walking is not just determined by the “where,” but also the “ware.” For the destination to be sought will also be driven by the set of attitudes set foot on the ground.

