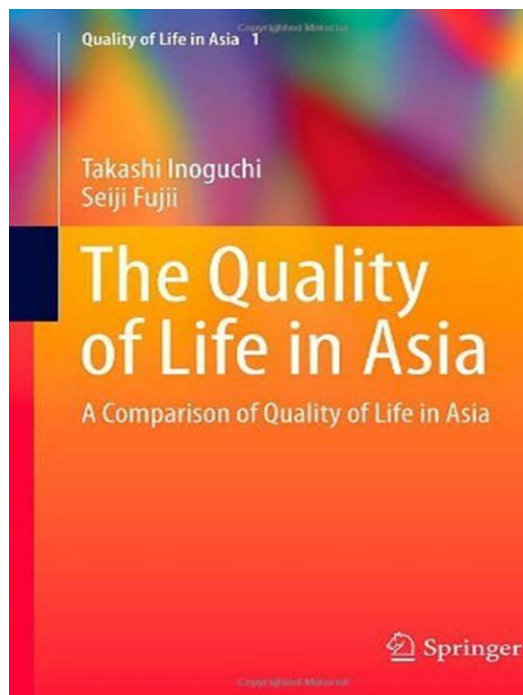


Book Review

Takashi Inoguchi and Seiji Fujii, *The Quality of Life in Asia: A Comparison of Quality of Life in Asia*, New York: Springer, 2012, pp. v-xii, 1-247.

Robert Chung

Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong



Asia is the largest and most populous continent in the world, covering 9% of the Earth's total surface area and comprising 30% of its land area.¹ With a population of 4.165 billion,² it hosts about 60% of the world's current human population. Counting the number of "countries/societies," it has a total of 51 countries/societies.³ Across this big

¹ National Geographic Society (2006). National Geographic Family Reference Atlas of the World (p. 264). Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.

² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013). World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision, DVD Edition.

piece of land, any study of its people is bound to be tedious and an utmost challenge. However, this is precisely what the two authors, Takashi Inoguchi and Seiji Fujii, set out to do.

In *The Quality of Life in Asia: A Comparison of Quality of Life in Asia*, the authors studied and compared the quality of life in 29 Asian countries/societies, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Korea (South), Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. In terms of societies, the 29 “countries/societies” studied covered 57% of all Asian societies. In terms of headcounts in the broadest sense, the study can be considered to have covered 3.834 billion people, which is 92% of the entire population of Asia.

As academics and/or scientists, we obviously have to be very careful about these figures, simply because any study which covers China and India in name or in substance could be construed as having covered more than 60% of the Asian population, or over one-third of the world population. These two most populous nations in the world together contribute about 2.565 billion people.⁴ Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to ask this foremost question, central to the appraisal of any survey study: How representative are the findings, thus how much can they be generalized? Merely looking at the sample or population size will not tell the whole story.

For this quality of life study, data was collected from 29 countries using the AsiaBarometer Survey conducted from 2003 to 2008. The total number of subjects sampled was 49,158 distributed somewhat unevenly across different countries and also across the years (p. 23). According to the authors, “nationwide and stratified random sampling methods were utilized in principal [but] in some cases due to such problems as public security and costs, quota sampling methods were applied...” (p. 24) and readers were asked to go to the AsiaBarometer website at www.asiabarometer.org⁵ for

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ AsiaBarometer: Surveys. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2013, from <https://www.asiabarometer.org/en/surveys>.

more detailed methodological descriptions. However, when one really studies the details on the website, many important questions arise.

For example, when one looks at the survey of 2005, which constitutes the biggest per year sample of 12,241 subjects to the entire study, and then selects India, which contributes the biggest sub-sample of the year with 1,238 subjects, the methodological note says it only sampled subjects from 7 cities, namely, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. Likewise, when one looks at the survey of 2004, which constitutes the second biggest per year sample of 10,685 subjects in the entire study, and then selects China which contributes the biggest sub-sample of the year with exactly 1,000 subjects, it says only 8 cities were chosen for the study, namely, Shanghai, Chongqin, Chendu, Wuhan, Nantong, Wenzhou, Hangzhou and Nanchang, “among which Wuhan is the city changed for [Zhuhai]⁶, predetermined originally due to the fact that Zhuhai is a relatively small city with small population, which is not representational enough while Wuhan is the capital and of Hubei province, the economic center with relatively long history.” It goes on to say that “According to the fifth population census, there are 0.8 billion people in rural areas. Considering that the sample percentage allotted in the rural and urban areas according to the respective population will lead to severe discrepancy in the research results, we decided to assign 800 samples in the urban areas as against 200 samples in the rural areas, in the ratio of 8:2.” The website gives no information about the 2008 survey, probably because the methodological descriptions are not yet ready.

From the above observations, the surveys conducted in many if not most countries cannot be considered as representative of the countries on the whole, and thus the 49,158 subjects sampled cannot be considered as representative of the population of Asia. Perhaps it was not meant to be. As explained by the authors, their attempt was “to measure diversities and contrasts among 29 countries and societies in Asia in terms of value priorities, lifestyles, specific life domain satisfaction, and overall quality of life – happiness, enjoyment, and achievement” (p. 199). That being the case, the authors have certainly succeeded in demonstrating the vast diversities of different

⁶ Misspelled as “Zhouhai” in the source.

geographical, social and ethnic groupings of peoples across Asia, perhaps even among different communities within individual countries and societies.

In terms of conceptualization and operationalization, this study has no doubt contributed tremendously to the literature on the quality of life, by providing a very useful framework and extensive empirical evidence. The concurrent use of “happiness,” “enjoyment” and “achievement” to measure people’s quality of life, the breakdown of life satisfaction along 16 “specific life domains,” namely, housing, friendships, marriage, standard of living, household income, health, education, job, neighbors, public safety, the condition of the environment, social welfare system, democratic system, family life, leisure, spiritual life, and the factorization of these life domains empirically into “life spheres” was an ingenious way to study and describe people’s quality of life on a comparative basis, coupled with standard demographic analyses.

In very specific terms, the authors have distinguished the following three life spheres: (1) The “materialist” sphere which comprises housing, standard of living, household income, health, education, and job, which are “more or less related to basic survival needs... the QOL-sustaining factor. (2) The “post-materialist” sphere comprising friendships, marriage, neighbors, family life, leisure, and spiritual life, which are “related to the aspects of life that people can choose more freely and are allowed to exercise more self-expression... the QOL-enriching factor.” (3) The “public” sphere comprising public safety, condition of the environment, social welfare system, and democratic system, which are “mostly connected with conditions of community and national life... the QOL-enabling factor” (pp. 33-36).

With this conceptualization, the authors were able to categorize the different countries and societies into broad types according to the priorities given to the three life spheres by its people, like materialist then post-materialist, materialist then public, post-materialist then materialist, public then post-materialist, and so on (pp. 65-76, and p. 201). However, as with many research papers dealing with sophisticated categorization and empirical listings, extra care must be taken when one uses these findings. For example, in this first edition of the book, there are a number of inconsistencies and typographical mistakes where the categorization of different countries is concerned, briefly discussed as follow:

In Table 4.21 (p. 76), three countries are apparently misclassified if the tables provided in Appendix C (pp. 210-237) are correct. Taiwan should be subsumed under “Materialist then Post-materialist” rather than “Materialist then Public”, Sri Lanka should be grouped under “Public then Post-materialist” rather than “Post-materialist then Public”, and Singapore should be classified as “Public then Post-materialist” rather than “Public then Materialist”.

In the final paragraph of the book (p. 201), other than repeating these same mistakes, the entire category of “Public then Materialist”, with Brunei, the Philippines, Bhutan, and so on, is misprinted as “Post-materialist then Public”, which is a duplication in title of the “truly Post-materialist then Public” countries like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, and so on.

The authors concluded the book by suggesting the use of more macroscopic categorization and analyses like examining “the characteristics of quality of life in subregions of Asia... [namely] East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia” (p. 201). This is a wonderful suggestion but before that, more attention has to be paid to the consistency between the tables and the main text.

Whether one agrees with the author’s conceptual framework or not, and no matter how representative or unrepresentative the figures are in terms of describing a specific country, society or region, if not the continent of Asia itself, the book, together with its many sophisticated tables and appendices albeit some technical errors, has definitely provided researchers and social scientists with a wonderful sourcebook to further one’s enquiry about the state of development across Asia and among its many peoples. This in itself is one big achievement, especially when the study of social science is somewhat skewed towards the western and developed world. As the authors observed, in relation to the “rationale and promises of the AsiaBarometer” (pp. 8-14), knowledge begets prosperity, and knowledge engenders stability. Regional and cross-cultural surveys of public opinion generate information, enhance knowledge, and stimulate academic activities. This is what Asia needs, and what the world aspires to. *The Quality of Life in Asia: A Comparison of Quality of Life in Asia* may just be one small book on Asia, but it may well be one giant leap in the study of mankind.

Biographical Note

Robert CHUNG is the Director of Public Opinion Programme (POP) at the University of Hong Kong since the programme's foundation in 1991. Under his leadership, POP has become well known for its impartiality and professionalism in collecting, studying and interpreting public opinion in Hong Kong, and is a highly respected programme in the region. Up to this date, POP has conducted over 1,500 independent surveys, covering media development, electoral studies, policy issues, and youth studies. POP's output is widely covered by the media and frequently cited in academic publications. Dr Chung is the Chief Editor of the HKU POP Site at <http://hkupop.hku.hk> and its sister PopCon website at <http://popcon.hk>. Dr Chung is also the Warden of RC Lee Hall in the University of Hong Kong, a panelist of Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) Programme Advisory Panel, and a panelist of the RTHK Television Programme Appreciation Index Research Panel. From 1993 to 1994, Dr Chung served as a part-time community panelist of the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Government. He then became a part-time member of the Central Policy Unit between 1994 and 1999. Between 1997 and 2003, he served as a member of the Community Research Sub-committee of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Community Relations of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), and a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Community Relations. From 2009 to 2012, Dr Chung was a member of the Specialized Committee on Social Development of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service. Dr Chung has been the Hong Kong representative at the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) for a number of years. Between 2006 and 2007, he was the elected Secretary-Treasurer of WAPOR. Since 2010 he has been the elected Chair of the Liaison Committee of WAPOR. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal of Public Opinion Research.