

Building Students movement in the Asian Pacific

The ASA experience



ASA (*Asian Students Association*) was established in 1969 in Malaysia. Nine Asian delegations including HKFS, with students federations from Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia etc joined to form ASA aiming to facilitate exchange of cultures and thinking etc. Since then, ASA has not only initiate education issues, but rather issues such as peace and human rights. In 1971, ASA faced the coercion from the Malaysian government when it applied for registration as an association. The application was rejected. HKFS offered to host the secretariat office here. Since 1971, ASA was relocated to Hong Kong.

REY: The late 60s and early 70s saw the development of social movement all over the world. There was the Vietnam War. A lot of social turmoil. Especially in Asia. That brought forth the youth and people's movement. ASA started as an association for exchanges, but eventually some years after, it became a "political" organization, meaning it can't isolate itself from the reality of the society. That was one of the reasons why ASA was refused registration by the Malaysian government because it was deemed as a political organization. As a political organization, you speak up, you become critical, and any government that is authoritarian and repressive would not want any resistance. And ASA developed into that. And the HKFS being at the fore front of the Hong Kong youth and student movement back in the 70s, (and I guess even until now) was the one who open the door for ASA to have a home here.

A lot of people would rather say that students should remain neutral. This stance of being outspoken, and the development of ASA becoming a political organization, I guess must have gone through a lot of discussion amongst its members, that the student being an active part of the political arena is in fact positive....

Khai Loon: Yes, that's how ASA briefly become alliance with international organizations, unions, movements and student bodies all over the Asian Pacific. We have 53 members from 31 countries. Some have two or three members.

How are the members constituted?

REY: We have some criteria. One is that you have to be national in scope. That is you need to have coverage over the whole country. Like the HKFS has to cover the whole of the Hong Kong territory. Second, the leaders have to be democratically elected. Third, they have to be independent, from government and business. Forth, they adhere to the objectives of ASA: having a student perspective in political issues, this is view as a positive thing because we are trying to break the concept of the "liberal capitalist" right

now, that all successful individuals are based on the amount of money he has in the bank. The number of cars he owns. On the social level, we become involved in changing society not only for the benefits of the students but other sectors of the people.

According to my ancient encounter with ASA, there were heavy discussions on ideologies. Is the atmosphere now similar with a lot of discussions on issues like globalization, new capitalism and leftist ideals?

Khai Loon: From my personal observation, the discussions on ideologies seem to be not so active now. The main discussions are around the problems our members face in their countries. Like war and conflict. They are trying to find out the cause of these problems. And how youth can contribute. This is ASA's main work rather than ideology. It is still political because ASA is a very broad organization with many people from different background, maybe people with different ideologies. This is the venue from which we wish to create according to their varieties. We need to come together, sit down and discuss, and work out the issues and find out what can be done.

Can you briefly tell me what is the situation with the member countries now? What kind of issues are they dealing with at present?

REY: ASA covers the Asian Pacific with five sub-regions, which is: the pacific, east Asia, which includes Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan and several others; for south-east Asia, we have Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia; for south Asia, which includes, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka; then you have west Asia, which is partly middle east, which includes, Iraq, Palestine, Syria and several others. Because of this kind of nature, it is a hot-pot of issues. But basically on two major concerns: one is globalization; the other is war and conflict. There are countries that are deemed as part of the "axis of evil," these affect a lot the dealing among other countries. We have Iraq and Afghanistan, and suddenly we have Philippines which are the second front from the US. And at the same time we have internal conflicts like India and Pakistan, North and South Korea, China and Taiwan. Then you have the democracy and unification issues. And there are in various countries the issues of military rule and dictatorship, as in Nepal. In a way, the issue of "conflict" is so diverse but at the same time you cannot isolate one from another. They are all interconnected. As to globalization, the issue of privatization of agriculture runs havoc in the local markets of many countries of the region. In the Asian Pacific, the capitalist big countries are New Zealand, Australia and Japan; the emerging countries are Malaysia and Singapore, but the rest are poor

countries. So, with these policies being imposed on the small countries by the giants, the former could not fight back. Against these policies, they have to cut down on social securities, education, and health-care. Even Hong Kong experience such cut backs. The young people are facing a period of transmigration, in which they need to go to other places to find work to survive - Hong Kong young workers are going into China to look for jobs. There are so many crises that the Asian youth are confronted with right now. Although there are also a brewing resistance. The youth, in all these, whichever way, is involved; despite the magnitude, the gravity and level of their involvement and resistance. It is important to have a framework to look at these problems.

The work of ASA is to co-ordinate discussion and takes action in advocacy. But besides these activities, what do you think you could further achieve?

REY: We try to be as comprehensive and as broad as possible. We do not just take the issues to the streets; we also try to help other organizations by providing them with skills. Building their capacity to generate and mobilize other people to participate in the movement. For example we have the South East-Asian women program, where we wish to put the women's voice and perspective on the line.

KL: Besides critique and campaign, we also engage with other international organizations, for example, UNESCO, to discuss issues like education. We also involve in policy-making process. We are even invited by the ILO (International Labour Organisation) of the UN to discuss the employment issues. So this is something that we also contribute: the views and perspective from Asian youth inside these meeting. We are consciously maintaining a critical view because we believe that only through such critical position we could be constructive. Otherwise they would implement those policies that would not benefit to the third world countries.

But is there a problem with the insistence on this critical stance, as the secretariat of ASA changes every three years?

We have several factors. The challenges that we have at one point or the other, we are still confronting, have certain gains. One is language. Unlike Europe and North America, or Africa, we have a great variety. Here in Hong Kong you speak Cantonese, you go to Malaysia you speak Mandarin, in Philippines you speak American English and Pilipino... The melting pot of languages and cultures makes it difficult for us to engage each other regarding issues, to look for solutions. But at the same time it helps in providing a diversity that gives us a unity: we are different, but we are actually having the same missions and concerns. It's just a matter of approaching differently from the kind of culture we are born in and nurtured. Secondly, within the organization, we also have limitations. For example, the digital divide. Here in Hong Kong, we have the access to Internet at almost the click of a finger, but in Tonga, you may need an hour to open your mail in Yahoo. Meaning the issue is still as economic as such, not to mention the political realities in some countries. Some of our members are consider a threat to the government and therefore deemed either subversive or watch over by the military. These are the challenges that we face and trying to reunite them. But the beauty in ASA is that we recognize each other's individual or country-base differences in terms of realities. But it doesn't stop us from working with each other. Our motto is: your struggle is my struggle. That is something we always keep alive in ourselves. The word "Asa" has a variety of meaning in different Asian languages. That shows no matter how different and distinct we are from each other, the