

Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) Focuses on Marriage Migration

by Francis Daehoon Lee and JjyoungLeeAn

ARENA's turf

When the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA) started in the 1980s, our founding fellows felt that something was missing among Asian social movements at that time. They decided to set-up a specific regional non-government organisation (NGO) to work on alternatives and develop like-minded people in different networks. So ARENA defines itself as a community of concerned scholars and activists.

Sometimes, we describe ourselves as a virtual organisation within critical and political social movements. We try to affect research and intellectual thinking based on current challenges facing social movements. At the same time, we try to affect social movements by developing new discourses and critical perspectives, new visions and experiences.

Moving to South Korea

Two years back, when we had a discussion on relocation, we had already been in Hong Kong for about twenty years, quite some time.

We began to think of the best way of renewing and rejuvenating, making the organisation younger. One of the ways we thought of was to relocate to some other country where vibrant social movements existed. Thailand was one option, along with South Korea and the Philippines. We even considered Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. As luck would have it, one university in Seoul said it was ready to provide an office space.

Facing challenges

The concept of reaching researchers and social movements activists sounds nice



Photo by: Precy Obja-an

Francis Deehoon Lee (right) and Jiyoung LeeAn (left).

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and must be considered very important. In reality, however, people have different needs and perspectives, varying desires when it comes to engaging with social movements. It is very difficult to include every expectation and need in ARENA's programme. Sometimes we negotiate with many people. Like in the marriage migration programme, some wanted to be involved in the more conceptual aspects of work, more theorising, while some participants from NGOs, local groups, and grassroots groups preferred more discussions on specific actions. It is not always easy to them all together in one place, in perfect harmony. Still, we are trying to understand and find our common ground. I think the process itself is more important, and that is actually a big challenge.

Identifying priorities

Marriage migration is now our top priority. We have a programme called Master of Arts in Inter-Asia NGO Studies (MAINS) offered by ARENA and SungKongHoe University in Seoul. We invite student activists from around Asia. We try to make it highly interactive by employing new forms of education so activists can develop expertise and knowledge on civil society and become teachers in their own society. This is one of the goals of ARENA. We want to change the whole notion of education and develop respect for higher education. We want to provide some space for a comprehensive training, deep thinking and reflection for activists.

We believe comparing similarities and differences among societies and across borders is an excellent source of knowledge. Too many Asian studies depend on textbooks and sources of the West and the US. We want to shift the source of our knowledge. If we want to gain more knowledge about Asia, it is to Asia that we must go. We also want to change the language of study on Asian studies. We just started this year, and we build step by step. For next year, we want to focus on the role of racism in Asia in sustaining and promoting global hegemony of the US. We believe that the global hegemonic power has colonial roots, and racist ideas in Asia are very much part of those colonial roots.

Zeroing on marriage migration

This regional school is a kind of starting point. Next year, we will have another regional school, probably with the same people participating in this programme and with training geared towards more

specific research and actions plans. Through this regional school, we can develop more advocacy plans with local NGOs in different Asian countries. At the same time, we can make more specific research plans between Korea and the Philippines for example, or Korea and Japan, between Vietnam and Korea or Vietnam and Japan. We try to develop more research action plans.

Marriage migration with a feminist lens

We try to re-imagine citizenship, informing it with the perspectives of feminism and of migration. Most of the work on the feminist citizenship issue so far is more like criticisms of liberal democracy's notion of citizenship. However, this kind of work is not directly connected to the issue of migrant citizenship. So that's what we're trying to do—explore and develop a more nuanced discourse on marriage migration especially on citizenship.

We also believe that feminism is an incredibly important source of critical ideas. We think it goes beyond women's interests or the difference between men

and women. We think feminism is beyond binary thinking.

Moving the issue of marriage migration forward

We are a regional NGO but now we think that we should be more involved with the locals. We will divide our work within the region and among the local NGOs. We promise to try to make that balance. At the same time, our initial objective, developing new discourses on social movements based on critical thinking and perspective, will be ongoing. ■

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