

Aging ASIA: Very Old Idea

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By Tom Plate

LOS ANGELES — I don't know about you, but, being middle-aged, I'm getting tired of reading about how much of Asia's work force is aging. In fact, I think the aging in Asia story is the overblown story of the year.

I give you two big reasons. The first is that people are living more healthily than ever before, fewer are taking middle age sitting down, and adults are working well past the usual retirement age. Instead of being a drag on the economy, they are giving it a lift.

Consider Prof. Jay O. Light, just named the new dean of Harvard Business School. Harvard University president Lawrence H. Summers (who is unfortunately stepping down as president amid a political correctness firestorm) announced the appointment the other day. Isn't it time for him to retire, someone asked? The highly regarded Light, 64, in effect replied: Not in my lifetime!

Harvard, which does a lot of things right, has no mandatory retirement age. Neither, by the way, does the UCLA or many other excellent American universities. Why throw a vintage Merlot away just because it is a year older?! The aging issue is one of those news-media crisis (and academic exploitation-for-grant boondoggles) that deserves to be put in some academic and media retirement home. The story is getting whiskers by the day.

Another reason that the aging of Asia and aging almost everywhere story is losing some of its get-up-and-go as time goes on is that its bottom-line conclusion not only excludes the healthier-when-older factor, but it often leaves out half the population: women. Until recently in too many parts of Asia, women have not been a significant part of the labor force. That's changing, perhaps slowly, but it's changing nonetheless.

Singapore, out of economic necessity rather than ideological conviction, showed the way decades ago in aggressively integrating women in education and employment. (Most of the time, you can look at what Singapore has done and surmise what much of the rest of eager-to-catch-up Asia will also do.) By including women in the work force, you can — without being a math whiz — figure that you are more or less doubling your economic productivity.

The idea of women's employment and political rights is starting to cook in some of the unlikeliest places. In Syria, women, in conjunction with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), are striking much more than a pose for

fuller political rights. Dr. Mona Ghanem, head of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs, released a new study on the increasing political empowerment of Syrian women and announced the urgent need to prioritize the growth of women's power as part of Syria's political and economic development.

Though otherwise a terrible dictatorship, Syria has in fact seen more women in parliament over the past decade. There are more women judges than ever before, and 19 percent of the country's lawyers are now women. Women's groups in several countries in the region are banding together to emphasize female power in the political and economic realm.

In China, too, women are increasingly becoming important to the economy and polity. A symptom of the dramatic change was the recent announcement, on page one of China Daily, the Beijing-based English-language newspaper, of a new major women's study program.

Because China's Communist Constitution enshrines the equality of the sexes, in theory little more should need to be done. But constitutional theory is one thing, actual practice another; and the authorities rightly recognized this when they let the Ministry of Education formally approve an undergraduate major in women's studies at China Women's University in Beijing.

Women Studies Professor Han Henan points out that the creation and certification of the new major — the first in China — reflects the country's economic and social reforms, but admits that in the western regions of China, especially, women are still considered to be inferior to men.

It was the women studies movement in the United States in the seventies, explained the professor, which launched the basic idea that helped inspire Chinese women; U.S. feminist influence has also been sighted in India and Pakistan. The net effect of women's economic and political liberation will be to greatly magnify the size of the Asian workforce.

That the increasing presence of much healthier older workers and gender emancipation should prove more than enough to abate the so-called aging of Asia crisis. In fact, that whole argument about aging Asia is getting rather stale.

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