A Search for the Perspective
on the Studies of East Asia:
Centering on Chinese Studies

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I.

Since the mid-19th century, almost all East Asian countries have written their histories from the European perspective. An example of the division of history is to view the Opium War as the beginning of Chinese modernization. Viewing the beginning of Modern Asia by the entrance of Europe is prevalent in the three East Asian countries, i.e. China, Japan, and Korea.

In this case, the term ‘modern’ contains an European concept formulated on the basis of European perspective of time and space. As noted, it is a historical and cultural concept theorized by the combination of the Renaissance, Reformation, Revolution by the common, and Industrial revolution. Moreover, since Europe advanced into East Asia by means of violence and military defeat, it was commonly believed that the value of Europe was superior to that of East Asia. Thus, the term ‘modern’ is an Europe-centered perspective of history and culture which assumed the superiority of Europe.

Although East Asia was defeated by violent and oppressive characteristics of capitalism, it resisted European modernity and accepted it as

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an attempt to modify itself in accordance with European modernity. Thus, East Asia regarded the process of resistance, acceptance, and modification as the process of its own modernization.

Modern East Asia obtained the universality of the world as it viewed itself from a European value system. Recently, a regret or criticism has occurred within East Asia concerning the European value of the modern violence, superiority, and universality. However, East Asia tries to reform the structure of modernity by accepting the tendency of anti-modernity. In East Asia, the acceptance of anti-modernity or post-modernity is not suggesting the end of European influence, but lead East Asian Countries to assimilating it in a more serious way.

II.

Looking at the process of Chinese history, we can discover that a gradual change occurred in every 300 years. For instance, the claim for the right of survival and possession, a change in the right of monarchs, the claim for the discussion of equal distribution of land for the sake of the commoners, the tendency to decentralize, and so forth occurred between the 16th and 17th centuries, in the 20th century the Chinese spirit continued as each district gained independence, the dynastic system collapsed, the public ownership of land by the People’s Republic of China, and so forth. Thus, the period between the 16th and 20th centuries can be characterized as the period of the collapse of the dynastic system, which was caused by the power of the dialectical development within the system. This view claims that it was not Western modernity that initiated Chinese modernity, but that it was a part of the process chain of change which already existed in China.

The characteristic mark of this process is that it was not a simple replacement between dynasties, but the collapse of the entire system which lasted for about 2,000 years. Secondly, the collapse was not caused by any external force, but by the power inherent in the history of China. This inherent power raised the question as to what kind of constitution should be established instead of the dynastic system, a question which never occurred for the last 2,000 years. Around the mid-19th century, when China was about to be mired in confusion, capital-
ism (imperialism) invaded China for its markets. Moreover, it had a very different principle, which was evolution, the stronger preying on the weaker. Also, the Western culture was recognized as being superior to Chinese.

However, it is to be noted that, although China was in a dire situation, it never abandoned the fundamental idea of Heaven’s rule that people regard food as heaven and equal distribution enables myriad things to find their own places. But continues as changing its shape as the Idea of Great Unity at the end of Qing Dynasty; Sun Wen’s Minshengzhuyi (sufficient clothes and sufficient food for the four hundred million people), the idea of socialism, and so forth.

Due to the invasion of capitalism (imperialism) and Western cultures, China had to accept to some extent an unexpected modification, but it continuously succeeded its old idea for better or for worse. China, between the 19th century and the earlier part of the 20th century, experienced a dramatic moment in which the dynastic system collapsed and the Social People’s Republic was created.

III.

At this point, I would like to present the problem of perspective. The perspective that sees the Opium War as the beginning of Chinese modernity also implies the view that the dynastic system is a rotten tree, which means that the process of Chinese modernity was a rotten dynastic system that was finally destroyed by Western influence and, as a result, the search for European democratic politics could start. Here lies the Hegelian concepts of “continuity” and “stagnation.” What if we escape from the European perspective of history and culture, and look at the East Asian culture from a different aspect?

It is generally accepted that the cultural characteristics of the Chinese, which I refer to as the East Asian cultural area, are stable. However, comparing it with the Islamic cultural area, only a few would agree. Again, comparing it with the European cultural area, most people would have the impression that a radical change exists in the latter, whereas there is only a slow change in the former. That is to say that Europe experienced a progressive radical change and a development
from the Middle ages until Modern ages, whereas China was a country which had continuity and stagnation while only continuing a replacement of dynasties. What about the comparison with the Islam cultural area? From the beginning, the Islam cultural area was in a situation to resist and fight against both European culture and the Indian culture. It was continuously forced to fight against adjacent cultures whose development was similar or superior to theirs. Its area originally covered the Mediterranean and Iberia, but had to retreat to the northern part of Africa. However, their area was extended to Indonesia in the East. It might be said that their cultural area moved from the West to the East.

On the contrary, China, which was the center of East Asian culture, never came outside and the cultural area never moved. Although it made contacts with other cultures, it did not fight against the Roman, Islam, or Indian cultures. However, China united the dynasties of small countries adjacent to it, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, etc. The reason for no cultural changes might have been due to the geographical condition. The Himalaya, desert, and the distance from other cultures explain why there were no conflicts with other cultures. Moreover, the fact that its culture was based on Confucianism or Buddhism, which was harmonious rather than hostile, had something to do with its stability and continuity. Furthermore, the system of tributary trade was a reason for maintaining a harmonious relationship between China and its adjacent countries. At any rate, comparing Chinese culture with the Roman culture, which was almost destroyed at an earlier time or the Islamic culture, which might be called the war culture, or the Indian culture, which was the route for other cultures to pass, implies that the stability of the East Asian culture was due to many factors-geographical, relational, and structural. It is not a complete perspective to view the Chinese culture simply as a “stagnation.”

It is now required for us to reconstruct the perspective of history from the East Asian view. Let us take an example of Chinese clan code. One of the earliest edificatory thinkers, Yan Fu, felt that the sense of crisis translated the title of the book, *A History of Politics* by E. Jenks, as the *Shehui Tongquan*, accepting the theory of the three stages: clan code — feudal code — military nation, and understood that China had 70% of clan code and 30% of military nation, which he thought was still at the primitive stage as
opposed to the *civilized* stage. Thus, Yan Fu also thought that China’s weakness was an underdeveloped stage in history as well as in civilization. The reason for translating “feudal” in the original text not as “feudal 匯,” but as a clan code is because at the time the term *fengjian* 匯 was used to mean “local self-government” and that the rank between the higher and the lower in Chinese system of clan codes 匯 may have appeared to Yan Fu, who had studied in the United Kingdoms, to be the feudal system of social positions. Since then, Chinese system of clan codes along with teaching of the propriety 匯 was criticized by the movement for new cultures at the time of the May Fourth movement as being the symbol of the feudal system. As is well known, Mao Zedong considered the system of a clan code as one of the things to be removed during his revolution.

However, the system of a clan code was an ordering system for the relationship between the higher and the lower and also functioned as a tool for stabilizing the relationship of owning land, which aimed at mutual help and insurance. In other words, Taiping Revolution or Mao Zedong’s revolution attempted to extend the blood relationship to the non-blood relationship, i.e. to the scale of the people of Heaven or the people of the nation, in a formal aspect, and mutual help and insurance to all the people in a teleological aspect. Chinese socialism was a form of Chinese system of clan codes which was negative in a formal aspect and extensive in a teleological aspect. As a result, the Confucian tradition of the system of a clan code permeated into Chinese socialism and became an element which caused the Cultural Revolution.

Thus, viewed in the context of East Asian history, the socialistic revolution in China was on the line continuing from such tradition as the system of a clan code, although it was originally born under the influence of the international movement of communism.

IV.

A question that arises in the attempt to reconstruct history in the context of each country as opposed to the Europe-centered view of history is on what point of view we must consider the relationship
between East Asian countries. For instance, on what perspective must we consider the war between the Qing Dynasty and Japan?

The general view in the past was that, whether it was an invasion by Japanese imperialism or not, the reason for Japanese victory was due to its earlier achievement of capitalistic modernization; this is a view derived from presupposing the superiority of European modernity.

However, seeing it in the inner context of East Asian history, another aspect exists. As mentioned earlier, China intended the common possession of property or mutual help and insurance to prevent the distribution of land which became more and more divided by generation due to the system of equal distribution by inheritance. As a result, the social relationship in China which developed the ethics of mutual help differed from the capitalistic principle which allowed the principle of the stronger preying on the weaker. Moreover, since the rule of literary officials was a primary idea in China, the position of military officials was not high. Also, as China was at the end of the dynastic system, the power of authority weakened because of the tendency to decentralize and China was about to face confusion caused by Taiping Revolution, which was an internal movement. Moreover, the highest position in China was Heaven and, traditionally, the people belonged to it, and not to the government. This was an inappropriate condition for establishing a national state or a national military. In other words, the constitution of China was not appropriate for warring against other countries. On the contrary, the system of private possession in Japan was largely due to the system of the feudal inheritance, i.e. the inheritance to the eldest son, and so Japan could adapt to the principle of competition, and the stronger preying on the weaker. Also, the inherited military rank was in charge of ruling and Japan accustomed to the military, and emphasized the Confucian principle of courage, wisdom and benevolence. Moreover, in Japan the emperor or the nation was considered to be the highest position of public concern and being faithful to it was called fenggang. Therefore, it was easy to establish a national state or a national military.

The difference of the cultural and historical elements between the two countries was the reason for the victory or defeat in the Sino-Japanese War. Historically, the war between the Qing Dynasty and Japan had the characteristic that when the dynastic system of China was weak, an
adjacent country called Japan, which had the culture of military did invade it. This is not very different from the invasion of China by other countries when its system weakened. The Japanese invasion was not the only problem within the scope of the East Asian culture. European capitalism (imperialism) and culture invaded Asia and Japan was at the same side, partly for self-protection and partly for its own profit. The historical relationship between the Qing Dynasty and Japan was almost the same as that between Joseon (sc. an old name for Korea) and Japan. I do not have any specific knowledge of the history of Joseon, but, in comparison with the history of China and Japan, Joseon must have had the same sort of spirit, i.e. of under movement for development. On what perspective we must consider the recent history of the three countries is a question we should ask.

A reasonable view concerning Japan is that the system of the inherited rank, the eldest son’s inheritance derived from the feudal system in Japan, which was the center of military culture, effected the system of private property and the consciousness for jobs. At any rate, it is a biased and the Europe centered perspective to regard the Japanese invasion of China and Korea as the result of Japanese superiority in modernity to other countries, not merely as a faster establishment of capitalist modernity which would be done in other countries in the time. Even those Japanese who think that Japan must apologize for its invasion of other countries were still under the influence of the European perspective of history. For this reason, their apology is exercised on the basis of their sense of superiority of “the earlier success of capitalism in Japan” or ‘the civilized’ or ‘the primitive’ and, as a result, it takes the form of ‘the arrogance of apology.’

If we interpret the historical events from the European perspective, we will be able to escape from the view of the civilized or the primitive. The difference, between the East Asian culture and the European or Islam culture, between premodern Japan that was appropriate for capitalism and China that was appropriate for socialism, or between a literary culture and a military culture was not a difference between the civilized and the primitive, but rather of types. This way of viewing history as a difference in types is very important in that it will stop the inappropriate nationalistic feeling of superiority, prejudice, discrimination in East Asia, in particular, in Japan.
V.

Finally, let me mention something that might arise in the studies of East Asian countries. I am a Japanese scholar who has specialized in China. In my case, the reason for studying China is not that I want to know about China or something about China or that I like China or something Chinese, but that I want to know the reality of Asia. By reality, I mean the real view of the Asian world which does not involve any prejudice.

Those Japanese who were born in 1930’s, like myself, received a false education about Asia. We learned that Asia required the exercise of the Japanese leadership and must be united under Japan. In the name of a union, it was to raise interest in Asia and at the same time, to insert a prejudice for Asia. When I opened my eyes, as to the falsity of the so-called Asianism, I became interested in the reality of Asia. My pursuit for the reality of Asia rooted the sense of guilt in me about the invasion or colonization of Asia and led me to examine and criticize the prejudice to Asia instilled in me.

This sense of guilt, self-examination, and self-criticism are the tasks I have to do as a Japanese. In addition, I have to ask the questions of how I have to live and in what way Japan should exist. I have grown up with a consideration of those.

Again, the reason for my studies of China is not for knowledge, personal taste, or self-cultivation, but to reveal where the falsehood or prejudice of history lies by means of researching into China. The representative falsehood or prejudice is, as mentioned, the understanding of China from European point of view. The problem is that this kind of viewpoint has permeated into many East Asians and, as a result, it becomes, as in Japan, the rationale for the Japanese inappropriate superiority or contempt for Asia.

When I, as a Japanese scholar, research into the East Asian world, I cannot avoid the problem of apologizing for Japanese invasion or colonization. There are many ways to apologize. One might concern oneself directly or indirectly with social, political, cultural activities or the like. However, if one is a scholar, one has to be involved in apologizing through the content of one’s own research.

To say that “one has to be involved in apologizing through the
content of one’s own research” does not mean that one has to research for the sake of apology itself or to research into something that is related to apology. In my case, I have tried to solve the prejudice of history passed on from the previous century through the real history of East Asia. This is related to the way of living. For example, consider whether one is sensitive to the prejudice of society or not, whether one will accept such a prejudice or not, and whether one will resist or compromise, and so forth. The way of living is, after all, a question about one’s personality, idea, and world-view. Human in ‘the way of human living’ refers to the man who has the sense of responsibility for the place in which he lives. Such a man is the man who recognizes his responsibility as a Japanese, as an East Asian, as one of the yellow race, or as one of the world citizens. The depth of the sense of responsibility forms his personality, idea, and world-view and, also, becomes his substance.

For me, the study of East Asia involves the endless question concerning the way for my living and the reality of myself. The purpose of study is related to the question of how to make Japan a country which is morally generous and which other countries can love. The problem with apology lies not only in how to apologize to other countries, but also in the hope of building a better country that apologizes in itself for its own fault and that is morally responsible. ‘The hope of building a better country’ must be common to scholars from all three countries. In the process of actualizing its own hope, we can have real communication over the borders of East Asian countries.

As a member of East Asia, I am happy to witness the Institute for East Asia established at Sungkyunkwan University. Moreover, it is an honour for me to be invited for the international conference for the studies of East Asia which was held for the commemoration of it. As a scholar specializing in the field of East Asia, I would like to share the responsibility.