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The Idea of Asia and Its Ambiguities

WANG HUI

P RASENJIT DUARA'S "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times" is a rich and inspiring paper. The distinction between the concept of region and the concept of regionalization shows the author's historical approach. Asia as a region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the result of imperial regionalism and the anti-imperialist regionalization project. The question of Asian "modernity" must eventually deal with the relationships both between Asia and European colonialism and between Asia and modern capitalism. A lot of research has shown Asia as a region from a long historical perspective, but most can be thought of as a modern construction of the early history of Asia in light of imperial or anti-imperialist projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For example, as early as the 1940s, Miyazaki Ichisada began to explore the "birth of Song dynasty capitalism" through the study of wide-ranging historical transportation links, believing firmly that the study of "the development of modernity after the Song has brought us to the point of needing to reflect on modern Western history in terms of the development of modern East Asian history."¹ That his theory of "East Asian modernity" overlapped with the Japanese idea of a "Greater East Asia" does not obscure the insight inhering in Miyazaki's observations. He saw that from the perspective of world history, the digging of the Grand Canal, urban migration, the ability of the circulation of commodities such as spices and tea to connect European and Asian trade networks, and the promotion of artistic and cultural exchange between Europe and Asia enabled by the expansion of the Mongolian empire not only changed the internal relations in Chinese and Asian societies, but also connected Europe and Asia by land and sea.² If the political, economic, and cultural features of "Asian modernity" appeared as early as the tenth or eleventh century, was the historical development of these two worlds merely parallel, or more closely linked?

Andre Gunder Frank responded to this question by noting that Asia and Europe were already profoundly tied together by the thirteenth or fourteenth

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¹Miyazaki Ichisada, "Dongyangde jinshi" [East Asian modernity], *Riben xuezh*, 1:240.

²Miyazaki Ichisada, "Dongyangde jinshi" [East Asian modernity], in *Selected Translations of Japanese Scholars' Research on Chinese History*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 163, 166.

centuries, and as a result, any discussion of the birth of modernity must proceed on the assumption of a world system characterized by such relations.³ The significance of communication is not the mere bundling together of two worlds; it is more like two gears connected by a belt: when one turns, the other must turn as well. So a logical conclusion is that,

If history were only European the Industrial Revolution would never have eventuated, because it was not merely a matter of mechanization but a matter of the whole social structure. The rise of the petit-bourgeoisie was a necessary precondition for the Industrial Revolution, and it also required the capital accumulated through trade with East Asia. Making the machines work required not just motive power but also cotton as raw material and markets into which to sell the finished products, both of which were in fact supplied by East Asia. Lacking interaction with East Asia, in other words, the Industrial Revolution probably would not have taken place.⁴

Miyazaki's research centers mainly on Chinese history proper, and his writings on the intercourse between Asia and Europe are thin. Frank's research, on the other hand, is economistic and trade centered, lacking convincing explanations of the internal dynamics of European history and the capitalism that these dynamics produced. In their structured narratives based on a maritime world, wars, contingent events, and other historical factors are necessarily pushed into the background. Both accounts, however, from their different perspectives provide us with the possibility to create new narratives of "world history."

In such an interactive historical narrative, then, the efficacy of the idea of Asia diminishes, as it is neither a self-contained entity nor a set of self-contained relations; it is neither the beginning nor the end of a linear world history. It would be better to say that this "Asia"—neither starting point nor end, neither self-sufficient subject nor subordinate object—provides the moment to reconstruct "world history." If we need to rectify mistakes in theories of "Asia," we must also reexamine the notion of Europe. As we correct the errors in the idea of Asia, we must also reexamine the idea of Europe. To borrow Lenin's phrasing, we should ask, where does this advanced Europe come from, after

³Frank points out that both the European population and European capitalism within the world economy have grown steadily since 1400, and that this process is consistent with the East's decline since around 1800. European countries used the silver they acquired from their colonies in the Americas to buy their way into Asian markets that were expanding at the time. For Europe, the commercial and political mechanisms for this Asian market were unique and effective from the perspective of the worldwide economy. Just as Asia began to decline, Western countries became rising industrial economies through the mechanisms of import and export. In this sense, modern European capitalism resulted both from changes in relations of production within European societies and out of its relationship with Asia. See Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

⁴Ichisada, "Dongyangde jinshi," in *Selected Translations*, 236–38.

all? What sort of historical relations have resulted in Asia's backwardness? Historical relations internal to societies are important, but in the historical long run, how should we appraise the effects of ever-extending interregional relations on a society's internal transformation? If the discourse on Asia continues to be based on notions of Europe that are taken as self-evident, and the motive forces that gave rise to the concept of Europe are not re-understood through a penetrating review of European historical development, this discourse will not be able to overcome its lack of clarity.

The accounts of Asia discussed here demonstrate not so much Asia's autonomy as the ambiguities and contradictions in the idea of Asia itself: the idea is at once colonialist and anticolonialist, conservative and revolutionary, nationalist and internationalist, originating in Europe and, alternatively, shaping Europe's image of itself. It is closely related to issues of both nation-state and empire, a notion of a civilization seen as the opposite of the European, and a geographic category established through geopolitics. I believe that as we examine the political, economic, and cultural autonomy of Asia, we must take seriously the derivativeness, ambiguity, and inconsistency that were intertwined with the history of its advent—these are products of specific historical relationships, and it is only from these relationships that they can be transcended or overcome.

From here, let me summarize some points of thought in my earlier work, "The Politics of Imagining Asia" (*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 [March 2007]: 1–33) about the idea of Asia. First, the idea of Asia was always closely related to issues of "modernity" and capitalism, and at the core of the question of "modernity" lay the development of the relationship between nation-state and market. The tension in the notion of Asia between nationalism and supranationalism is closely related to the reliance of capitalist markets on both the state and interstate relations. Because discussion of Asia is rooted in such issues as the nation-state and capitalism, the full diversity of historical relations among Asian societies, institutional forms, customs, and cultural patterns comes to be understood only through the narrative of "modernity," and analysis of values, institutions, and rituals independent of that narrative has either been suppressed or marginalized. It is in this sense that, even as we challenge the Eurocentric historical narrative, how we go about unearthing these suppressed historical legacies—values, institutions, rituals, and economic relations—and rethinking European "world history" become key tasks.

Second, at this point, the nation-state is still emphatically the main force behind advancing regional relations within Asia, with the following manifestations: (1) regional relations are the extension of state relations: whether we are talking about the Asian Forum promoted by Malaysia, or the East Asian Network advocated by South Korea, or regional organizations such as ASEAN or the Shanghai Six, all of these are interstate relationships formed along the axis of developing economic association or state security collaboration. (2) Asian sovereignty has yet to be fully established: the standoffs on the Korean

peninsula and the Taiwan Straits and the incomplete sovereignty of postwar Japan all illustrate that the nationalism set in motion in the nineteenth century still determines, to a large extent, power relations in East Asia. (3) Because the new discourse on Asia tends to be directed at forming protective and constructive regional networks against the unilateral dominance and turbulence brought about by globalization, the national question still lies at the center of the Asian question. Imagining Asia often appeals to an ambiguous Asian identity, but if we examine the premises underlying the institutions and principles of this idea, the nation-state emerges as the political structure needing to be overcome. So, how to deal in the present with the legacy of national liberation movements (respect for sovereignty, equality, mutual trust, and the like) and traditional regional relations is still a question demanding the most serious consideration.

Third, and closely related to the first two questions, the dominance of the nation-state in Asian imaginaries arose from the empire/nation-state binary created in modern Europe. The historical import of this binary is that the nation-state is the only modern political form and the most important premise for the development of capitalism. The binary, however, not only oversimplifies the diversity of political and economic relations subsumed under the category of empire, but also underestimates the internal diversity within individual nation-states.

Modern Asian imaginaries are based mainly on interstate relations and seldom deal with Asia's complex ethnicities, regional communications and forms of interaction that are conventionally grouped under the category of empire—for example, trans-state tribute networks, migration patterns, and the like. The question is this: in an era in which the nation-state has become the dominant political structure, will the traditional Asian experiences of various types of communication, coexistence, and institutions provide possibilities for overcoming the internal and external dilemmas brought about by the nation-state system?

Fourth, the category of an Asian totality was established in contradistinction to Europe, and it encompasses heterogeneous cultures, religions, and other social elements. Whether from the perspective of historical traditions or contemporary institutions, Asia lacks the conditions for creating a European Union-style superstate. Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Daoism, and Confucianism all originated on this continent we call Asia, which represents three-fifths of the world's landmass and contains more than half of the world's population; thus, any attempt to characterize Asia as a unitary culture is not plausible. The idea of Confucian Asia cannot account even for China itself, and even if we reduce the idea of Asia only to East Asia, we cannot escape the region's cultural heterogeneity. Any new imagining of Asia must combine a vision of cultural and political diversity with regional political and economic structures. A high degree of cultural heterogeneity does not mean that Asia cannot form definite regional structures; it merely reminds us

that any such structure must have a high degree of flexibility and pluralism. Two possible directions for imagining Asia are, therefore, (1) to draw on the institutional experiences of Asian cultural coexistence in order to develop new models that will allow different cultures, religions, and peoples to get along on equal terms within the context of the nation-state and the Asian region; and (2) to form multilayered, open social organizations and networks linked through regional connections to coordinate economic development, mitigate conflicts of interest, and diminish the dangers inhering in the nation-state system.

Fifth, Asia has historically long-standing and unbreakable religious, trade, cultural, military, and political ties to Europe, Africa, and the Americas, so to describe Asia on the model of or to assume it to be something like an enlarged nation-state is equally inappropriate. The idea of Asia has never been purely self-delimited, but rather is the product of interaction with other regions; the critique of Eurocentrism is not an affirmation of Asiacentrism, but rather an attempt to eradicate a logic dominated by egocentrism, exclusivity, and expansionism. In this sense, discerning the disorder and pluralism within the “new empire” and breaking down the self-evident notion of Europe are not only important preconditions for reconstructing the ideas of Asia and Europe, but also the path required to break out of the “new imperial logic.”

Sixth, if the excavation of Asia’s cultural potential is also a critique of Western-centrism, then the reconstruction of the idea of Asia also constitutes defiance of the colonial, interfering, and dominating forces that have divided Asia. The commonality of Asian imaginaries partly derives from subordinate status under Western colonialism, during the Cold War, and in the current global order, and also rises out of Asian movements for national self-determination, socialism, and colonial liberation. If we fail to acknowledge these historical conditions and movements, we will not be able to understand the implications of modernity for Asia or the sources of its division and war perils. People regard the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc as the end of the “Cold War,” but in Asia, the structure of the Cold War has, to a large extent, been preserved and has developed new derivative forms under new historical conditions. Contemporary discussions of the question of Asia, however, are carried out either by state actors or intellectual elites, and the numerous Asian social movements—whether of workers, students, peasants, or women—are indifferent to it. This stands in sharp contrast to the tempestuous surge of Asian national liberation in the twentieth century. If it can be said that the socialist and national liberation movements of the twentieth century have drawn to a close, their fragmentary remains can still be a vital source for stimulating new ways of imagining Asia.

By way of conclusion, let me emphasize once again what I have been attempting to convey: the issue of Asia is not simply an Asian issue, but rather a matter of “world history.” Reconsidering “Asian history” is at once to reconstruct nineteenth-century European “world history,” and an effort to break free of the twenty-first-century “new imperial” order and its associated logic.