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To cite this article: Ichijo Muto (2010) Asia, inter-Asia, and movement: decolonization into the future, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 11:2, 178-183, DOI: [10.1080/14649371003616094](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649371003616094)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649371003616094>



Published online: 21 May 2010.



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Asia, inter-Asia, and movement: decolonization into the future

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In 1997, soon after we, a group of activist-intellectuals, started the People's Plan Study Group (PPSG) in Tokyo, Chen Kuan-Hsing visited us and we set up for him a small workshop where he broached his initial idea about his inter-Asia project. I located the transcript of his input in an old issue, actually No. 2, of the PPSG periodical. I have read it again with some nostalgia and excitement.

Of several interesting points Kuan-Hsing made in the lecture, two impressed me at that time. Re-reading it 10 years later, they tell me more than they did before. First, he said the current situation should not be seen as post-colonial. When we talk about colonization, he observed, we should include in it domination, exploitation, and suppression exercised on the basis of *our* identification with the West, an identification which, he thought, continued.

The other point he emphatically made was about critical syncretism that would allow us to pluralize the object so that we could get loose from the structure that determines our relationship with it. In other words, we need to positively try to become other. Unlike hybridity, critical syncretism means active mutual intervention. It is an antidote to identity politics of various strands. 'We talk about ourselves. You talk about yourself. You should not talk about us.' This is identity politics. Acting on it, he said, labor activists had failed to critique patriarchy and first generation feminists to critique heterosexism.¹

I think that his first point, the keen awareness of the colonality of today as a state of being dominated through identification with the West, underlies our use of Asia to designate ourselves. Asia here is of course

not a geographical designation but a historical and social construction. As everyone may agree, it is the creation of the other, the 'West,' in modern history, notably through conquest, colonization, and subjugation. Takeuchi Yoshimi, a maverick Japanese thinker whose insight into orientalism, I think, predated Edward Said's, said that for Europe to be Europe it had to invade the East. 'Only by breaking into the heterogeneous, was Europe able to confirm itself' (Takeuchi 2005: 14). As Wang Hui observed, 'Historically, Asia is not an Asian concept but a European concept' (Wang 2006: 119).

Why we should identify ourselves as Asians is a question with no obvious answers. But I think we need to do so because the asymmetrical relationships that produced Asia and the West in a single process are still entrenched and being reproduced. They have set in, in new ways, as 'colonialism without colonies' as Nishikawa Nagao aptly put it, with the West securely built into its core as the self-appointed universal standard provider (Nishikawa 2009). Ashis Nandy calls it the 'second form of colonialism' that colonizes 'minds in addition to bodies,' generalizing 'the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category' (Nandy 2009: xi). Identification with the West is thus a voluntary choice although there are always moral and material factors of coercion working behind it. The West, in this sense, appropriates for itself the privilege of turning its private affairs and concerns into public affairs and concerns of the non-West. You may call this phenomenon postcolonial if postcolonial is understood as a version of colonial just as postmodern is a version of modern.

So, we still need to decolonize. And this would mean de-identifying with the West. This of course would not mean going anti-West, let alone adore 'Asian values' as opposed to 'western values' as have some human rights-phobic Asian politicians. It simply means that we must soberly recognize how power originating in the West is exercised globally, nationally, locally, nay in all creases of our brains and must find ways to overcome it. Its effects are permeating. It establishes its grip on people's minds and ways of living as global culture soaking through sensibilities, projecting shared images of a good life, and teaching cutthroat competition as the only art of survival.

Assuming that we should resist this, why should we do so as Asians? Isn't it enough that we are just non-West?

We know Asia is not an innocent concept. Not only is Asia a construct made by the West, but it was also used by the Japanese empire to justify its hegemonic project to dominate its neighboring peoples, beginning with Korean, Okinawan, Ainu, and Chinese peoples and eventually leading to the military occupation of a vast territory of Asia in the name of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This development largely tainted and discredited pan-Asian discourses.

The picture is tricky, however. The success of Japan in establishing the first modern nation state in Asia in the 1860s was seen as a shining example to the rest of Asia, suggesting an alternative future for the Asian peoples facing threats from the West. Tokyo functioned as a concourse for young revolutionaries and reformers from China and other Asian territories colonized by the west. The Japanese victory in 1905 over Russia had a double-edged significance for the rest of Asia. While it was hailed by Asian people far away from Japan as the first victory of a 'colored' people over the whites, it also signaled the beginning of full Japanese conquest of its neighboring peoples. With Russia driven away from the peninsula, Japan annexed Korea by force and obtained a firm foot-

hold in North East China. It was also the decisive moment of Japan's accession to the western imperialist club. Britain backed Japan as a means to fight and weaken its adversary, Russia, while the United States recognized Japan's right to control Korea in exchange for Japan's approval of the US colonization of the Philippines.

The anti-colonial struggle against the West's (and later Japan's) invasions and conquests, developed not as a pan-Asian struggle but unfurled as national liberation movements aiming to create independent nations in colonial and semi-colonial territories. Nationalism was the guiding spirit of these struggles against colonial domination, which were led by intellectuals and joined by peasants' uprisings and actions of urban masses. The dominant thrust of the times was the struggle of the colonized people to emerge in the world arena as peoples and that was by acquiring a modern nation state. The idea of nation state, the most ingenious creation of the modern West, was directed against the West as the colonized people's most effective weapon.

Against this historical background, a sort of Japan exceptionalism came to be widely accepted. Even now, visiting foreigners wonder why Japanese talk about 'Japan and Asia' as though Japan were not part of Asia. In this rather common diction lurks the historical relationship between modern Japan and the rest of Asia.

As is well known, the founders of the Meiji state, drawn from ranks of young lower-ranking patriotic Samurai activists, chose to assimilate to the west to modernize under the slogan of 'wealthy nation and strong army.' Behaving like western powers, they quickly succeeded in creating an empire by invading neighboring territories. This initial success instilled into the Japanese mind a myth of Japan's superiority over the 'still backward' (rest of) Asia. Meiji-period enlightenment thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi's famous epigram, 'Quit Asia and Join Europe,' well captured this state of mind and choice of position. But this choice trapped modern Japan in a double bind.

Asia was 'other' to the West, but it could not be 'other' to Japan. Nevertheless, the 'Join Europe' choice was a choice that would make Asia 'other' to Japan. If so, wasn't a Japan as Asia 'other' to a Japan as aspiring West? Japan came to have two selves, the first ashamed of itself and the second taking pride in itself and despising the first. What then was the identity and integrity of modern Japan?

This dilemma, or rather the autoimmune disorder, deeply rooted in the 'quit Asia, join west' project, gnawed at the minds of the best of Meiji intellectuals. Natsume Soseki, a novelist/thinker with an exceedingly sharp and critical sense of the times, in his 1911 speech, bluntly characterized the 'development' (or enlightenment) of Japan as 'exogenous,' meaning 'forced on us by an external power.' The West had developed what it had achieved 'endogenously,' 'like a bud breaking into a flower,' he said. Japan too had been developing endogenously (until the Meiji change), but that process had been disrupted by a Western cultural shock, forcing it to take an 'abrupt turn.' So, Japan 'suddenly lost its own capacity to develop and found it unable to survive unless it followed what was dictated from outside.' The consequence, according to Natsume Soseki, was the 'rootlessness of modern Japan's development' (Natsume 1975: 333–334).

Decades later, in 1948, Takeuchi Yoshimi discussed the same problematic of Japanese modernity by juxtaposing it to Chinese modernity, which, he argued, took the form of resistance. This thinker, one of the few postwar critics who seriously tackled modern Japan's relationality with the rest of Asia, found in Chinese writer/thinker Lu Shun a tough core that refused to change (adapt) and resisted the overwhelming power – the power 'claiming rationality but backed by an irrational will (to dominate)' – of the West. Takeuchi was talking about Lu Shun's integrity as the base of resistance (Takeuchi 2005: 28–30). He saw in Lu Shun the prototype of the integrity of the Chinese resistance and, by extension, of the 'resistance of the East.'

In comparison, modern Japan lacked this integrity, this quality of resistance, according to Takeuchi, because it lacked the desire to preserve its own self. Nay, he said, it lacked a self.

I think this distinction between Japan and the rest of Asia typically made by Takeuchi – a reverse of the imperialist version of Japan exceptionalism – continued to be valid throughout the period of the national liberation movement. Whilst in Japan 'the modern' (development, enlightenment) meant rootlessness in Natsume Soseki's sense, it meant rootedness elsewhere in Asia – a tough spirit of resistance and people's struggle for national liberation. It was a historic project of achieving modernity as the acquisition of modern nation states *against* colonial and imperialist domination, which had been exercised by the West and clumsily imitated by Japan. China accomplished this task by revolution and other peoples in other forms.

I dare argue, from the vantage point of the 21st century, that, with hindsight, the two approaches – Japan's 'quit Asia and join the West' version and the national liberation approach – shared the same basic context, that is, modernization prompted by the West. With national liberation through the establishment of independent nation states achieved, the two approaches converged. It should be immediately emphasized that convergence did not mean the erasing of Japan's responsibility for war and colonization against its neighbors. Nor does it make meaningless Takeuchi's distinction between the two approaches. The imperialist past and the past as national liberation struggle differ greatly, with their respective traces engraved in the present. Convergence can only mean that the same exogenousness and rootlessness that Natsume Soseki warned of 100 years ago may plague Asian societies in their reckless dash to catch up with and outrival the more 'advanced.'

Asia made a historic 'debut' in the 1950s as an alliance of new nation states, symbolically in the Bandung conference of 1955. It was an Asia that was pledged to end the

colonial domination of the West and remake the world in line with the ten Bandung principles of fairness and justice. Asia as Bandung carried a great moral authority, inspiring hope into hundreds of millions of oppressed people all over the world.

But the euphoria did not last long. After the mid-1960s, Asia found itself thrown into the embrace of the West in the name of 'development' for nation building and then industrialization for the world market. No matter what nationalistic rhetoric was used, this path of development was laid out by the West. Pro- or anti-West, Asia as nation states all emulated the West-set model of civilization (often minus human rights), thus identifying with the West.

Asia remains colonized in Chen Kuan-Hsing's sense, and, in Nishikawa's stronger sense, 'new-colonized' without being made into colonies. In this setting, Asia as Asian nation states failed to serve as an agency of decolonization. It was also a delusion of liberation. Many of the nation states won through sacrificial struggles by the people not only failed to meet their people's expectations, but also behaved as corrupt dictators or phony democracies, perpetuating patriarchy, discriminating against ethnic and other minorities in the name of national unity, and resorting to harsh repression of their own people who asked for justice and legitimate rights.

Ironically, however, Asia is entering the limelight, this time not as heroic people in resistance, nor as a new moral force in the international arena, but as the world's most promising center of capital accumulation. Asia is appreciated and lauded for its 'rise' in the global capitalist system. As IACS's editorial statement warned, there is 'triumphant sentiment' spreading through ever increasing Asian nouveau riche (*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2009). With the American empire in decline and the European economy in crisis, global capitalism now depends on the rapidly growing Asian markets for its survival. Asia, organized around the two giant economies of China and India, is being welcomed and mainstreamed at a time when hundreds of

millions of Chinese and Indian peasants are being marginalized and harshly treated. Does this not represent a vastly enlarged version of 'shallow and rootless' development?

Should we take pride in this Asia? If not, why not drop Asia altogether from our identity as well as from the title of this journal and simply go cosmopolitan? I don't think we should. Such a choice would make us dually rootless and shallow. The West, having incorporated its Asian counterparts, is still there in the center, meticulously trying to reproduce an Asia that is acceptable and comfortable to it. Let me repeat that the global rule we are obliged to obey is not an anonymous rule but one bearing a name of its owner. If so, we also need to have a name to overcome it.

This may sound like a rather dangerous proposition. Are we to be anti-West chauvinists reaffirming 'Asian values'? Or are we to work together to create an Asian economic community to compete with the European Community? Or should all Asians unite under the hegemony of one big Asian country or two? Or are we to dream of the resurrection of Bandung in the form of BRIC?

Certainly not. If Asia meaningfully matters in the present historical conjuncture (and I believe it does), let me say it does so only as *inter-Asia* as dynamic processes. The inter-Asia we envisage is not a state-level affair but people's level processes of interaction, cross-fertilization and formation taking place amongst hundreds of millions of different people, living, speaking, and dreaming differently. And the point here is that, of necessity, inter-Asia can and will emerge beyond the horizons of modernization and modernity.

It has become a clear fact that we are all in a civilizational crisis. I will not repeat its multifaceted symptoms, such as the environment catastrophe and so on, which no bandage countermeasures can remedy. It is the claimed universality of the modern, indelibly hallmarked as the West and emulated by all, that has decayed, fallen apart and been discredited.

Asia as inter-Asia faces this historically unique conjuncture. In other words, inter-Asia must constitute itself not as anti-West as did Asia as a modern state-building project, but as a force ready to go beyond the West, and modernity for that matter. If, for Asia, it was the acquisition of nation states through revolution that allowed it to decolonize, we as inter-Asia need to constitute ourselves into inter-linked people's communities not subsumed by the modern project of nation building.

Discussing the problem of modernity in China, Wang Hui wrote that the neo-enlightenment in China (the thought drive behind the Tiananmen action) experienced a 'historic downfall' because it limited its criticism to the behavior of the state and failed to see the fact that the state had already become enmeshed into complex relationship with the global market. Let us examine Wang Hui's thoughts about China:

It (Chinese 'neo-Enlightenment') did not understand deeply enough that diagnosis of the China problems should also be a diagnosis of globalizing capitalism and that the West could no longer be usefully invoked as the tool of criticism of Chinese politics, society, and culture... The discourse of Chinese Enlightenment [the national revolution and socialism, Muto] was constituted for the attainment of the goal of modernization of the nation/state; this goal that originated in Europe was set by the spread of capitalism throughout the world. The task now faced by the neo-enlightenment in China is to go beyond that goal and give diagnosis to and critique China's modernity in the era of globalized capitalism. (Wang 2006: 48-49)

This I think may apply not only to China but also to the rest of Asia. For decades, developmental dictatorships were the major problem in quite a few Asian countries. Although they still persist in some countries, most of them have been overthrown by popular resistance and uprisings, giving place to more or less liberal democracies. Have the problems been solved under the new democratic regimes?

Not at all. From the Philippines through Indonesia to South Korea as well as from Vietnam to China, identical problems cause the people to suffer in similar ways. Asia's modernization project, once a source of hope, has run its course, waiting for a new paradigm, a new dream, 'another world' to be ushered in. We welcome democratization everywhere, particularly where there is no democracy in any sense, but even if liberal democracy is ushered in, we are sure that the people will find themselves in the same bitter situation as exists in other post-dictatorship countries.

Activating inter-Asia processes is a movement. It means taking the initiative to ignite and promote critical syncretism to help create autonomous, hopefully collaborative relationships amongst diverse people's collectives. And this will be a dynamic process, requiring positive action, cultural and intellectual as well as political, to overcome unequal inter-group relationships based on intertwined systems of domination. In this regard, cultural politics is a crucial arena of contestation, as the power that shapes antagonistic relationships fosters violent chauvinistic subjectivities. But we also witness people's collectives autonomously going beyond the barriers and working together to find each other's friends to fight the same foe. We must carefully study how positive interaction occurs and learn how we can help stimulate such interaction with intellectual tools we develop as well as our commitment, to help create a positive situation.

In order to reconstitute ourselves as Asians, we need to go to Asian resources. We will reach, study, and share Asian people's knowledge, memories, experience, stories, cultures, beliefs, visions, and originalities and bring them into inter-Asia people-to-people processes. As a part of this, we need to evaluate the tradition, philosophies, and historic actions in Asia for social change. I remember that when Asian activist intellectuals met in a pre-IACS conference in Taipei in 1995, Chinese-speaking friends were telling us that for Asia to change and go further, full

evaluation of the thoughts and deeds of Mao Zedong and Mahatma Gandhi were essential. I fully agreed. Both led historic struggles, succeeded, and failed in their respective big ways, and failed where they ventured to go beyond the modern. Given what is happening now in Asia and the rest of the world, evaluation of their dreams and failures is of greater importance now than it was 15 years ago.

Activities along this line, organically integrating intellectual activities, may not be a movement in the conventional sense – in the sense of workers' or women's movements. We can say that this is another kind of movement. It is more an initiative to intervene in the prevailing state of affairs to stimulate, mediate, and systematically organize inter-people interactions toward 'another Asia' as a major part of 'another world.' When IACS declared itself 'the Movement project' (*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2009), I understand it did more than promise to print papers on social movement in every issue. The journal can define itself as a movement when its work plays performative roles for the birth of inter-Asia people. Shall we now look back on IACS from this viewpoint and design its future along this path?

Note

1. The PPSG periodical is in Japanese and quotations from Chen Kuan-Hsing are re-translated from the Japanese text. CKH fully develops his discussion on decolonization and critical syncretism in his introductory essay, 'The decolonization question,' in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (Chen 1998), but here I

used his oral presentation to make the scene alive.

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Special terms

enlightenment 開化

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