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## **Fusing a Perspective on Historical Development into Strategic Studies: The Case of Northeast Asia\***

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The issue of China's rise has occupied the central importance in our debate. A successful rise would result in a tectonic shift in the Northeast Asian and global security orders. Conversely, should the rise turn into an abortive disintegration or an implosion, we will most likely face an extended period of chaos in the region. The current discourse in academia suggests that the first scenario is more likely.

Many have analyzed the question of China's rise from a wide variety of the existing power perspectives found in Western international relations studies. Though providing effective analytical approaches, these perspectives do have some serious limitations. For example, the deterrence theory and the theory of balance-of-power are inherently static. Robert Gilpin's power preponderance theory and Jacek Kugler's power transition theory are strongly biased in favor of the existing Westphalian inter-state system and downplay the extant legacy of the Sino-centric world order. On the other

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\* The author is greatly indebted to FURUTA Hiroshi for his analysis and theorization of Sino-centric **culturalism** and its interplay with Chinese and Korean nationalism. See HAGASHI-AJIA HANNICHI TORAIANGURU (『東アジアの「反日」トライアングル』、The East Asian Anti-Japan Triangle), Tokyo: Bungei Shunju, 2005. Original is the author's application of Furuta's discussion to strategic studies in regard to regional order in Northeast Asia.

This essay draws upon the following works:

Ko Bunyu (黄文雄, Huang Wenxiong), KANKOKU HA NIHONJIN GA TSUTSU'TA (『韓国は日本人が作った』、The Republic of Korea has been built by the Japanese), Tokyo: WAC, 2005.

Sha You-Den (謝幼田, Xie Youtian), KOONICHI SENSO CHU, CHUUGOKU-KYOSANTO HA NANI O SHITEITAKA – OOI KAKUSARETA REKISHI NO SHINJITSU (『抗日戦争中、中国共産党は何をしていたか 覆い隠された歴史の真実』、What Did the Chinese Communist Party do during the anti-Japan War? A Veiled Truth in History、『中共壮大之謎』), Tokyo: Soshisha, 2006

hand, some regime perspectives of Western comparative political studies hint of the significant implications of the inside-out dynamics in which a country's domestic politics influences its external policies. For instance, the democratic transition theory warns that an undemocratic regime will take advantage of external issues for internal political gains by manipulating nationalism domestically.

Due to severe regional divergence in terms of stages of development, the Northeast Asian order will likely undergo a far more intricate and complex transitional process than Western analysts expect. While Western Europe is completely post-modern, the Northeast Asia is composed of a post-modern Japan, a modern South Korea and Taiwan, a pre-modern China, and a regressing pre-modern North Korea. Though Western Europe is a renewed Christendom, Northeast Asia does not share any common values or creeds except for their respective ethno-centric aspirations for modernization. This contemporaneousness exacerbates the prospects for a peaceful transition of China's rise, while hampering the creation of an even rudimentary sense of region-wide unity.

Japan has been the forerunner and central enabler of modernization in the region, and has already made a successful transition to post-modernity after an extended period of war and peace and of its rise and fall. Before 1945, Japan had "exported" modernization to its pre-modern neighboring countries, concurrently carrying out imperialistic invasions of them. Consequently, Japan's neighbors have developed ambivalence toward Japan, where envious admiration coexists with resentment and inferiority complex exists together with superiority complex.

Drawing largely from Furuta Hiroshi's discussion on Sino-centric culturalism, this essay will analyze obstinate antagonism that China and South Korea have towards Japan, and discuss implications for both the transition in regional order and U.S. security policy toward Northeast Asia. The hope is that an understanding of the historical development of the region will help fill the existing gap between the ongoing discourse in the Japanese academia and the ahistorical, structuralist approaches of IR studies that are prone to underestimating the significance of the inside-out dynamics inherent in Northeast Asia.

### **The Legacy of the Sino-centric Culturalism**

Sino-centric culturalism is based on the distinction between the Han Chinese living in China proper - defined by the Han's way of life, especially manners, etiquettes, and behavioral standards that the Hans consider as moral - and the non-Han barbarians living in the peripheral regions. From this cultural viewpoint, the Japanese are presumed as savages on the grounds that their customs, such as cremation, endogamy, and mixed bathing, contravene the Han's taboos. Thus, the Sino-centric approach to the non-Hans, particularly the Japanese, presupposes the righteousness-based proposition that the Hans possess implicit moral superiority while the non-Hans are categorically immoral. This approach has been utilized to contain the non-Han barbarians in the peripheral regions.

The Sino-centric world order is structured with multiple concentric circles in which a Chinese dynasty is located at the center and barbarian tributary states on the periphery. Certainly, Chinese dynasties have varied in aggressiveness according to their comparative wealth and military power, but, when capable, they occasionally annihilated non-Han states which did not demonstrate allegiance or submission. The Korean peninsula adjoins with the Chinese continent, so that most of the Korean kingdoms, if not all, were incorporated into the tributary system. In contrast, Japan has largely detached itself from the system thanks to its distanced insularity.

Subjugated into the Sino-centric order, the Koreans were still able to retain their ethnic identity by developing small Sino-centric culturalism. They attempted to outshine Chinese dynasties by introducing universal Sino-centric cultural principles yet purifying them through praxis. The Koreans have contended that this approach helped them to be on par with the Chinese at least spiritually and to outrank the Japanese who assimilated Chinese cultural elements selectively out of expediency.

Following the breakdown of the Sino-centric order, the Japanese empire aspired to formulate its own version of ethno-centric culturalism, one primarily based on its self-esteem through economic prosperity and modernization. The Japanese sought both to obtain the recognition as a modern state by Western great powers and to emulate the great powers by organizing pre-modern Asian countries into a Japan-centric Asian community through solidarity and modernization. Having already made a successful transition from modernity to post-modernity, Japan no longer looks to ethno-centric culturalism.

## **Severe Lack of Legitimacy: the Chinese and the South Korean Governments**

China and South Korea now face a serious imbalance in development. China has enjoyed rapid economic growth while suppressing democratization. This has been made possible by introducing a great amount of foreign direct investment into China's pre-capitalist economy under a state which has forcibly organized the country's pre-modern society. Lacking the rule of law, the system is inescapably predatory to individual life and intrinsically apt to destroy the very base of market mechanism. With the demise of the Communist ideology, the regime needs to increasingly rely on nationalism for legitimacy. Under this strategy, the Chinese Communist Party uses anti-Japanese campaigns as a trump card, with legitimacy being claimed on the grounds that the Party won the war against the Japanese empire and succeeded in restoring the greatness of the Chinese nation.

Similarly, South Korea now suffers from continuing bipolarization after having experienced serious economic stagnation – yet has achieved significant democratization. With the peninsula divided, the South Korean regime had vainly attempted to secure legitimacy through the state-led industrialization and development: “the Republic of Korea” state nationalism. This approach was aborted, however, due to the financial crisis in the late 1990s in which foreign multinationals, particularly American corporations, seized a major portion of South Korea's national capital. With increasing globalization, the country has undergone a grave economic hollow-out effect: 70 percent of its production facilities have moved to China. The middle class is continuing to immigrate to the United States due to domestic high unemployment rates and a rigid class structure in which only the elite have lucrative opportunities. To make up for the dwindling political support, then-President Kim Dae-jung responded to the financial crisis by appealing to the general public, particularly in the urban sectors, and stirring up ethnic-Korean nationalism through the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. This approach, as practiced by the current leftist ROK administration, links the regime's legitimacy with North Korea and inescapably utilizes anti-Japanese campaigns to arouse a sense of unity between South and North Korea.

Now China and South Korea need to utilize Japan as the imaginary adversary upon which to vent their stress and nationalist passion and strive to secure a sense of national unity essential for their capitalist take-off and modernization.

### **Spasms of Chinese and Korean Nationalism**

China and South Korea have displayed symptoms of integration dysfunction syndrome, characterized by Sino-centric culturalism and these countries' dependency on Japan as the prime agent of modernization in Northeast Asia. Japan's neighbors suffer from ambivalence in which resentment coexists with envious admiration and in which a superiority complex exists together with inferiority complex.

This state of political psychology will not be easily overcome because China's liberation from Japanese invasion and Korea's independence from Japanese colonialism resulted not from their own armed struggle against the imperial Japan but from the windfall luck of the Japanese defeat in the World War II at the hands of the United States. As for China, the Nationalist Party (KMT) forces that were engaged in the armed struggle against the imperial Japan achieved no significant victory on the battlefield. The Communist Party cannot claim any legitimacy as liberator given that CCP forces avoided armed struggle for partisan opportunism (except for minor combats). As for South Korea, first generation political leaders under Rhee Syngman never fought against the imperial Japan since they were always away from Korea. Also, they were never baptized by Japanese modernization, instead returning to Korea with the pre-modern Korean world outlook: small Sino-centric culturalism. North Korea under Kim Il-song is very similar, save for the fact that Kim's guerilla forces did vainly engage in a limited number of skirmishes against Japan. Yet, for this reason, as long as South Korea is locked in ethnic-Korean nationalism, it will inevitably lean toward North Korea given the regime's implicit anti-Japan legitimacy.

In this historical context, Chinese and Korean find themselves to be an object rather than a subject in world affairs. Without a strong sense of achievement, they are unable to emancipate themselves from their resentment and hatred vis-à-vis Japan. Some 60 years since the end of WWII, it seems that the conciliation between Japan and the two

neighboring countries will be impossible – a strong contrast to the case of the United Kingdom and India.

## **Prospect and Implications**

For the next ten to twenty years, the international relations in Northeast Asia will be continuously characterized by an intractable resonance of the two old and new factors: Sino-centric culturalism involving Chinese and Korean contempt for Japan and state- or ethno-nationalism centered on their anti-Japan campaigns. This behavioral pattern will last until China and South Korea (or a unified Korea) succeed in modernization and their nationalistic passions get defused.

Japan has demonstrated over the past 60 years that it is a responsible and mature democracy. Yet, Japan's prudence and restraints in its foreign and security policy are by no means unlimited. In this light, it is extremely important for great powers outside Northeast Asia, especially the United States, to embrace Japan when anti-Japanese sentiments outburst. In particular, the United States has to anchor Japan to the U.S. regional and global security frameworks, so that Tokyo would not be compelled to take drastic independent action in response. American leaders need to be aware of the regional dynamics of anti-Japan campaigns from this historical development perspective, and to take a more active approach to controlling disoriented nationalisms. The current U.S. policy is unsatisfactory because it simply keeps a distance from the ongoing quagmire while playing a mediating role among China, Japan, and South Korea. In some cases the United States has even applied pressure on Japan to make an unfavorable compromise.

In keeping with the power perspectives of IR theories, many scholars have already prescribed a hedging strategy to manage China's rise. At the structural level, this strategy of combining deterrence and engagement vis-à-vis China will be sustainable as long as the United States has the willingness and capability to lead major allies, particularly Japan. Certainly, this approach is necessary for achieving a peaceful transition but is not sufficient since it is devoid of a due attention at the process level in which the dynamics of intra-regional bilateral relations might corrode the base of the hedging strategy. A significant portion of the so-called "Japan's history question" is in fact an epiphenomenon of modernization and development, upon which a major research focus needs to be placed.