

THE ROLE OF MARITIME TRADE IN THE FORMATION OF TRADITIONAL JAPANESE CULTURE: A Report on a Joint Research Project

INTRODUCTION

I am now holding a seminar entitled “Thought and Culture in East Asia,” which used to be called “Chinese Philosophy,” a term still used in many university seminars throughout Japan. By “Chinese philosophy,” we do not mean “philosophy in China,” which would include ideas in such places under Chinese political control as Tibet or Xinjiang, which come under the study of Buddhism and Islamic studies. Rather, “Chinese philosophy” is mainly concerned with the cultural sphere influenced by Confucianism, including Korea and Japan. This is a tradition that has continued for over a hundred years in Japan, giving rise to excellent research on such neo-Confucianist intellectuals as Yi Toegye in Korea and Nakae Toju in Japan. One reason why the name of the seminar I give was changed is that the subject of “philosophy” as taught in Japan is extremely limited in scope. Another reason is that the change in the name from “Chinese” to “East Asia” makes students more conscious of the existence of Korea in this cultural sphere and helps them reflect upon ideas in China, Korea and Japan (not to mention Vietnam) in historical perspective. That is to say, placing Japan in this cultural sphere has not only to do with its relationship to China, but

Korea as well.

The term “East Asia” did not exist until 150 years ago. The term “Asia” is of western origin, said to mean “where the sun rises” in European eyes or anything from Anatolia east. In other words, it is not a term that Japanese, Chinese or anyone else in the region invented to apply to themselves. Then the Europeans decided from their own experience that “Asia” was neither a historically or culturally unified region, so they started to apply geographical modifiers to it like east, west north, south and even southwest, not to mention inland and pacific (insular). The “eastern” part was also known as the “Far East,” the remotest regions of “Asia.” The adoption of the term by countries in “East Asia” to identify themselves geographically therefore arises from a European view of the world, Marco Polo-style.

However, Japan decided to adopt the term Toa 東亞 in Chinese characters in its efforts to bring the region under colonial control during the 1930s and 40s, the best known terms being the Great East Asian War and the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. After Japan’s defeat, the term Toa was banned, and the region became known as “Higashi Ajia.” With the rise of the newly industrializing economies during the 1980s and China’s economic growth during the 90s, it became self-evident that Japan had become part of East Asia, even in Japan itself.

The problem of being defined as “East Asia” by some foreign geographer has in recent years become problematic among Japanese researchers. For example, there are historical studies that try to show “East Asia” as a region of international contact. The problem that arose is that until 150 years ago “East Asia” did not exist in the minds of the people of the region, only concepts of “the world,” like “everything under heaven” (Tianxia 天下) and “the four seas” (Xihai 四海), not a specific “region.” It is in this sense that the meaning of historical and cultural exchange in “East Asia” needs to be redefined. What follows is an examination of how “East Asia” was conceptualized in Japan (actually not so) and a proposal for joint research that will lead to a proper understanding of that (mis) conceptualization.

THE PLACE OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION IN JAPANESE HISTORY

Let us start with a review of what history textbooks tell us about the formation of Japanese culture. They begin chronologically with a

discourse on “Jomon Culture,” a hunting and gathering culture characterized by the manufacture of earthenware ten thousand years ago, after the geophysical separation of the Japanese archipelago from the “Asian” continent. Later on, with the introduction of agricultural technology from the continent 2,300 years ago, the “Yayoi Culture” evolved, leading to economic prosperity and the formation of a nation-state. Most of the discussion tends to follow Friedrich Engels’ historical materialist analysis of Lewis H. Morgan’s findings, entitled *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

Japan’s ancient period is the story of kingship, with a number of small kingdoms being integrated into one political entity. The proof cited for this state of affairs comes from archeological remains and the references to Japan in Chinese historical documents. Soon, the Japanese state was formed under a set of legal codes and Buddhism imported from Sui and Tang China, establishing an “emperor” as its sovereign. Japan was referred to internationally as the “Kingdom of Wa,” and the term may have also been used in Japan, read “Yamato.” However, the name “Nippon” (where the sun rises) was used intentionally in its international relations with Korea and China. The narrative goes on to say that as the result of diplomatic relations with China being interrupted, after the fall of the Tang Dynasty, Japan began to develop its own indigenous culture, as literary works like *The Tale of Genji*, written exclusively in Japanese script (*hiragana*), instead of Chinese characters, appeared. From that time up to the Meiji Restoration (1868), a period that some historians have called the medieval period and some have further divided into medieval and “early modern” periods, the textbooks have us believe that it was a time during which the warrior class took over real-politik, and the emperor was reduced to a mere figure-head. Culturally, while importing Zen Buddhism and tea (and other mind enhancing substance) drinking customs from China, Japan continued to form an indigenous culture apart from its “East Asian” neighbors.

During that time, the 16th century saw the arrival of westerners on Japan’s shores, with Christian missionaries in tow. The Japanese government suppressed Christianity and closed the country (at least most of it) to foreigners. Subsequently, for over two hundred years, Japanese ships all but disappeared from the seas, the country cut off from the rest of the world, living in peace and further developing its own culture in isolation.

After the Meiji Restoration, called the “modern period” and lasting until its defeat in the Second World War, first, Japan was forced to open

its ports to international trade under pressure from the western world powers at the time. As the term “restoration” implies, political changes occurred that resulted in the formation of a nation-state centered around the emperor, while at the same time customs and culture took on more and more of a western character under the slogan of “civilization” and “enlightenment.” In one phrase, “out of Asia into Europe.” The “Great Japanese Empire,” ruled by a constitutional monarchy aiming at economic prosperity and military superiority then began its invasion of “Asia,” including China. At least that is what the history textbooks tell us.

The interpretation, therefore, is that Japan was formed historically within an “East Asian” environment dominated by China, while at the same time developing its own indigenous culture. It is only natural that a history textbook requiring a government imprimatur and designed to ideologically inculcate the “nation’s” youth would take such a line. In other words, China appeared in the form of a mentor towards Japanese culture, and from antiquity to the present day has existed apart from Japan, albeit an equal partner across the sea. Take the case of Zen Buddhism. (The internationally accepted pronunciation being of Japanese origin, not the Chinese “Chan.”) The textbooks tell us that its introduction to and diffusion within Japan was “heavily influenced by Chinese culture.” However, they do not bother to mention why Zen Buddhism became popular in China between the 12th and 14th centuries (when Japan was first introduced to it) and in what way those ideas actually influenced Japanese society and culture. China is always discussed from a Japanese standpoint without any attempt being made to offer any historical insights into Chinese culture itself. In the case of Zen Buddhism, Japan has always determined its own historical course, nothing will stop that course, even Zen Buddhism, which merely assisted in the formation of a unique Japanese culture.

Another point is that this sort of narrative not only pervades the obligatory and high school history courses, but also university education. With exception of those who specialize or at least attend courses in Chinese thought, college students are incredibly ignorant about the subject. This is why the Japanese public is unfamiliar with any Chinese intellectual other than Confucius and Mencius, Laozi and Zhuangzi (Daoists), and Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming (Neo-Confucianists). For example, in a series of articles written two years ago in *Shokun!*, a monthly magazine read widely in the business community, Nishio Kanji, a specialist in German literature, attempted to reconsider Japan’s late feudal period; and in the concluding article he stated the following.

In a book written by Shimada Kenji, I was surprised to find that the works of classical Chinese thought only began to be read in Japan about two hundred years ago. And it seems that not only the Confucian literature was read. For example, in another book Shimada cites Zhougong Dan 周公旦 (the Duke of Zhou) as the most popularly read thinker, Confucius being only his conduit to later generations. In other words, prior to the Tang period, among the great Chinese thinkers, Zhougong was given more importance than Confucius. (“Confucius and Socrates as turning points,” *Shokun* 36, no. 9 (2004): 278–9.)

The late Shimada Kenji, who specialized in Neo-Confucianist thought, was not a prolific author, but what he did publish is characterized by clarity of expression and a straightforward historical image, resulting in his work being read by specialists and general readers alike. The point I am making here, however, is that a fact that has been known in the research literature on Chinese philosophy for the past one hundred years was finally discovered by Nishio at the age of seventy. Incidentally, Nishio is neither a businessman nor a politician, but a scholar of modern western thought, particularly Nietzsche, and a well-known university professor. In other words, here we have an excellent example of the level of general knowledge in Japan concerning the history of Chinese thought.

The responsibility for this situation lies in the field itself (including yours truly), which has tended to carry out its own exclusionary scholarly discourse; but I would like to put that problem aside for the time being and take up instead the level to which the intellectual community is involved in discussing the issue of so-called “East Asian Civilization.” Concerning the rapid economic growth in the newly industrialized economies, Japanese scholars have tended to get on the bandwagon of western economists who praised “the rationalism of the Confucian cultural sphere,” and when social reform in China was progressing to slow for them, denigrated “governance of people without the rule of law.” The lack of a firm stance will always lead to a lack of a firm opinion. The topic of East Asia as a scholarly pursuit in Japan has not been given the legitimate attention it deserves.

The above-mentioned Nishio Kanji has in recent years been involved in a political movement to write a new history textbook for Japanese middle and high school students. In preparation for such a project, he has written a voluminous tome entitled *History of the Nation*. He and his colleagues’ definition of a “new history textbook” is one that

(1) correctly evaluates the Pacific War in the context of all wars fought in the modern world and (2) instills in Japanese youth pride in their own history from the standpoint that the Tokyo Tribunal was one-sided in its condemnation of that war only. Also, while criticizing existing textbooks for their Marxist nuances, this group (sect, perhaps) argues that more emphasis should be put on the unique character of Japanese culture. With respect to Zen Buddhism, their new textbook merely teaches that “it was transmitted from China” without going into how the aspect of Chinese culture was influenced and changed in Japan. The reasoning is that since Japan has possessed a mental culture that has remained unchanged since antiquity, the spread of Zen would have had to adapt to such a culture. The treatment in the new textbook of international contact in East Asia is superficial at most. In sum, the clear purpose of the movement is to teach the youth of Japan the illustrious aspects of its culture in order to instill a greater sense of patriotism.

However, the aims of Nishio and his group can be attributed in part to the ignorance of Chinese intellectual culture Nishio himself admitted in the above-mentioned *Shokun* article. For example, they are wrong about Zen Buddhism and tea drinking, which were introduced from Song period culture, and as these customs put down roots in Japan, they brought about a great transformation in the mental culture around them. In addition, the penetration of Neo-Confucian ideas into Japanese culture gave rise to the idea of *bushido* and was also related in part to mental qualities desired of soldiers serving Imperial Japan. These revisionists have considered none of these aspects, because they want to believe that *bushido*, for example, was nurtured by indigenous tradition and thus unique to Japan. Recently, the movement was delighted by the publication in Japanese by the ex-president of Taiwan Lee Tonghui’s book entitled *Reading the Work, Bushido*, in which the writer, who once held Japanese citizenship, criticizes the lack of samurai spirit among Japanese today. Their hearts have been touched by one unexpected remnant of the Japanese language education implemented by Greater Japan’s colonial government in Taiwan.

Then there is the stereotyped, caricatured image of China and Korea in the Japanese psyche, which is a constant embarrassment to most scholars specializing in the intellectual culture of East Asia. For example, total ignorance of the establishment in ancient China of an exclusively Confucian scheme, resulting in the decline of intellectual pluralism, the birth in medieval China of a tripartite Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist scheme, resulting in the fall of Confucian supremacy,

and the development in early modern China of the Mencius revival movement, which then resulted in a change from the term Zhougong-Confucian thought to Confucian-Mencius thought.

Another scary thing about these new textbook advocates is that they are ignorant of the historical changes in East Asian culture during the early modern period (not the ancient period), which for the first time made *Mencius* a classic. No seventy-year-old student of German literature would be surprised at hearing that up until two hundred years ago, common people could not read the Bible because it was written in Latin, now would he? Scholars who haven't the slightest notion of such changes in the history of ideas, thinking that the great Chinese thinkers have been read for the last twenty centuries, then turning around to employ the schemes of modern western thought which they actually study in a critical manner to sing the praises of Japanese culture would seem confused, to say the least, if not outright contradictory. (The problem is that such a scheme is not the result of confusion, but rather a scheme to identify with the nation-state, a product of modern Europe, a scheme that could never be obtained from the intellectual heritage of East Asia.) What follows is one response to such a scheme in the form of a planned research project entitled "History and culture of the East Asian maritime sphere."

THE PLAN

Please don't get me wrong. The above discussion is one factor in why I became involved in and excited about this Project; however, the other factor is solely academic. Furthermore, the views expressed above are my own and do not reflect those of the other members involved in the Project. We are not an advocacy group with a political agenda.

The idea for the Project was hatched in 1999 at a symposium held by the Song History Research Association entitled "Issues in the study of Chinese history as seen from historians of the Song period." The proceedings of the symposium may be found in Ihara Hiroshi, Kojima Tsuyoshi, ed. *Chishikijin no Shoso* (Various Aspects of Intellectuals, 2001). The symposium and the resulting project plan was well-received enough to earn us two private foundation grants, which we used to attend the International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, held in Montreal in 2000 and then meet with scholars at Harvard University and the University of California Los Angeles on the way home. Afterwards, we held several symposia in Japan.

During that time, it was suggested that joint research be conducted centering around the city of Ningbo (Ningpo) 寧波, an important seaport connecting China and Japan within the East Asian maritime sphere during the Tang and Ming periods. We then called upon a world-leading expert in the study of Ningbo, Professor Shiba Yoshinobu, presently the director of The Toyo Bunko, to act as our advisor, and recruited over one hundred researchers.

First, we presented a research plan application in November 2004, which fortunately was accepted, enabling the research to begin in 2005 under a five-year program. Coordination of the research was to be carried out by the University of Tokyo at the Next Generation Humanities Development Center in the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, where a special Department of East Asian Maritime Exchange was set up under the direction of yours truly.

The Project itself turned out to include 140 members (give or take a few due to turnover) employed by various universities, libraries and research institutes around Japan (regardless of nationality) divided into thirty-four research teams. These teams were then organized into three groups according to the methodological tasks at hand: Group A being involved in rereading source materials; Group B in fieldwork; and Group C in cultural exchange. In other words, methodology became the Project's organizational feature instead of academic discipline or affiliated institution. Group A was to thoroughly read and interpret source materials so as to correct any errors or oversights that may have been made in the research to date; Group B was to be dispatched to locations in China (especially Zhejiang), Korea and Japan to collect new sources and interpret them; and Group C was to reexamine mutual contact in the region within the context of the history of civilization. In addition, the three groups were not to work separately, but rather in conjunction with one another in order to produce a truly joint research result.

Then, totally apart from the above methodology-oriented organization, another scheme was set up based on the area of expertise of the members. Six groups were formed: maritime region, environment, daily life, society, culture and thought. The participants in these groups were to bring the results of each research team to share with members of other teams studying the same field. Again the emphasis was put on joint research along the lines of conventional academic disciplines. The Project can be characterized by the following seven points.

- (1) The main object of the Project, the city of Ningbo, is a central port

in the East China Sea which flourished from the 8th century AD up to the end of 19th century. It was a disembarkation-embarkation point for people traveling to China from Japan, and many cultural items imported by Japan from China were shipped from there. There are of course other large-scale ports in China, like Guangzhou and Quanzhou, but Ningbo is more suitable for Japanese researchers who study intra-regional contact in the East China Sea.

- (2) One aim is to consider the formation of Japan's so-called traditional culture from the expanse of a wider area, the East China Sea. Much recent research has focused on mutual contact in East Asia from the viewpoint of "maritime region" along with "region," without assuming national boundaries to be self-evident. The Project, while incorporating the results of such research, will attempt to fill in the gaps by dealing with changes that occurred in continental culture over the course of history and their transmission to Japan.
- (3) Among the cultural items, like art objects, books and articles of daily life, transmitted to Japan from the Chinese continent, many came from places like Hangzhou and Ningbo in Zhejiang Province. These were carefully preserved in Japan by both Buddhist temples and feudal lords. Since many similar items were lost in the wars that waged on the continent, the worldwide survey and research activities of the Project just may show that there are cases in which the only extant copies exist in Japan, findings which could lead to international joint research.
- (4) Researchers from all fields of the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences are participating. The teams are organized so that researchers can take charge of tasks unrelated to their fields of specialization, resulting in joint research outside of their daily study routines.
- (5) Many of the Project's members are in their 40s, meaning that the Project has been staffed by veteran scholars active in the field today. This also means that after the Project ends in a couple of years, for the next ten years or so, the research will be greatly advanced as the result of its members building on Project accomplishments.
- (6) Today, the position and role of China in the world is drawing a great amount of attention. The Project focuses on historical study, not current affairs, intent on conducting multi-faceted analysis of the role of Chinese civilization in East Asia. Nevertheless, such an approach may well lend, while indirectly, a purview into contemporary issues. As East Asia becomes more and more

engulfed in the waves of globalization, the Project should be able to contribute some insight into the issues being faced by contemporary society.

- (7) What meaning the term “maritime East Asia” has for “East Asia” per se is one more angle the Project intends to examine. Historical study is the key in answering this question. Our Project holds no self-evident presumption about the framework of “East Asia.” Rather, we are interested in clarifying its historical formation in a relativistic, problematic manner. Similarly, we hope to attain a perspective that transcends both the framework of the nation-state and paradigms centered on the west.

For more information on the Project’s membership and specific research content in English, please refer to *Blue Wave* (no.1, 2006.6). To order a copy, go to ningbo@l.u-tokyo.ac.jp. There is also an English page on the Web (although the latest reports are in Japanese only). See <http://www.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/maritime/>

It goes without saying that even if the Project is successful in attaining all of its aims, this does not mean that Japanese society as a whole will all of sudden change its views about East Asia. Nevertheless, we believe that through the information that we disseminate, those within the scholarly community with biased views about East Asia will be given an opportunity to correct those views, leading to a significant decrease in the number of scholars who express astonishment at the fact that Confucian thought up through the Tang period was called “The teachings of Zhougong Dan and Confucius.” Maybe then can an accurate image of East Asia be presented to the general public, allowing better international relations and mutual understanding between the peoples in the region, and making all the time and effort put into planning and running such a program all the more personally gratifying.

—Originally written in Japanese