

CREATING REGIONS: A Hypothesis Concerning the Possibility of an East Asian Community

WHAT IS A “REGION”?

Cultural anthropologist Takaya Koichi, while casting doubts on such ideas as stages of development, modernization, and universalism and in favor of considering the “nation-state” as having in its creation both dependent and independent origins, has focused on specific geographical spheres, each with its own value system (which will be heretofore referred to as “regions”) in the sense of organizational units that do not conform to the conventional nation-state framework. According to Takaya [1993], “A ‘region’ is a sphere that has its own existential meaning; that is to say, it is a place where the people who live there possess a common world view.” Such an outlook is very interesting, for what it is worth. However, from the perspective of a social scientist, does the idea of “region” always fall within the a priori category? And what does “common worldview” mean? I do not think that there is anyone, including Takaya, seriously involved in area studies who could deny the existence of the geographical sphere known as “Southeast Asia,” but finding a “common worldview” there would be like searching for a needle in a haystack, what with the cultural, religious and political diversity that runs rife throughout that region.

Yamakage Susumu, an expert in international politics, has drawn attention to “region” as being characterized by relatedness. He suggests that perceiving regions starting from the attributes of an object and ending up with “their similarities” is like filling in a children’s coloring book and should be avoided, in favor of a “regional perception based on relatedness; that is, connecting points and lines.” “Region” is not an a priori object, but rather created by the deepening of relationships. For example, the regional formation of “Southeast Asia” was steadily driven by how ASEAN came into existence, a 40-year maturation process that strongly supports Yamakage’s argument. One more essential insight [Yamakage 1994] is “as soon as we start looking at regions as wholes, we lose sight of their wholeness as regions, for they also simultaneously exist as parts.” It is in this way, by means of wholeness and relationship, that we can look at “regions” in the sense of being created, and also expanding and contracting.

East Asia, which is one of the main themes in Waseda’s Center for Asian Studies (COE-CAS) program, can be said to have entered such a creation process. The intentions and conditions of the people who reside there and their countries are also determining the attributes of a new region. Clarifying what kind of “region” they are striving to create and what necessitates a region with a specific relatedness and orientation is the subject of this article.

Here, the ideas of Jang Yinson regarding modern international relations in East Asia are important. Jang [2004] has focused his work on the formation, development, and maturation of regions as: (1) international communities having geographical existence, (2) international societies sharing interaction and a specific, common understanding based on the institutions and norms that underlay relationships, and (3) international regional communities with rules and mechanisms, in addition to being equipped with internal principles that maintain regional communication and fair-mindedness. What he is emphasizing is whether or not a given region has commonality. When discussing East Asia in the future, it will be important to focus on commonality and regional international community.

SIX APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING “ASIA”

Although a hundred years have passed since Okakura Tenshin declared in India that “Asia is one,” there still has not been one occasion on which that has actually been realized. Nevertheless, attempts have been made

“at intellectual approaches to various Asian communities.” These approaches (including desirable intellectual activity in the future) probably number six in all at the present time.

The first can be called “Asia as fiction,” as having been composed, imagined and remembered in various ways and in various places since the beginning of modern times; and people cannot exist without fiction in their lives; it plays a definite role within reality.

The second approach can be called Asia as an international and political symbol. For example, the prewar ideologues of Japanese militarism utilized “Asia as a symbol” in order to legitimize Japan’s territorial expansion and control of the region. And there is no basis for thinking that such a context will not be utilized again. However, history tells us that there are various dangers involved whenever Asia is turned into a political symbol.

Thirdly, there is “Asia as a space,” in which people, things, wealth, information, etc. all move about. It is topographically favorable to the flow of goods and services and to the formation of various networks on both land and sea.

The fourth approach is “Asia as identity,” stemming from the idea that Asia shares common cultural and historical traits, as well as a common political culture in the relations among individuals, groups, and states.

Next, there is what we can call “functional Asia,” an entity that has been consciously created: for example, free trade agreements (FTA), joint energy storage schemes, and military security alliances. One classic way of thinking in this respect is the image put forth by economist Suehiro Akira that “the market we call Asia is a joint stock company with the region’s countries and large multinational enterprises as its shareholders.”

Our final approach can be termed “Asia as a system,” which tries to develop the “functional Asia” approach—to borrow Jang Yinson’s expression, “the East Asian international community.” For example, when creating what Kang Sangjung calls the “East Asian communal family,” although it is assumed that identity forms its foundation, the family must be secured by some system, since identity within Asia is not uniform. When in the distant future, Asians begin to consider forming a union similar to what exists in Europe today, it will become necessary to approach Asia as a system.

There is no doubt that each researcher will choose these approaches based on his or her respective discipline, arrive at various destinations and gain different perspectives as a result. What is essential, however, is

to determine which approach is the most effective in considering contemporary East Asia and determining which stage it has reached in the process of forming a community.

WHAT IS CONDUCTIVE TO COMMUNITY FORMATION AND WHAT IS NOT

Next, let us turn to what kind of community is being aimed at in East Asia and the things that are conducive to its formation and those that would be hazardous.

The present model for a regional community is without a doubt the EU, and it also goes without saying that East Asia in its present state is far behind Europe with respect to levels of cooperation, identity, and integration. However, the fact that we Asians are now willing to discuss an “East Asian community” shows that we hope that one will be formed.

In doing so, I think that the following procedures will be necessary:

- (1) Start a debate about what a community is and how it functions.
- (2) Since communities can be plural and stratified, we must ask exactly what those two terms mean for each other. We can assume that in any given regional community of neighboring countries, there will at least be economic, political, military security and socio-cultural sub-communities. If so, then at the time to coordinate the four, an EU-model may very well be possible in Asia. On the other hand, is it possible for only an economic community to be formed? Also, if each sub-community is not coordinated, is it still possible for a community in them to function as communities? Or like in Asia, where there are regions and sub-regions, in those regions that have no form or are in the process of being formed, will the relationship between regional and sub-regional communities be questioned?
- (3) In the case of fully coordinated communities or communities in various fields, it is still necessary to analyze the factors that promote community formation and those that hinder it. In the case of East Asia, first, its 150-year modern history has been marked by mutual distrust, suspicion, deception, and hatred. Secondly, especially during the 50 years since World War II, the region has seen rampant nationalism in all of its countries. Thirdly, there exist great disparities and asymmetry among the member countries of the region with respect to economic prosperity, military strength, and influence over the region. It goes without saying that these three factors pose

definite barriers to community formation, which leads one to conclude that community formation may very well encounter rough sailing and will be bound to possess some “special East Asian idiosyncrasies.”

In November 2004, Japan’s largest area studies organization, the Japan Association for Asian Studies (Ajia Seikei Gakkai), took up the theme of the possibility of “an East Asian community” in a session at its annual academic conference, featuring panelists Miyagawa Mikio (Japan Institute of International Affairs; Nihon Kokusai Mondai Kenkyusho), Kojima Tomoyuki (Keio University), Suzuki Yuji (Hosei University), and Fukagawa Yukiko (University of Tokyo). In the lively discussion and debate that ensued, the following issues were taken up:

- How will such existing organizations as ASEAN, APEC, ARF (Asian Regional Forum) relate to “an East Asian community” (EAC)?
- What are the common values, ideals, and organization principles for the EAC to be?
- Is a regional community possible among countries, like China, Japan, and Korea, where fervent nationalist sentiment and pride still exist?
- Are the EAC’s actors to be limited only to the nations in the region?
- Is there a chance of the community formation process turning into a power struggle over regional hegemony, given such striking disparities in state and economic power throughout the region?

As the coordinator of the session, let me summarize the discussion in the following five points:

- (1) There has never been a case of “Asia as one” in the past; however, there is presently progress being made in the direction of “one Asia” in functional terms.
- (2) The move for an EAC is based on the experiences learned from the Asian monetary crisis of 1997 and the historical experience of ASEAN, which was born out of mutual deception and suspicion only to mature into a symbol of regional cooperation.
- (3) However, it is going to require a long time to attain fundamental agreement on the common ideals, aims and organizational form indispensable to an EAC.

- (4) The discussion is meaningless if serious attention is not drawn to such issues vital to the region as the US-Japan Security Treaty, the Taiwan problem, and various territorial disputes in the region.
- (5) If non-sovereign polities (such as Taiwan) are not made members of a regional community, that community's function becomes limited.

ISSUES STILL TO BE SOLVED

There has been drastic political movement among the region's countries regarding an EAC, and an Asian Summit Meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur at the end of 2005. However, if this is to attract the attention of the academic community, the following points should be considered by Asian studies scholars.

To begin with, there is the question of the EAC's principles: Is the organization to be one that merely protects the interests of its members or one that aims higher towards such principles as peace and human rights? Today, discussion is proceeding on the former goal, and in the formation of any genuine regional community, it is indispensable for its members to share its values and goals. However, in the case where many of the members are still in developing stages of state formation and economic growth, a regional community should be envisioned as a truly "communal" organization committed to mutual assistance.

Secondly, there is the problem of what to base a community on. That is to say, are currently shared interests enough? Can a foundation be built on a violent history of aggression and subjugation, or on common goals for the future?

Thirdly, there is the question of how the community is to function. Is it to be like a meeting hall where its members gather, or like a communal home with stable relationships and protocol, providing protection from inclement weather, or like a shared fortress that points out threats to its members and common enemies? It could be all three, depending on the range of problems EAC decides to deal with.

Next, there is the question of who gets to join. Is it to be a community of states, nations, or citizens? In any case, there is no doubt that it will need a format to deal with such serious issues as the Taiwan problem, refugees, and the environment—issues that cannot be solved by a group of sovereign states alone.

Furthermore, membership will also be related to the problem of where the geographical boundaries of "East Asia" are to be drawn. Should they be drawn around the traditional geography, or encompass

Southeast Asia, or stretch as far as Australia and New Zealand, like in the vision of Prime Minister Koizumi, released in Singapore in January 2002? Should India be asked to join? And what about the community's relationship to the United States, which has such a heavy presence but no residence in the region?

Finally, there are two historical aspects to consider. Up until now, an overwhelming amount of time and effort has been expended in relating the events that happened in modern and contemporary East Asia up to the end of World War II. However, what has happened during the 50 years since the War is also history, and by the way, a rich historical heritage indeed. It is true that the Cold War and nationalism during that time has torn the region apart politically and ideologically, but there are also the movements to democratize the region and its remarkable economic development. Other historical treasures include the maturation of ASEAN, its role in the regional formation of Southeast Asia, and the epoch-making settlement between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1998. We also have to mention Japan's postwar commitment to peace and economic prosperity, both of which contributed greatly to stability and development throughout East Asia. The question here is how or if the formation of a regional community is going to perpetuate these two conflicting postwar historical heritages.

On the one hand, the heritage filled with stories of mutual distrust and nationalism definitely threatens to nip the community formation in the bud; but it is also necessary to focus on the important meaning of entering an era in which ideas about a community can be openly discussed on an equal footing by members who were once enemies. It is a time for ideas to come out about a new model, in the light of present conditions in the region—not only the ideas of the states involved, but also those of local communities, non-government organizations, and private citizens alike.

COE-CAS' PRELIMINARY PROPOSAL

The Waseda University Center of Excellence “How to Create a New Contemporary Asian Studies?” (COE-CAS), in its commitment to studying the possibility of an East Asian regional community, has formed a special research group (EAC Research Group) for that purpose. The EACRG's agenda can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Determine whether a “region” is being formed in accordance with the economy, politics, and society within East Asia.
- (2) What are the chances that such a region and a community will be formed in East Asia? What kind of an organization could be formed and what sort of “Asian characteristics” will it have?

In developing a theory about building an EAC, the following problematics and concepts will be pursued.

First, a desirable EAC should be an organization of states, nations, and citizens.

Secondly, unlike Europe, East Asia faces problems stemming from immaturity as a region, deep-rooted nationalist sentiment, and globalization. The EAC itself will probably turn out to be a multifunctional organization, acting as a common meeting place, shelter, and fortress.

Finally, the formation of an EAC demands efforts to transcend nationalism, foster trust and implement a joint regional project. The concept that “regional public assets” be provided by the region, not the most powerful member countries in it, should also be shared. Ideas like “community of people,” “multifunctional community,” and “regional public assets” add new issues from the Asian side to the issues of regional and national integration experienced in Europe, thus hopefully contributing to the further development of an EAC theory. Without these three new issues in the plan, the formation of an EAC will probably not be realized.

—Originally written in Japanese

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