
*“Asia” as a “Relational” Concept
from the Perspective of Japanese Marxist Philosophers:*

Hiromatsu Wataru, Miki Kiyoshi, and Tosaka Jun

1. The “New East Asian Regime” of Hiromatsu Wataru

How can we confront the concept of “East Asia” today? This concept has a political bias in the Japanese context. For example, it is still fresh in our memory that Hatoyama Yukio, Japanese Prime Minister, proposed a vision of “East Asian Community,” when he had a top-level meeting with Hu Jintao, the Chinese head of state, in New York on September 21, 2009. However, this vision of “East Asian Community” is not unique to the government of the Democratic Party of Japan. Koizumi Jun’ichiro, former Prime Minister, already mentioned it in Singapore on January 14, 2002 and the future realization of “East Asian Community” was written in the “Tokyo Declaration” as a result of the “ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit Meeting” held in Tokyo between December 11 and 12, 2003.

As is often explained, this vision of “East Asian Community” could be an East Asian version of the EU. However, because of the decisive difference in political and historical circumstances between East Asia and the EU, it is considered very difficult to realize an “East Asian Community.” There is no doubt that the important moment among the political and historical circumstances is a vision of the “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” or the “East Asian Cooperative System” advocated by pre-war Japanese intellectuals. In other words, the vision of “East Asian Community” is always haunted by former ghosts.

The same situation is repeated in the world of thought. One of the

most symbolic cases is the “New East Asian Regime” advocated by Hiromatsu Wataru in his last essay published in the *Asahi Shinbun* on March 16, 1994 just before his death. In this essay “Northeast Asia Taking a Leading Role in History: The New ‘East Asian’ Regime in the Axis of Japan and China,” he says:

I don't want to simply assert that the age of Asia is coming. The whole world is becoming integrated. However, there must be a leading role and a supporting role in history. At least in the near future, if not the distant future, I am convinced that Northeast Asia will be obliged to play a leading role.

The era in which the U.S.A. plays the role of absorbing worldwide productive output in exchange for dollars is passing away. The Japanese economy has to place its pivot foot within Asia.

The idea of a Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere was a patent apparatus for the right wing, where only the confrontation with Europe and America was highlighted, leaving Japanese imperialism as it was. However, today the scene of history is turned around drastically.

A New East Asian Regime in the Axis of Japan and China! A New World Order based upon it! I believe that it is a good moment today to adopt this as a slogan of the antiestablishment left wing, which calls for a radical inquiry of Japanese Capitalism itself. (Hiromatsu 1997b, 499)

Here Hiromatsu asserts that it is necessary to make “the idea of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere... a slogan of the antiestablishment left wing, which calls for a radical inquiry of Japanese Capitalism itself.”¹

1. The first draft of this essay is as follows:

The “New East Asian Regime in the Axis of Japan and China! A New World Order based upon it! This is a slogan advocated by right wing intellectuals who left Japanese imperialism as it was. However I believe that it is a good moment today to adopt this as a slogan of the left wing, which calls for a radical inquiry of Japanese Capitalism itself.” (Kobayashi Masato “Introduction,” in Hiromatsu 1997, 527–528).

This assertion of Hiromatsu “caused a sensation and brought misunderstanding, repulsion, and puzzlement” (527). Nevertheless, the truth may be what Imamura Hitoshi pointed out:

As he wrote his book *An Argument for “Overcoming Modernity,”* in order to take back the argument of “overcoming modernity” from the right wing, Hiromatsu was convinced that the idea of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere should be taken back from the right wing for the left wing. This is a proper attitude for Hiromatsu as a Marxist fighter. One might object that this is just a change of the vector, that the content is still the same. However, it is no little wonder that Hiromatsu turned an idea of the “Co-prosperity Sphere” to his advantage in order to realize solidarity in East Asia, drawing from the old wisdom that Marx captured the idea of “class struggle” in a left wing manner from bourgeois historians. To my surprise, there are many people who have an impression that Hiromatsu “turned to the right” through this essay, but we have to say that this is a misunderstanding.²

If this is indeed a misunderstanding, as Imamura suggests, what then is the reasoning behind Hiromatsu’s idea that the “New East Asian Regime” is not “just a change of the vector” of the “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere”? Two key points seem important. One is that his idea is to undertake a “radical inquiry of Japanese Capitalism itself.” Another is that the “New East Asian Regime” is to be based upon a “new worldview and concept of values.” Hiromatsu says that “new worldview and concept of values will be born in Asia in the end, and they will sweep across the whole world,” “it is nothing other than to make a ‘relation-based doctrine’ the foundation instead of a European ‘substance-based doctrine’ that has been in the mainstream while excluding a small number of exceptions like Mahayana Buddhism” (Hiromatsu 1997a, 498).

It is true that this idea could be the transformation of the “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere,” but in what way is it distinct from

It is obvious that Hiromatsu elaborated an idea of a “New East Asian Regime” by transforming the “idea of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.”

2. Imamura Hitoshi, “Commentary,” in Hiromatsu 1997, 498.

another idea, that of the “East Asian Cooperative System”? At a glance, there seems a very fine line between two. In short, what is the difference between Hiromatsu advocating the “New East Asian Regime” and Miki Kiyoshi advocating an “East Asian Cooperative System”?

2. Hiromatsu's Reading of Miki Kiyoshi

In a discussion with Kuno Osamu entitled “Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun,” Hiromatsu spoke about Miki Kiyoshi in the following way:

Frankly speaking, I feel that the indispensable moment for an argument of an East Asian Cooperative System to enter into philosophical thinking and to grasp Japanese intellectuals is to “partially” adopt a transformed “socialism” (in Japan, the mainstream of “socialism” is a self-professed Marxism) or “Marxist” socialism. I don't want to argue immediately that Miki and his colleagues distorted “Marxism” in such a way, but I cannot help considering that Miki and those associated with the “Shōwa Research Association” contributed to the ideology of the Establishment. Because this was a time when it became an indispensable socio-intellectual phase for the ideology of the Establishment to partially adopt the idea of socialistic cooperation (and this is quite different from the proper idea of socialism). (Kuno 1972, 96–97)

Hiromatsu thinks that the “East Asian Cooperative System” represented by Miki was a Marxist socialism transformed and adopted by the Establishment. In such a case, Hiromatsu's idea of a “New East Asian Regime” should be regarded in a reverse vector, as a Marxism transforming and adopting the idea of the “East Asian Cooperative System.” For that, it is necessary to clarify and criticize the “structure of thinking” or “logic” of Miki Kiyoshi who developed the “East Asian Cooperative System” (99).

Hiromatsu's conclusion is as follows:

As far as Miki Kiyoshi criticized these ideas [absolutism based on the Japanese emperor system and Buddhist-naturalistic pantheism],

he had to emphasize the autonomy of the modern “ego” rather than union with the community. However, on the other hand, he had to take the moment of the original sociability or social cooperativity of human beings into consideration in relation to the materialistic view of history.

In other words, if we use a popular terminology in the current situation, Miki thought of the relationship between individuality and the genus of human beings, and he confronted a difficult theoretical problem of how to classify and systematize it. In the historical and intellectual situation at that time, if he stressed sociability, he would have been captured by a pre-modern ideology. That is why the emphasis on individuality was necessary. [...]

In the end, the practice or behavior Miki referred to is not a practice that closely bears on real social life, though I don't dare to say that it is a practice limited to his consciousness. It seems to me that the range of his idea of practice does not reach that far. Moreover, when Miki talked about organization, he fundamentally lacked a viewpoint of the reification of human practice. This is what I cannot understand, but I feel that this lack might derive from the framework of Miki's philosophy itself. (102–103)

According to Hiromatsu, Miki took into consideration the “moment of the original sociability or social cooperativity of human beings” that Marx asserted and introduced it into his argument for the “East Asian Cooperative System,” but he could not understand its proper meaning. Instead, Miki so emphasized the “autonomy of the modern ‘ego’” that he could not move toward social practice. This is a “weak point in Miki's philosophy where it fails to connect the individuality and sociability of human beings” (100).

As far as Hiromatsu criticizes Miki in this way, his idea of a “New East Asian Regime” has to stress the “moment of the original sociability or social cooperativity of human beings” rather than “ego,” and should be institutionalized as a “practice that closely bears on real social life.” We can say that this is Hiromatsu's way of “Overcoming Modernity.” In his book *An Argument for “Overcoming Modernity”: a Perspective for the Intellectual History of Shōwa* (1980), he says:

In sum, the “philosophy of cooperative doctrine” of Miki Kiyoshi did not fully become conscious of “modernity,” which should be overcome, and its intellectual horizon, therefore it could not positively formulate a new concept that could replace “modernity.” (Hiromatsu 1997a, 117)

For Hiromatsu, Miki’s philosophy is utterly absorbed in the “horizon of modern learning” and is just an expression of a “short-sighted view and of imprudence” which “‘adopts’ the social scientific knowledge of Marxism on the one hand, but hastily ‘criticizes’ the ‘imperfection’ and ‘lack’ of Marxism on the other” (186). For Hiromatsu, it is not Miki’s view but rather “new thought” based upon Marxism that could provide a philosophical foundation for “Overcoming Modernity.” The “new thought” stresses the “moment of the original sociability or social cooperativity of human beings” and “makes a ‘relation-based doctrine’ the foundation instead of a ‘substance-based doctrine.’”

If so, Hiromatsu’s idea of a “New East Asian Regime” is due to the invention of “Asia” or “East Asia” not as substantial concept, but as relational concept. What connotation could it have? Before examining this question, we had better confirm whether Miki’s argument for an “East Asian Cooperative System” really corresponds to Hiromatsu’s interpretation.

3. The “East Asian Cooperative System” of Miki Kiyoshi

In an essay entitled “Ground of East Asian Thought” (1938) developed his argument as follows:

If the so-called “East Asian Cooperative System” should have a world historical meaning today, it is that it undoubtedly has a particularity to East Asia, but it is not limited to its particularity; it must be universal at the same time. In other words, it should be an index for the new world order that transcends the East Asian area. The new East Asian order becomes a new world order, to the extent possible. Therefore, the emergence of the new East Asian order should bring a

new solution to the world’s problems today, that is, to the problem of capitalism. (Miki 1967a, 315)

Miki tried to understand “East Asia” both as a regional concept and as a “total” concept, intending particularity and universality at the same time. While saying that “East Asian thought signifies the expansion of totalitarianism,” he defined the logic of the “totality of the East Asian Cooperative System” as “a new logic whereby individuality is constantly involved in the totality, but is thoroughly independent of it” and as a “logic of a correct dialectic” which differs from the “logic of the doctrine of the social totality as an ‘organism’ in the former totalitarianism” (319–320). Therefore, Miki did not exclude a nationalism or liberalism based upon individuality. His “East Asian Cooperative System” is not an “abstract cosmopolitanism,” but is “only realized in its particularity.”³ Besides, Miki understood this “totality” as that which would transcend modern society based upon the “system of atomism” (318).

If we accept this view, Miki’s “New East Asian Order” based upon an “East Asian Cooperative System” would be none other than what “makes ‘relation-based doctrine’ the foundation instead of a ‘substance-based doctrine.’” Needless to say, Miki stressed Japan’s “initiative” (325) for the construction of an “East Asian Cooperative System.” In this regard, his “relation-based doctrine” loses its dynamism and comes close to the idea of the “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere.” So we can say that Miki “partially” adopts a Marxist idea of “cooperation,” as Hiromatsu says. But how then does Hiromatsu’s “New East Asian Order” develop an inclusive “cooperation”? When he says it is “in the Axis of Japan and China,” why does he exclude Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries?

This is an open question. There is one more issue to address in Miki’s “East Asian Cooperative System.” That is, the so-called argument of “double reform” which Yonetani Masafumi referred to and Kumano

3. Ibid., 324.

According to Kumano 2010, the contemporary significance of Miki’s criticism against “abstract universalism” is highly regarded in a context of post-colonialism by Uchida 2007 and is criticized as Yonetani 2006.

Naoki discussed in detail recently. Miki put this argument forward in his essay “A Reexamination of the Argument for an East Asian Cooperative System” (1940), published after his visit to China.

When we consider the East, especially Japan and China, reform should be a double reform. Double reform takes up two themes at the same time: to overcome feudal vestiges and to overcome modern liberalism. (Miki 1982, 157)

From this time on, Miki began to emphasize the overcoming of “feudal vestiges” in addition to the overcoming of modernity based upon liberalism and capitalism. He regarded the domestic reform in Japan important for the construction of an “East Asian Cooperative System.” Kumano Naoki discusses this as follows:

In Miki Kiyoshi’s argument concerning the “East Asian Cooperative System,” the construction of an “East Asian Cooperative System” and domestic reform were inseparably linked. Here, Miki raised two themes, assistance for Chinese modernization and the resolution of Japanese modern liberalism and capitalism, presupposing self-evident stages of development to define “China as a feudal society” and “Japan as a modern society.” However, this presupposition was changed slightly after his visit to China in the spring of 1940. After his return from China, Miki began to stress, in his calls for “double reform,” the overcoming not only of Chinese, but also of Japanese feudal vestiges. For Miki, the Japanese he encountered in China were too impolite and engaged in inconsistent and “disgraceful” behavior. Miki sought the fundamental cause for this in the incompleteness of individuality of the Japanese people. He then came to advocate the “revamping of nationality,” stressing the use of the strong points of liberalism in order to break down Japanese feudal consciousness. (Kumano 2010, 620)

If Hiromatsu were to read this text, he may conclude that the characteristic of Miki’s philosophy, i.e. the “autonomy of the modern ‘ego,’” comes to the fore. However, if we assume that the significance of the

“relation-based doctrine” lies only in its criticism of “substance-based doctrine,” then the shift to the “revamping of Japanese nationality” (Miki 1967b, 416) in the construction of an “East Asian Cooperative System” has an important significance.⁴ This leads to the re-reading that Hiromatsu inherits the possibility of Miki’s argument for an “East Asian Cooperative System.” That is to say, it leads us to the view that Hiromatsu’s idea of a “New East Asian Regime” seeks a new form of solidarity (his “relation-based doctrine”) in East Asia, one presupposing the critical viewpoint of the reality of East Asia, especially of Japan (his criticism against “substance-based doctrine” involving liberalism and capitalism). In this respect, we can conceive of Asia or East Asia as a relational concept in Hiromatsu as a “cooperation” viewed in terms of “double reform.”

4. *Tosaka Jun and Translatability*

I would like to touch on Tosaka Jun, one of the most important Japanese Marxists. In a discussion with Kuno Osamu, entitled “Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun,” Hiromatsu did not speak favorably about Tosaka. However, as he inherited the argument of Ernst Mach from Tosaka, there is no doubt that Hiromatsu had a close intellectual association with Tosaka. What then was the thought of Tosaka? He intended to open up Japan to the world by developing a criticism against “Japanese Ideology,” including not only Japanism but also liberalism. In *Japan as Part of the World*, published in 1937, the year he received the order to stop writing, he says:

I have consistently believed that we must look at Japan from the angle *of the world*. This attitude is based on the belief that we must look at Japan from the standpoint of *the people*. What I mean by the “people” is not the same “people” that rulers use, but rather the democratic

4. Kumano grasps this significance and evaluates Miki’s “East Asian Cooperative System” because the assertion of “double reform” is different from the assertions of Ultra Nationalists or the Imperial Way Faction and the Kyōto School represented by Kōyama Iwao advocating “overcoming modernity.” (Kumano 2010, 620)

mass that autonomously attempts to defend its daily life. (Tosaka 1967, 3)

As I consider it in chapter 5, for Tosaka the act of seeing from the “angle of the world” is namely the act of seeing from the “standpoint of the people.” Why is this so? The answer lies in the fact that Tosaka’s version of the “people” is the “political power” that makes up the contemporary character of the world (57). Therefore, Japanese people should stand up as the “wheel of historical movement” together with the people in Chiang Kai-shek’s China, Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s Germany.

The people’s lack of political autonomy is both a situation and a condition of the Japanese people. However there are natural limits on it as a condition. It is not impossible to encounter a limit where the conditions themselves are inevitably evolved. Even the apolitical gas we call the Japanese people can be ignited by the pressure within the cylinder. The cylinder just needs to be kept at room temperature and regular pressure. (59)

In that case, does Tosaka intend an international solidarity among the people and to abandon the ethnos or the state? No, he does not. This does not mean that Tosaka abandons the national people or the ethnos as useless concepts. To the contrary, he attempts to draw on an understanding of the importance of respecting the cultures of all ethnos by avoiding becoming embroiled in political games regarding ethnos, and by shifting the issue from the ethnos to culture, based on the assumption that Japan at that time was composed of multiple ethnicities (51–52). Thus, Tosaka refers to literature in terms of culture and forcefully discusses the establishment of renewed morality through the criticism of literature (Tosaka 1966b). This is why he states the following:

All real thought and culture must be translatable to the world, in the most broad sense of the word. No thought or culture is real unless it is a culture or a strain of thought that has translatability, in the realm of categories, to every country and ethnos. Just as real literature must

be “world literature,” philosophies or theories that can only be understood by a particular ethnos or nation are fakes, with no exceptions. A culture of thought that remains nebulous even to its own nation or ethnos is not thought or culture, but complete barbarity. (Tosaka 1966a, 298)

In sum, Tosaka stands within the singularity of Japan and criticizes it from its foundations on the one hand, while on the other he tries to “translate” Japanese thought and culture “to the world” and hold them in common simultaneously.

This “relation-based doctrine” as translatability probably gives us an important suggestion, if we understand the possibility of Hiromatsu’s “New East Asian Regime.” However, there is no intervention upon a specific regional concept like East Asia in Tosaka’s thinking. It persistently appeals to the contemporaneity of the world and calls upon the singularity of Japan to aim for the world all at once. We have to ask the question again: Why does Hiromatsu start from East Asia, especially from Japan and China?

5. From the Periphery

Kobayashi Toshiaki gives clear answers to this question. One of them is that “Marxism, which Hiromatsu regards as his lifetime credo, still remains somehow” in China at least (Kobayashi 2007, 164). However, even so, there is no sufficient reason to involve Japan in Hiromatsu’s idea. What is more important is another reason Kobayashi points out. He states:

Therefore, what worries everyone is Hiromatsu’s emphasis of “Asia” and “Japan,” when he says that “a new worldview and concept of values will be born in Asia in the end, and they will sweep across the whole world. As a Japanese philosopher, I think I make this assertion” (Hiromatsu 1997b). If one reads only this phrase, I think that it is almost impossible to differentiate Hiromatsu from the Kyōto School. Those who stand by Hiromatsu seem to want a distinction between

the two in order to save Hiromatsu from being wrongly suspected, but I think that it is not necessary to distinguish them compulsorily in this respect. It is not irrelevant that both of them had their “starting point” based upon the periphery and regarded the world “centrifugally” from there. (Kobayashi 2007, 166–167)

Kobayashi argues that “Asia” or “East Asia” for Hiromatsu has a meaning only as a “starting point” based upon the periphery. In other words, “Asia” or “East Asia” for Hiromatsu is not a regional concept juxtaposed with the West, but what is brought forward to respect the asymmetrical history of the “periphery.”

As Kobayashi points out, it is true that it is impossible to distinguish Hiromatsu’s “New East Asian Regime” from the Kyōto School. In this respect, there is no need to defend Hiromatsu. However, if we try to locate the possibilities within his thinking, we cannot overlook the characteristic of his thinking as thought on the “periphery.” “Asia” or “East Asia” as a relational concept could propose a new sociability, if it opens itself up critically and radicalizes its historical characteristic as the “periphery.”

As for “East Asia” as the “periphery,” Baik Youngseo has discussed this by way of the concept of the “perspective from the periphery.”

It is possible to understand that the “periphery” points out a geographical position as the periphery of the Chinese continent and means the “neighbor” of the Chinese continent. But, I try to understand the “periphery” not as a simple geographical position, but as what is relevant to the basic perspective of research. The “periphery” means an attitude to question the structure itself, which represents the “periphery” as the object of discrimination in the hierarchy led by the “center.” This is basically linked with the idea of “East Asia in intellectual praxis” that I have already emphasized for a long time. I would like to introduce the relevant part of my previous paper.

I come to think that what will be demanded for East Asia including China would be a discourse concerning East Asia as a heuristic device, which is located in a different dimension from

East Asia as a substance (of civilization or region). As a result, I found (temporarily) a term, “East Asia in intellectual praxis.” This means a type of thinking which does not regard East Asia as a fixed substance, but grasps it as fluidity in self-reflection and as a process of praxis based upon this thinking. I expect that if we follow this attitude, we can form a reflexive subject looking back to East Asia in myself and to myself in East Asia. (Baik 2000, 50)

To make sure, I would like to repeat my concept. The “East Asia” I talk about is not a mass holding a “pure” homogeneous civilization (or culture) in common, but a “field” where the diverse subjects constituting the area of East Asia compete, compromise, and are connected together. In this “field,” the role of “peripheral” existences treated neglectfully, that is, diverse ethnos including minorities in each nation state and diverse areas should be considered particularly important. The perspective from the “periphery” to view China and Japan anew is significantly important for “East Asia in intellectual praxis.” Nonetheless, we don't have to confer a privilege on the “periphery.” Individuals and groups who live in the center could carry out “peripheral” thinking, those who live in the periphery could carry out “central” thinking. Therefore, the “periphery” I talk about is not a noun, but has an adjectival meaning. (Baik 2002, 20–21)

For Baik Youngseo, the main meaning of “periphery” is the “periphery” of China and Japan and other countries and minorities. However, as mentioned repeatedly, this “periphery” is an adjectival attitude. “East Asia” itself should become a “field” of “intellectual praxis” as “periphery.” It is here that we can find the best interpretation of Hiromatsu's “New East Asian Regime.” Only when we start to think from “East Asia” as “periphery,” can we set up “East Asia” as a “field” not of “substance-based doctrine,” but of “relation-based doctrine.” In this translatability of Hiromatsu's possibility, we can recognize a decisive starting point for our thinking of “East Asia” today.

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