

*The Challenge of Linear Time:
Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*

edited by Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider
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This edited volume addresses a problem which fascinated intellectuals from East Asia for decades. To Japanese scholars in the 1940s, it emerged with the discussions on “overcoming modernity” (近代の超克 *kindai no choukoku*) and later the historical evaluation of the so-called “Greater East Asia War” (大東亞戰爭 *Daitōa sensō*). To the Chinese, this question is entangled with the century-long history of modernization and revolution. It was reflected in the reformists’ challenge against the Old Text Confucianism (古文經學 *guwen jingxue*) by proposing the New Text Confucianism (今文經學 *jinwen jingxue*) in the late Qing period. We can also spot a similar concern in the impassioned debates that began in the 1930s regarding the characteristics of Chinese society, especially over the issue of whether or not Chinese historical development had experienced a stage of what Karl Marx referred to as an “Asiatic mode of production” (*Asiatische Produktionsweise*). With the beginning of market reform in China in the 1980s, the Chinese society also began to face a new tide of theoretical challenge which soon led to the political ratification of the term “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中國特色社會主義 *Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*). In recent years, the discussion of “East

Asian modernity” demonstrates a more reflexive relation between Japanese and Chinese scholarships. It reflects, as the editors of this book argue in the beginning, a tension between “the dominance of linear time and progressive history and the concomitant delineation of the nation in Chinese and Japanese historiography.”

Even since Western colonial military and commercial expansions began to intensify globally in the nineteenth century, the tendency to form a universal historiography was inevitably integrated into this political transformation of world order. In the non-Western world, on the one hand, this process was accompanied by the emergence of a universal discourse of modernization rooted in a social Darwinian reception of progress. On the other hand, it also triggered the rising awareness of a theoretical resistance against such a universal narrative of modernity. In East Asia, intellectuals began to draw a more complex picture of modernity, or rather, *modernities*, in order to liberate this concept from the framework of linear progress monopolized by Western colonial/capitalist discourse. Through this lasting resistance, countries in East Asia generated their own subjectivity in modern world history. Political reality such as revolution, war, reformation, and nationalism in modern East Asia could then be understood through such a theoretical scope, which transcends the chronological and spatial limitations troubling East Asian nations until today.

The theoretical resistance against a universal narrative of modernization in East Asia also establishes a communicative relation between East and West. The collapse of a Chinese empire and the formation of modern nation-states in East Asia were accompanied by the spread of the modern Western legal system and the decline of colonial hegemony. Hence, the theoretical resistance against Western universalism represents a political struggle for national sovereignty and dominance. Through this perspective, we could then better understand the formation of a modern “world system” as well as the complexity of a modern world order.

The complexity of “East Asian Modernity” is also reflected in the diversified political responses toward Western imperialism among East Asian countries as well as the interconnection among these nation-states. Japan answered the challenge of Western imperialism with Pan-Asianism and an ethnocentric imperial warfare. China initially responded with a more introverted reformation and attempt at revolution, and later with a Maoist ambition to achieve political equality through struggles against imperialism in any form internationally. Another key component of this complexity of East Asian Modernity is Korea. Its national history of modernization was entangled with the decline of the Chinese Confucian order and the rise of Japanese military expansionism in the early twentieth century.

An essential thesis of *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia* is in line with the continuing intellectual quest for “East Asian Modernity.” This book can be seen as not only an introduction to English-language readership on such a scholarly discussion in East Asia, but more importantly a contribution toward it. Editors intend to question the role of national “traditions” in the process of searching for modernization under the challenge of the universal discourse of Western “modernity.” This book engages in the discussion by attempting to present a dialogue and comparison between Japanese and Chinese historiography. It includes ten papers from scholars who write in various languages other than English. Some of the papers, including Sun Ge’s reading of Takeuchi Yoshimi, are introduced to scholarship in the English language for the first time.

The ten papers in this volume are arranged into four themes: Time, History, and Moral Responsibility; The Burden of the Past and the Hope for a Better Future; Recollection of the Past and the Popularization of History; and History and the Definition of Spatial, Cultural and Temporal Boundaries. As typical studies of intellectual history, papers included in this book deal with topics such as scholar societies and intellectual trends (such as the Kyoto School, the Popular Reading Publishing House, and

the Critical Review School), individual intellectuals (such as Tan Sitong, Zhang Taiyan, Liu Yizheng, and Takeuchi Yoshimi), as well as individual works and political movements (such as the Campaign to Criticise Lin Biao and Confucius, the National Learning movement, and the Chinese Daiyi Landlord Mansion Museum).

The first section, including four papers, lays out the theoretical foundation of this book. Naoki Sakai's paper "Negativity and Historicist Time: Facticity and Intellectual History of the 1930s" mainly deals with the concept of negativity discussed by philosophers from the Kyoto School, such as Tanabe Hajime and Miki Kiyoshi. The Kyoto School is known mostly by its social historical studies on the "early modern history of Asia" (近世東洋史 *kinsei Tōyōshi*). "Kinsei" as a historical period is chronologically succeeded by "*kindai*." The intention of establishing a "*keiseishi*" specific to East Asia represents the Kyoto School's historicism of rejecting the historical universalism developed in modern Europe. For the Kyoto School, it is important to establish a historiography, which can fully demonstrate the endogenous history of modernization in East Asia. Both the Orient and the Occident experienced the rise of ethno-centric nationalist identity through interactions within their own spatial boundaries and the spontaneous growth of capitalism along the process. Naoki Sakai's paper historicizes this famous periodization and intends to explore the ontological foundation and ideological consequences of the Kyoto School's historical narratives in the 1930s. Sakai demonstrates that the manufacture of Japanese modern subjectivity is a consequence of dialectic interaction. The Hegelian concept of negativity is used in this paper to explain the Japanese intellectuals' broadly struggling relations with the Others as well as their own history. Through this perspective, Sakai intends to shed light on the Japanese intellectuals' paradoxical involvement in Japanese imperial nationalism and anti-fascist struggle at the same time.

Historically, the Kyoto School began in the early twentieth century. At the time, Japan had won the wars against Russia and the Chinese Qing

empire and had successfully installed colonial control over the island of Taiwan and the Korean peninsula. With its military successes, Japan was acknowledged by the West as a major modern power in East Asia and a member of the “Family of Nations.” It was under such a legal and political recognition that the theoretical and ideological ambition of establishing an Asiatic identity and its history of modernization parallel to the Occident began to thrive. Chinese intellectuals such as Zhang Taiyan also shared a similar ambition. However, by the time the Kyoto School had gained its name in the 1930s, the pan-Asian ambition in Japan had already taken a turn to a full-scale military imperialist expansion marked by its invasion of the Manchuria area of China. Establishing a modern history of East Asia began as the attempt to resist against the Hegelian historiography of universalism. However, it also became an ideological foundation for the rising Japanese military imperialism supported by a universalistic discourse of Pan-Asianism.

The paradoxical characteristic of Japanese modernisation experience continues to haunt Japanese intellectuals. A famous example is Takeuchi Yoshimi, a key subject of investigation in the respective papers of Sun Ge and Takahiro Nakajima. Interest in Takeuchi Yoshimi among East Asian scholars itself demonstrates the shared concerns of Asian historical narrative. As a politically engaging and conflicting figure, Takeuchi on the one hand roots his literary and political idealism solidly in the resistance against Western universal modernity. Through his discussion on Lu Xun, Takeuchi demonstrates an intellectual ambition similar to the Kyoto School, which aims to illustrate the Asiatic nature and the multiplicity of modernity. On the other hand, Takeuchi was also seen by many critics as a proponent of Japanese pan-Asianism. His famous argument, which views the Japanese imperial *Daitōa sensō* as having dual characters, is heavily criticized for its political incorrectness. Takeuchi was strongly opposed to the Japanese imperialist war against China, yet he was also justifying the war against the United States as a war against Western imperialism. To Chinese scholars, this is

known as the “Takeuchi Yoshimi paradox,” which represents the theoretical and political dilemma experienced by generations of Japanese intellectuals in the twentieth century.

Takeuchi was systematically introduced to China in the late 1990s. His study on Lu Xun was the first to be translated into Chinese at the time when China began to argue theoretically for the unique Chinese path of modernization. Sun Ge is among those Chinese scholars who have seen the possibility of engaging in the rising concern among Chinese intellectuals to search for an East Asian modernity by introducing and discussing works from their Japanese counterparts, such as Takeuchi. In this sense, the spread of Takeuchi in China itself reflects the interconnected dynamics within East Asia in the process of modernization. Takeuchi’s work “Overcoming Modernity,” which is the main subject of discussion in Takahiro Nakajima’s paper, was another article which triggered waves of debate in China in the early 2000s.

To many Chinese scholars such as Sun Ge, Takeuchi’s paradox reflects a typical urge among Asian intellectuals to be socially engaged. In Sun’s paper, she almost views Takeuchi as an intellectual bridge which connects the concerns of both Japanese and Chinese scholars. In this sense, “Takeuchi studies” is not only a regime that links the physical space, but it also chronologically connects the modern intellectual and political history of Tōyō with contemporary East Asia. According to Sun, a contemporary dogmatic categorization of right wing conservatism and left wing internationalism cannot be used to fully comprehend the complexity of Takeuchi. Sun argues that we will not be able to fully comprehend Takeuchi’s historicism if we continue to impose a dogmatic evolutionary framework. As she suggests, such an approach is completely unhistorical. Chinese scholars tend to approach Takeuchi through his work on Lu Xun and put these two figures in a comparative perspective. Instead of submitting to metaphysical boundaries, Takeuchi and Lu are seen as intellectuals who are subject to the philosophy of praxis. In his study of Lu Xun, Takeuchi used a religious term,

“conversion” (回心 *kaisin*), to interpret Lu Xun’s transition from hoping to be a doctor into the practice of being an intellectual. According to Takeuchi, it was through his experience of disillusion toward Chinese politics and retreat to pure classic Chinese literature that Lu Xun could finally begin the long process of conversion. Conversion suggests a fundamental transformation of value and position through a dialectic process of negation. This process of negation leads to a creation of a subjectivity by reevaluating and resisting against the tradition (or to an individual, the existing epistemology) in the flux of social reality. Subjectivity that emerges through this process of conversion is hence unique and free from the limitation of universalism.

We can find an obvious epistemological similarity between Takeuchi’s concept of conversion and the Kyoto School’s philosophical discussion on negativity. To Kyoto School philosophers such as Tanabe Hajime, the uniqueness of Asian modernity could only be argued based upon the dialectic connection between Asian tradition and its contemporary reality. The linear historiography proposes a universal destiny of historical evolution, based upon which the universalism of Western modernity is constituted. By breaking up with such a linear narrative, and by establishing dialectic connections within Asia both on spatial and chronological levels, they are able to logically argue for the plurality of modernity.

Both Long-hsin Liu’s and Tze-ki Hon’s papers apply the logic of negation in understanding the revolutionary nature of conservatism and popular tradition in the making of the Chinese narrative of modernity. Tze-ki Hon’s article focuses on the issue of national essence (国粹 *guocui*) and its relationship with Chinese modern revolution. Hon demonstrates that in early twentieth century China, such classical learning was not a revival of “imperial learning” that served the monarchy. Instead, it was the national heritage, which served the newly established nation after the revolution. Liu’s paper is another case study on Chinese wartime historical writings in the 1930s.

Two papers in this collection deal with Chinese national historical narrative during the early People's Republic period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik's paper on the problem of "restoration" in Chinese Marxist historiography begins with the discussion of Wang Gungwu's remark on the Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔 *Pi Lin Pi Kong*). Wang argues that "Marxism opened an opportunity for Chinese intellectuals to look at Chinese history as part of world history." However, according to Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, this statement seems to be in conflict with the Chinese communist narrative of establishing the uniqueness of the Chinese past. She points out that through criticism against restoration, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) not only attempts to eliminate the threat of Chinese heritage overwhelming revolutionary result, but also aims to criticize the present by using the past.

Haiyan Lee's work looks at an artistic creation in the 1960s. She uses the Daiyi Landlord Mansion Museum as a case study to argue that the CCP historical narrative of China as a modern state uses "class racism" to replace nationalism as a strategy of nation building. Lee argues that "the ideology of class in socialist China" should be understood through the "prism of the racism-nationalism nexus." However, the use of terminology is problematic in Lee's discussion, which consequently weakens the historical and theoretical foundation of her paper. To the Kyoto School, the historical process of interaction and negation which leads to the possibility of establishing the East Asian modernity happened not only between historical heritage and contemporary reality, but also spatially among different ethnic and social groups in East Asia. The latter hence fuelled the spontaneous growth of nationalism and nation-states in East Asia. The term ethnicity or race in this context should therefore be used cautiously with a conscious historical concern toward East Asia. Lee's article focuses on the stories displayed at the Daiyi Landlord Mansion Museum, especially the series of statues picturing the brutality of the landlord Liu Wencai. Lee

correctly points out that this story serves a political purpose of generating class resentment against both the landlord class and the feudal past of China. Indeed, Maoist China was featured with discourses of class politics, which seem to be universal regardless of ethnicity. However, we should also notice that at the same time of promoting class politics, Maoist China was also actively conducting a social practice of ethno-identification (民族识别 *minzu shibie*). As a key component and initial stage of implementing ethnic policies (民族政策 *minzu zhengce*), one of the guiding principles was to emphasize the uniqueness of Chinese national/ethnic problems (民族问题 *minzu wenti*) in order to prevent dogmatic use of the Stalinist/Marxist definition of ethnicity which was developed in the European historical context. Use of the term “class racism” risks overlooking China’s political reality in the 1960s. Hence, this term appears to be a victim of a teleological narrative of universalism.

To conclude, this edited volume is a great contribution to the discussion of the Kyoto School and East Asian Modernity in English-language scholarship. It is worth mentioning that the collection could present a more complete picture if it had included discussions on the colonial experience of Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. As the fruit of a joint conference in Leiden, this book, however, may be the beginning of a series of academic endeavors. After all, as the editors state in the beginning, “International trade and diplomatic relations required that Japanese and Chinese rethink their notions of time and space.” A similar inspiration could be applied to the writing of a world history in an even broader geographic scope crossing the East and the West.