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Reclaiming Asia From the West: Rethinking Global History

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by Wang Hui

Many Asians are now debating the idea of Asia. Some want to create a regional system in opposition to neo-liberal imperialism. Others want to transcend nationalism, which they regard as outmoded, and to create a fresh sense of Asian identity that does not depend on the old, and western-invented, dichotomy of East and West.

By Wang Hui

Asia, like Europe, wants to create regional institutions strong enough to counterbalance the power of the United States. Two apparently different ideas - liberal globalisation and the new empire?- have knit together military unions, collaborative economic associations and international political institutions to set up a global order encompassing politics, the economy, culture and the military. This order may be called neoliberal imperialism?

European societies have attempted to protect themselves with a form of regionalism. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, in an article on why Europe needs a constitution (1), proposes three major tasks in the construction of post-national democracy: to form a European civic society, to build a Europe-wide political public sphere, and to create a political culture which all citizens of the European Union will be able to share.

Regionalism is also the subject of a major debate in Asia. China, for instance, suggested a few years ago that it could join the 10 members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) (2) through a formula of ?0 plus one.? Japan immediately followed, suggesting a formula of ?0 plus three?(China, Japan and South Korea). A Japanese news agency article in 2002 said: if the unification of Asia accelerates . . . the sense of distance between Japan and China will tend to disappear naturally in the process of regional unification; eventually, based on a first regional negotiation occasion that excludes the United States, a conference of ASEAN and the leaders of Japan, China, and Korea may achieve an Asian version of the reconciliation between France and Germany (3).

When 10 eastern European nations were accepted as formal members of the European Union on 1 May 2004, a Japanese diplomat and an Indian political scientist suggested that China, Japan and India should be the axes of an Asian version of Nato.

This raises the question of what Asians mean when they speak of Asia.? Since the 19th century, different forms of Asianism?have been closely linked with different forms of nationalism. But in the wave of modern Asian nationalisms, the idea of Asia contains two opposing concepts: the Japanese colonial concept of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere and the socialist concept of Asia centred on national socialist and liberation movements. In the context of the collapse of the socialist movement and the reconstruction of Asian imaginations, how should we regard and deal with the socialist legacy in Asia? If we seek today to surpass the nation-state, then an

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idea of Asia means that we have to substitute a supranational state vision for 19th-century imaginings.

Asia: A European notion

The idea of Asia?is not an Asian invention but a European one. In the 18th and 19th centuries the European social sciences (historical linguistics, modern geography, philosophy of rights, theories of state and race, historiography, political economy) developed quickly, along with natural sciences. Together they created a new world map. The ideas of Europe and Asia were integrated into the concept of world history. Charles de Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Hegel, and Marx, among others, constructed the idea of Asia in contrast with Europe and incorporated Asia in a teleological vision of history (4).

The core elements of this vision can be summed up as the opposition between Asian multi-ethnic empires and the European sovereign/monarchical state; between Asian political despotism and European legal and political systems; between the nomadic and agrarian mode of production of Asia and European urban life and trade. Since the European nation-state and the expansion of the capitalist market system were considered as the advanced stage, Asia was consigned to a lower developmental stage of history. In the European imagination, Asia was not only a geographic category, but also a civilisation with a political form in opposition to the European nation-state, a social form in opposition to European capitalism, and in transition between an unhistorical and a historical stage.

This discourse provided a framework within which European intellectuals, and also Asian revolutionaries and reformists, could represent world history and Asian societies, establish revolution and reform policies, and describe the past and future of Asia. Through most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the idea of Asia was contained in a universal discourse of European modernity that provided a similar narrative framework for colonists and revolutionaries. Ironically, European discourses presented Asia as the starting point of world history. Hegel wrote: the history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia is the beginning . . .The East knew and to the present day knows that no one is free; the Greek and Roman world, that some are free; the German world knows that all are free. The first political form, therefore, which we observe in history is despotism, the second democracy and aristocracy, the third monarchy?(5).

This is a philosophical condensation of European discourses on Asia. In The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith analysed the relationship between agriculture and irrigation in China and other Asian countries to contrast it with western European cities, characterised by manufacturing and foreign trade. Smith's definition of four historical stages, of hunting, nomadic, agriculture and commerce, coordinates with his definition of regions and races. He mentioned native tribes of north America?as examples of nations of hunters, the lowest and rudest state of society? Tatars and Arabs as examples of nations of shepherds, a more advanced state of society? and ancient Greeks and Romans as examples of nations of husbandmen, a yet more advanced state of society?(6).

From Hegel's perspective, all these issues belonged to the political sphere and the formation of the state: hunting races were regarded as the lowest and crudest because hunter-gatherer communities were so small that the political specialisation of labour demanded by a state was impossible. When he described world history, Hegel resolutely excluded North America (characterised by hunter-gathering) and placed the East at the beginning of history. Smith divided history according to different economic or productive patterns, while Hegel classified by region,

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civilisation and state structure. Both linked productive or political forms with specific spaces such as Asia, America, Africa or Europe, and arranged them into a relationship of temporal periodicity.

When he expounded the evolution of socio-economic systems, Marx defined four stages: Asian, primitive, feudal and capitalist. His unique version of the Asian mode of production originated in a synthesis of Hegel's and Smith's views of history. According to Perry Anderson (7), a series of generalisations about Asia in European intellectual history since the 15th century formed the basis upon which Marx built his idea of the Asiatic mode of production: public or state ownership of land (from James Harrington, Francis Bernier, Montesquieu); lack of legal constraint (Jean Bodin, Montesquieu, Bernier); religion rather than legal systems (Montesquieu); lack of hereditary aristocracy (Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, Montesquieu); slavery-like social equality (Montesquieu, Hegel), isolated village communal life (Hegel); agriculture that overwhelmed industry (John Stuart Mill, Bernier); stagnant history (Montesquieu, Hegel, Mill). All these supposed characteristics of Asia were regarded as the properties of oriental despotism. This ensemble of ideas can be traced back to discussions of Asia in Greek thought (8).

Asian ideas of Asia

Asian ideas of Asia are the products of modern nationalism. Although they are historically opposed in substance, the various Asian nationalist discourses - the Japanese departure from Asia and joining Europe the national autonomy advocated by the Russian revolutionaries, and the Pan-Asianism of Chinese revolutionaries - were all based on the idea of the antithesis between the nation-state and empire.

The Japanese nationalist slogan came from a short essay by Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) published in 1885. Departure from Asia reveals a determination to abandon the China-centred world, its politics and Confucian ideology. The idea of joining Europe was to establish Japan as a European-style nation-state. Fukuzawa's view of Asia was that it could be considered as culturally homogenous, as a Confucian space; he aimed to break with Confucianism by transforming Japan into a nation-state. Japan's self-consciousness as a nation-state was to be achieved through separation from Asia and reproduction, within Asia, of the dichotomy civilised/barbarian, western/eastern.

He argued that Japan should not only depart from its own past identity, but also reshape an axis in the whole of Asia. In reality, its route as a nation-state was not departure from Asia and joining Europe?but rather entering Asia and confronting Europe.?The Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere?proposed as a colonial slogan in the early 20th century was used to legitimise the Japanese invasions in Asia. Given this colonial context, it is understandable that most Chinese intellectuals became reluctant to elaborate or to adopt this idea.

National liberation movements created a new Asian imagination, echoing the socialist idea present in the Russian revolution. The socialist movement, anti-capitalist and fighting the bourgeois nation-state, was from the start directed towards internationalism and anti-imperialism. However, like the theory of departure from Asia in Japan, the theory of the right of nations to self-determination was elaborated within the dichotomy of nation-state and empire.

Outcome of European modernity

Lenin published a series of articles on Asia 27 years after Fukuzawa's essay and soon after the republican revolution erupted and the provisional government of the Chinese republic was established in January-February 1912 (9). He described China as a land of seething political activity, the scene of a vibrant social

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movement and of a democratic upsurge (10), and condemned the fact that civilised and advanced Europe with its highly developed machine industry, its rich multiform culture and its constitutions?came out, under the command of the bourgeoisie, in support of everything backward, moribund and medieval?(11). The opposing views of Lenin and Fukuzawa are based on a common basic understanding that Asian modernity was the outcome of European modernity and that, regardless of Asia's status and fate, the significance of its modernity manifested itself only in its relationship with advanced Europe.

In historical epistemology, there is no substantial difference between Lenin's revolutionary judgment and the idea of Asia held by Hegel or Smith. All perceived the history of the development of capitalism as an evolutionary process from the ancient Orient or Asia to modern Europe, from hunting, nomadism and agriculture to trade or industry. Hegel's view of world history and his designation of Asia as medieval, barbarian and non-historical was also Lenin's premise. His Hegel-plus-revolution idea of Asia described historical development in three stages: ancient, medieval and modern (feudalism, capitalism, proletarian revolution or socialism). It provided a framework, when joined with temporality and periodisation for the capitalist era, to understand the history of other regions.

Lenin's arguments, especially the idea of an inherent connection between nationalism and capitalism, provide an outline to understand the relationship between modern Chinese nationalism and the idea of Asia. When Sun Yat-sen visited Kobe in 1924, he (12) made his famous speech on great Asianism (13). He distinguished two Asias: one with no independent states that had been the origin of the most ancient civilisation; another that was about to rejuvenate. He claimed that Japan would be the genesis for this Asia since it had abolished a number of unequal treaties imposed by Europe and had become the first independent state in Asia. He applauded the Japanese victory in its war with Russia as the first triumph of Asian nations over the European in the past several hundred years . . . All Asian nations are exhilarated . . . They therefore hope to defeat Europe and start movements for independence . . . The great hope of national independence in Asia is born (14).

It was not just a question of East Asia as part of a Confucian cultural sphere, but of a multicultural Asia whose unity was based upon the independence of sovereign states. Sun Yat-sen's Asian nations?were the desired outcome of national independence movements and not awkward imitations of European nation-states. He insisted that Asia had its own culture and principles – the?culture of the kingly way?as opposed to the?culture of the hegemonic way of European nation-states. He called his speech great Asianism?partly because he connected the idea of Asia with the idea of the kingly way. The inherent unity of Asia was not Confucianism or any other homogeneous culture, but a political culture that accommodated different religions, beliefs, nations and societies. Great Asianism, or pan-Asianism, was antithetical to the proposed Greater East Asia of modern Japanese nationalism, and it led to a new kind of internationalism.

The connection between socialist values and Chinese traditions has inspired contemporary scholars to reconstruct the idea of Asia. Mizoguchi Yuzo argues that categories such as heavenly principles?(tianli), and public/private?(gong/si) ran through Chinese intellectual and social history from the Song (960-1279) to the Qing (1911), and that therefore there is an inherent continuity between some themes of modern Chinese revolution and the idea of land regulation. This attempt to define Asian culture both resists and criticises modern capitalism and colonialism

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(15). There is a sharp opposition between socialist and colonialist ideas of Asia.

As early as the 1940s, Miyazaki Ichisada started to explore the beginning of Song capitalism by studying the history of wide-ranging communications in different regions. He argued that those who regard history since the Song as the growth of modernity should reflect on western modern history in light of the earlier modernity in east Asia?(16). That his theory of east Asian modernity overlapped with the Japanese idea of the?Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere?does not obscure his insights. Within a world-historical framework, he observed how the digging of the Grand Canal, largescale migration to the metropolises, and the use of commodities such as spice and tea connected European and Asian trade networks. He also argued that the expansion of the Mongol empire, which promoted artistic and cultural exchanges between Europe and Asia, not only changed internal relations in China and Asian societies, but also connected Europe and Asia by land and sea (17).
Parallel development

If the political, economic and cultural features of Asian modernity appeared as early as the 10th or 11th century, three or four centuries earlier than comparable features appeared in Europe, was the historical development of these two worlds parallel or associated? Miyazaki suggested that East Asia, especially China, not only provided the necessary market and material for the industrial revolution, but also nurtured the growth of humanism in the French Revolution. He logically concluded: the European industrial revolution was definitely not a historical event affecting only Europe, because it was not only a problem of machinery but also an issue of the whole social structure. To make possible the industrial revolution, the prosperity of the bourgeoisie was necessary, and the capital accumulation from trading with east Asia was also indispensable. To make the machines work not only required power, but also cotton as raw material. In fact, East Asia provided raw material and market. Without intercourse with East Asia, the industrial revolution might not have taken place (18).

The movement of the world is a process in which multiple spheres communicate and, interpenetrate and mould one another. When historians located Asia in global relations, they realised that the issue of modernity was not an issue belonging to a certain society, but the result of interaction between regions and civilisations. In this sense, the validity of the idea of Asia diminishes, since it is neither a self-contained entity nor a set of relations. A new idea of Asia - which is neither the beginning of a linear world history nor its end, neither self-sufficient subject nor subordinating object - provides an opportunity to reconstruct world history. This corrective must also lead to a re-examination of the idea of Europe, since it is impossible to continue to describe Asia based upon Europe's self-image.

The accounts of Asia that we have discussed reveal the ambiguity and contradictions in the idea of Asia. The idea is simultaneously colonialist and anti-colonialist, conservative and revolutionary, nationalist and inter-nationalist; it originated in Europe and shaped the self-interpretation of Europe; it is closely related to the matter of the nation-state and overlaps with the vision of empire; it is a geographic category established in geo-political relations. We must take seriously the derivativeness, ambiguity and inconsistency of the way that the idea of Asia emerged, as we explore the political, economic and cultural independence of Asia today. The keys to transcend or overcome such derivativeness, ambiguity and inconsistency can be discovered only in the specific historical relations that gave rise to them.

The criticism of Euro-centrism should not seek to confirm Asia-centrism but rather to eliminate

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the self-centred, exclusivist, expansionist logic of dominance. We will not be able to understand the significance of Asian modernity if we forget the historical conditions and movements we have discussed. In this sense, new Asian visions need to surpass the goals and projects of 20th-century national liberation and socialist movements. Under current historical circumstances, they must explore and reflect on the unaccomplished historical projects of these movements. The aim is not to create a new cold war but to end forever the old one and its derivative forms; it is not to reconstruct the colonial relationship but to eliminate its remnants and stop new colonising possibilities from emerging.

The question of Asia is not merely an Asian issue but one of world history. To reconsider Asian history requires both a revision of the 19th-century European conception of world history and an attempt to break through the 21st-century new imperial order and its logic.

This article, based on a talk at the London School of Economics in May 2004, is revised slightly from Le Monde Diplomatique, December, 2004. Wang Hui is a historian of ideas and chief editor of Dushu, Beijing. The article appeared at Japan Focus on February 23, 2005.

(1) Jurgen Habermas, "Why Europe needs a constitution", New Left Review, London, Sept-Oct 2001.
(2) Asean, originally created in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the
Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, now also includes Cambodia, Laos,
Vietnam, Brunei and Burma.
(3) Nishiwaki Fumiaki, "Relationship between Japan, the US, China, and
Russia from the perspective of China's 21st century strategy", Sekai
Shuho, Tokyo, 12 February 2002.
(4) Teleology is the doctrine that certain phenomena are best explained in terms of purpose rather than cause. In the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx regarded the history of western Europe as "an epoch marking progress in the economic development of society". This preface was never reprinted during his lifetime. In 1877 he commented that one should not "transform [his] historical sketch of the development of western European capitalism into a historical-philosophical theory of universal development predetermined by fate for all nations". See Saul K Padover, ed, The Letters of Karl Marx, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1979.
(5) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History, Colonial
Press, Jackson, Michigan, 1899.
(6) Adam Smith, "An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of
nations", The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam
Smith, vol II 2, Oxford University, London, 1976.
(7) Perry Anderson, Lineages of the Absolute State, Verso, London, 1979.
(8) Op cit. Anderson's analysis of the Asian mode of production is
authoritative but he did not touch on the important influence of Smith and the Scottish school on the ideas that Hegel and Marx had about Asia.
(9) "Democracy and Narodism in China" (1912), in V I Lenin, Collected
Works, vol 18, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1963; "The Awakening of Asia" (1913), vol 19; "Backward Europe and advanced Asia" (1913), vol 19. The Russian term "narodism" means populism.
(10) "The awakening of Asia".
(11) "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia".
(12) Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) was president of the first Chinese republic.
(13) Sun Yat-sen, "Dui Shenhu Shangye Huiyisuo Deng Tuanti De Yanshuo" (speech to organisations including the Kobe Chamber of Commerce), in Sun Zhongshan Quanji (complete works of Sun Zhongshan), Zhonghua

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shuju, Beijing, 1986.
(14) Ibid.
(15) See Mizoguchi Yuzo, Chugoku No Shiso (Chinese thought), Hoso daigaku kyoiku shinkokai, Tokyo, 1991; Mizoguchi Yuzo, Chugoku Zen Kindai Shiso No Kussetsu to Tenkai (Turns and changes in Chinese pre-modern thought), Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, Tokyo, 1980.
(16) Miyazaki Ichisada, Toyo Teki Kinsei (East Asia's modern age), Kyoiku
Times, Osaka.
(17) Ibid.
(18) Ibid. See also Philip S Golub, "All the riches of the East restored",
Le Monde diplomatique, English language edition, October 2004.

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