Moments of subversion and resistance: Unintended consequences of nationalist/imperialist ideas in the Japanese Empire (draft)

Atsuko Ichijo, Kingston University

Introduction
The overall aim of this paper is to examine the development of political modernity in East Asia in the early twentieth century through an exploration of the ways in which ideas about political community were produced, used and appropriated by both the imperialists and the colonised. Inspired by the theory of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) which rejects the teleological assumption of conventional modernisation theories - an eventual convergence of various societies to the European experiences of modernity -, the paper focuses on the ways in which Asianism, a discourse of resistance to European/western hegemony, was developed and acted upon as subjective attempts by Eastern Asian intellectuals to define modernity in their own terms. In particular, the paper reviews the ways in which various ideas associated with Asianism, articulated within the context of the philosophy of world history by the Kyoto School, were engaged by colonial intellectuals in Korea, China, Manchuria and Taiwan. These ideas include schemes such as the ‘East Asian Community (東亜協同体)’ and the ‘East Asia League (東亜連盟)’ as well as principles such as ‘the same letter, the same race (同文同種)’ and ‘the unity of Japanese and Koreans (內鮮一体)’. These initiatives clearly constituted oppressive Japanese imperial rule; but in some instances, attempts were made by intellectuals in various parts of the Japanese Empire to make use of these ideas in order to resist and subvert Japanese imperialism. Their attempts were limited, cerebral and short-lived and did not lead to tangible outcomes. The fact that these attempts were existed does not compensate for the brutality of Japanese imperialism, either. However, by examining the ways in which the oppressed and subjugated tried to mobilise the ideas of the oppressor in order to resist and subvert the oppression, the paper calls for a more-agency centred investigation of the ideas used by the colonised and the oppressed in the unfolding of modernity.

One of key concepts in this piece is nationalism, not just nationalism of Japan but nationalism of Taiwanese, Koreans, Chinese and possibly Manchus which was thought over and acted upon within double constraints of imperialism: Japanese imperialism and western imperialism. In dealing with the nebulous concept of nationalism, the paper focuses on a perspective that places particular emphasis on the totalising effect of nationalism. Nationalism could be a driving force for people to win liberation from various forms of oppression as the examples of the American and French Revolutions as well as a number of independence movements in Asia and Africa in the post WWII era attest. Another aspect of nationalism as a force to impose conformity also needs to be recognised. In discussing the idea of culturalism as conceptual equivalent to nationalism in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century China and India, a context fitting to this paper, Prasenjit Duara presents an understanding of nationalism as a totalising force in a somewhat roundabout manner. In challenging the claim that emphasises the novelty of nationalism as a form of consciousness which proves radical discontinuity between pre-modernity and modernity suggested by leading theorists of nationalism such as Benedict Anderson (1991) and Ernest Gellner (1983), Duara puts forward an argument that the novelty of nationalism as a form of consciousness lies in its insistence on the co-extensiveness of political and cultural communities, a totalised vision of a community. Furthermore,
he argues that a totalising view of a community is not new in India and China where culturalism traditionally provided ‘totalizing representations and narratives of community’, hence nationalism as a totalising force was not new in the East of the nineteenth century (Duara 1995; 1996; 1999). In other words, the paper rejects the conventional, diffusionist idea of the spread of nationalism from Europe but suggests that attempts by the colonial intellectuals in East Asia should be understood as endogenous movements rather than acts of adaptation and aculturalisation.

Before moving on to examining the moments of subversion and resistance, some background to Japanese imperial expansion is due. With Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan got out of the ‘old’ Sino-centric world and entered a ‘new’ world of West-centric order. It is widely known that the first years of the Meiji government were used to address the problem of unequal treaties with western powers, which previous Tokugawa shogunate concluded under duress or otherwise. While pursuing to right the perceived wrong in the form of unequal treaties, the Meiji government was quick to adapt to the Westpharian system. It proceeded with clarifying and settling the borders of Japan, and the 1875 treaty with Russia clarified the northern border (Japan gave up all territorial claim to Sakhalin island in exchange for undisputed sovereignty over all the Kuril islands up to the Kamchatka peninsula) and unilaterally incorporated the Kingdom of Ryukyu to its territory in 1879. The first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 led to Japan incorporating Taiwan in its empire, and Korea was annexed to the Japanese polity in 1910 following Japanese victory over Russia in 1904-5. Japan participated in World War I on the winning side and inherited German leased territories and German colonies such as Marshall Islands. The major push for further territorial expansion was mounted vis-à-vis China and Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and established Manchukuo in 1932. The second Sino-Japanese war started in 1937 with Japan occupying various parts of China. The ideas to be examined below were developed in this period when the Japanese Empire was expanding, a development which came to a halt in 1945.

**Background: Asianism and the philosophy of world history**

*Asianism*

(to be developed)

*The philosophy of world history*

The phrase ‘the world-historical standpoint’ appears in the title of a symposium (‘The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan’) organised and published in Chūō Kōron which took place in November 1941 (and published in the January 1942 issue). The symposium was one of the three Chūō Kōron symposia in which Kōsaka Masaaki, Kōyama Iwao, Nishitani Kenji and Suzuki Shigetaka, all of them members of Kyoto School, took part. The three symposia, after published individually in different Chūō Kōron issues, were published in a book form under the title of The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan in 1943. These symposia are generally seen as ‘the most important public debates of significance for Japan of the transformation of a European war into a global conflict in 1941’ (Williams 2004: 55). The world-historical standpoint can be understood as a way of understanding history which emerged out of the deliberation as to how to deal with world history in philosophy, a deliberation mainly pursued by the members of Kyoto School in the early twentieth century.
The idea of the world-historical standpoint was built on an understanding of the contemporary situation as a world-historical era in which the Western-centric world would disintegrate and the world would finally be unified in the true sense, an understanding shared by the members of Kyoto School. It is more of an expression of conviction that Japan was to play a significant role in the world where the existing order was collapsing than a clear proposition of methodology to study history (Koyasu 2007). According to the members of Kyoto School, the world-historical era was deemed to be a period in which various states and nations would influence the world culture through their unique characteristics. They further argued that Japan was to take the lead in this new era of history as a fully self-aware subject because of its history of developing by absorbing and digesting influences from both the West and the East. The war, at the time of the symposium, yet to develop into the Pacific War from a war against China, had a particular ‘world-historical significance’ because it was to reveal ‘a new idea of world history by realising unification of the East, thus, enabling the true unification of the world’ (Suzuki 2010).

The symposium, which took place while the members of Kyoto School were discreetly co-operating with the Navy, was not certainly a denunciation of Japanese imperial expansion and the symposium and the idea of the world-historical standpoint are generally seen as an expression of the intellectuals’ support for the war. The second Sino-Japanese war was presented to have a moral dimension in that it would lead to ‘Asian Awakening’ rejecting imperialism, soviet communism and fascism, all of which were deemed to represent a logic of Western power (Suzuki 2010).

While the symposium could be dismissed as a self-centred exercise to justify Japanese militarist and imperialist expansion at a certain level, a closer look into what was discussed there points to a range of features which had potential to be used to resist or subvert Japanese imperialism. Because the world-historical standpoint perspective aspires to realise ‘true’ universality, not the West-centric one which was dominant albeit in the process of crumbling at the time, the world-historical standpoint as an idea had potential to reject imperialist, self-expanding nationalism and to try to comprehend history beyond the confines of nations and states (Yonetani 2005). The vision was spelt out in a Japan-centric manner: in facilitating ‘Asian Awakening’, Japan was expected to exercise moralische Energie (moral energy), which the declining West no longer possessed, and to advocate and realise multi-culturalism and multi-polarism in the world (Suzuki 2010). These were, nonetheless, some of the aspects of the world-historical standpoint approach which could be utilised to subvert Japanese imperialism, the very subject which the discussion was assumed to justify.

It is not very difficult to see the influence of the rise of civilisational discourse in the articulation of the world-historical standpoint by the members of Kyoto School. It is widely acknowledged that the Western powers justified their imperial conquest as a civilising mission drawing from Enlightenment ideals. The Western civilisation in this regard was conceptualised as singular and universal, but some alternative views of civilisation started to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century welcomed by intellectuals such as Herder and Alexander von Humboldt. The old, Chinese conception of wenming (文明) valorised by the Christian missionary attracted particular attention. The Orientalist scholars were busy describing ancient civilisations to educate the West because some of these were understood to be the source of the contemporary Western civilisation. There was also a Buddhist revival in the world. These new discourse of Eastern civilisation with an emphasis on the spiritual
aspect was affirmed in the West before it was in the East (Duara 2003: 92-93). By the conclusion of World War I, there was generalised anxiety about the state of Western civilisation, and, as it is well-known, another infamous symposium, ‘Overcoming Modernity’, was organised in reference to efforts made by Paul Valéry to examine the state of civilisation in Europe (Isomae 2010: 62-63). The focus on moral energy in the ‘World-Historical Standpoint and Japan’ symposium was therefore, at least partly, a reflection of the general intellectual climate of the time.

The influence of the civilisational discourse in the deliberation of the world-historical standpoint can also be seen in the inherent contradiction of the idea as outlined above; it was an exercise to justify Japanese imperial expansion in the universalist language with moral commitment to lead the resistance to the Western powers’ hegemony. This inherent contradiction did not go unnoticed by the oppressors and the oppressed alike. Duara describes Sun Yat-sen’s attempt to influence the course of Japanese imperialism using the idea of wangdao (王道), the way of the ethnical monarch of Chinese antiquity:

Sun was rhetorically skilful at drawing the Japanese into a discourse of solidarity while simultaneously retaining a Chinese centrality by invoking the imperial Chinese tribute system. Wangdao was based upon the recognition of the Chinese emperor through the hierarchical system of reciprocities of the tribute. Thus Sun appealed to the Japanese to renounce the Western methods of badao (覇道) and return to the Asian method of peaceful solidarity (Duara 2003: 102)

Sun’s suggestion was most notably taken up by Tachibana Shiraki, an influential intellectual architect of Manchukuo, and in his goal to create a new East that was modern, progressive, and socially egalitarian. At the same time, he was convinced that the East was organised around different ethical and spiritual principles than the West (Duara 203: 102). Whether Tachibana’s ideal was fully realised in Manchukuo is outside the concern of this paper. What needs to be noted here is that the inherent contradiction found in the ideas behind Japanese imperial expansion was noted and some attempts were made to make use of it in order to influence the course of Japanese imperialism. In the context of the Sino-Japanese relationship, it is also worth noting that another idea, 同文道教 that is both Japanese and Chinese derive their culture from the same source, the ancient Chinese civilisation, was mobilised by a variety of actors, both Japanese and Chinese.

**Various guises of Asianism in circulation in the Japanese Empire**

**Taiwan: East Asia as way of transcending division**

One of first moments of resistance and subversion to Japanese imperial rule and imperialism in general was seen in Taiwan. For instance, the writings by Tsai Pei-huo (蔡培火), a multi-faceted politician, who petitioned the Japanese colonial office to install a local council for Taiwan and who also campaigned to introduce the Latin script in order to improve literacy among Taiwanese, contain a range of ideas which are relevant to our inquiry here. Tsai was a nationalist as seen in the publication of ‘Our island and ourselves’ in Taiwanese Youth in 1920 in which he argued that Taiwan was for Taiwanese. At the same time, he declared himself as an East Asian by publishing The Son of East Asia in 1934 in which the idea of ‘East Asia’ was explored as a way of transcending cultural
subordination to China and political domination by Japan and of establishing the selfhood (Shih 2008). Shih sees Tsai’s use of the notion of East Asia as a constructive response to Japanese intellectuals’ efforts to overcome modernity; while Japanese intellectuals sought to overcome modernity by branding it as western-derived and inferior to their modernity, Tsai, according to Shih, explored the idea of East Asia as a way of enhancing the sense of self by overcoming division and confrontation.

The East Asian Community and the common ancestry of Japanese and Korean peoples

As the war with China became entrenched, then Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro issued a statement on ‘the construction of a new East Asian order’ on 3 November 1938 which was followed by another statement on the normalisation of Japan-Sino relationship on 22 December 1938. These statements publicly proclaimed that the Japanese government no longer saw China as the enemy and that it would like to regard and treat China as a partner of their efforts to build a new order in East Asia, the redefined aim of the war efforts. These statements signalled the birth of the East Asian Community (東亜協同体) initiative.

The East Asian Community initiative was formulated by Showa Kenkyukai, a group of intellectuals which advised Konoe Fumimaro. One of its members, Miki Kiyoshi, seen as a member of Kyoto School, emphasised the world-historical significance of the East Asian Community. He saw a universalist ideal in the initiative that would overcome the opposition of Japanese invasion and Chinese resistance. For Miki, the initiative was a mode of thinking that could overcome nationalism and that contained an orientation for a new kind of cosmopolitanism. In his thinking, the universality and cosmopolitanism of the initiative would facilitate the solution of problems of capitalism and Western hegemony. It would lead to a renewal of Japan, which would in turn become fully qualified to lead Asia to the world of new order (Yonetani 2005).

History shows this Japan-centric but in a way idealistic vision of the world was short-lived. It was met by a complete rejection from the Nationalist government of China, the main target audience. When the Japanese government was took over by the Imperial Rule Assistance Association in 1940 for the purpose of total mobilisation for the war, the East Asian Community initiative was superseded by a more obviously imperialist plan of building the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, from which a sincere engagement with the problems posed by Chinese nationalism was absent.

There is evidence that the short-lived East Asian Community initiative provided opportunities for the oppressed and subjugated in the Japanese Empire to resist and even subvert Japanese imperial rule. For instance, some left-wing Korean intellectuals saw opportunities for social reform in the initiative which was originally proposed as a response to the rise of Chinese nationalism (Tobe 2004; Yonetani 2005). They saw in the initiative an invitation to nurture and articulate agency among the subjugated in the new world order albeit a Japanese-led one; a means to overcome Japanese imperialism by making the most of their own idea. These intellectuals also saw the opportunity in the initiative to overcome some problems which they saw as particular to the Korean nation. The emphasis on the rejection of Western hegemony and the Japanese leadership in the act of challenging and overcoming Western hegemony would ultimately suggest space and means for preserving the integrity of Korean nation. They also reasoned that the initiative, because of its anti-capitalist undertone, could also be used to address the entrenched class issue in Korea (Tobe 2004).
So In-Sik, for example, in his deliberation of the philosophy of world history, accepted the East Asian Community initiative as being based on respect for autonomy and collaboration and took the view that the logical conclusion of this principle would be opposition to assimilationist policies directed to the Koreans (Yonetani 2005; Chou 2004; Workman 2013). So came to see in East Asian subjectivity as embodied in the Japanese nation-state a potential to overcome class society by solving problems associated with capitalism. So saw in the East Asian Community initiative a potential to develop a new, multi-centred domestic order, a regime which guarantees subjectivity of multi-national and ethnic citizens.

Tobe (2004: 344-7) reports on writings by three left-wing intellectuals, Kim Myung-Sik, Cha Cha-Jong and In Chong-Sik, in a special section on the East Asian Community initiative and Korea in a left-wing journal published in 1939. The three intellectuals, writing independently and contributing an article each, presented some shared understanding about the potential of the initiative in protecting and advancing the interests of the Korean people. They accepted the construction of a new China by the Japanese military as the basis of the realisation of the East Asian order, which, when applied to Korea, should lead to preservation of the Korean nation. They saw in the East Asian order the necessity of reforming Japan on an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist line. In this regard, they made reference to the idea of the common ancestry of Japanese and Korean nations, an idea that was pushed forward by the Korean colonial government in order to assimilate Korea into the Japanese Empire, as something to be accepted and made use of in order to bring about changes to Korean society. The three intellectuals were in agreement that Korean society was in need of radical change and they saw the war situation as an opportune time to realise such changes because war would compel radical action on all sides. They also expected that there would be Korean support for and participation in the war against China. Apparently in this regard, the intellectuals completely misread the nation; there was no surge in support for the war, which meant a route to bring about social reform that was envisaged by these intellectuals never became available to Korean people.

(内鮮一体論)
To be developed

The East Asia League in China
While the East Asian Community initiative mainly shaped by Miki Kiyoshi achieved limited and brief traction in Korea under Japanese rule, what gathered some support in China, which was effectively at war with Japan since the Mukden Incident of 1931, was the East Asia League movement led by Ishiwara Kanji, a general in the Imperial Japanese Army and one of the main plotters of the Mukden Incident. The movement was officially launched by the establishment of the Association for the East Asia League in Tokyo in 1939 but it is reported that Ishiwara started to develop the initial ideas for the East Asia League soon after the Mukden Incident when he become involved with an organisation to promote co-operation between Japan and Manchuria established in 1932 (Saga 2015). As it is widely known, Ishiwara, an arch-supporter of the occupation of Manchuria at the time of the Mukden Incident turned to be a supporter of Muchuria’s independence emphasising the slogans such as ‘five races under one union’ and ‘ideal state through ethical and just rule’ soon after the establishment of Manchukuo. The East Asia League, as envisioned by Ishiwara in response to Konoe’s statements on a new East Asian order, had three principles in order to achieve peace: joint
The whole idea (Isomae 2010) of an autonomous subject who would then use its agency to challenge Japanese modernity of the West, an attempt which inevitably contains the risk of turning those identified to be oppressed and subjugated in Korea, Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia, for it invites the imperialist and militaristic expansion, which had to lead the reformation of the world order contradicting the universalistic and cosmopolitan historical standpoint was developed was clearly to justify why Japan is at one level a conscientious engagement with the idea history from a philosophical angle and the philosophy of world history or the world-historical standpoint articulated in specific reference to Japan’s privileged position was an idealistic expression of the block-like sphere, it contained a risk of being re-read by the oppressed and subjugated in Korea, Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia, for it invites the oppressed and subjugated in the Empire to identify with Japan as a way of overcoming modernity, a modernity of the West, an attempt which inevitably contains the risk of turning those identified to an autonomous subject who would then use its agency to challenge Japanese hegemony ingrained in the whole idea (Isomae 2010).

The idea of the world-historical point, a short hand for a range of ideas developed mainly by Kyoto School in response to Japanese militaristic and imperialist expansion, for instance, is very complex that it contains contradictory orientations. The philosophy of world history, part of the range of ideas developed by Kyoto School, is at one level a conscientious engagement with the idea history from a philosophical angle and it also contains serious questioning of the existing order in which taken-for-granted Western hegemony including capitalism, imperialism, communism and totalitarianism was challenged. At the same time, the way the world-historical standpoint was developed was clearly to justify why Japan had to lead the reformation of the world order contradicting the universalistic and cosmopolitan orientation embedded in the philosophy of world history. At the same time, since the philosophy of world history or the world-historical standpoint articulated in specific reference to Japan’s privileged position was an idealistic expression of the block-like sphere, it contained a risk of being re-read by the oppressed and subjugated in Korea, Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia, for it invites the oppressed and subjugated in the Empire to identify with Japan as a way of overcoming modernity, a modernity of the West, an attempt which inevitably contains the risk of turning those identified to an autonomous subject who would then use its agency to challenge Japanese hegemony ingrained in the whole idea (Isomae 2010).

In place for a conclusion
The all too brief and incomplete review of various ways in which ideas associated with Asianism and the philosophy of world history circulated and interacted with the colonised and oppressed suggests a number of things about ideas and their unintended consequences. Asianism, or in the guise of Sun Yat-sen’s Greater Asianism (which should mean ‘to treasure the East Asian world following the ideal of ethical and just rule’ but often misunderstood (Wang 2015)) were mobilised by both Japanese and colonial intellectuals to present their vision of a more just world. The idea of the world-historical point, a short hand for a range of ideas developed mainly by Kyoto School in response to Japanese militaristic and imperialist expansion, for instance, is very complex that it contains contradictory orientations. The philosophy of world history, part of the range of ideas developed by Kyoto School, is at one level a conscientious engagement with the idea history from a philosophical angle and it also contains serious questioning of the existing order in which taken-for-granted Western hegemony including capitalism, imperialism, communism and totalitarianism was challenged. At the same time, the way the world-historical standpoint was developed was clearly to justify why Japan had to lead the reformation of the world order contradicting the universalistic and cosmopolitan orientation embedded in the philosophy of world history. At the same time, since the philosophy of world history or the world-historical standpoint articulated in specific reference to Japan’s privileged position was an idealistic expression of the block-like sphere, it contained a risk of being re-read by the oppressed and subjugated in Korea, Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia, for it invites the oppressed and subjugated in the Empire to identify with Japan as a way of overcoming modernity, a modernity of the West, an attempt which inevitably contains the risk of turning those identified to an autonomous subject who would then use its agency to challenge Japanese hegemony ingrained in the whole idea (Isomae 2010).
This theoretical risk for the oppressor and an opportunity for the oppressed was in part realised as seen in the ways in which Taiwanese, Korean and Chinese intellectuals try to turn the table round by adopting the ideas, being the world-historical standpoint, the East Asian Community initiative, the common ancestry for Japanese and Korean peoples or the East Asia League movement. These ideas may not have been produced to support primarily Japanese hegemony but they were produced in a specific socio-historical condition, and inevitably had elements of supporting or justifying Japanese imperial expansion and ultimately the Pacific War. However, efforts by Sun Yat-sen, So In-Sik, Kim Myung-Sik, Cha Cha-Jong and In Chong-Sik show that the oppressed and subjugated did retain agency, and saw an opportunity to make use of the Japanese imperial ideas to their advantage. The fact that these efforts did not result in clear outcomes that worked in the favour of Chinese or Korean people is beside the point; the point is that ideas, because of their open nature, prepare a space in which even the oppressed can engage with subjectively. Granted, those who were engaged in this type of activity were limited to a small number of intellectuals, whose experience was not probably fully representative of that of the oppressed people. Still they had potential to inspire and guide certain responses to hegemonic domination. Paying attention to this potential in investigating the workings of nationalism, imperialism and/or domination is at the same time an act of reminding ourselves that the oppressed retains at least a degree of agency, and fully accounting for it probably means paying due respect to the subject of investigation.

A close examination of ideas therefore opens up another possibility for an investigation that is more sensitive to agency retained and exercised by those who are dominated and excluded. This is a point any social scientific investigation should be mindful of if we were to capture more accurate, truer picture of the world.

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