Moments of subversion and resistance: the non-Western take on ‘modernity’ and its unintended consequences

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Abstract
The paper proposes to apply the theory of multiple modernities to the study of national identity examining various discourses of modernity that were in circulation in the Japanese empire. As proposed by Shmuel N Eisenstadt, the theory of moderenities is an expression of attitudes to social scientific understanding of the world: conventional theories of modernity and modernisation need to be challenged for their often implicit western-centricity in that all societies in the world are expected to converge on the European model. Apart from a focused critique of the conventional theories’ western-centricity and the suggestion that the analytical focus should be place on human agency, the theory of multiple modernities is rather undefined. However with these two points, it still helps develop new research on identities, and the case of East Asia serves as an ideal context in which identity is investigated from a fresh angle.

Set in this broad framework, the paper investigates discourses of modernity that were in circulation in the Japanese empire. As it is well known, intellectuals of wartime Japan were deeply engaged with the question of modernity, and the idea such as the East Asian Community and the event such as the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium of 1942 were expression of their endeavour. These were, needless to say, the ruler’s hegemonic idea but there is some evidence some intellectuals in colonised Korea and Taiwan took them up as the tool of subversion of Japanese imperial rule as well as of consolidating national unity. Drawing mainly from secondary literature on colonial intellectuals in the Japanese Empire, the paper sheds light on the complex interaction among different ideas framed in the modernity discourse which reflect conscious exercise of agency.

Introduction
When Shmuel N Eisenstadt (2000) proposed the idea of multiple modernities, he made it clear that his objection to the modernisation theories that were prevalent at the end of the twentieth century and, indeed, classical theories of modernisation proposed by Marx, Durkheim and Weber lay with their implicit or explicit Euro-centricism: the assumption of convergence of various societies to the standard set by European experiences. In Eisenstadt’s eye, the conventional modernisations theories, by expecting an eventual convergence of every part of the world to the European model (though if there is the European model could be another point of contention, which is outside the scope of the current article), effectively deny agency of non-western actors; they are supposed to be passive recipients of the European/western standards whose job is to internalise these ‘imported/imposed’ models to become like Europeans/westerners. In a certain way, Eisenstadt’s idea of multiple modernities is critique of western hegemony in the world of social sciences. The theory of multiple modernities is, therefore, a challenge to the entrenched Euro-/western-centricism in social theory and as such, it can be seen as part of the wider anti-colonial/imperial struggle which has been going on for some time in the world at large.
Drawing from this understanding of the theory of multiple modernities, the article attempts to apply the theory to a re-evaluation of the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium which took place in wartime Japan. The symposium took place in 1942 in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the United States, and it has been largely seen as epitomically of what went wrong with Japanese modernisation and, thus, something to be criticised in post-war Japan (Matsumoto 1979: vi). But ‘wrong’ according to what criteria? Japanese modernisation has been judged to have gone wrong, for instance, because Japanese society did not manage to develop solid and healthy democracy as seen in the West although it managed to industrialise quickly. This is, very crudely put, the established evaluation of Japanese modernisation by Japanese intellectuals and others (for a succinct summary of this, see Howland 2001: 15-18). In light of the concern articulated in the theory of multiple modernities, this conventional view is problematic because it is formed according to the very expectation Eisenstadt has objected to: convergence to the European/western model. In other words, the conventional evaluation of the symposium in particular, and of Japanese modernisation in general, can be seen as an act of conforming to Western hegemony in reference to the understanding of modernity, however well-meaning the exercise has been. And this is why the article aims to re-evaluate the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium. The purpose is not to excuse of its political and intellectual responsibility in assisting or facilitating the Japanese military’s aggressive expansionism at that time, which has been extensively covered by a number of intellectuals, both Japanese and non-Japanese, in the postwar period, but to explore what different understanding of modernity one can derive from the symposium by applying a revised theoretical approach.

In other words, this paper is not about reassessing the importance of the symposium in Japanese intellectual and political history, but about rethinking modernity in a context where there is enhanced awareness of implicit/unconscious western-centrism. For the theory of multiple modernities enables us to resist the taken-for-granted expectation of convergence to the western model. Because of its conscious efforts to object to Euro-/western-centrism, the theory should also be able to assist an attempt to bring agency back to non-western actors. This article is therefore intended to a small step towards refining our understanding of modernity.

The theory of multiple modernities: a brief overview
Shmuel Eisenstadt, who is usually seen as the first proposer of the idea of multiple modernities, articulated the major problem the conventional or classical theories share as follows:

They all assumed, even if only implicitly, that the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing societies; with the expansion of modernity, they would prevail throughout the world (Eisenstadt 2000:1).

The starting point for the theory of multiple modernities is therefore recognition of diversity in the modern world. It is also fundamentally opposed to often implicit Euro-centrism found in the conventional modernisation theories and classical sociological theory. It is therefore a theory driven by a normative concern: respect for diversity and conscious resistance to Western hegemony. While it is a normative theory, it is also supported by the undeniable fact that diversity of modern societies exists in the world despite the history of western expansion for the last few centuries. In other words,
it is not a pure thought experiment but a considered response to the apparent discrepancy between the theory and reality.

The rejection of often implicit Euro-centricity leads to another notable feature of the theory of multiple modernities: the denial of what is understood as the evolutionary and teleological tendency of the conventional or classical theories of modernisation. While the theory acknowledges that the western model of modernity emerging out of revolutions in the Christian-European civilisation, revolutions which were based on the belief in human agency’s capability of bridging the gap between the transcendental and mundane orders, is a crucial reference point for other society, it disagrees with the conventional theories that societies in the world are therefore bound to converge to the same model.

Because the theory of multiple modernities rejects an evolutionary and institutional explanation of modernity, it is a rather difficult theory to comprehend. In fact, absence of a clear definition of modernity and uncritical prioritisation of the cultural aspect at the expense of institutional and social structural dimensions are often pointed out by its critics as the theory’s weaknesses (Schmidt 2006; 2007; Fourie 2012). In Eisenstadt’s words, modernity should be understood as ‘a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs’ (Eisenstadt 2000: 2). According to the theory of multiple modernities, modernisation is not a linear process with a set of clearly demarcated stages of development but a series of clashes of ideas about what the society should be and these ideas are put forward and refuted by various actors with an intense level of reflexivity. These ideas cover every sphere of life, not just economic or material aspects but also ontological issues. In the theory of multiple modernities, modernity is about the centrality of human agency in interpreting the surrounding environment rather than a particular pattern in institutional development and differentiation. It is a ‘vision’ about ‘the capability of men to transform the world for the better, without the constraining beliefs and institutions of the past which had been the anchors (if not chains) of the social order.’ (Tiryakian 2011: 243). Eisenstadt has pointed out that ‘some distinct shifts in the conception of human agency’ marks out modernity, and elaborated this insight further by citing different aspects such as an ‘intensive reflexivity’ and ‘an emphasis on the autonomy of man’ (Eisenstadt 2000, 2001). The idea that the significance placed on human agency ultimately defines modernity is shared by others. Johann Arnason has described modernity as an ‘unprecedented affirmation of human autonomy’ (Arnason 2006: 233), while Gerard Delanty has gone as far as suggesting modernity as ‘a particular kind of time-consciousness’ (Delanty 2006b: 275).

The theory of multiple modernities does not define modernity as a concrete stage of development. In fact, it does not clearly say what modernity is but elaborates on how modernity should be considered and the distinct features of modernity that differentiates it from pre-modernity. The theory of multiple modernities urges the researcher to conceptualise modernity as continuous constitution and reconstitution of diverse cultural and political programmes; it is a state of mind rather than a set of material and institutional arrangements though the mindset would in due course obtain certain institutional expressions. Being modern is marked with an enhanced level of self-reflexivity and unprecedented affirmation of the power of human agency to create new order in order to bring about betterment. The centrality of human agency is therefore the most appropriate way of describing what modernity is in the theory of multiple modernities.
The ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium

The symposium in question was held in July 1942 in Tokyo and its (edited) proceedings were published in a literary magazine, Bungakukai (Literary World) in its September and October 1942 issues together with supplementary essays by some of the participants of the symposium. It was then published in a book form by a Tokyo publisher in 1943 (Calichman 2008: x). A total of 13 intellectuals took part in this event from a wide range of fields from literature, musicology, theology, philosophy to physics.

The timing of the event is significant in shaping its reputation. On 8th December 1941, what turned out to be a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour signalled the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the US, an event that was publicly remembered by a number of Japanese intellectuals of the time as something that produced an ‘intellectual shudder’, a profound feeling of clarity, a sense that an opening was finally found in the stagnating, desperate situation. The organiser of the symposium, Kawakami Tetsutarō, referred to the outbreak of the Pacific War as a main catalyst for organising it. Because of this close association with the Pacific War in particular and the Fifteen-Year War in general, the symposium has conventionally been seen as tainted with ‘ominous memories’ and dismissed as ‘infamous’ or even ‘notorious’, not deserving serious attention (Takeuchi 1979). As touched upon briefly earlier, the symposium was largely seen as an attempt by the intellectuals of the day to legitimise the war and fascism (Minamoto 1994: 197; Matsumoto 1979; Suzuki 2010a).

The ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium is widely-known despite its apparent lack in popular appeal, probably because the phrase ‘overcoming modernity’ became a magical, catch-all term (Takeuchi 1979; Fujita 2010). It was, in fact, one of several symposia that were held around the same time with a similar set of participants, mainly made up of members of the Japanese Romantic School and the Kyoto School of philosophy. It has been pointed out that the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium is ought to be made sense of within the context in which other intellectual attempts were being made by overlapping circles of intellectuals (Horio 1994; Williams 2004; Fujita 2010; Isomae 2010). In addition to the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium, there were three more symposia held in Kyoto and whose proceedings were published in a periodical called Chūōkōron, a high-brow journal intended for interested members of the public. The four symposia took place over a thirteen-month period from November 1941:

- November 1941, Kyoto: The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan symposium
- March 1942, Kyoto: The Ethical and Historical Nature of the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere symposium
- July 1942, Tokyo: The Overcoming Modernity symposium
- November 1942, Kyoto: The Philosophy of Total War symposium

The relevance of the three Chūōkōron symposia to the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium will be explored later in the article.

The intellectuals gathered in the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium were unanimous in their recognition that modernity as they knew it was foreign in its origin. Modernity was invariably
described as European or western originating from Europe. One of the participants, Shimomura Toratarō, a philosopher of science, was unequivocal in his contributing essay: ‘What we call “modernity” originates in Europe’. However, there were roughly two views on their relationship with modernity (Fujita 2010). Some of the participants, in particular Kawakami Tetsutarō and Kamei Katsuichirō, were of the view that problems associated with modernisation had not fundamentally derived from Japan since modernity was essentially foreign to Japan. Modernity was imposed from outside and implanted in a very different environment. Therefore the way to overcome modernity was to go back to the original state of Japan. Others, however, were of an opposite view. In particular, Nakamura Mitsuo, Miyoshi Tatsuji and Suzuki Naritaka were unequivocal that modernity could not be overcome by ‘Japanism’ or the reviving Japanese tradition, whatever it may be because Japanese society and Japanese people had digested western-derived modernity. Suzuki even thought that because the imbalance of power between Japan and the West was beginning to be redressed, modernity in real sense would just about to start in Japan. Furthermore, another participant, Kobayashi Hideo, a literary critic, declared rather mischievously that ‘what is at stake in overcoming modernity is to overcome western modernity; overcoming modernity in Japan does not pose any difficulty’.

There was a shared understanding that modernity was of the European origin but what modernity was not very clearly articulated; it was associated with westernisation, capitalism, imperialism, the emphasis on Protestant ethics and so on (Isomae 2010). Accordingly, there was not much agreement among the participants as to how to overcome it. It is clear that the participants were deeply embedded in the hegemonic understanding of modernity, a type of understanding Eisenstadt has objected to. At the same time, these participants were exercising their self-reflexivity by engaged with an act of articulating their own reflection of the situation and suggestions for ‘bringing out a better tomorrow’.

Another consensus among the participants in what is often described as a disparate, unfocused discussion was that there was something wrong about modernity as they knew it and therefore it had to be overcome (Takeuchi 1979; Fujita 2010). What was ‘wrong’ and ‘problematic’ with modernity, according to the participants, was its effect on human spirit and morality, more precisely, the decline in spirituality or spiritual power. Kamei Katsuichirō described this as the tendency to abandon thinking on its own; the decline in sensitivity; the loss of ability to appreciate silence; reification of language – all these were symptoms of a weakening of human spirit and its eventual demise. Nakamura Mitsuo summarised modernity as a psychological/mental state in which humans were constantly compelled to search for something novel, which was deemed to be bad for human spirit. Modernity was seen as a spiritual malaise: modernity was bad because it damages human spirituality. Nishitani Kenji articulated his concern over modernity as the threat to the foundation on which an integrative worldview could be formed, for Nishitani believe that modernity was conditioned by three different directions introduced by the Reformation, Renaissance and the rise of science. The loss of the possibility of forming an integrative worldview centred around a core was an inherent problem of modernity. Moroi Saburō agreed with Nishitani in his assessment of the problem of modernity as a danger for humanity to plunge into confusion in its attempt to self-understanding.
The problems of modernity identified in the symposium were: rationalism which induced the urge to explain; impatient utilitarianism; addictive sensationalism; the decay in sensitivity; the tendency to expose; the rapid increase in speed due to the development of machines - the poisons of modern civilisation. The mechanised and material-oriented dimension of modernity was particularly picked up by the participants and often equated with Americanism, and a new(ish) form of art: film and photography. This gives an impression that symposium was one of those expressions of anti-westernism or anti-Americanism which was inevitably encouraged by the government of the day (cf., Buruma and Margalit, 2004: 1-12).

The participants were not interested in denouncing technology and material progress they had already achieved. No one advocated abandoning machines that had made life a little easier; no one advocated abandoning intellectual endeavours in philosophy, sciences, western literature, western music, which were clearly acknowledged by them as something foreign and something imported and implanted. As for suggesting the direction for self-correction, the symposium was not too successful. Many of the participants urged the restoration of spirituality but were rather vague about exactly what was to be restored and how it should be achieved. While a number of them thought a rigorous re-examination of Japanese classics was necessary, some also cautioned against blinding oneself by believing the utopia would be found in classics, a clear refutation of the call of Kokugaku. Moroi, amongst others, was clear as to what was needed: building their own culture. He added this could be achieved by putting senses/sensitivities back to their rightful place as means of making sense of the world in addition to reason, and by ensuring the superiority of spirit. According to Moroi, this was the utmost task for artists. Shimomura suggested a new conception of spirit was the only way without much further elaboration. Nishitani thought Oriental religiosity could be the way forward. His suggestion was ‘subjective nothingness’, affirmation of being through total self-denial. Through subjective nothingness, the pure and clear mind would be achieved, which in turn overcome modernity which had lost its wholeness/integrity, according to Nishitani.

They agreed that modernity as they knew it was in the cul-de-sac because it had ill effects on human spirit, and this was not a problem that was confined to Japanese society; it was a problem of modernity with its universality, therefore it was a problem for humanity as a whole. And it is in this context the other symposia and what they represented – the philosophy of World History – becomes relevant, to which the article returns later.

The concerns expressed in the symposium over modernity were not radically different from what was aired by European intellectuals of the time. This is perhaps not too surprising since all these intellectuals, who were considered to be the leading figures in each field, were seen as excellent because of their mastery of disciplines that had been ‘imported’ from the West. They were well-versed in their own fields: physics, western classical music, Christian theology, philosophy and so on. In fact, the symposium itself was partly inspired by Paul Valery’s series of symposia on the question of Europe as mentioned by the organiser, Kawakami (Kawakami et al. 1979: 166). The ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium was therefore an event that needs to be understood as one of countless moments in which self-reflexivity of modern agents was demonstrated. It was not a freak incident that expresses a fundamentally non-modern dimension of the world. The event, of course, had its particularity in that it took place in a context in which modernity, the universal, had been imported/implanted and that the Pacific War, the major catalyst of the symposium, had
contradictory meanings that it was a conscious revolt against the western version of modernity by a non-European entity at the same time an application of aspects of this contested version of modernity to Asia by Japan.

The symposium’s position as part of wartime propaganda in popular (and intellectual) perception is well-established but there have been some sporadic attempts to re-examine its contribution to Japanese political and cultural thought starting with Takeuchi Yoshimi’s essay published in 1959. Takeuchi (1959=1979) dismissed the symposium as intellectually empty but argued that the event represented a historical moment when various contradicting forces in Japan, such as restoration vs innovation, the East vs the West and so on, came into a violent collision as an attempt at ‘overcoming modernity’. He appreciated the intellectuals’ concern with ‘overcoming modernity’ as a worthy endeavour to look for solutions to the perceived social, economic and political ills but concluded the symposium failed to contribute to the development of political and cultural thoughts in Japan because of the intellectuals’ failure to recognise the double-sided nature of the Pacific War (as an anti-imperialism war against the hegemonic west and as an imperialist and colonialist war towards Asian countries) in their attempts to understand the world.

Takeuchi’s efforts of stepping out of an automatic condemnation of the symposium as war propaganda and of examining its implication in Japanese thoughts have been continued by some scholars. For instance, Fujita Masakatsu (2010) has stated that while it is unfair to describe the symposium as meaningless since some of the most fundamental questions such as the significance of thinking in Japanese were raised, the overall impression is that there was no coherence in the discussion and the participants failed to engage with one another in a constructive manner. In English publication, an article by Minamoto Ryōen (1994) and a chapter in Harry Harootunian’s *Overcome by Modernity* (2000) are probably most accessible. Minamoto regards the symposium as a moment of frankness among the intellectuals of the time which raised and aired fundamental questions about modernity as they saw it:

... the discussions on ‘Overcoming Modernity’ have rightly been criticized as disjointed and inconclusive, but this does not mean that they amount to no more than idle talk. In a variety of ways the participants were able to express themselves frankly on modern, Europe, without which the existence of modern Japan would have been impossible, and their own relationship to Europe and the West. (Minamoto 1994: 226)

Harootunian is similar to Takeuchi in his recognition of the intellectuals’ failure to engage with the war and Japan’s place in Asia in the symposium as the major fault of the endeavour, but appreciates its ‘foresight’ as a critique of modernity:

It is, nevertheless, important to point out that the very critique mounted by Japanese against modernity prefigured precisely all of those doubts and obsessions concerning subjectivity, cultural difference, and even racism that have become the signatures of a Western and putatively global discourse that marks our own historical conjuncture today, almost sixty years after the symposium first raise them in a different context. (Harootunian 2000: 94)
Despite these efforts, the symposium is still popularly seen as a mere moment of ‘Kyoto professors’ rant’ against western-centricism and the creeping Americanisation (Buruma and Margalit, 2004). Restoring the symposium to its rightful place in the history of Japanese thought or exorcising the fascist propaganda label from the symposium is not the article’s concern, nor is the evaluation of the comments on the symposium put forward by a number of scholars. What the foregoing has illuminated, however, is that the symposium was indeed one of the occasions in which ‘modernity’ was questioned by dozens of intellectuals providing some insights into their understanding of modernity and their proposal for correction. The symposium was therefore a quintessentially modern event in which modern agents engaged with self-reflexivity in their specific socio-historical context.

The philosophy of World History
It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium was but one aspect of intellectual endeavour of the time, the philosophy of World History or the idea of world-historical standpoint (Horio 1994; Williams 2004; Fujita 2010; Isomane 2010; Yonetani 2005). This is what other three symposia of the time explicitly dealt with.

In agreement with Takeuchi (1979) who saw the term ‘overcoming modernity’ acquiring a magical quality, Fujita (2010) sees the term serving as an ‘empty vessel’ for anyone to slot their desired meaning in, and the philosophy of World History or the world-historical standpoint becoming the intellectual context in which the vessel sailed. The idea of ‘World History’ or the philosophy of World History, often associated with the philosopher Nishitani Keiji (who also participated in the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium), was supported (and opposed) by both right and left wing intellectuals of the time and represented an attempt to propose a new way of understanding the world by overcoming western hegemony (Isomae 2010; Yonetani 2005; Koyasu 2007).

The philosophy of World History, tainted by its association with the Fifteen-Year War, never fully developed into a school of thought. Proposed by those who were well-versed in the western philosophical traditions as an attempt to come to terms of with Japan’s ‘modern’ history, the philosophy of World History was a highly abstract blueprint of an alternative worldview or a new world order (Horio 1998, Heisig 2001). The ‘world’ in the philosophy is conceptualised as ‘an objective, universal horizon that transcends the standpoint of particular nations’ (Horio 1998: 296). It is expected when human beings fully become aware of the fact of absolute globality, history then becomes true history. It is a discursive formation of self-understanding of the state and the nation as well as a subjective engagement premised on the understanding of the decline of the West or the end of western hegemony (Koyasu 2007).

The term World History was evoked by the Shōwa Kenkyūkai (Shōwa Research Association, Prime Minister Konoe’s think-tank) in its Intellectual Principles of New Japan (1939): ‘revealing a new idea of World History by realising unification of the East, thus, enabling true unification of the world’ and this was ‘the world historical significance of’ the second Sino-Japanese war (Suzuki 2010b). While the idea of ‘World History’ was thus firmly interwoven in the war against China, which represents a fundamental contradiction as Takeuchi (1979) pointed out in his critique of the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium, the philosophy of World History itself was at its core an attempt to realise ‘true’ universality i.e. ‘true’ modernity by overcoming the particular.
The philosophy was premised on the understanding that the modernity originated from the West was not truly universal despite its claim to be so in reference to rationality, science and technology. The ‘particular’ nature of western modernity could be seen, for instance, in the Hegelian understanding of the state representing the highest morality and unity. It was also evident in its self-righteous nationalism which fuelled imperial self-expansion that denied the agency of the ‘Other’ (Yonetani 2005). Confronted with this hegemonic and oppressive version of modernity, according to the philosophy, the East had no other option but to resist, and through the act of resisting, a truly universal/global understanding of the world and history would emerge (Isomae 2010). The philosophy of World History called for a comprehension of true, universal/global history beyond the confines of the nation and the state and its vision of the world was multi-polar and multi-cultural (Yonetani 2005; Suzuki 2010b). In the ‘world’ as envisaged in the philosophy of World History, ‘moralische Energie’ is exercised so that ‘people could find new purpose and a new sense of spiritual integration’ and that ‘society could discover a new basis for stable development’ (Horio 1994: 293).

While the philosophy of World History itself could be seen as a philosophy of resistance against western hegemony and a sincere call for achieving true universality, it is, as pointed earlier, deeply entangled with Japan’s war efforts and has attracted criticism from the left and ‘conscientious liberals’ of the postwar period. This is because of the way Japan’s role was articulated by those who were engaged with developing this idea. Invariably, Japan was cast in the position of the leader to develop and realise the philosophy of World History. It is not because the Japanese were superior to others, according to the proponents of the philosophy, but because of the plain fact that Japan was not part of the West and as a consequence it could propose an alternative viewpoint, the world-historical standpoint (Koyasu 2007; Duara 2003: 62). ‘As a country that digested modern civilisation while managing to hold on to a traditional culture of its own, quite different that from the West, Japan was charged with the ‘world-historical task’ of using modernity to overcome modernity’ (Horio 1994: 299). In short, Japan was thrown in this position to lead the resistance to a variety of western hegemonic powers including imperialism, Soviet communism and fascism because it happened to have coped with western modernity rather well before others in the East.

At this juncture, Japan-centricity in the philosophy of World History becomes evident, which is undoubtedly problematic at various levels. First, the crept-in Japan-centricity contradicts the ‘spirit’ of the philosophy of World History, an attempt for realising ‘true’ universality. Secondly, as Takeuschi (1979) pointed out in his critique of the ‘Overcoming Modernity’ symposium, this suggests that the intellectuals were either unaware of or turning a blind eye to this fundamental contradiction, which undermines the moral ground of their intellectual endeavour. However, the point here is not to repeat the widely-circulated critique of the Kyoto School, but to acknowledge that the intellectuals grappling with the idea of World History in wartime Japan were clearly engaged with intense self-reflexivity. The idea of World History was their blueprint for self-correction having identified what was wrong with the present. In other words, they were clearly acting as modern agents who were engaged with a very modern endeavour, regardless of the outcome of their action. The shift away from the expectation of convergence to the ‘universal’ western model and enhanced emphasis on the working of human agency which theory of multiple modernities advocates make it easier for us to appreciate the modernity expressed in this development, rather than dismissing it as anomaly. It is interesting to note that the phrases such as ‘the philosophy of World History’, ‘the world-historical standpoint’ and ‘overcoming modernity’ are judged to have been popular beyond
the intellectual circles to the point of acquiring a magical quality (Horio 1994; Takeuchi 1979). This indicates, albeit only anecdotally, the heightened level of self-reflexivity was shared by a wider population at that time.

**Unintended consequences of the questioning of modernity under Japanese imperial rule**

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 Valerie 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 ethncal 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 (霸道) 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 socialistically 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.

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
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). For So, the initiative had the potential to overcome totalitarianism at the same time to create universalistic and cosmopolitan culture that would encourage co-operation among autonomous and independent nations.

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.

In these instances, Korean intellectuals were seeking the ways in which to resist and subvert Japanese imperial oppression by using the ideas proposed by the very Japanese imperialists. They were in fact engaged with subtle subversion by translating the oppressor’s ideas for oppression to those that would support resistance. We know that their attempts did not lead to significant outcomes, but there were those among the oppressed who were subjectively engaged with an activity which could be the basis of resistance against oppression. The oppressed was not completely deprived of its subjectivity and agency; even under a very challenging circumstance, some of the oppressed exercised their agency to grapple with the situation as a fully self-aware subject and were engaged with an act of subversion through ideas.
What has been reviewed all too briefly suggest a number of things about ideas, and their unintended consequences. 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 Chinese and Korean intellectuals try to turn the table round by adopting the ideas, being the world-historical standpoint, the East Asian Community initiative or the common ancestry for Japanese and Korean peoples. 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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\(^{1}\)The list is long and includes Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977), Hiromatsu Wataru (1933-94), Maruyama Masao (1914-1996), Katō Shūichi (1919-2008) to name but a few.

\(^{2}\)The examination of the symposium undertaken in this article is based on my reading of the 1979 edition of the symposium proceedings. Wherever possible, Calichman’s 2008 translation is referred to, but most of translation of participants’ intervention is mine.

\(^{3}\)Despite its notoriety, the symposium in fact did not have much impact. It is reported that only 6,000 copies of its proceedings were printed. In contrast, the proceedings of the so-called Chūōkōron symposia on the world historical standpoint, the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and the idea of total war reached a far bigger audience. Fifteen thousand copies of the first edition were printed and further ten thousand copy of the second edition were made available in 1943. The popularity of the book so annoyed the military that it banned further reprints after the first one (Suzuki 2010a: 209-216; Williams 2004; Horio 1998; Heisig 2001: 201).
The three Chūōkōron symposia are not translated in English in full. Some extracts are available in Heisig et al. (eds) (2011: 1059-1077).

Nishitani is reported to have stated that during the war years, the philosophy of World History was criticised by the right wing, ‘Imperial War’ philosophers but in the postwar era, it was severely criticised by the left wing intellectuals (Horio 1998: 293).