Sin Chaeho and Nationalist Discourses in East Asia

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I. Introduction

The “discourse on East Asia” has become the subject of much recent discussion in various areas of Korean academia. The discourse is linked to the attempt to overcome modernity in its specifically capitalist and Western form in a world where the collapse of socialism as a realistic possibility has left no seemingly viable alternatives to the reign of capital. The fall of socialism, though understood by some as the victory of capitalism, has occasioned a mature reflection on the nature of “modernity” at large, and resulting questions regarding the centrality of the West and its tradition of rationalism stimulated interest in much that had been denigrated under the Western system of values. The effect of all this was the resurgence of interest in the “Orient” or “East Asia.” In Korea, the East Asia discourse awakened the intellectual world from the state of self-imposed exile in which it had been immersed since the opening of the ports, an exile from traditions of East Asia caused by a blind admiration of the West. This discourse has also been expansive enough in range to allow contemplations of a new alternative civilization capable of overcoming the problems associated with capitalism and modernity.

In this light, it is interesting to note that Professor Choe Wonsik, one of the first to articulate this discourse on East Asia, begins by censuring the strain of “peripheral rigidity” in the history of Korean thought. In his re-examination of Lenin’s notion of “the slave’s nomenclature,” Choe urges us to “accomplish a creative leap through dialectical participation with the reality upon which we stand,” rather than remain bound under the authority of dogma. This invitation suggests that the discourse on East Asia does not merely strive toward “the perspective of narrow regionalism,” but aspires to a new way of thinking which remains outside the discursive systems of the West. Because it is motivated by such a goal, the discursive content incorporates both academic and actual praxis.

Written with this problematic in mind, this paper focuses specifically on the issue of nationalist and regionalist discourses in East Asia. In particular, it investigates the subject of nationalism, a pivotal issue in assessing the suitability of the discourse on East Asia to the actual conditions in the region. Historically speaking, this discourse has always been discussed in conjunction with the problem of ethnocentrism, and our search for a new East Asian perspective cannot overlook this historical link. The birth of a new civilization in East Asia may remain an impossible dream unless the surging ethnocentrism in Korea, China and Japan can be overcome.

This essay, therefore, briefly surveys past ethnocentric discourses in Japan and China, and compares them with Sin Chaeho’s views on East Asia and nationalism. Even though Sin Chaeho (sobriquet: Danjae) is well known as one of the most zealous nationalists

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among early modern Korean thinkers, his writings reveal a unique point of view, one that
cannot be classified as exclusionary ethnocentrism. It is hoped that Sin Chaeho’s writings
may be suggestive for present and future reflections on East Asian ways of thought.

II. The Relationship between Past Discourses on East Asian Solidarity and
Ethnocentrism

1. As the first Asian nation to achieve modernization in the Western mold, Japan was
also the first to be exposed to the lure of Eurocentrism and the first to attempt to overcome
this lure. The history of early modern Japan as it moves from Meiji Restoration to a
program of “Leave Asia, Enter Europe” and ultimately embarks on efforts to “overcome
modernity” is highly instructive in this regard.

When we trace the origin of its civilization, we see that even Europe had to undergo
various steps in this trajectory (primitive—semi-developed—civilized) to get to the
present stage. Therefore, the civilization of Europe, as it stands now, should be
considered the pinnacle attained through great human effort. It is for this reason that
the nations all around the world, whether their present state is primitive or semi-
developed, must look to European civilization as the goal to be attained, establish the
standards of discussion with this goal in mind, and assess costs and benefits
according to these standards (parenthesis mine).²

Fukuzawa Yukichi, often called “the greatest national educator of Japanese
modernization” thus makes it clear in An Outline of a Theory of Civilization that the model
of Japanese modernization is European civilization. Worthy of note in the above passage,
however, is Fukuzawa’s perception that “the civilization of Europe, as it stands now, should
be considered the pinnacle attained through great human effort.” In other words, Fukuzawa
does not accept Western civilization as an absolute given but considers it a stage in
historical development, thereby relativizing it as a time-bound condition.³

This move allowed Fukuzawa to secure a space in which Japanese national
subjectivity can be negotiated. That is, he transformed Western civilization into an object to
be placed in a reciprocal relationship with the subject (i.e., Japan). As an object, European
civilization could be grasped as a stage accomplished through effort rather than something
unique and absolute unto itself. What he gained through this rhetorical move was first a
certain distance from Western civilization, and it is precisely this distance that allowed
Fukuzawa, the executor of the most radical critique against the Japanese tradition as well as
the entire cultural tradition of East Asia (read: China), to keep his critique from
degenerating into one-sided exaltation of Western civilization. The view also made it

² Fukuzawa Yukichi, An Outline of a Theory of Civilization (Mummyeongnon ui gaeryak), tr. Jeong
³ Jo Byeonghan, “Enlightenment Thought in China and Japan During Late-19th Century: Yan Fu