Building a Peaceful East Asian Community: Origins of a Regional Concept and Visions for a Global Age

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While the thought of a regional community in East Asia comparable to the European Union is premature, I consider the transforming international relationships among North Korea, South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Japan and examine the possibility of realizing such a community via sociocultural approaches. I trace the conceptual origins of East Asia and its historical place in international relations, investigate East Asia in the post–Cold War era through renewed cultural exchanges among the region’s countries, and propose a vision of and tasks for an East Asian cultural community. Keywords: East Asian Community, East Asia history, sociocultural exchange.

A new stream of cultural interaction flows in East Asia in the twenty-first century, including in South Korea, China, and Japan. A good example is Boys over Flowers, a highly popular television series that drew a wide audience of Asian youths a few years ago. This show is emblematic of the bond that many East Asian youths share through popular culture. Initially, the storyline originated in Japanese manga, but its popularity led to its adaptation for television in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea (Sin 2009; Kim and Chang 2010). Different versions were exported and televised elsewhere in Asia.

While successful as popular entertainment, these dramas also contributed to the formation of an Asian cultural identity. Cultural contact of this kind was not limited to televised dramas but also found expression in popular music and movies. Now it has become commonplace for one Asian country’s cultural products to be consumed by people in other East Asian countries, contributing to creating East Asian cultural codes. These cultural phenomena
involve both a shift of cultural capital and a voluntary interchange of citizens—a kind of bottom-up cultural integration process.

Today a new post–Cold War ethos has taken hold in East Asia. International relationships exist at various levels and forms beyond the nation-state. While in the Cold War era international exchanges between Asian countries operated within the context of bilateral relations fixed around the central axis of the United States, today multilateral interactions occur among various Asian countries. For example, Japan’s pro-US and pro-Europe policies since the Meiji Restoration gave way to greater interest in Asian countries in the mid-1990s; after the Democratic Party came to power in September 2009, Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio started to pursue an Asia-centered foreign policy (Hatoyama 2009).

Cultural interchange among the civil societies of East Asian nations is actively taking place. A multicultural society where various cultures and peoples coexist is now taking shape. These developments have brought not only mutual cultural effects but also friction. In Korea, for example, the tension between foreigners and native citizens has led to conflicts between them; occasionally they have turned violent. When the Beijing Olympic Torch passed through Seoul, scuffles broke out between young Koreans and Chinese youths staying in Korea. At issue were the Tibetan independence movement and human rights issues in North Korea and China. Cyberspace is another arena where competing perspectives on historical controversies have sparked online flame wars (bashing) among Internet users hailing from Korea, China, and Japan.

In recent years, rapid changes in South Korea have, largely without preparation, moved the country closer to becoming a multicultural society. The growing number of foreigners in the country is causing a shift toward a multicultural society. In the global age, these emigrants are building personal and business relationships through improved methods of travel and communication. Consequently, in East Asia and particularly on the Korean peninsula and in China and Japan, state-level integration and disintegration is continuing, and new cultures are being formed in accordance with the diverse entanglement of persons and cultures.