



Cultural Prospects for an East Asian Community

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Today, people discuss whether it is possible to have a regional community in East Asia like the one in Europe. Many people desire one for East Asia, but tend to think it is difficult for Asia, far more difficult than for Europe. However, I believe it is possible to declare that an East Asian Community is being created now.

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1. People's Movement and Community Formation

Whether a community is created or not depends on how you define it. A community is a space where its members are more or less closely interconnected, being in fairly frequent contact with one another, sharing a degree of common interest, and sensing the possibility of mutual understanding among themselves, on the basis of so-called “we-feeling” and “common destiny”. It is to be noted that the degree of interconnectedness, namely, the frequency of contact, the degree of commonness of interest, and the possibility of mutual understanding are all loosely defined, given no definite threshold beyond which anyone can say for sure that there is a community established. They can be varied from one case to another. In other words, they are quite subjective; when we say we have a community, there is a community.

What we can definitely say is that unless members move around, there is no chance for them to get in contact with others, to be interconnected, to share common interests, and to be motivated for mutual understanding. Thus, the minimum necessary condition for the creation of a community is its members' movement. If members move around only within the limits of a tiny space, say, a village, their community is confined within that tiny space, only to be a village community. When members move around within a bigger space, getting in contact with a larger group of others, there arises the possibility of a bigger community being created. As the possibility of members' movement expands, the size of a community grows, as in the case from

village community to local community, to national community, to regional community, and finally a global community¹⁾.

It is to be noted in passing that the members composing a community are not limited to human beings. Animals and plants compose their community; organizations can have their community and states seem to have their community. “International community” often denotes a community of states, but this community is a community at the minimum level of meaning of the term. There is the least level of contact, shared interests, desire for mutual understanding among states, because the state as such does not move. On the other hand, people move as far as they can with given means of transportation. So, from now on let us concentrate on people's movements and people's communities.

The upper limit of people's movement in an age sets the borders of a community in that age; within the borders people develop “we-feeling” and “common destiny” on account of frequent contacts and shared history, while beyond the borders other peoples have their own communities. One cannot fully belong to two communities simultaneously. However, that condition applies only to communities on the same level. One can simultaneously belong to a number of communities that are situated on different space levels; we are members of a local community, of a national community, of a regional community, and of a global community at the same time, to the extent in which we can move around on each of those different levels of space.

¹⁾ A more theoretical overview of theories relating people's mobilization to community formation is Hirano Kenichiro, “Kokusai ido jidai no nashonarizumu to bunka” (Nationalism and culture in the age of global migration), in *Nihon Kokusai Bunka Gakkai (Japan Society for Intercultural Studies), Inta-Karuchuraru (Intercultural)*, vol.4 (2006), pp. 2-22.

2. Regionalization, not regionalism, in East Asia

Discussions have been carried out for quite some time on how a regional community of East Asia should be constructed. ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, which was created in 1978, is now well established. APEC or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, starting in 1989, has been growing in the number of member countries. A series of proposals have been offered that an East Asian regional organization be created with ASEAN or APEC as its model. Some proposals have had ASEAN as the core or the leader of that regional organization. The most plausible proposal was one made by Mahathir bin Mohamad, then Malaysian prime minister, in 1990. He proposed forming an East Asian Economic Group, EAEG with the ASEAN member countries plus three Northeast Asian countries, namely, Japan, South Korea and China. The proposal was opposed by the United States government who suspected that the group was to exclude the US and other non-East Asian countries. As a result of the US opposition and the Japanese government's irresolution, the proposal did not materialize, despite Mahathir's compromise, somewhat mitigating the aim of group formation and renaming the group the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC).

Fifteen years later, however, an East Asian Community was formed, with its first summit meeting being held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. The governments of ten ASEAN countries and three Northeast Asian countries attended the summit meeting. The member countries proved to be the same as those of Mahathir's EAEC. In a sense, the East Asian Community can be regarded as a revival of the EAEC fifteen years later.

As to the East Asian Community this time, the

US government did not express any objection and the Japanese government took a positive posture, with the Chinese government receptive as well. Yet, some disagreements emerged among the concerned governments, the most notable being on membership; whether the East Asian Community should be formed by the ten ASEAN countries plus three, namely, Japan, South Korea and China, or plus six, adding Australia, New Zealand and India to the three Northeast Asian countries.

It is to be noted here that those East Asian regional organizations, such as ASEAN, APEC, and the recent EAC, and such proposals for regional organizations as EAEG, EAEC, and EAC either consisting of ASEAN plus three or plus six, are all expressions of regionalism. Their proponents are state governments who propose one or another regional organization for the sake of their political and economic interests and out of their calculations on inter-state relations. The question of membership is important for the governments, regardless of whether a region is in fact formed or not and how widely and how thickly the region is formed. Membership is an important question, because the regional organizations existing and being proposed are products of regionalism.

Why did Mahathir's EAEC revive in 2005, fifteen years after it got nipped in the bud as just another proposal of regionalism? It seemingly got revived because actual regionalization proceeded in East Asia during the fifteen year period, or more precisely, because regionalization had been proceeding even before Mahathir made his proposal. Whereas regionalism is an expressive political act by governments, or government officials and political leaders, regionalization is an actual process proceeding with the movements of people and goods

within a region. We must distinguish regionalization from regionalism. Regionalism is not the same as regionalization. Mahathir's proposal for the EAEC, though it was an act of regionalism, somehow corresponded with the regionalization which was going on in East Asia.

Little is to be said as for the economic integration of the East Asian region that has been growing rapidly²⁾. In a recent survey with a focus on the transborder/transnational movements of people, this author discovered that the region had already been in the process of formation when Prime Minister Mahathir made his proposal and it was fairly well formed in 2005, the year of the first summit meeting of the East Asian Community³⁾. It is proved by the fact that a fairly thick network of civil airline flight routes had developed over the space which covers the territories, though not all of them, of the ten ASEAN countries plus the three Northeast Asian countries to be exact. The network takes an oval shape that covers most of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, or, in geographical terms, the Japanese archipelago, the North China and South China Seas, the western Pacific coast of the Eurasian continent and the Southeast Asian peninsula and islands. The network demarcates itself quite clearly from other airline networks, not yet including Oceania and the

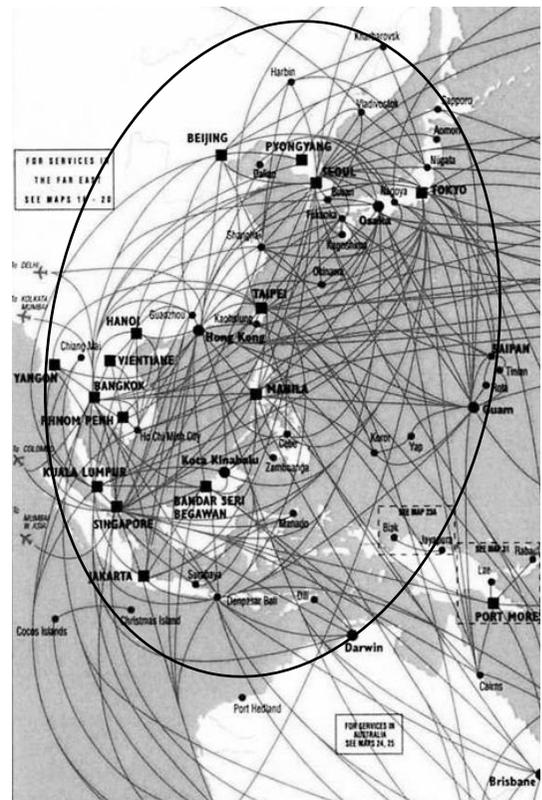


Fig. Airline routes in Asian-Pacific region, 2004

Indian subcontinent as well as the northern half of the Korean peninsula and a wide area of inland China⁴⁾.

The number of passengers carried by those flights has increased remarkably during the period. This tendency must have started around 1970

²⁾ Two commendable essays in English by Japanese economists on the economic integration of East Asia are Yamazawa Ipeei, Kinoshita Toshihiko and C.H. Kwan, "Japan and East Asia: How Do We Meet the Globalization Challenge Together?" and Urata Shujiro, "The Changing Patterns of International Trade in East Asia", both in Mori Kazuko and Hirano Kenichiro, eds., *A New East Asia: Toward a Regional Community*, National University of Singapore Press, 2007.

³⁾ Hirano Kenichiro, "Higashi-Ajia ni okeru hito no kokusai ido: Higashi-Ajia kyodotai no gendoryoku" (People's movements in East Asia: Driving force for an East Asian community), in Nishikawa Jun and Hirano Kenichiro, eds., *Higashi Ajia Kyodotai no Kochiku*, vol. 3, *Kokusai Ido to Shakai Henyo (Transnational migration and social change*, vol. 3 of the series, *Designing an East Asian community*), Iwanami Publishers, Tokyo, 2007, pp. 125-154.

⁴⁾ It must be added in haste that the network is not closed at all to the outside, as many airline routes spread out from it. Likewise, the East Asian community is not exclusive either. It will welcome other members in due course.

when jumbo jets started flying civil air routes and the phenomenon of so-called global migration is said to have started all over the world. The changes facilitated East Asian people in moving around the region. Today, people take mid-range flights between any airports in the region for business, study abroad, family reunion, tourism, shopping, cultural exchange, NGO activity and so on. Thus, the intra-region airline network has developed into an ideal pattern, connecting any two of the airports in the region almost directly. In short, it can be said that regionalization has been going on in East Asia for some time and it is thanks to people's intra-regional transnational movements.

3. Common culture for a regional community

It is possible to construct a region out of an advocacy of regionalism, but that region may lack the necessary conditions for building a community, and a community of people at the least. On the other hand, a region born out of regionalization is, by definition, likely to have a community growing along with it. Since the regionalization in East Asia until today is in one way a product of people's intra-regional movements, the East Asian region has the possibility of having a community of people growing within it.

The movement of people, however, is no more than the minimum necessary condition for the creation of a human community. As pointed out earlier, another key condition necessary for people to have a community is that they share a common culture. People's moving around in a region does not guarantee their automatically having a shared "regional" culture. In the time of the Pacific War, for instance, a very large number of Japanese soldiers moved around in the region that almost over-

laps the area called East Asia today. They did nothing to help create a shared East Asian culture; on the contrary, they ravaged the region and antagonized the other peoples. The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, a kind of regionalism propagated by the Japanese Empire to gloss over the war, is detested even today. People who move around in the region only to seek business chances and self-interest will not contribute to creating a regional culture to be shared by many peoples. What matters for creating a shared regional culture is what kind of people with what motives move around the region.

In East Asia today, new types of people are moving across national borders, seeking new kinds of activities such as studying abroad, sightseeing, cultural exchange, shopping and NGO activities that were not seen much before the 1970s. To use a rather simplistic expression, they are ordinary people, men and women on the street, who take advantage of increasingly inexpensive air fares offered by the mass transportation system. Airborne, they are almost equal with each other, one person seated in one seat, regardless of nationality, sex, age, occupation and so forth, except for some passengers being seated in the business section while many others are in the economy section.

Once on the ground at their destinations, they are more likely to meet and even work together with local people, for they are often engaged in the same activities or in counterpart activities with local people. Crossing the national border and moving around in the region, visiting people get in touch with and interact with host people. It is the most significant fact today that ordinary people move around in East Asia and have exchanges with each other, however shallow their exchanges

might be. In contrast, in the old days some people might have moved around in the region, but they had little contact with local people.

What is more, East Asian people nowadays tend to find similar cultural elements anywhere they may visit in the region. Pop music is heard everywhere; manga and anime, which originated in Japan, are now enjoyed, and even produced, in many places; and movies and TV dramas produced in Korea are appreciated by many people across East Asia. We can say that through these cultural exchanges, conditions are being created little by little for East Asian people to share a common culture⁵⁾.

To repeat, as more and more people move across national borders in the region, regionalization proceeds in East Asia. Ordinary people move around and contact each other and bring about the possibility of their sharing a common East Asian culture, although still to a limited degree. This ongoing process is brought about by popularization and equalization which are characteristic of today's mass transportation. In other words, today's mass transportation, represented by jumbo jets, has expanded the range of ordinary people's movement up to the level of an East Asian region, pushing regionalization forward and bringing the possibility of a shared common culture for the region. An East Asian community is no longer an impossibility and on an extension of the current phenomenon, we can hope to see a regional community by people, for people and of people, the exact opposite of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere.

4. Cultural prospects

It is well expected here that cynics scoff as they already do at such a hope. But this author believes that we have cultural prospects for a new East Asian community. To be more precise, it all depends on how we perceive culture and how we conceive international society. In other words, much is expected of the conduct of international cultural studies.

The cynics point out the cultural diversity of East Asia as the first obstacle against the formation of any East Asian community. Certainly, we find much diversity among the cultures and the religions of the region and we must admit that we have no single language that could possibly be a common language with which we could hope to overcome the cultural diversity. But do we really have to have cultural unity and a single common language to establish a regional community? Do we find a European culture in the European community? In Europe, do they all speak one language to make the union work? On the contrary, the EU employs the language policy that respects the member nations' languages as far as possible. There, ordinary people, while many of them are multilingual, adhere to their own languages and yet manage to communicate with other peoples.

Value differences and religious diversity are often mentioned as factors that prevent an East Asian community from being formed. Again, do we really need to have a single value system and a single religion to create a community? Indeed, the ordinary people of East Asia live according to values that differ from one locale to another, but today they have a common sensitivity which is increas-

⁵⁾ For a stimulating argument on this possibility, see Shiraishi Saya. "Popyura karucha to Higashi-Ajia" (Popular culture and East Asia), in Nishikawa and Hirano, eds., *op. cit.*, pp.203-226.

ing, as they share the common cultural ground being built by transnational mass culture. They may believe in different religions, but beneath those religions they all have a fundamental affection toward other people.

Some people ask the following questions. Do East Asian people have any sense of common destiny? Doesn't the question of differing recognitions of recent history block the formation of an East Asian community? The peoples of East Asia commonly experienced modern history, the history of the West, who claimed to be the propagator of universal civilization, trying to crush all the local cultures with rich tradition and diversity in East Asia, with the latter trying their best to resist the former. Today, under globalization, East Asian peoples are commonly experiencing the overwhelming power of a globalizing economy and trying every method to resist it. We can conclude that the peoples of East Asia have a common history and destiny, if not sufficient then necessary at the minimum to form a community.

In this circumstance, history certainly looms as a very important question, especially for the Japanese people. Whether all East Asian peoples consider they have a common destiny, having had a common history, depends upon whether they think that the Pacific War waged by Imperial Japan is a part of their common history embracing the Japanese people as well. If the Japanese people face the question sincerely with due repentance, it may be possible that the other East Asian peoples embrace such a concept of common history. The transnational movement of ordinary people in the region opens the chance for Japanese people to get a better understanding of the history of East Asia as a whole.

The fact that more and more people move

around, bringing about the oval shaped network of social communication in East Asia, underlies all these hopes. However, this causality will not be realized if we stick to a rigid definition of culture. If we think that a high degree of commonality of culture is necessary to get a community, an East Asian community will never be a reality, given such a diversity of cultures. If we think that a single common language is necessary for peoples to come to full understanding, ordinary people of East Asia will never be able to communicate with each other. But people are endowed with a rich capacity for communication that enables them to communicate without exact knowledge of languages or even without language. They have a common sensitivity and the same basic values as other human beings across cultures. In the final analysis, it is how we perceive culture that counts. Culture is not rigid, not static, being susceptible to change. We the students of international cultural studies are obligated to give culture a new definition, a loose definition that defines culture in such a way as it is possible to have a fuzzy common culture that functions to build a regional community above different cultures. The new definition will also have it that culture is changeable, so that East Asian people will endeavor together to create a new culture on the regional level.

Mr. Kawashima Shuichi, a Japanese student of the regional integration of Europe, stated, "It is the study of the history of Asian international relations that attempts to capture the cross-border exchanges and relations of people, goods, money and institutions from a world-wide point of view. It is a study of the political-economic order of a wide region, more than that of the European regional integration, that tries to explain the structure [of those movements]

as a global history.”⁶⁾ Mr. Kawashima suggests that the study of the regionalization in East Asia will make a great contribution to the study of regional integration in general. What does he mean by saying that the study of East Asian regionalization can be an attempt at global history? In this author’s understanding, besides the possibility of its contribution to the study of regional integration, the study of the East Asian regionalization and community formation is a global study because it deals with a region with a very complex structure that contains intricate cultures.

Suppose for the moment that the region of East Asia is a whole, this whole composed of many parts, namely, many national entities which in turn are composed respectively of smaller parts, that is, numerous local areas. East Asia itself is a part of the globe. This multi-layered structure is called a global structure. What makes the structure more complex is that each entity on every level has its own culture which must be respected for its own sake. In short, East Asia is a region which exists between international society one level above and national societies one level below, and it is becoming a community to which people are trying to give a degree of its own culture. International society of today must be conceived as having a multi-layered structure, and for that conception, East Asia on its way to regionalization and community formation offers a significant possibility.

Proposing “vertical multiculturalism” by way of conclusion

Today is the age of cultural diversity. Any com-

munity must be conceived in respect of cultural diversity. If we insist on having a unified culture, we cannot build a community today. But it remains the basic condition of forming a community that people must have a shared common culture. How can this contradiction be solved? For society on a national level, multiculturalism has been offered as a solution. Cultural differences among sub-national parts such as ethnic groups are respected for the sake of national unity. For the individual human being, distinctive culture is indispensable for his or her identity, while common culture is necessary to build a community with others. In other words, it is necessary that cultural distinctiveness and cultural commonness somehow co-exist. Multiculturalism on a national level, which here we name “horizontal multiculturalism”, is a contemporary device to make cultural distinctiveness and cultural commonness co-exist.

A regional community can be another device for the same purpose. On the national level, people should fully enjoy their respective culture, while, on the regional level, they should try to create a common culture to a minimum level at least to peacefully co-exist and cooperate with other peoples. This multi-level multiculturalism, here named “vertical multiculturalism”, will help promote the formation of a regional community and fulfill people’s desire to have a distinctive culture and common culture at the same time. In concluding this essay, vertical multiculturalism is proposed as an agenda for future study as well as for the building of an East Asian Community.

⁶⁾ Kawashima Shuichi, “Hikaku, kankei, seido: Kokka o koeru seiji kozo no rekishi o ikani kijutsu suruka” (Comparison, relationship and institution: How to describe the history of a political structure transcending the state), in *Sobun*, January-February, 2009, pp.1-3)