

Globalization, Identity and Regional Integration in East Asia, 1861-2011

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Within the last 150 years, the combined effects of globalization, western transplants and endogenous modernity have led to a complete and radical transformation of the East Asian region: Whereas, in the middle of the nineteenth century, East Asia was but a loosely integrated area of states which barely could withstand western expansion, East Asian economies today sway the markets of the world and their nations exert tremendous influence in the global arena. This transformation can be understood as the result of an ongoing process of globalization in East Asia and of the undercurrents of progressive regional integration. Japan, China and Korea have met (or suffered) the challenge of globalization and modernization in radically different ways, and in many cases the incoherence of identities and interests has led those nations into bitter conflict with each other. And yet, despite the historical legacy and the frequent outbursts of conflict on the diplomatic level today, the countries of East Asia have drawn closer together than ever before in interactions on the administrative, economic, cultural and scientific level. Thus, renewed talk of an “East Asian community” shows that people in East Asia are aware of the possibility of a collective East Asian identity and the creative potential which regional integration could unleash not only for East Asia, but for global politics and the world in general. This conference is devoted to assessing the impact of globalization on the East Asian region in different stages of its modern development as a basis for an informed prognosis of future possibilities of regional integration in East Asia.

For the history of East Asia’s globalization from a Japanese perspective, the year 2011 signals multiple anniversaries of fateful events: the conclusion of the so-called “unequal treaties”, such as the Prussian-Japanese Treaty of 1861, that initiated Japan’s entry into global politics; the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941 as a “stage” in Japan’s endeavor to create a “Greater East Asia” apart from it; the subsequent Peace Treaty of San Francisco of 1951 and the US-Japan Security Treaty which fixed Japan’s position for the rest of the cold war; President Gorbachev’s visit to Japan in 1991 which signaled the end of the cold war for Japan, as well as the Iraq War, which marked the beginning of new order in which Japan has to find its place, yet. These anniversaries are emblematic for Japan’s history, but events of similar significance and in close temporal proximity could be pointed out for the development of China and Korea as well. For the East Asian region in general, these anniversaries mark stages of an ever accelerating process of globalization.

Thus, one-and-a-half centuries after East Asia’s entry into globalization and “modernity” and twenty years since the latest stage of full-swing globalization has begun, it is time to re-assess past developments and take stock of future possibilities in East Asia along the following lines: What exactly was the impact of globalization on the political and intellectual identities of Japan and other East Asian countries in its subsequent stages as outlined above? Considering that “globalization” for a long time also meant a confrontation with western modernity, how does this experience of East Asian nations help to define a more global, i.e. “universal” concept of modernity? Moreover, moving along the historical trajectory into the present, what is the current impact of globalization on East Asian nations politically and intellectually, and how does it bide for a further regional integration in the future? And finally, given that the twentieth century has witnessed a de-centering of Europe

– but not necessarily a “provincialization” of its thought –, what is the intellectual basis for the “unfinished project of modernity” in East Asia today? The answers to these questions will not only help to understand the past and shape present developments in East Asia, but – with due qualifications concerning historical contingency and local settings – may contribute to an understanding of the effects of globalization on other “emerging” regions in the world, as well.