Special Issue
A Comparative Perspective on Asia: Ownership and Contracts

Preface

The Islamic Area Studies Project (1997-2002), headed by Professor SATO Tsugitaka, organized one of its research groups for comparative study of China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The purpose was to compare three Asian regions at "fundamental" levels. The following papers are part of the result.

Previous studies that compare Asia and Europe have shown Asian characteristics as a reverse image to the European/Western society model. Such conclusions are still within the framework of the European model, and lead to an emphasis on certain features for each region in the name of multiculturalism. In any case, we cannot find a common understanding beyond the regional borders.

Three coordinators organized the group: Professor KISHIMOTO Mio of Chinese history, Professor SEKIMOTO Teruo of Southeast Asian anthropology, and I myself. Over three years, we held eight seminars, including the International Workshop listed below. Each seminar had a common topic, such as ownership, contracts, markets, or justice and fairness.

We chose these topics because they are fundamental when individuals take action in the society of each region: China, Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East, Africa and so on. We seek to discover the rules of the game, or society, from the actions of individual players. These rules may be either local or universal. Also, even games played by the same rules can be expected to develop an individual character depending on differences in players and grounds. We have to ask what is a fair rule or a fair ground when different teams in the world play against each other.

Japan is in a good position for this comparative study, for two reasons. First, Japan itself has been, and is now more than ever, becoming the mid-contact point between West and East, Euro-America and Asia, in terms of geographical and cultural location. Second, due to the organization of Japanese scholarship, most scholars and students belong to both disciplinary divisions and also associations organized by geographical region. This double affiliation gives us a good comparative perspective.

In spite of the Project name, Islamic Area Studies, the comparative seminars have
intentionally avoided defining what is 'Islamic'. They assume instead that Islam, or the Islamic factor, is an "invisible ink" that can only be read from outside, or by comparing these regions with others having no Islamic factors. *

The results achieved by this comparative study group will soon be published in Japanese in a volume entitled "Asia in Comparative Perspective", part of the Islamic Area Studies Series by the University of Tokyo Press. The AJAMES editorial committee has also recommended publication in English in the AJAMES so these topics may be discussed worldwide. This volume, therefore, includes four papers relating to topics of ownership and contracts, three of which are revised English editions of the above book, while YANAGIHASHI's paper is newly written. A future issue of AJAMES will present papers on the other topics, markets and justice/fairness.

I wish to express my gratitude to all presenters and contributors at the Comparative Study Seminars. Without such cooperation, we could never have gone so far beyond the disciplinary and regional borders of these topics.

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The Comparative Study Seminars 1999-2001

Seminar 1: "Towards a Comparison of Ownership" (26 June 1999)
Seminar 2: "Contracts: God, the Community, and the Individual" (17 October 1999)
Seminar 3: "The Market Economy and Capitalism" (23 December 1999)
Seminar 4: "The Order of Markets formed through Interactions" (25 June 2000)
Seminar 5: International Workshop on Ownership, Contracts and Markets in China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East: The Potentials of Comparative Study (24 September 2000)
Seminar 6: "The Concept of Justice and Order" (23 December 2000)
Seminar 7: "Ownership reconsidered in Social Relations" (14 July 2001)
Seminar 8: Concluding Discussion Seminar (21-22 December 2001)

* The aim and activities of this research group have been shown in the following publications: