East Asia and Transnational Ethics

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The aim of this session was to investigate the possibility of Transnational Ethics (TE) in East Asia, given the critical political situation we are facing in East Asia now. Political tensions between China, Korea and Japan are running higher than ever, and the peoples’ feelings against each other seem to be worsening, fueling narrow-minded nationalism. Three speakers presented their ideas on TE from their different perspectives: Professor HUH Woo Sung from Korea (Kyung Hee University), Prof. YUANN Jeu-Jenq from Taiwan (National Taiwan University) and Prof. KAZASHI Nobuo from Japan (Kobe University).

In his presentation, “Civilization and Violence: Concerning the Viability of Transnational Ethics”, Prof. Huh, referring to M. K. GANDHI’s comment on AHN (AN) Jung-Geun’s killing of ITO Hirobumi, discussed TE as a way to overcome nationalism and imperialism, which bias moral virtues towards “our” nation and against “their” nations. Hearing the news that Itō had been killed by Ahn in 1909, he wrote a short article about the case, criticizing both of them on the basis of his philosophy of nonviolence. He also argued that, as long as Japan adopted Western ways, it could not help but follow the path of imperialism, i.e., internal unification, expansion and conquering neighbors.

Prof. Huh clarified the principles of action pursued by Gandhi, Itō and Ahn. Gandhi argued that modern civilization was innately violent, immoral and irreligious, and expressed his great concern about Japan’s mimicry of Western ways. Itō, with FUKUZAWA Yukichi, held that the essence of civilization lay in national independence and that its aim was not to promote the “usual principles of justice”, principles of impartial and universal brotherhood, though he was familiar with this kind of justice, which we may well call TE. For Ahn, Korea’s independence and the ‘Peace in the East’ as he understood it, were two
supreme values. In contrast to Ito, Ahn believed that civilization consisted in respect for eternal morality.

After discussing how these three figures perceived civilization and its relationship with morality, Prof. Huh suggested some constructive measures for a more ethical stance in pursuit of national advantage, which might eventually improve the viability of TE.

Prof. Yuann started his presentation, “Post-colonialism and Universal Responsibility: The Case of Taiwan”, by pointing out the paradox of the cliché that we should not forget history. The motto is clear but what we should not forget depends on the context. Then, Prof. Yuann referred to the Taiwanese attitude towards Japan as a peculiar case in this sense. While the Japanese imperialism is remembered as brutal and tragic, there exist among Taiwanese some sympathetic images about it.

For example, the recent film *Kano* which depicts a Taiwanese high school baseball team under the Japanese rule representing the island in the 1931 Japanese High School Baseball Championship at Koshien Stadium, raises disputes again concerning the way in which the Taiwanese should look at its colonized past. The director of the film says that he just wants to demonstrate historical facts, but they are actually mixed with a sympathetic attitude towards the Japanese colonialism. Such a sympathetic attitude can also be seen in the fact that right after the great earthquake in North-East Japan in 2011, the Taiwanese people immediately rallied together and donated the highest amount of money worldwide.

Here Prof. Yuann raised the question whether that is merely a reaction against likely aggression from China or it displays a deeper sentiment expressing that we do not need to inherit historical hatred. Prof. Yuann, discussing Spinoza’s idea of love overcoming hatred, concluded that we all know loving someone is the best way to resolve hatred, but we always confront the difficulty of overcoming our own mindset. Though loving your enemy is never easy, when the time comes, we have to give it a chance, under the responsibility of love, to see the superiority of love over hatred. Taiwan shows us a positive case.

In his presentation, “On Some Contradictions of Post-War Japan: A Critical Reflection Centering around Nuclear Issues”, Prof. Kazashi discussed four topics. Firstly he brought to light the idea of “Small-Japanism” as an “Undeveloped Possibility”, which appeared but remained marginal in modern
Japanese thought and which could have provided an alternative line of development. It already appeared in NAKAE Chōmin’s *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government* and culminated in ISHIBASHI Tanzan’s Small-Japanist ideas during the upheaval of “Taisho Democracy”.

Secondly, Prof. Kazashi discussed Japan’s internal contradiction over the nuclear questions. Japan’s tortuous relationships with Asia converges in the ambiguous significance that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have had for the Japanese and other peoples in Asia: it is expressed most straightforwardly in a poem by KURIHARA Sadako, “When we say ‘Hiroshima.’” As a hibakusha, Kurihara came to face head-on the ambiguity gaping between Japan as perpetrator of war crimes and Japanese people as victims of the same war. The significance of Hiroshima-Nagasaki has been doubly and triply twisted by the fact that Japan has chosen, not only to be under the nuclear umbrella provided by the U.S., but also to promote nuclear power generation in the name of the “peaceful use of nuclear power,” which has resulted in the Fukushima disaster.

The third topic was Japan’s belated response to Ahn Jung-Geun’s appeal for “Peace in the East”. The Japanese translation of his *Autobiography with the Unfinished “Treatise for Peace in the East”* was published in 2011. In this work, we find many points worthy of consideration. However, what is most thought-provoking is the fact that it was not until 2011 that the Japanese translation of the important work became available to Japanese readers.

Finally, Prof. Kazashi argued that we are now standing once again at a crossroads where Japan’s future might swerve back to the Big-Japanist course. Thus, reflecting on the questions presented above, we should realize that “transnational” ethics, at least for the Japanese, must concern, first and foremost, our own self-critical and imaginative search for a consistent and viable vision of Japan, as much as possible, as a member of East Asia and the world, despite the various complications involved.

After these three rich and thought-provoking presentations, we didn’t have much time left for discussions with the floor but we did exchange ideas over such important questions as who the agents of TE are, what the philosophical core of a possible union in East Asia would be, what the relationship between TE and economics is, and what “nation” in “Transnational Ethics” should mean, and so on. Even though we couldn’t reach agreement about what TE should be after all, we did share some essential
recognitions necessary for any valid conception of TE.