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Comments on the Symposium

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# For what are we still at a loss?—General Comments on the Symposium

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Till when should we discuss in terms of dichotomy? Dichotomy of what? Between the West and the East, between the colonizing and the colonized, between the authoritative center and the less powerful on the periphery, etc.? Isn't it about time we discussed the possibility of transculturalism or interculturalism, which should be the sublated concept out of multiculturalism.

Interestingly, there were as many as eighteen presentations in all, within three days, from various standpoints and perspectives, finely classified under subtitles from Part I to VII, as follows:

- Part I: "Oriental Reactions to Western Cultural Hegemony"
- Part II: "Western Rediscoveries of Oriental Cultures: Materiality and Spirituality"
- Part III: "Confrontations of Eastern and Western Institutions in Image-Politics"
- Part IV: "Conflicts of Interpretations in Visualizing the Invisible Orient"
- Part V: "Western Academic Disciplines and Things Oriental"
- Part VI: "Oriental Identity in Question: Beyond East-West Dichotomies"
- Part VII: "Orient on Display: Conflicts between Self-Image and Western Expectations"

Still more interestingly enough, those titles contain keywords of post-colonialist discourses and in fact the areas covered in the papers included in each section seem to cover to the best extent possible the questions and discussions relating to the theme of the Symposium. My general comment will be made from two viewpoints: aesthetic point of view and that of art history.

From the viewpoint of aesthetics, I always wonder if aesthetics as a discipline is really relevant to the Oriental way of thinking when we confine aesthetics within a part of Western philosophy. Needless to say, initially aesthetics emerged in the history of Western philosophy. The terminology of aesthetics was mostly coined by A.G. Baumgarten in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He inherited the discussion of epistemology starting from Descartes through Leibniz and to Christian Wolf.

Then, we also are left wondering if the Eastern way of thinking is devoid of the ability to establish aesthetics in the direction that Baumgarten led his thought. Heidegger once posed a question whether East

Asians could borrow and use concepts and categories that Western philosophy invented. According to him, in Martin Heidegger, “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache: Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd 12: *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), “Der Name [Ästhetik] und das, was er nennt, stamen aus dem europäischen Denken, aus der Philosophie. Deshalb muß die ästhetische Betrachtung dem ostasiatischen Denken im Grunde fremd bleiben.” (S.82) [The term and concept ‘aesthetics’ comes from European thought and philosophy. Therefore, aesthetic consideration is in essence unfamiliar and irrelevant to East Asian thought.]

Against Heidegger’s remark, a Japanese scholar admits that Japanese need help from aesthetics to get appropriate concepts because of the inability in the Japanese language to explain the aesthetic implication of traditional Japanese ideas. Then, Heidegger still wonders “ob es für die Ostasiaten nötig und berechtigt sei, den europäischen Begriffssystemen nachzujagen.” (S. 83) [if it is necessary for East Asians to seek for the European system of concepts]

Here, I am reminded of Nishi Amane’s case when he had difficulty to settle the translation term for aesthetics, struggling to find the fittest term among *zenbi-gaku* 善美学, *kashu-ron* 佳趣論, *bimyo-gaku* 美妙学 and others. I am intrigued by the fact that he never tried the term *kansei-ron* 感性論, the reason of which may be that he could not encounter the concept and way of thought of aesthetics in European philosophical meaning among his knowledge of neo-Confucianism as his stock of learning.

I don’t know whether what matters is on the side of language or for lack of intellectual ability of the way of thinking.

Anyway, Heidegger fears that “auf diesem Weg das eigentliche Wesen der ostasiatischen Kunst verdeckt und in einen ihr ungemäßen Bezirk verschoben werde.” (S. 97) [this way of adopting European concepts would keep East Asian art unclear in its originality and afar unfittingly.]

Heidegger’s eventual implications would be that (1) we should pay attention to the difference of cultural context at the background of a term or concept, and (2) that we should take care not to confuse or ruin an intrinsic meaning by adopting or borrowing a concept or device from a different culture.

With reference to (2) above, Arthur Danto’s criticism about Western intellectuals and artists moving toward Zen Buddhism and other Oriental mysticism in his *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1972) will be noteworthy. Danto wants to say that it is really interesting and important to study Oriental thought but it will be impossible for Westerners to live in it, and for their existential and ethical salvation, as it is alien to their worldview.

The rapid developments in trade, communications, Internet, etc. have significantly led to globalization in modern times; in such a scenario, we would need to take a closer look at the meaning of transplanting or transferring the culture of powerful developed countries to the colonized ones or less developed nations. Corroboration or a mixed style is now in fashion, sometimes as a symbol of friendship and peaceful action with the accompanying crisis of spoiling the originality of indigenous culture.

Nowadays, there seems to be a tendency to establish national “aesthetics” differently from the

Baumgarten model of Western learning. For example, Gao Jianping suggests a differentiation of “Chinese aesthetics” which is “establishing theories of their own to make sense of the specific contexts of China” from “aesthetics in China” which “apply theoretical frameworks borrowed from the West.” [Newsletter 35-36 October, 2010 (International Association for Aesthetics), p. 2]

This tendency will show an increasing self-confidence among Asian scholars due to the development of the economy, international affairs, military presence, etc., of their countries, as well as their academic accomplishments. In fact, it is time that we reconsidered the framework of aesthetics as a discipline, historically regarded as the heritage of European modernity.

The challenge to national aesthetics also means a contemporary version of the reaction against “Western impact” and will lead to a reassessment of modernity and incidentally to the possibility of transcultural/intercultural aesthetics.

From the viewpoint of art history, it occurs to me that Oriental art history (東洋美術史) has committed the same error that Oriental history (東洋史) did. As the latter excluded and kept Japanese history (日本史) apart, without directly relating it to the international history of Asian countries, eventually losing sight of the Asian perspective in research work, so, when Oriental art history was established as an independent discipline detached from Japanese art history, too much uniqueness had been emphasized.

To conclude, I would like to mention Homi K. Bhabha’s concept “location of culture” (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) for the purpose of only partially approving his theory. Being shaken and swayed by political reality and power politics, the culture of colonized nations or self-colonizing mentality among non-Western countries has made people under colonial conditions inevitably face the problem of identity. Is hybridity of all culture in modernity different from that in the post-colonial time or in an age of globalization? If so, in what terms is it so? Or, I am afraid that Bhabha’s theory of cultural translation and hybridity will not guarantee the compromise or sublation of confrontation/conflict/dichotomies between East-West, the colonizing and the colonized, etc. We need something beyond, something to suggest a deeper or higher universality to claim human dignity.