

Preface

The 38th International Research Symposium of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (IRCJS) was held on November 8–11, 2010, with the title of “Questioning Oriental Aesthetics and Thinking: Conflicting Visions of ‘Asia’ under the Colonial Empires.” The essays collected here cover the time span extending from 1874 to 1951, i.e. from the beginning of Japan’s colonial expansion to the end of American Occupation. The present volume also contains critical commentaries on those essays. The overall theme of the symposium coincides with the interdisciplinary team-research project that has been conducted by the organizer, INAGA Shigemi, at the IRCJS for the last three years.

The international symposium and the team research together aim at critically investigating the stereotypical view of the Orient or Asia as it was fostered during the period of colonial expansion. Why was the idea of essential Asian-ness or Japanese-ness promoted during that period? What were the historical as well as cultural conditions which allowed such notions to become prevalent? How was Asian Orientalism different from its Middle-Eastern counterpart? To what extent is it distinct from the recent post-colonial model of the colonial experience proposed in the Indian subcontinent? What were the mutual influences among China, Korea, and Japan in terms of their cultural identities?

The crisis in self-recognition in either the East or the West prompted people to cling to their own identities. And such identity-consciousness still remains dominant or at least subsists, erupting whenever cultural conflict becomes conspicuous. Visions of Asia were (and are even now) in constant conflict. Not only between the East and the West, but also between genders and among nations, there are fault lines, which penetrate even within ethnic groups. Such visions were products of conflicts, a result of the compromises and negotiations of the colonial experience. Constructions of Asian identity gained authority under the nation-state system and claimed their authenticity in the context of imperialism and colonialism. And yet, the connections are seldom questioned and their effects still overshadow present world views.

Scholarly discussions are often the prisoners of such prerequisites, as the academic disciplines are classified by and confined in the same East-West dichotomy and molded accordingly in the logic of “the West and the Rest.” While “the West” has proposed theoretical frameworks, “the Rest” yields raw materials for Western consumption. How to overcome this marginalization is still a great challenge for Asia’s peoples in the first decade of the 21st century. Rather naïve and perilous reactions to Western cultural and institutional hegemony have become the norm.

As stagnating economic recessions result in the decline of less-profitable studies, their survival in the shrinking market tends to reinforce a protective immune system of the established disciplines for the sake

of the status quo. Both economic globalization and the pursuit of market efficiencies are threatening the humanities with gradual extinction. At the same time, the rapid economic growth in China and India as well as Southeast Asia has been challenging the West. How to face this new temptation of the East, so as not to yield to the “*tentation de l’Orient*” of the colonial experience (as Imperial Japan succumbed to it in the 1930s and 40s)? To re-examine the past vision of Asia thus constitutes a crucial task for both the present and future. The present volume hopes to give some relevant insights into this topic.

INAGA Shigemi

Organizer and Chair of the 38th International Research Symposium

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