

The Challenge and Distress from East Asia: Message from the Japan-China Sociological Society

Japan-China Sociological Society

In Search of a Sociology from East Asia

Clashes of civilizations, the war on terror, environmental destruction, crises of everyday life, and the other problems that surround us can only be described as being in dire circumstances. The ideas and cultures that have historically been cultivated by East Asia are bound to be rife with implications when it comes to searching for clues to resolving such problems. Stated boldly, a number of factors could be mentioned for this, including their admonishments of covetousness and lust for power that are grounded in a non-monotheistic worldview, and the emphasis they have placed on coexistence and harmony with various different value systems through self-limitation and self-introspection. Yet there is the frustration of being unable to straightforwardly reflect such historical aggregations in an academic sense. This frustration is closely bound up with the knowledge structures that we have internalized.

What always comes to mind upon witnessing such dire circumstances are questions over what constitutes the modern societies that have been created by Europe and the United States, as well as the extent to which modernistic values have meaning and universality. However, this is not at all to imply that we are dismissive of Western social thought or social theory. Rather, we have a profound understanding of their importance and highly esteem the enormity of their significance. Yet on the other hand, those of us who have internalized East Asian value systems also raise other questions, such as on the ways in which we can contribute academically as well as the ways in which we can convey subject matter that is imbued with originality and ingenuity.

Assuming that this frustration and questions will be resolved, then at the very least one cannot help but regard the promotion of studies that are cognizant of an East Asian perspective as an extremely constructive approach. Considered pragmatically, what lies ahead is none other than the formation of the knowledge structures of an “East Asian sociology” and an “Asian sociology” that are on par with those conventional knowledge structures that have been grounded in Western civilization in a mutually complementary manner. It will also be necessary to forge a connection in which these inspire one another. In actuality, this will be grounded in “East Asian-style” concepts that are quite familiar to us, just like “ying and yang” and “heaven and earth.”

Upon further confirmation, one cannot help but think that we are approaching an age in which knowledge structures that can contribute to the establishment of coexistence and harmony in the world should be erected on the basis of a mutual acknowledgement of our differences. The expectation is that when the enormity of the speculative historical aggregations in East Asia is taken into consideration, there will be limitless possibilities for expanding upon these. The Japan-China Sociological Society is embarking upon the creation of the sociology from East Asia.

The Relationship Between Japan and China

An academic society covering Japan and China must deal with the opposition that is coming to

a head between Japan and China concerning the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands). This is an issue that profoundly troubles those of us who are members of the Japan-China Sociological Society at heart. Moreover, it has given us a sense for our own powerlessness, while also driving home the importance of the course of action that has been taken by the society.

I will refrain from delving into this topic in detail, but the roots of this problem lie in the fact that both Japan and China suffered from “Western shock” and were therefore impelled to form nation-states, and so both set about doing so against their will. Seen from this perspective, the way the issue is presented from the Chinese side is quite fascinating. They would insist on tracing back to the 17th and 18th centuries as seen from the perspective of the Chinese dynasties, or even farther back to the circumstances of the 15th and 16th centuries, and taking this as the point of departure. If we were to nullify the “Western shock” that we received and consider the matter by turning the clocks back to at least nearly 200 years ago in history then this would be a bold gambit, but the content would be sure to invite bewilderment. If we were to go by this criteria then a considerable portion of the EU region would belong to the Muslim world, and the borders of African states would probably all have to be open to question again.

At any rate, flexible and conciliatory efforts have continued to be made in order to scrupulously avoid mutual opposition in the historical East Asian region, as can be seen from initiatives such as Japan’s modalities for external trade and China’s tribute system. An awareness of East Asian-style values was undoubtedly brought to bear here, and we have passed down this knowledge. I am convinced that if the problem is presented by being traced back in history, then its solution can also be discovered by a reappraisal of history and culture. Moreover, the contents of this align splendidly with the course of action of forming an East Asian sociology that we are after.

About the Japan-China Sociological Society

1. Academic Exchanges that Have Weathered the Constraints of the Times

The Japan-China Sociological Society is a small academic society with approximately 300 members. But be that as it may, it could be described as an extremely idiosyncratic academic society for Japan. This is because it has aspired to be a transnational academic society that is based in East Asia. It goes without saying, but Japan’s sociological societies have developed based around the so-called importation of analytical techniques and value premises for sociological research from the West. Whereas on the other hand our society has a strong inclination to strive to surmount Western theories by freshly questioning East Asian history and culture while appraising Western sociological research. Its four major characteristics are summarized below.

- (1) Striving to be a transnational academic society centered primarily between Japan and China.
- (2) Conducting initiatives to accommodate multiple languages by publicly acknowledging the use of the three languages of Japanese, Chinese, and English.
- (3) Emphasizing empirical research.
- (4) Broadly questioning contemporary society from both an East Asian and a global perspective.

The society's establishment and its characteristics are closely intertwined with the development of sociology in both Japan and China. China was once an important field in sociological research by Japan. It is well known that since the early days leading sociologists such as MAKINO Tatsumi, SHIMIZU Morimitsu, and FUKUTAKE Tadashi have engaged in research there. Conversely, vast accumulations of sociological research have been amassed by enormous think tanks relating to China, such as the Research Department of the South Manchuria Railway Company and the East Asia Development Board(興亜院). But we have heard direct reports regarding the limitations of the times and circumstantial problems with the research by these think tanks. Furthermore, we have a deeper understanding than anyone else of the points to reflect on, and have been exploring the possibility of undertaking research through new forms of cooperation between China and Japan.

In 1978 sociology, which until then had been considered a bourgeois academic discipline in China, underwent a revival. Following which Fukutake Tadashi, who was a founding member of the society, organized a delegation of sociologists to visit China, and immediately initiated research exchanges with China. Since then, through frequent trips to China throughout the 1980s he repeatedly held close exchanges with researchers from the early days of this revival in China such as FEI Xiaotong, LEI Jieqiong, and YUAN Fang.

At the same time, the end of the 1980s was a time when Japan was waiting to undertake Chinese sociological research once again. Novel developments were seen from KOMAI Hiroshi and KITAHARA Atsushi in the post-war period on research focused mainly on Thailand. This collection of research on Southeast Asia has been passed down and expanded through the efforts of young researchers by taking China and East Asia as their fields. In conjunction with this, international students from China came to Japan one after another starting from the middle of the 1980s, and Japanese sociologists made enormous contributions to the world of Chinese sociology during its revival period. These were two major contributing factors for the promotion of Chinese social research.

As can be surmised from this chronology, there have been complex considerations in the form of the deep reflection on the research approach prior to and during World War II on the Japanese side, as well as in the revival of sociology from its condemnation as a bourgeois academic discipline on the Chinese side. Such a background engendered a resolute approach in researchers from both Japan and China of attempting to carry out research and run academic societies grounded in mutual understanding of historical facts while distancing themselves from the nation-state framework.

This paper will introduce some of the major initiatives for this, leaving aside the holding of events and research meetings in Japan.

In 1979 when the society was established Professor Fukutake Tadashi raised the three themes of field studies ascertaining social changes in China, the cultivation of young researchers, and academic exchanges between Japan and China in his address at the inaugural convention. The *Japan-China Sociological Society Newsletter* was also published in the same year. Together with this Fukutake Tadashi's *Gendaika chugoku no tabi: syakaigakusya houchuudan houkoku*, (Travels

in a *Modernizing China: Report from a Delegation of Sociologists to China*, University of Tokyo Press, 1979) was also published.

Delegations of sociologists to China were frequently organized up through the middle of the 1980s, and exchanges with researchers on the Chinese side continued.

In 1988 the *Japan-China Sociological Society Report* was issued as an academic journal.

Then in 1993 the *Japan-China Sociological Society Report* was renamed the *Journal of Japan-China Sociological Studies* and turned into a peer-reviewed academic journal. From this period until the present, small and medium-sized workshops and academic conferences have been held in Japan, sometimes China, and Hong Kong from once to several times a year.

The *East Asian Sociology of the 21st Century* was published in 2008. This was the second peer-reviewed journal, and emphasized daring and unique research results. The papers can be presented by three languages of Japanese, Chinese, and English.

All seven volumes of the Japan-China Sociological Series were published between 2008 and 2009 by Akashi Shoten. The titles for each volume were *Volume 1-“De-Orientalism and Chinese Culture”*, *Volume 2-“Chineseness and Transnational Identity”*, *Volume 3 -“China’s Media and Industry in Globalization”*, *Volume 4-“Diverging Chinese Families”*, *Volume 5-“Social Security and Social Welfare in China in Its Transitional Stage”*, *Volume 6-“The Reorganization of Resident Organizations and the Search for Self-Governance in China”*, and *Volume 7-“Migrating People and the Pluralist Society Seen in China”* (all of the reports and journals mentioned above are in Japanese). This series considered the visible changes in various fields of Chinese society over 30 years of reforms and the hidden structural transformations that occurred in the depths of society in an attempt to elucidate the mechanisms by which these changes took place. Naturally, of course, this series left much that is still open to debate, but it could be described as an important cornerstone for 21st century East Asian sociology as a manifestation of the society’s three themes.

Also the academic events were joint held in China in the form of international forums. *The East Asia Forum: In Search of a New Paradigm for East Asia* was held at the Central University of Nationalities and *the Japan-China Economic and Social International Academic Forum* was held at the Capital University of Economics and Business in 2009.

That same year an agreement over mutual exchange and mutual cooperation was concluded with the China-Japan Sociological Society (China).

2. Investigations into the Workings of East Asian Social Systems with a View towards Modernity

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake on 3.11 there has been a great deal of attention paid to the workings of Japan’s social systems with a view towards large-scale natural disasters. This has attracted considerable interest in developing countries regarding how they should face up to modernization in the future, which has turned from the peachy dream it has been thus far into a double-edged sword. However, mutual understanding between Japan and China is still inadequate due to a number of factors, and their historical grudges have been further exacerbated amidst their current fierce economic competition.

On the other hand, the fact of the matter is that through the experience of major disasters such as the Sichuan Earthquake or the Great East Japan Earthquake there have been mounting opportunities for mutual understanding and mutual aid between Japan and China that transcend national borders and ethnicities, and which are rooted in the universal value of respect for human life. In response to this, together with Chinese researchers the society has pursued the question of how social systems that will enable respect for human life and sustainable development should be created in order to counter the risks concealed in modernization, which acts as a double-edged sword. Through comparisons of social changes and the workings of social systems in the modernization of both Japan and China in the 20th century it has proactively carried out research activities to ferret out the unique mechanisms that lie dormant in East Asian societies, which differ from Western societies.

Since 2011 the society has been promoting a project for the Japan Foundation's Grant Program for Intellectual Exchange Conferences. The 2011 theme was "Groping a New Social System after East Japan Earthquake: Dialogue Series between Japan and China," while the 2012 theme was "Comparative Research on the Impacts of Globalization between Japan and China."

Through this, Japan's experiences and lessons from being the first Asian country to achieve modernization will be shared with the newly emerging country of China through intellectual exchanges. More specifically, the achievements from this include: (1) a renewed recognition of the roles of risk management techniques at the global level and social capital (trust, norms, networks) with people as the primary agents in this for the sake of achieving the sustainable development of regional societies, (2) the creation of frameworks for mutual understanding between Japan and China that clarify values that are universal to mankind such as respect for human life and sustainable development, and (3) the strengthening of transnational networks for academic exchanges. These research results was published in China (Chen 2013).

Not too long after China ushered in its period of reforms and liberalization and the ban on sociology was lifted by the Chinese state, the Japan-China Sociological Society was established at the prompting of Professor Fukutake Tadashi. Over the more than 30 years that followed since then the society has aspired to come to a full-scale understanding of Chinese society by facing up to China's populist society and through repeatedly undertaking field studies in an ongoing manner. The myriad political tensions between the two countries have been quick to lead to deteriorations in public sentiment in both countries. But by rendering the human emotions found at the level of the social lives of the public in both countries in a detailed manner, the Japan-China Sociological Society has carried on with research activities that accurately get a hold on the pulse of social transformations and the workings of social systems.

The above has offered a brief introduction to the history of the Japan-China Sociological Society, but right now the society is facing a major turning point.

Challenge for East Asian Sociologists

The development of sociology has been built upon the basis of social phenomena. The social transformations that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, which occurred in the West in the first

half of the 19th century, and the rise of the new continent of America from the latter half of the 19th century contributed enormously to the development of Western sociology. Yet following in the wake of the decline of Western Europe and the overall rise of Asia in the 21st century there have appeared East Asian social phenomena that differ from the conventional phenomena in the Western societies. How such developments should be read into and interpreted poses a major challenge, and is not just a question for sociologists from East Asia.

This raises the question of how this should be achieved. More specifically, the question of how to go about achieving multiculturalism—including value premises and the languages used—is a major theme in this. Building new relationships with the Western sociological world also poses a pressing challenge in combination with this. As was already stated, it is mutual complementarity that we are aiming for. We must create dynamism on the research front by harnessing historical East Asian social phenomena and an East Asian-style value consciousness in order to contribute to newly developing of a 21st century sociology. Now is truly the time to achieve such a feat.

Closer cooperation than ever before between transnational sociologists will be indispensable in the 21st century. While the Japan-China Sociological Society has achieved considerable results with this thus far, we are now obliged to work to expand this across the entire Asian region.

As a postscript, Japanese people who have been appointed as president of the society since its founding include Fukutake Tadashi, AOI Kazuo, MIYAGI Hiroshi, NEBASHI Shouichi, and NAKAMURA Norihiro. But in 2010 CHEN Lixing, a Chinese national, was appointed president. Her appointment further boosted the transnational character of the society.

References

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