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Asia: A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness

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One sees nothing if one simply goes somewhere without problematizing
oneself—Takeuchi Yoshimi

Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of
time.—Karl Marx

Historians write about others, usually from some past treated as dead or foreign. It is a “safe” endeavor, secure in the comfort of recent methodologies and the accumulation of knowledge and perspective. Even though historians have some future in mind, we hide behind our methods and assumptions to distance ourselves from our object of study, often obscuring the subject. That makes this engagement with Miyoshi so hard to write. It brings out my insecurities—the challenges he issued, and then the realization that more often than not, he was right (which of course further exacerbated those self-doubts). I remember when Masao told me about his draft, “Japan is Not Interesting” (2010b [2000]). I responded with surprise (pleasantly) and admiration that he would have such a title that directly challenges a field known for its -ophiles and -ophobes. I might even have been the befuddled colleague he reports in the essay.

Yet, the title “Japan is Not Interesting” embeds a series of issues that, typical of his thinking, challenge us to query what we think we know. For my focus on his legacy, it is the importance of pasts and how our engagement with pasts must go beyond the discipline of history. Miyoshi placed into practice what Takeuchi Yoshimi, in the epigraph above, understood as the limitation of Japan’s prewar and postwar understanding of China. Takeuchi (2005: 163) suggests that soldiers and politicians as well as China scholars, despite being in China or “knowing” China, “saw nothing.”¹ For scholars today this should be an important question, to what extent our knowledge system is appropriate to societies today, or even an earlier era? Takeuchi is correct to point out that we know others through ourselves. What we think we know is often just a portion, or worse, a fantasy of what exists. If we return to “Japan is Not Interesting,” my initial reaction was as an historian whose object of study is usually the past of a “Japan.” Yet when one reads this essay, perspective becomes more ambiguous—to whom is Japan uninteresting and to what extent do we—specialists on Japan— “see” or “know” Japan. After all, the essay started from Miyoshi’s conversations with friends and former classmates in Japan who casually commented that Japan is uninteresting.² Second, this statement raises a question of nation-state—to what extent does a Japan, especially in an increasingly global world, hinder our understanding of others on the archipelago as well as throughout the world. In an age when information is virtually instantaneous and available at our fingertips, what types of places now have meaning for individuals (the nation-state still certainly does for governments to marshal support for armed conflict and corporations that exploit national boundaries)?

A hint toward how Miyoshi offers a way to deal with these issues is in his essay “Outside Architecture” (2010 [1996]). Miyoshi had a keen eye and attraction to architecture (and later photography—see his *This is not Here* [2009]), but like most things, that did not keep him from seeing limitations or problems. He writes, “Perhaps, instead of building guilty conscience into aesthetically, theoretically, intellectually admirable but useless shapes and forms, we might stroll in the streets of Kawasaki, Keelung, and Puchon (west of Seoul) and learn how people live... There may be more life there than in architecture’s patronage houses” (2010 [1996]: 156-57). Here, Miyoshi—like Takeuchi—is challenging us to see beyond our comfort zone within the certainty of modern categories, that experts professing on others often don’t see what they claim to know. I see the phrase “building guilty conscience into...admirable but useless shapes and forms” as akin to Takeuchi’s claim that Japanese in China (many of whom often desired to help/aid Chinese) “saw nothing.”³ Instead, Miyoshi suggests that we stroll among those we have objectified. To stroll is different than going to or knowing; it is to be with, to be willing to interact, to engage, and see something new about oneself. Most area studies specialists would say we do this through the learning of the language and culture, in the rite of passage (dissertation research) and subsequent trips. Yet Miyoshi, like Takeuchi, is willing to suggest that we “see nothing”; we see only the category rather than activity it purports to encompass.

In my effort to look forward through Miyoshi, I see much of his career querying and moving around the idea of “Asia.” In Miyoshi’s case, the stroll can be seen as a method; it is operating in the postwar knowledge system we think we know, while not being

contained within. His career was a long stroll: he left Japan (figuratively and then physically) for English literature, after becoming well established in that field shifted toward Japanese literature and studies, and then he moved to sites of knowledge maintenance and production—area studies, the global economy, and the university. This career embeds methods that we might take more seriously in our overly specialized disciplines. It restores alterity—the possibility of the self interacting with and even becoming the other—rather than the binary form of otherness common to modern society—self vs. other. Through his career, Miyoshi challenged this fixed notion of the modern self, which Michel de Certeau identifies as being maintained by the “repetition of the gesture of exclusion. The ‘same’ is a historical *form*, a practice of dichotomy, and not a homogeneous *content*” (1992: 17). Miyoshi's wandering to different sites and topics was an interrogation of his own historicity, a refusal to accept the easy dichotomies that lead to quick or facile categorization. Instead this method led to incisive and often difficult questions about our own assumptions. Eric Cazdyn highlights his approach to teaching, which I see as a core principle of his intellectual sojourn, “To see what constitutes the world and to describe it without allegorization is nearly impossible, but such an impossibility is what all of us are conscribed to inhabit” (Cazdyn 2010: xix). This is a riddle of our twentieth century knowledge system and a challenge for twenty-first century scholars.

Asia as Spatialized Time

The difficulty of untangling this riddle is located in the conflation within the word, Asia, of a relational idea with notions of absolute space (geography) and absolute time (history). In his 1925 Lowell Lectures Alfred North Whitehead (1967 [1925]: 50, 51) inquired into the place of science in human understanding and exposed the role of time and space as central elements in the mechanistic nature of thought, an epistemology that existed since the seventeenth century and, in his words, we could “neither live with nor live without.” He called this a “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.” Whitehead, here, recognized that our current understanding of time and space has been superseded and sought another way to understand our world.

We need to question whether Asia, too, is a “misplaced concreteness” that constricts us.⁴ Asia is foundational to the global knowledge system we inhabit; moreover, this system has been built upon principles and ideas that grounded the rise of the liberal-internationalist world during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet at the same time discoveries of special relativity and thermodynamics relegated many mechanistic notions such as Newton's absolute time and absolute space to classical science. Nevertheless, we still use formalized structures where allegorical accounts comfortably reiterate preconceived forms. After more than thirty-five years since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) (Miyoshi was a close friend of Said)[Paul—is this necessary? for us it is so obvious, but for other readers?] various fields have written much, from the early critiques of deconstruction and post-everything, beginning with post-structuralism; to today where it seems we are no longer re-ing, but now un-ing everything. I do not mean to belittle these efforts; my own work fits within some of them. Yet, I have been

impressed that we always seem to reiterate what has been stated earlier. The forgetting that is a part of our knowledge industry is rather remarkable.

This is particularly true in the case of Asian studies where the idea of Asia keeps its subfields (Japanese studies, Chinese studies, South Asian studies, etc.) within the Orient; area studies has become a discipline that disciplines its objects. This is the impossibility. We have recognized this to an extent. Simplistically, the nouns have changed from Orient to Asia and we celebrate that we are in a post-Orientalist phase. Yet the structure of meaning remains despite statements that we know better. We now use Asia as if we have escaped the Orientalist frame. But have we? Unpacking this is harder than simply changing nouns. Unless we develop an understanding of the conflation of relational place and chronological time in how we understand ourselves and others, Asia will continue to be the Orient.

Asia is an accepted “reality”; it is the name of a continent. Yet, scholars also understand that Asia is a Western appellation that now applies to this geographical area. But this connection between idea and geography is frequently contested and indeed, is rather recent.⁵ We can trace the idea of Asia back to ancient Greece (who often lived in the geographical region now identified as Asia); for Herodotus Asia was the land to the east (today we would call this Anatolia or the Middle East). It is a realm that emerged in the imagination of ancient Greeks. This Asia is identical with the Orient, an other of a West. But interestingly, even for Herodotus Asians did not inhabit this land, Scythians, Persians, etc. did. Moreover, people in this Asia did not identify themselves as Asian. They were of a particular community, region, or empire; today they are from particular

nations. The word Asia (*yaxiya*) was introduced to the western Pacific by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century. When we move farther east to Tokugawa society, what we now call China was referred to as *shinkoku* (the characters for Qing and country), and one appellation for the people was *tōjin* (the characters for Tang and person). In one eighteenth-century school of scholars (*kokugaku*), the use of *chūka* (middle kingdom) was countered with *iteki* (barbarian). *Chūka* was not a place but a condition that was the opposite of *iteki*.

But today Asia is not just a relational designation, an over there from the ancient Greece or the West. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Asia was located onto a chronology of becoming; it gained temporality. Montesquieu discusses Asia as a static antithesis to the dynamic Europe; Voltaire recognizes it as the beginning of civilization, but one that had never advanced; and Hegel locates Asia (the “Oriental World”) as the first stage in the evolution of universal history (Hegel 1956). This shift fixed Asia as a repetitive “gesture of exclusion” that is constantly invoked to reinforce the superior condition of the Same, the West. I invoke Hegel for two reasons. He is central in the making of history, more accurately, the spread of historical thinking. Second, his universal history is the incorporation, the synchronization, of the world into one history, the naturalization of this gesture of exclusion. Rebecca Karl (1998: 1098-1101) points out that it was not until the late nineteenth century that Asia gains meaning as an autonomous geographical place. D. Graham Burnett (2003: 18) calls this synchronized world a geochronocultural tableau.⁶

In this synchronization, Asia becomes spatialized time, a space frozen in the flow of a new historical way of thinking.⁷ The recurrence of Asia as Orient, I believe, is from the naturalization of this homogeneous time. This spatialized time is produced from a conflation between the idea of the Orient, the Newtonian notion of time as absolute and external to humans, and geography. At this point it is important to bring up the epigraph from Marx, that man is an incarnation of time. Asia is both a creation of this time as well as a container for such time. Certeau (1986: 216) describes the centrality of time in the objectification of ideas such as the idea of Asia, “For three centuries maybe the objectification of the past has made of time the unreflected category of a discipline that never ceases to use it as an instrument of classification.” Even though it has been described as “empty” (Benjamin 1968: 261-64), absolute time plays an active role in our knowledge system. History has classified Asia as the first stage, as forever past. Asia shifted from a relational appellation to a fixed place in the ordering of the world. This unified history—the synchronization of the world--depends upon the idea of an absolute time for its veracity and uses geography to conflate idea with places to make it “real.”

At this point a detour is necessary. It is important to mention briefly the history of time and the history of history.⁸ For my purpose in this essay it is important to point out that our current understanding of time and of history arose between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The work of Sir Isaac Newton punctuated the abstraction of chronological time from human society in Europe and was a critical move in the rise of science, technology, and capitalism. The rise of a singular, linear chronology became common from the seventeenth century when Dionysius Petavius, working from Joseph

Scaliger's Julian period proposed the BC/AD system for reckoning years (Wilcox 1987: 203-08, Grafton 2002).⁹ A global or universal time emerged in the nineteenth century; in 1884 the International Meridian Conference organized the globe according to one time (synchronized to the Greenwich meridian), divided into twenty-four zones. Acceptance occurred slowly over the next several decades.

The emergence of modern history and its application to the world should be seen in relation to this transformation of time. On the one hand, this mechanical time offered a way for intellectuals such as Hegel to unify the myriad places of the world into one system. It is important to point out that this ordering is far from neutral; chronological time serves as a naturalized metric to emplot and measure development and progress. On the other hand, it provided a new metric for evaluating and ordering information. Events were now verified by dates; seriality, not situatedness, became the common mode of ordering information and some collective singular (usually the nation-state) became the subject of history, replacing deeds of exemplary figures. Finally, these changes were occurring simultaneously as the European world was discovering science, mapping (and claiming) the world, and creating new wealth. In short, our understanding of time and history is the foundation of capitalism, liberalism, and imperialism.

One outcome of this rise of a world history is a conflation of the different meanings of the word, Asia. The genius of this formulation is to take a relational idea (the Orient) and fix it along a chronological continuum, fixing it as forever the “not yet” (Chakrabarty 2000: 6-11). Otherness shifts from alterity to a fixed other as some past that reinforces the superiority of a modern West. As Asia becomes an autonomous geographic place it

shifts from a relational (and highly unspecified) area to a spatialized time (still rather amorphous). Asia/Orient remains as Hegel's first stage; he cites conditions closer to some idealized originary moment—Morality, closeness to nature, and a near absence of subjective will—to “prove” stasis. By temporally marking the otherness of the Orient, it is always already defined by what it does not have or has not yet accomplished in comparison to the West, the most advanced place. History has become an “instrument of classification.”

Recognition of the power relationship embedded in the word Asia existed well before Said's powerful exegesis.¹⁰ Intellectuals in the areas designated within Asia (from the Levant to the western Pacific) have long sought to alter the framework or path so that they were not trapped in the first stage. These intellectuals certainly differ considerably as does the conditions in which they operated. There is a similarity in that each recognized the partiality of what was presented as universal knowledge and each turned to history to create a knowledge system that did not predetermine the West as supreme. Interestingly, some of the best work on this problematic have come from ascendant modernizing places: Japan during the first half of the twentieth century, India especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century, and with the rise of “China” at the beginning of the twenty-first century from the Peoples Republic of China and Taiwan (Chen 2010; Sun 2000a, 2000b; and Wang 2011).

From the late nineteenth century Japanese intellectuals proposed a range of ideas to alter the hierarchy of history (presented to them as universal), and especially during the first decade of the twentieth century, intellectuals from other regions of Asia looked to

Japan for hope (only to be later disappointed by Japan's own imperialism) (See for example, Tagore 1917, Aydin 2007). For example, in 1891 Inoue Tetsujirō made what is now a rather familiar appeal in a speech entitled “Tōyōshigaku no kachi” (the value of Oriental studies). Inoue pointed to the European ignorance about Asia and believed that filling the lacuna will correct the deeper structural misconceptions, especially their misunderstanding of Japanese. Here, he recognized the hierarchy that embedded European disdain for Asians, but he believed that by adding histories of the East to world history it would show to Europeans that Japanese were different than Chinese and did not belong in the same category. The limitation of this method is that more information enters existing categories and thus offers greater detail and nuance. It has not upset hierarchical positions.

A decade later Shiratori Kurakichi began a different corrective. Shiratori, trained in the positivistic (and nationalistic) history of Leopold von Ranke, created what we might call today an alternate modernity.¹¹ His *tōyōshi* (oriental history) created a history that reordered Japan's subjectivity to be seemingly autonomous, but parallel that of the West. This history used stages of development like that of Hegel, but began in ancient China and ended in Japan. It, too, was a dynamic historical process that used Newtonian time, as if universal. This alternative modernity changes the subject of who is on top; Japan is the recent and superior place in Asia, and this system also argues that Japan will rise above the West. Tsuda Sōkichi offered a variation by attempting to eliminate the geographical link between Japan and Asia.¹² In 1938, in a move that begins to see the problem in history itself, he divided the past into *rekishi* (History or *Geschichte*) and

shigaku (histories or *histoire*); argued that there is no Asia, instead a group of nations, India, China, and Japan; and claimed that Japan is an Occidental, not Oriental or Asian place. This final claim, of course, returned Tsuda to the linearity of history.

One of the most interesting prewar Japanese intellectual/activist to deal with the problem of Asia was Ōkawa Shūmei. He was a leading intellectual in 1930s Japan: director of the East Asia Economic Research Bureau of the South Manchurian Railway, critic of the government, supporter of Japan's leadership of Asia against Western imperialism, translator of the Quran, as well as a keen critic of modernity. He lived his convictions: between 1932 and 1937 he was imprisoned for plotting to assassinate the prime minister and major industrialists, and at the end of the Pacific War he was arrested and indicted by the United States as a class A war criminal (he was not tried, having been declared legally incompetent to stand trial). To decenter both West and Asia Ōkawa turned to Islam to re-establish the relationality of these categories. He pointed out that Islam in the West is of the Orient, but from his Japanese perspective it is part of the West: "Islam is frequently called an Oriental religion (*tōyōteki shūkyō*), and that culture is called an Oriental culture. However, Islam is part of a religious family that includes Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity" (Ōkawa 1974: 4-5).¹³

These intellectuals understood the myth of universality as well as the unevenness that it maintains. They addressed some aspect of the way that representation was conflated with place. Inoue argued that it was necessary to fill in the gaps of knowledge; Shiratori dug into the Asian past to present an alternative modernity built upon the same absolute time and absolute space and historical thinking as Western histories; Tsuda questioned

Asia as a spatialized time and emphasized developmental level to position Japan alongside Europe, not China; and finally Ōkawa used other regions of Asia beyond East Asia (today this might be called transnational or inter-Asia) and then pointed to the incongruities between identification and place. In short, they sought to revise the universal, fill in the huge gaps, or reorder world history to eliminate the hierarchy embedded within the word, Asia.

These are all arguments that we hear today as well. Dipesh Chakrabarty's important *Provincializing Europe* (2000) and Naoki Sakai's (1997) influential work on the universal and particular have raised the awareness of the way Enlightenment epistemology constricts the places of Asia. More recently, a decentering of the West has become an important concern among intellectuals on the western Pacific. For example, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), invoking Takeuchi in his book, *Asia as Method*, calls for an inter-Asian Studies, an Asian Studies in and for Asia. Wang Hui goes further. He concludes, "The issue of Asia is not simply an Asian issue, but rather a matter of 'world history.' Reconsidering 'Asian history' at once represents an effort to rethink nineteenth-century European 'world history,' as well as an effort to break free of the twenty-first-century 'new imperial' order and its associated logic" (2011b: 62). These intellectuals are correct to point to the unevenness embedded in world history. Many do have promising suggestions—I will discuss some of these below. But we must also recognize that despite the effort of many very smart intellectuals there is a remarkably stubborn consistency in the way that "Asia" marks Asia. These accounts often echo the work of earlier Japanese intellectuals. For example, in Wang's last clause if we change "twenty-first" to twentieth

and eliminate new in “new imperial” the statement could easily have emanated from one of the prewar Japanese intellectuals. It does recall the impossibility that conscribes us.

Return of Time

Just as the renaming of Orient to Asia is superficial at best, the fix is elusive. It involves many interconnected components, and in particular, we need to go beyond the questioning of content of history and dig into the layers underlying history, itself. Certeau (1986: 203) hints at the complexity of untangling this misplaced concreteness, “The operation in question is rather sly: the discourse gives itself credibility in the name of the reality which it is supposed to represent, but this authorized appearance of the ‘real’ serves precisely to camouflage the practice which in fact determines it. Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it.” Asia gains a reality (spatialized time as the first stage connected to geography) through this synchronization of the world around a world history, but this “reality” camouflages a part of the practice—Asia never gains a history.

This recalls Miyoshi’s allegory. Asia serves as the incorporation of an area as static, the first stage, while in the slyness of the operation, there is a shift to another “reality”—specific cultures or nations within Asia—China, India, Persia, and Japan. History is operating at two levels. In Hegel (1956: 116) China is both the “oldest and newest,” and this emplotment is picked up by intellectuals in the non-West. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1973 [1875]: 142) laments that Japan’s past is twenty-five centuries of “continually doing the same thing,” and intellectuals on the subcontinent scour their past to write a history of

India (Thapar 2013). Specific cultures (or later nations) within Hegel's "Oriental World" offer empirical data. But these nation-states are being constituted as they offer evidence for a reality that gives reality to Asia. This "real" is one step removed from Asia, allegories that further camouflage the praxis. The pioneering world historian Donald Lach (1965: xiv) points out that the "Europeans' view of Asia was not a static one." True, there were many variations. But when he gets to specifics, he writes about China, India, Japan, and countries of Southeast Asia as allegories of Asia as if they are "Asia." This turn to the specific brings out the second level, the nation-states and their history had to be made; they are necessary conditions for a world history, but in their formulation the universalizing structure is elided.

The possibility of writing one's own history is a dream (more accurately illusion) of possibility out of this delimited condition; it is a powerful one.¹⁴ The turn to the specificity of a culture or nation-state as allegory for Asia also opened up the possibility/need for these places to redefine themselves either as separate from Asia or to redefine Asia. This is what Inoue did to correct for what he saw as a lack of knowledge. Shiratori formulated an Oriental studies in Japan to create an alternate modernity because of the partiality of the Western universal, and Tsuda denied an Asia (as spatialized time) for nation-states—China, Japan, and Korea—to separate Japan from the continent. More recently, Chen (2010) argues for an inter-Asian studies to "deimperialize" Asia and create a new Asian subjectivity independent of the West. And, Wang Hui (2011) searches for an indigenous history (Song era) for an alternate modernity of China. These and other examples bring out a seduction in this process—to extract oneself from the position of

stasis, one gets to write a history of one's own nation. History both traps and seduces as if there is a solution. Nation-states are homogenized into a single process (the geochronocultural tableau) but allowed to mine the same past for material to claim their own subjective autonomy.

Michel Serres's (Serres/Latour 1995: 49) metaphor of a race to describe this synchronizing world history and the centrality of the nation is apt; it shows the depth of the sly operation described by Certeau. "That's not time, only a simple line. It's not even a line, but a trajectory of the race for first place—in school, in the Olympic Games, for the Nobel Prize. This isn't time, but a simple competition—once again, war. Why replace temporality, duration, with a quarrel? *The first to arrive, the winner of the battle, obtains as his prize the right to reinvent history to his own advantage.*" This metaphor of a race strikes me as particularly apposite for the temporality of the modern, especially as it has imbricated our understanding of the non-West. If for the moment we stay within that modern history, it is seductive/or a threat for it presents a clear path (participate willingly or be swallowed up) of participation in a system that seems to offer all the same conditions, linear, "empty" time. The seduction is the illusion that the creation of one's national history will free oneself from stasis, its status within Asia.

This was the goal of Meiji Japan, *fukoku kyōhei* (rich country, strong military), the horizon of wealth and power. Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) was also caught up in this race. At the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war he writes, "The Japanese triumph over Russia was the first triumph of an Asian over a European nation in the past several centuries. ...All the Asian nations are astonished and overjoyed and have become

extremely hopeful. ...They therefore hope to smash Europe and begin independence movements. ...A great hope for national independence in Asia has been born” (Quoted in Wang 2011b: 30). This is part of Hegel’s genius as well as the genius of modernity—to establish a goal that brings units into the same order that then uses unevenness and the past to mark place and, especially, to explain why others do not measure up. The race is seemingly place-neutral, or in Enlightenment terms, universal. It is also scalable, reinforcing its perceived universality. It can be populated by nation-states, regions within nation-states, or individuals vying to succeed within society (it also structures universities and work within universities). The limitation of Japanese intellectuals was not their lack of reflexivity. Instead, they were caught within the sliness of history that obscured the making of Asia. Japanese intellectuals sought a resolution by modifying or changing the content of history, not history itself. They recognized the particularity of History, what Wang Hui calls world history, but the solution was to formulate a new relation of Japan to the world, using history. A Japan (here one can replace any nation-state) remained the central allegory of their work. It is easy to criticize them now, but this is also the very basis for area studies in the United States today—through the existence of an Asia (Asian studies) academics practice through the allegory of the national culture.

These efforts use the same linear, historical process—history of the world/history of a nation-state—but when placed on a different scale meaning changes. This is one place where the system camouflages “the practice which in fact determines it.” On the one hand in the synchronization of the world, Asia is frozen time; it is forever at the first stage. On the other hand, the national form restores chronological time through the

telling of the national becoming. This is the opportunity to create the identity of one's own nation, both in juxtaposition to the West as well as others within Asia. The hope is evident in the inquiry of intellectuals today such as Wang Hui who is in dialogue with many in Asia who are asking similar question about modernity in Asia. In Sun Ge's two essays, perhaps the best historical analysis of Japanese efforts, she ends with a query that recalls Takeuchi's statement that begins this essay, "whether Asia should be taken as a perspective of instrumental value, and on which level the question of Asia should be broached, is of concern to our own history" (2000b: 337). Sun Ge is very well aware of the role of the nation-state in trying to understand the concreteness of the idea of Asia. Yet, the allegory of one's own nation-state is also central to the problem. The search for a history of the nation-state masks the way that history fixes Asia as the originary state. Despite our critiques, we have operated within an idea of history that reiterates the chronological framework. Here the historian is operating like the workers in E.P. Thompson's classic essay on time and work. Workers protested abstract labor through the temporal system that served as the basis of it. They had accepted the categories of their employers and learned to resist within the metric that created those categories.¹⁵

The third fold of this sly operation is that the places of Asia are confronted by their past—both evidence of their lack as well as data for a history that shows progress. In the writing of their national history the very conditions that prove the stasis of Asia serve as data for demonstrating historically the uniqueness of the nation-state. All nation-states claim uniqueness, some essential, timeless quality. In Japan historians and national literature scholars described themes that run through epochs and characterize the cultural

becoming of the nation—Buddhism, Bushido, and a selective smattering of Confucianism; an aesthetic that reveres Nature and is tied to Shinto; and affiliation with some communal unit—family, village, or domain. These map directly onto Hegel’s evidence that the Oriental world is static—morality, closeness to nature, and near absence of subjective will. Japanese studies (and by extension Asian studies) has turned to these topics to give Japan specificity as if it is old and new.

It strikes me that this is where we still are today despite a call from Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian over twenty-five years ago.¹⁶ In the introduction to *Japan in the World* (1991: 7) they argue that “national borders and narratives that have been constructed by colonialism during the past two centuries are no longer viable units. Japan in the world as an isolated national entity is no more meaningful than any other claim to a unique national identity.” If a goal is to alter the fixity of Asia as Orient, then we must also recognize that (1) modern history itself was established to shift the subject from humans and their experience to a knowledge about nations, (2) the writing of history (of a Japan or China) is part of the very sly mechanism that uses time to objectify Asia as past, and (3) in the making of the nation-state, even though we don’t call it colonization (the emergence of the idea of settler colonization is an exception), similar conceptual structures and technologies that homogenized the world operate within the nation.

This is one of the lesson’s from Miyoshi, the impossibility of describing what constitutes the world without allegorization. This is not a reflexivity of history where we question a particular past or relations of one national culture to another. Instead, it is a recognition that our very subject position is a product of history, not an accumulated past

(it is that as well), but an allegory of history itself. This is one reason for the difficulty of writing this essay, the need to question the ways that I, myself, have both perpetuated and been trapped by history.

The invocation of the nation or history returns us to the presumption of the absolute space and absolute time of Newton. This form of time is now called classical time in the sciences, and geographers have shown us that the space I am discussing here (place) is social. At the very least we must recognize that they are historical, a way of thinking that emerged around 200 years ago. Even more, we should consider them myth. Certeau (1986: 220) writes, “Thus, historical discourse becomes the one possible myth of a scientific society that rejects myths—the fiction of a social relationship between specified practices and general legends, between techniques that produce and demarcate places in society and legends that propose a symbolical ambiguity as an effect of time.” Certeau’s statement is central if we are to unpack issues embedded in an Asia, the Orient, or *tōyō*.

The intellectuals I have discussed have called for a reflexivity, a hope that a different engagement with others will help us understand ourselves. Yet their return to either history as a way to establish an autonomous subjectivity, or the nation demonstrate the extent to which Newtonian absolute time and absolute space are embedded in our own knowledge system. I see Takeuchi’s call for “Asia as method” (2005) as a desire to shed oneself from these limiting frames. Yet, Takeuchi himself could not outline that method. He elevates, above all, the values of freedom and equality which emerged in Europe, but recognizes that even in Europe, these values were partial and weakened, especially through its imperial endeavors. He writes, “the Orient must re-embrace the West, it must

change the West itself in order to realize the latter's outstanding cultural values on a greater scale. Such a rollback of culture or values would create universality" (165). This statement recalls the attempts of many intellectuals described above. Yet he concludes the essay, "When this rollback takes place, we must have our own cultural values. And yet perhaps these values do not already exist, in substantive form. Rather I suspect that they are possible as method, that is to say, as the process of the subject's self-formation. This I have called 'Asia as method,' and yet it is impossible to definitively state what this might mean (165).

If one has followed my argument, there is a circularity in Takeuchi's appeal for "Asia as method." But perhaps it is the impossibility of which Miyoshi warns. If we "change the West," itself (here world history and the nation-state that is an integral component) then it would be impossible to return to either history or the nation. To do so is to use the conditions created by the West in the making of Asia. Even though Takeuchi does not delineate a clear alternative, we should not take the last clause as not knowing, but a recognition of the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of the endeavor. Asia as method is a reluctance to fall into established structures, patterns, or knowledge systems. It is an insistence on process and an opening into a different notion of subject. But we must also recognize that that process without examining the centrality of chronological time returns us to where we started. My current work explores the possibility of writing history that is not built upon chronological time (Tanaka 2016). In the quote above, Certeau reminds us that history—the fiction of social relationships—is an "effect of time." History as myth then is not untrue as much as an accepted truth that lives on because of practices rather than

empirical basis (See for example, Mali 2003). The epigraph from Marx is of modern society; man as an incarnation of time is our acceptance of modern history as myth.

Serres (Serres/Latour 1995: 48) wrote that our current understanding of time as an irreversible line “is the equivalent of those ancient diagrams ...which place the Earth at the center of everything.”

Wayfaring

As a conclusion that does not provide an answer, but hopefully goes beyond critique or lament, I find in Miyoshi’s stroll rich potential for moving beyond the riddle. The stroll is a way to recover uncertainty, heterogeneity, and perspective. Going through some of the neighborhoods often called seedy, dirty, etc. is less to glorify some authentic life located in the everyday or a subaltern than to think of a mode of seeing beyond what our modern forms of knowledge guide us to see. Serres (Serres/Latour 1995: 121-22) offers hope for a method where a stroll helps us move away from our riddle. He writes, “Allow me to say that what drives history is, precisely, failures. ...As for history, it advances and retreats at a shuffle, like an invalid. Humanity makes progress most often thanks to small children, women, old people, the sick, the simpleminded, and the poorest.” I hope that this becomes more than a glorification of difference. Serres recognizes that history has been a form of knowledge that maintains the status quo. A recognition of the margins—those outside of history—opens the possibility of change (as opposed to improvement).

Tim Ingold, in his recent book, *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), juxtaposes our modern world, not as the new against the old, modern versus tradition, or linear versus circular—those are points of a linear connection—but through different kinds of lines that do not

necessarily impose such a linearity of absolute time. The wayfarer moves *along*, taking in the surroundings, and inhabits that which he traverses. This is juxtaposed to the traveler who moves *across*, from point to point; an apt metaphor here is transport and production (again, status quo). Ingold argues that practices that started as traces of a gesture have evolved into an assembly of point-to-point connectors. He applies this formulation to narrative, and I would extend it to disciplines and spatialized time:

This fragmentation ...has taken place in the related fields of *travel*, where wayfaring is replaced by destination-oriented transport, *mapping*, where the drawn sketch is replaced by the route-plan, and *textuality*, where storytelling is replaced by the pre-composed plot. It has also transformed our understanding of *place*: once a knot tied from multiple and interlaced strands of movement and growth, it now figures as a node in a static network of connectors (75).

Wayfaring as an approach is an effort to think of the mobility and ways of knowing prior to the nodes that reduce diversity into generalizable units. The study of movement, the stroll, has purpose, but it is not to go see what one knows (the point-to-point or an alternate modernity that instantiates the nation-state), but to look for what exists (or existed) in and beyond the known. For Asia, it requires us to keep in mind the warning of Certeau, that time is a hidden classifying instrument of history. Miyoshi teaches us the humility that our perspective is but one of several possibilities. His is a methodology that willingly accepts a heterogeneity in the world (but an impatience for those academics who use conceptual structures that homogenize).¹⁷ It requires that we embrace uncertainty, unless our goal is to replicate the Same.

A growing number of scholars have employed this emphasis on mobility as a way of studying the past. They work from individual movement from which we can determine connections, commonalities, and regions rather than working from ideal types. Two such recent works are Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science* (2009) and Enseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim* (2006). Wang Hui (2011b: 45-49) moves in this direction when he finds hope in work such as Hamashita Takeshi's focus on trade networks in his study of tributary systems. The results are a much richer understanding of how activities in the past addressed particular needs and desires, sometimes, but not always morphing into our modern structures.

The emphasis on mobility suggests the need to incorporate different perspectives and questions the subject of scholarship. Indeed, that is a hope. Miyoshi's *As We Saw Them* (1979) is a terrific example. Miyoshi wrote this book in response to a bias he detected in Japanese studies in which, despite an affinity toward Japan, there is an undercurrent of assumed Western superiority in the way Japan has been judged by Western standards (Cazdyn 2010: xxiii). This recognition echoes those cited above, yet his approach is different. Miyoshi examined the interchange between Japanese and Americans in 1860 through the knowledge system of the actors, themselves. Tokugawa travelers were placed in the knowledge system of their bakumatsu period; Americans who contacted (or wrote about) these emissaries were also placed within their particularities of pre-Civil War United States. Moreover, there were many perspectives, not just a "Japanese" and an "American" view. They included sailors, translators, ambassadors, and reporters; while he finds generalizable propensities, there is no homogenized "Japanese" or "American"

view. These multiple interpretations of the new experience depended on the individual's knowledge system (low-ranking samurai, translator, ambassador, etc.), their surroundings and opportunities, and personal proclivities. Wang Hui finds a respect for the significance of the moment in his *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*. He invokes a "propensity of the times" (Ch: shishi) a concept that he attributes to Confucianism from the Song dynasty. It emphasizes the particularity of the contemporary conditions and events, rather than seeing them through a world history (Wang 2011a: 69-70). Wang invokes this propensity of the times as a temporality different than the teleology of world history or abstract time and recognizes that a different historical thinking would also be a part of this different temporality.

Today, many profess to move beyond the nation-state, often invoking the transnational. Few actually do so, but here, too, we might take some hints from Miyoshi's career. He started with the nation, English literature, then Japanese literature, but then moved on to intercultural relations, area studies as a knowledge system, global capitalism, and then the university as a site of knowledge production. It is obvious, but important to point out that there is a constant movement toward a questioning of the self.

First, we need not find a historical antecedent in a national past. As I have argued, to do so might solve one issue, but traps us within other reductive frames of history. Here, it is worth considering Georg Simmel's (2002: 11) opening statement in his essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and

the external culture and technique of life.” Simmel suggests that the nation and/or the state—historical heritage, sovereign power, external culture—might also be part of the problem.

Second, we can find similar work that argues for experience, learning, and knowing as culturally situated knowledge. This understanding has been growing over the past few decades. For example, Reinhardt Koselleck’s (1985: 267-88) “space of experience” is a recognition that not all societies (of the present as well as past) are organized through modern linear time. In psychology the introduction of the writings of Lev S. Vygotsky (Cole 1985, 1995) (a contemporary of Mikhail Bakhtin) was key to the understanding of culturally inflected modes of knowing, inter-subjectivity, and learning. One important area of cognitive science, distributed cognition, sees cognition as embedded within the immediate environment (Hutchins 1995). And, in anthropology “figured worlds” have taken up similar interpretations that knowing and understanding is conditioned by what individuals know and the immediate environment (Holland et al. 2002: 49-65). Miyoshi operated both within and beyond the structures of our modern knowledge system; his legacy to us is to continue pushing to move beyond those structures which we now know have been very reductive and homogenizing.

To end, those who only saw Miyoshi from afar, or through some of his more trenchant writings, would be surprised to see the word humility connected to him. Indeed, disagreeing with him was necessary but often harrowing. Yet there is an intellectual humility in the recognition of the impossibility of our (especially) current knowledge system, and he practiced it through a willingness to move beyond the safe confines of the

discipline or region of focus. He recognized, like Serres that the role of our knowledge system is to promote and maintain the status quo. This Serres argues (and Miyoshi would agree) is not thinking, it is classification and ordering, “Trying to think, trying to produce, presupposes the taking of risks, the living of one’s life, precisely, in the surge outside of the classings of the encyclopedias” (Serres 1995: 98). Miyoshi recognized, indeed defended, the importance of literature and Japanese studies, but these were tools that facilitate efforts to know and understand, not institutions (disciplines) that have value in and of themselves. In his last essay, “Literary Elaborations” (2010[2009]: 47), he moved again well beyond the issues Serres discussed here, toward the question of the global environment and human survival. He was pessimistic; cockroaches he asserts will survive humans. I hope that he will be wrong; I fear as well that like so many times, he again is more correct than me. At least by that time, I will not have to worry about any more of my insecurities.

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1Takeuchi was criticizing what is quite possibly the first Asian studies area studies program in the twentieth century. The Japanese study of the continent certainly predates the U.S. area studies programs which emerged during the Cold War. See for example, Cumings 2002.

2The phrases in Japanese were “nihon wa tsumaranai” (Japan is boring/uninteresting) and “nihon wa dame da” (Japan is no good).

3This issue has profound implications for the future of the university. See for example his “Ivory Tower in Escrow” (2010a [2000]). I am involved in the work of the Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition where concerns about culture and equity are often investigated through community-based research. Such work has the potential both to add a new dimension to the word public in a public university and to alter how we conceive of knowledge of others. For a fine overview of such work, see Lassiter 2005.

4Sun Ge (2000: 13) writes, “As difficult as it is to sort out the question of Asia, it remains an underlying thread running through the intellectual history in the modern world. Hence, we still have to grapple with the question of Asia as one that constitutes a totality in itself.”

5For attempts of Russian and Soviet scholars to reframe the Orient, see Tolz 2011, esp. chap. 2.

6Alternatively, Johannes Fabian, writes, “In short, *geopolitics* has its ideological foundations in *chronopolitics*” (1983: 144).

7Numerous intellectuals have discussed the spatialization of time. See for example Bergson 2002, Gross 1982, and Fabian 1983.

8The literature on each is vast. For my understanding please see my “History without Chronology” (2016)

9The Anno Domini system was created by Dionysius Exiguus (born in Scythia) in the sixth century but it was not used widely. I continue to use the BC/AD system in recognition of its historicity. The use of Common Era elides the connection of this form of chronology to the West and Christianity.

10Much of this history of history was recognized by scholars in the non-West as they sought to write a history of their own society. My *Japan's Orient* (1993) brings out a particular attempt by historians at Tokyo Imperial University during the early twentieth century. For historians at Kyoto Imperial University, the other important school of Sinology, see Fogel 1984. Sun Ge (2000a, 2000b) has written a fine account Japanese scholars on Asia throughout the twentieth century.

11See for example, Blackbourn and Eley 1984. Discovering an alternate modernity in China's past is also the goal of Wang 2011. For two fine extended reviews of his work, see Murthy 2006 and Zhang 2010.

12This recalls Fukuzawa Yukichi's well known essay from 1885, “Dissociating from Asia.” For a fine analysis of this line of thinking in relation to Asia, see Sun 2000a: 14-22.

13Ōkawa's argument bears several similarities with Russian criticism of East and West. See for example the description of Vasili V. Bartol'd in Tolz 2011: 50-54.

14It is important to recognize that the histories of European nations were written during the nineteenth century: for example, Leopold von Ranke's *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (History of the Romanic and Germanic Peoples from 1494 to 1514) in 1824, Thomas Babington Macaulay's *History of England* in 1848, and Jules Michelet's *Histoire de France* in 1855.

15Cited in Tomba (2013: 162, fn9). Thompson wrote, "They had accepted the categories of their employers and learned to fight back within them. They had learned their lesson, that time is money, only too well."

16My barometer is the work of Wang Hui, perhaps the most conceptually sophisticated of recent attempts within Asian Studies to reconsider Asia. Yet his *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, despite this sophistication and like some of Japan intellectuals before, is bound by China and is an effort to reconceive modernity there (to find an alternative modernity).

17Miyoshi criticized those who simplistically operated within such disciplines or places as if they are self-evident categories. A good example is his Miyoshi 2010 [1997].