

## Rethinking Asianism and method

LO, Kwai Cheung

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**Rethinking Asianism and Method**

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**By Kwai-Cheung Lo**

Hong Kong Baptist University

Kwai-Cheung Lo, Professor in the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, and Director of Creative and Professional Writing Program at Hong Kong Baptist University, is a specialist in trans-Chinese cinemas and cultural studies. He is the author of Excess and Masculinity in Asian Cultural Productions (State University of New York Press, 2010), and Chinese Face / Off: The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong (University of Illinois Press, 2005). His academic articles appear in Postcolonial Studies, Camera Obscura, Cultural Studies, boundary 2, positions: east asia cultures critique, Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, etc. Also a creative writer in Chinese language, his Chinese publications include short stories, poems, interviews, play scripts, cultural and literary criticisms. He has been working on the issues in relation to the racial minorities in Hong Kong and China. Some of the research output has already been published, including a book entitled Xianggang: duoyidianyanse (Colors of Hong Kong: Racial Minorities in the Local Community). Currently he is working on a project of ethnic minority cinema in China.

E-mail: [kwaiclo@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:kwaiclo@hkbu.edu.hk)

Mailing Address: 6/F, Sir Run Run Shaw Building, HSH Campus, Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

## Rethinking Asianism and Method

### Abstract

While contemporary Asian scholars are debating how they can avoid locking up themselves in an obsession with the West and discover new categories and new methodologies by inter-referencing and multiplying their frames of reference through grasping Asian shared realities that have moulded their histories and cultures, this essay looks back and closely examines postwar Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi's tantalizing idea of "Asia as method" by discussing why and how he calls for a "rollback" of Western values instead of forming a distinctive Asian paradigm in order to effect universal freedom and global equality. For Takeuchi, "Asia as method" may mean Asia courageously embraces the negativity brought by Europe as the path to a higher stage of freedom and equality.

### Keywords

Asia, Method, Takeuchi Yoshimi, Modernity, Eurocentrism, Epistemology

While it is debatable if the institutional practice of cultural studies is another kind of grand narrative in complicity with the ubiquitous globalized capitalism brought by the hegemonic West, there is always a strong desire from other parts of the world for a genuine reconstruction of knowledge paradigm and a radical intellectual reassessment in regards to culture, representation, ideology, modernity, postcolonialism, globalization and many other socio-historical issues. The project is concerned with examining and testing the founding ideas, narratives and systems of thought that today's Western-oriented world too often relies upon. Indeed, generations of Asian intellectuals are galvanized to strive for epistemological horizons specific to Asian societies and to ponder the meanings and directions of Asia at the time when the world has been dominated by European imperialism and Eurocentric mode of knowledge production. Pan-Asianism was once, in the early twentieth century, an idealist mission to foster a continental identity against Western hegemony and materialism, although the notion has then been appropriated by the Japanese military to justify its aggressive expansion to other Asian countries. In the post-war era, the calls for Asia's historical, cultural and political awakenings and the search for its autonomy remain strong and have repeatedly returned over several decades. One of the recent seminal works is Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as*

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3 *Method: Toward Deimperialization*, a thesis on epistemology with implications for  
4 subjectivity transformation, underscoring the significance of inter-referencing among Asian  
5 societies' common destinies in order to produce alternative perspectives and to distance from  
6 the obsessive absorption with the West and Western knowledge. While "Europe/the West as  
7 method" has been dominant in knowledge production over past few centuries, "Asia as  
8 method" was first proposed by Takeuchi Yoshimi in a 1960 lecture. His "method" totally  
9 goes against the post-war third world nationalist and decolonizing striving for autonomy or  
10 self-determination, since Takeuchi's notion of "rollback" is not to move away but return to  
11 the very core principles of Western Enlightenment that had derailed into the barbarism of  
12 European modernity. Yoshimi's insistence on the unfulfilled-ness and redeemability of  
13 Enlightenment resonates with Jürgen Habermas' call for completing the "unfinished"  
14 modernity project anchored in principles from the European Enlightenment. In this way, the  
15 "Asian method" may open up a possible dialogue with the West's own struggle for answers  
16 to the exploitative and violent development of modernity. With these historical contexts, I  
17 would like to examine the trajectories of these endeavors, even though their motives were  
18 always mixed.

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Shortly after the outbreak of the Pacific War in the early 1940s, Japan's ultranationalist theorist Komaki Saneshige, a Professor of Geography at Kyoto Imperial University, and his group attempted to establish for the rising anti-Western Asian empire a new geopolitics by means of which the world would be seen from the height of Japan (in Komaki's words, 'the height of takamanohara', which is heavens in Shinto myth) to counteract European global cartography. In his schema of reconstructing the world space, Komaki renamed different continents and seas under influences of the 'overcoming modernity' debate<sup>1</sup> and the projection of East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In his geographical nomenclature, America becomes 'East Ajia [Asia]', Australia 'South Ajia', Africa 'Southwest Ajia Continent', Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean as 'New Great Japan Sea' and 'Great Japan Sea' respectively.<sup>2</sup> The act of renaming is an ideological, if not phantasmal, manifestation of Japanese empire's aggressive ambitions to conquer the world. It also reveals how the referring function does not necessarily correlate to any described substance. Contingencies and rhetorical dimensions of geographical perception under Western organizing framework perhaps are also unfolded in Komaki's act of re-nominating. European cognitive mapping and name-giving activity of the world have demonstrated how hegemonic Western discourses exercise their power and control over almost all descriptive and non-descriptive lands, objects and their features by 'baptizing' them with words. The geographical representations constructed through nomination provide a condition for the operation of navigational colonization. However, Komaki's reversal of the geographical names to Asia-centered perspective cannot really remake history. Neither can it be anti-Western in epistemological sense. Given the fact that

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3 the notion of 'Asia' was a European invention, he only repeated the act of genesis by the  
4 Occidental itinerary of knowledge.  
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6 Far from offering an alternate world, the empire-building of Japan may allow Western  
7 powers to witness the features of their own development in a new kind of references that are  
8 unfamiliar and too regional-bound to them. Japanese imperialism of the 1940s has  
9 strategically appropriated the notion of 'Asia' to compete with Western powers as well as to  
10 legitimize its imperialistic expansion, colonization and leadership in the Asian regions. With  
11 such appropriation, however, 'Asia' was no longer defined as an abstraction or a given entity  
12 of the world dominated by forms of European thought but a construct of otherness refusing to  
13 be reduced to the same within the hegemonic sway of the Western perception. In the heyday  
14 of European imperialism, some Asian thinkers already strived to conceive a possible world  
15 after Europe. Fukuzawa Yukichi's idea of '(Japan's) dissociation from Asia', Okakura  
16 Tenshin's concept of 'Asia is one', Rabindranath Tagore's promotion of Asian spiritualism, or  
17 Sun Yat-sen's 'kingly way of Greater Asia' can all be understood as forms of resistance  
18 against the powers of Europe from an East-versus-West perspective. Asianism as a general  
19 term referring to a wide range of ideas and movements has created consequences in much of  
20 Asia since then. That may explain why even if the idea of Asianism or terms like 'Toyo'  
21 (Eastern Seas, the Orient) 'Toa', or 'Higashi Ajia' (East Asia) were notoriously defamed by  
22 Japan's military aggressions, postwar Japanese intellectuals, the left-wing in particular, still  
23 insistently (or perhaps even unwittingly) tried to reconfigure the notion of 'Asia' as a  
24 persistent form of defiance against Western hegemony.  
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27 Inspired by the wave of independence movements in many Asian countries and the  
28 establishment of a Chinese socialist state, Japanese progressive intellectuals sought to  
29 identify with something larger than a nation or a common race (tongzhong / dōshu)<sup>3</sup> that had  
30 served as a major ideological propeller for the World War. The collectivity of oppressed  
31 people became their point of identification. With idealization of socialist China as a vanguard  
32 against capitalism and imperialism, Japanese leftist thinkers reiterated the notion of Asia,  
33 which was ideologically amorphous and its cultural-political manifestations diverse and  
34 complex throughout Japan's modern history, as an important vision to strive for emancipation  
35 and for a better human future. Under the historical contexts of Jawaharlal Nehru's advocacy  
36 of pan-Asian non-alignment and Mao Zedong's promotion of Asian-African-Latin American  
37 Third-Worldism, the thoughts of Asia, in the minds of left-wing Japanese thinkers, are not  
38 merely anti-Western critiques expressing discontent with the Eurocentric international order,  
39 or nativist rejection of Western-styled modernity, but also orienting towards revolutionary  
40 and utopian visions in the Cold War age that has suffered from a paucity of political and  
41 cultural imaginations. The ideal of Asianism can be alive again in contemporary liberation or  
42 revolutionary movements in other areas of the world, and have, therefore, more than a purely  
43 Asian historical significance. It also provides a new incentive to theorize a global relationship  
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3 between liberation practice of people and epistemology of knowledge. To say the least,  
4 epistemology can validate the others as a subject of equal status and should not be  
5 manipulated as an instrument of domination by the sameness.  
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8 Scholars of the postwar generation are looking for a pre-modern or a lost Asia of the past,  
9 a temporality prior to the invasion of Europe, ie prior to the formation of the oppositional  
10 notions of 'Europe' and the 'Orient', for example, Hamashita Takeshi's study of  
11 China-centered tributary system in East-Southeast Asia before the age of European  
12 imperialism.<sup>4</sup> The focus is not simply historical but also epistemological: they are not exactly  
13 seeking a golden Asia-centered world system that edges Western domination (ie  
14 Asia-centrism versus Eurocentrism), but a different configuration, if not a newly emerging  
15 conception, of knowledge through which the truth and the complex reality of Asia can be  
16 examined. Postwar socio-political mayhems in the name of decolonization movements also  
17 created impacts on the operation of existing knowledge system. Ethical considerations are  
18 injected in the discourse of history and politics that targets at the previous attempts for  
19 hegemonic control. Instead of holding to the objectivity and neutrality stance, reason is  
20 redefined as something that should be in support of salvation and of constituting the lived  
21 experiences of oppressed people, though it does not necessarily lead to the idea that  
22 everything boils down to subjective interpretations and perspectives. Cultural critic and Lu  
23 Xun scholar, Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977) has advocated for 'Asia as method' (Hōhō to  
24 shite no Ajia) which is commonly grasped as a (China-centered) form of resistance in  
25 occupied Japan of the 1960s when the US power fully monitored its Asian allies for Cold War  
26 strategic concerns in order to maintain the hegemony and legitimacy of postwar order in Asia  
27 by containing contesting communist movements. Takeuchi's recondite but tantalizing idea of  
28 'Asia as method' might not be fully comprehended and decoded, but his call for resistance  
29 and alternative model through a different understanding of Asia did provoke a lot of  
30 responses from Asian intellectuals both in the public arena and the academy (Takeuchi was  
31 the one renowned for being capable of subverting 'pure' scholarship of Japan's academic  
32 institution by intertwining it with the public discourse of controversy).  
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### 45 **What the Method is**

46 That 'Asia as method' has been interpreted and modified by different scholars to deal with a  
47 variety of issues<sup>5</sup> may urge us to look back closely at Takeuchi's autobiography-based  
48 essay/lecture 'Asia as method'. While the word 'method' is inserted in the title of Takeuchi's  
49 famous essay that has induced interesting imitations, there is seemingly no specific  
50 methodology involved in relation to how he understands and anticipates to 'Asia' even  
51 though the context of his writing was all about searching for method.<sup>6</sup> While later critics take  
52 Takeuchi's formula 'x as method' by filling it with various terms for different  
53 discursive-political purposes and engaging in debates on the ontological status and  
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3 epistemological functions of that 'x', there is relatively little analysis focusing on the  
4 meaning of the term 'method' in all those discourses. Perhaps, it is presumed that since 'x' is  
5 an equivalence of 'method' in the formula, if the status of 'x' is solved, then 'method' will not  
6 create any new problem. However, are 'x' and 'method' really identical? How significant the  
7 'method' may mean to object 'x'? Method is usually understood on the basis of the specific  
8 nature of the object to be reflected and investigated. 'Asia' is a matter of method rather than a  
9 matter of content because we cannot count on having this 'object' deduced from previous  
10 understandings, perceptions and articulations from either Europe or imperialist Japan as a  
11 'result'. But did Takeuchi provide us any method to realize his 'Asia'? With what method can  
12 his 'Asia' be understood? Can generic definition of method as some kind of procedure,  
13 practice or practical application in accordance with the principles of epistemological  
14 exposition be pertinent to Takeuchi's 'Asia'?

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16 In regards to any concrete methodology offered in the essay, Takeuchi mentioned his  
17 own experiences of studying China – at first, he was taught to adopt a sheer textual approach  
18 which was dominant in Japan's traditional kangaku (Han studies) and shinagaku (sinology or  
19 China studies) scholarship. But such method entirely overlooked human presence. Later, he  
20 took his first trip to the neighboring nation. After interacting with the people there, he  
21 discovered the severe inadequacy of existing sinology and endeavored to change the very  
22 way Japanese study China by exploring the 'heart' (kokoro) of actually living Chinese. But  
23 such an attempt to study China is only the beginning of the 'method'. After making  
24 comparison between Japanese modernization as something introduced externally from the  
25 West and the Chinese counterpart as the one being forged from its inherent ethnic-national  
26 characteristics and impulses, and after calling for a new way to understand modernization on  
27 the basis of a more complex framework than that of East-West binary oppositions, Takeuchi  
28 did not simply stress the differences between Asia and Europe or within Asia. Instead, he  
29 came to embrace general humanity and universalism by stating that 'men are substantially the  
30 same, even in their historicity. Modern societies are thus the same around the world, and we  
31 must recognize that these societies produce same types of people. Likewise, cultural values  
32 are everywhere the same'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, universal values like freedom and equality, though spread  
33 from the West, were also weakened by Europe's colonial invasion and exploitation in Asia  
34 and Africa. Although Takeuchi reiterated Tagore and Lu Xun in order to point out how Asian  
35 poets are able to see severe limits of the Western powers, the notion of Europe has not been  
36 thoroughly discredited, in Takeuchi's heart, either by imperialism, racism, transnational  
37 capitalism, or by every act of colonial atrocities committed in the name of bestowing  
38 European civilization upon the dominated. In his vision, while Europe (Takeuchi understands  
39 the United States as 'pure Europe') is and would be incapable of effecting universal freedom  
40 and global equality,

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42 the Orient must re-embrace the West, it must change the West itself in order to realize the



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3 latter's outstanding cultural values on a greater scale. Such rollback of culture or values  
4 would create universality. The Orient must change the West in order to further elevate  
5 those universal values that the West itself produced. . . . When this rollback takes place, we  
6 must have our own cultural values. And yet perhaps these values do not already exist, in  
7 substantive form. Rather I suspect that they are possible as method, that is to say, as the  
8 process of the subject's self-formation. (Takeuchi, 2005: 165)

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11 However, Takeuchi immediately added at the end of his essay in a modest tone that  
12 '[t]his I have called "Asia as method" and yet it is impossible to definitely state what this  
13 might mean' (165). Perhaps 'Asia as method' cannot be conceived as any substance, but only  
14 as subject. But what is method if it cannot even tell us the steps to be taken for performing  
15 certain task? Does Takeuchi imply that, other than 'method', 'Asia' is something which is  
16 impossible to be defined? Criterion for determining 'Asia' is no longer referential (ie the  
17 word corresponding to the thing named) but only phenomenal. Stable meaning of 'Asia' is  
18 suspended though it can be comprehended in phenomenal and cognitive sense. It becomes a  
19 signifier, or an object of a dynamic and changing perception and cognition, in which a subject  
20 in the process of its self-formation finds out his or her understanding of it is being constantly  
21 modified. Each new discovery may add a new dimension to the previous constituents that are  
22 being contradicted, expanded, transformed, repeated, or allowed it to be open to the wildest  
23 arbitrariness. 'Asia' then is shifted from a referential code to a poetics at the cost of producing  
24 definitive meaning, namely a poetic representation which is not based on the reproduction or  
25 imitation of an external historical referent. As such, the 'method' contains possible negation  
26 of any affirmation or certainty.

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29 Perhaps, Takeuchi never sees 'Asia' simply as a 'method' to serve itself, but an  
30 exemplarity of certain 'theory' that testifies its truth-value. As long as theory is understood as  
31 a system of concepts attempting to bestow a global explanation and pretension upon the field  
32 of knowledge, it has to be verified by praxis to arbitrate if it is a speculative or ascertainable  
33 form of knowledge. Theory, for Takeuchi, may refer to Western notions of freedom and  
34 equality which were introduced to Asia through colonial invasion. But Europe has failed to  
35 deliver these values and make them available to the world other than Europe itself. The  
36 claims to truthfulness of Enlightenment theory have been undermined because of  
37 conspicuous discrepancy between its ideals of universal freedom and its real practice of  
38 exploitation and enslavement throughout the world.

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41 Asian resistance against the advancement of Europe, according to Takeuchi, is doomed  
42 since it only functions as a referent 'out there' for Europe to define itself and to ascertain its  
43 cognitive perception of the world. In other words, Asia's resistance acts as an important  
44 precondition for the reach of Europe's knowledge into phenomenal categories of time, space  
45 and subjectivity. The form of resistance grounded on Asia may mean both in opposition to  
46 and in the meaning of resting against Europe. Ambiguity of resistance and submission is at  
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3 stake in the situation. Asia's resistance to Europe, though failing if seen from the angle that is  
4 caught up in the realm of representation, inscribes rather than effaces the universal dimension  
5 of the theory brought by European aggressors. Conceived of in relation to 'theory Europe',  
6 'method Asia' seems to be subject to it, and when theory goes awry, method also appears  
7 arbitrary and problematic. But Takeuchi's re-articulation of 'Asia as method' tries to liberate  
8 it from the hold and supremacy of theory by converting it into a figure of agency. It then  
9 becomes the mission for Asia to 'rollback' in order to ensure that the 'theory' and the 'method'  
10 sustain each other. That may explain why rollback can create universality. Takeuchi suggested  
11 that Asia can find itself and create its own subjectivity paradoxically by re-embracing the  
12 West. Is 'Asia as method' a way to override 'Europe as theory' which is actually lagging  
13 behind rather than self-posing as something superior or always in advance? In other words,  
14 Takeuchi's 'Asia as method' may provide a possible model that Asia's project of  
15 self-formation and reestablishment of cultural values does not have to be anti-Western.  
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22 By re-embracing Western values, that is to say, the 'rollback', Asia is not necessarily a  
23 passive and inferior imitator or follower, since it is a willing act of 're-embracing' than a  
24 simple embrace of Western values that historically refers to the way how Asian countries  
25 were coerced to adopt Western culture for their own survival. On the contrary, 'Asia as  
26 method' with the 'rollback' can shape the content of theory and offer some kind of didactic  
27 productivity and strength, constituting not exactly a complementary, symmetrical nor  
28 antithetical relationship with the theory. Asia is then envisioned as both heirs to and  
29 revolutionaries of European values. In such schema, like method and theory, 'Asia' and  
30 'Europe' could be both ally and enemy, or neither, at the same time. The 'rollback' or  
31 re-embrace suggests neither hostility nor alliance but their simultaneity materialized in a  
32 virtual presence together without clear distinction or borderline. Different from revolt against  
33 the West, the act of rolling back treats the European other (as oneself) as though they were  
34 friend and enemy at the same time. The logic of reason states that to be both friend and  
35 enemy is a contradiction, but this logic fails to condition a newly possible relation. Neither  
36 actual kindness nor hostility but a third comprising both that prepares a symbolic place for  
37 their actualization. The simultaneity of hostility and alliance may not refer to an East-West  
38 relation but also allude to the historically ambivalent position of Japan to Asia and the West  
39 in inter-war periods: a cruel invader of other Asian countries but also a (self-claimed) Asia  
40 defender against European colonialism. The Pacific War waged by Japan indeed carries a  
41 double nature, that is to say, it is a war as sheer conquest of an Asian aggressor over other  
42 Asians as well as a war with collective efforts of Asia against Western imperialism. The  
43 ideological slogans of 'liberating Asia' and 'new world order' promoted by Japanese military  
44 did resonate with Asian collective desire at the time, even though postwar decolonization  
45 movements in Asia cannot be attributed to Japan's political ambitions. The entangled  
46 histories have complicated what Takeuchi means by 'rollback'. 'Rollback' could be  
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3 productive in the sense that it acknowledges the legacy from Europe (and Japan as well), no  
4 matter the brutality and violence accompanied with it, as an inherent, built-in part of Asian  
5 cultures in modern era since Asia has actually taken part in it by sharing same temporality (let  
6 alone Japan was one of the modernity-driven imperialist powers), and displaces the one-sided  
7 resistance that depicts native nationalists against European imperialist encroachment on the  
8 rest of the world.  
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12 Against current calls for the formation of distinctive ‘Asian theory’ or ‘substance’  
13 supposedly developed from local, indigenous vantage points, ideas, practices and experiences  
14 in order to challenge Western hegemony and transform Eurocentric epistemological  
15 foundations, Takeuchi’s views show how he fully understood anti-Western drive for crafting a  
16 Asian (or post-Western) school of thought, or Asian own model of modernity, is actually  
17 motivated by an undying inferiority complex and a vain attempt to create nothing more than a  
18 poor copy or a derivative discourse of Western theory. Takeuchi’s argument could be easily  
19 misinterpreted as a simple reinforcement of civilization hierarchy by which only Europe can  
20 produce theory (indeed Europe is proud of its unique and exceptional mode of theory or  
21 knowledge production, which is able to constantly criticize, reflect and transform itself).  
22 Apparently, modern ideas, knowledge, and values have to be transported from Europe to the  
23 rest of the world. However, it would be futile, for Takeuchi, to search for an actual or  
24 substantial difference at the level of content to which signifiers ‘Europe’ and the ‘Orient’ refer.  
25 The notion or representation of ‘Orient’ or ‘Asia’ is an external imposition that cannot lead to  
26 any inherent self-identity. More important is that, Europe can never be simply ‘Europe’ either.  
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### 35 **Ambiguity and Coincidence of Enemy and Ally**

36 In Takeuchi’s another famous essay ‘What Is Modernity? (The Case of Japan and China)’, he  
37 writes, ‘[s]imply being Europe does not make Europe Europe’ (2005: 54). Europe’s self-same  
38 identity cannot be obtained from claiming a naturally given Europe. Instead, Europe must go  
39 through incessant tensions and conflicts, including confronting the heterogeneous like the  
40 ‘Orient’ and risking the danger of losing oneself, so as for the European self to be identified  
41 structurally and securely with the idea of Europe. European Enlightenment thinkers looked to  
42 the Orient for their origins. European oriental studies during the eighteenth and nineteenth  
43 centuries rendered the East into various orients (the Asian elements invented in the founding  
44 classical myth of Europe) from which Europeans create a narrative of origin, comprise a  
45 remote past against which progress is measured, project and romanticize a mysterious  
46 primitive realm where innocence and purity can be accessed. The oriental object constituted  
47 by European epistemological institution has become something that Europe is heavily  
48 dependent upon. Takeuchi described how Europe cannot claim natural ownership of itself and  
49 its identity. There seems to be some kind of obscure forces occupying Europe, tearing it apart  
50 from within, and driving it to aggression and destruction: ‘there existed in Europe something  
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3 fundamental that supported this instinct, making the invasion of the Orient inevitable' (2005:  
4 54), and 'in order for Europe to be Europe, it was forced to invade the Orient. This was  
5 Europe's inevitable destiny, which accompanied its self-liberation. Its self was confirmed  
6 inversely by encountering the heterogeneous' (2005: 55). It is evident that the logic of  
7 alienation of self in the other is in play. But how can Europe really attain its liberation if it is  
8 pulled and driven by those instincts and impulses in all direction? Europe's self-alienating  
9 instincts were grounded on 'the will of capital, a speculative spirit of adventure, the Puritan  
10 spirit of pioneering, or yet another instinct for self-expansion', or 'something [that] has been  
11 deeply intertwined with the essence of what is called "modernity"' (2005: 54). How can  
12 Europe get outside the circuit of modernity drive? Does it differentiate itself from itself by  
13 positing its otherness and then overcoming this difference, ie homogenization of the world?  
14 Thus, the 'truth' of Europe's relating to its otherness or to the heterogeneous is its  
15 self-relating, or self-movement. The logic of self-circulating capital governing Europe creates  
16 its own material conditions and converts them into suitable moments of its own expansions.  
17 So can such circuit be taken as a model for revolutionary process of emancipation?

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19 On the other hand, Takeuchi believed, Asia after European invasion and the  
20 accompanied modernization process can never simply go back to claim its own self either,  
21 since some 'new things were born in the Orient that had never previously existed' (2005: 54),  
22 one of which was 'the phenomenon of Oriental capitalism' (2005: 55). If Asia believes it can  
23 still get rid of the 'new things' brought with European encroachment, it will only fall further  
24 because resistance against Europe, in Takeuchi's analysis, only leads the Orient to  
25 'increasingly Europeanize' (2005: 55-6). 'Oriental resistance was merely the essential  
26 element that made the world history [in Hegelian sense] more complete' (2005: 56). History  
27 of resistance in the Orient was history of modernization, ie Europeanization. In other words,  
28 the stronger Asia desires to unite oneself with its own self-same identity, the further it  
29 actually alienates itself and remains removed from it. The resistance, or self-liberation  
30 movement, of Asia only reproduces European hegemony. Then, in Takeuchi's logic, shall  
31 Asia resist or not? Perhaps, his notion of 'rollback' is already a rejoinder: instead of simply  
32 fighting against universal values imposed by Europe and asserting oneself as a heroic  
33 confrontation with external power, 'Asia' announces, after its process of resistance, total  
34 surrender by giving up its particular content in order to revolutionize Europe, to elevate and  
35 realize universal values that the West produced. In this sense, Takeuchi's idea echoes with  
36 Habermas' appeal for a 'Europe' that is beyond Eurocentrism. This 'Europe', in Habermas'  
37 view, should pull itself together by learning the lessons of history and correcting its own  
38 mistakes in order to play its "appointed civilizing role" (2006: 5).

39  
40 Takeuchi denounced Japanese modernity as nothing<sup>8</sup> since it zealously copied the West  
41 while praising China for its overcoming of European modernity that has been violently  
42 imposed upon Asia. Making reference to John Dewey and Bertrand Russell's comparative  
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3 comments on Japan's apparently successful modernization and China's nascent modernity  
4 when they had visited the two countries in the 1920s, Takeuchi concurred with them that  
5 Japan's achievement was only superficial whereas modernization in China was internally  
6 generated and had greater potential. Japan at best, in Takeuchi's words, is only an 'honor  
7 student' or 'model student' who closely imitates and chases after Europe in order to become  
8 'as European as possible' without much resistance. Appropriating the Hegelian dialectic of  
9 master and slave, he called Japan a 'slave' who does not know that he is a slave ('The *slave* is  
10 a *slave* in thinking that he is not a *slave*' [79. Emphases in the original]), and believes that he  
11 is a master attempting to emancipate 'backward students' (ie other Asian countries). However,  
12 a master, if he is a real one, will never emancipate the slaves or eliminate the institution of  
13 slavery altogether, since the status of the master is totally dependent upon the slave. Takeuchi  
14 was aware that once Hegelian dialectical machinery is set in motion, the immediate beings of  
15 all things will be changed and some imperceptible complex meanings may take place. In  
16 today's situation, it is facile to state that no one can save the slave except by him- or herself.<sup>9</sup>  
17 Freedom and equality cannot be granted to the slave from the master. The slave's own  
18 self-emancipation has to go through a trial of risking one's life or negation. What it means is  
19 the slave has to recognize in the negativity that threatens to annihilate him or her as the very  
20 core of his or her subjectivity. The slave has no other choice but to identify fully with this  
21 negativity. In other words, freedom and equality can never come from the master. There is  
22 only a substitution of one master by another. The price one pays for such identification is the  
23 sacrifice of all particular content or the so-called essence.

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25 Takeuchi's denial of Japanese modernization and applause of the Chinese one may have  
26 a lot to do with his longing for a revolutionary China and his guilt feeling toward the crimes  
27 committed by Japan against China and the rest of Asia. He dramatically remarked that '[t]he  
28 absence of resistance means that Japan is not Oriental, but at the same time the absence of the  
29 wish for self-preservation (the absence of the self) means that Japan is not European. That is  
30 to say, Japan is nothing' (64). However, his critique of Japan's modernity as 'nothing' has  
31 brought out the dilemma many Asian countries have confronted since the nineteenth century:  
32 how to become modern while at the same time discarding the derogatory categorization of  
33 being 'Oriental' but not losing an identity. Apparently, in Takeuchi's view, Japan has failed to  
34 create its own sense of self in relation to Asia and Europe. His critique of Japan's modernity  
35 as nothing embodies the ambiguity of Japan's view of itself and its position in the world  
36 constructed by Europe. While abandoning traditional Chinese learning and knowledge, Japan  
37 was not able to find any real alternative other than adapting itself to the organizing  
38 frameworks of Eurocentric world history. However, in the cliché of dialectical reversal, utter  
39 nothing or negativity could be converted into new higher positive order. There may be no real  
40 effective reversal from negative to positive, from retreat to advance, or from defeat to victory.  
41 But there can be a shift of position, a pure formal change through which retreat is re-viewed  
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3 as advance.

4 Re-embracing the West, or re-rolling / rewinding of its values, for Japan as nothing,  
5 means more than imitating, accepting the superiority of Europe and paying homage to  
6 precursors. Rather, it is an act for itself not to divorce from modernity but to innovate, break  
7 with, displace, surpass, rework the hegemonic episteme, reject established patterns and  
8 redefine the universal. Unlike Habermas' rehabilitating project of revivifying reason as an  
9 agency, Takeuchi's attempt to propose new model for defining universality beyond the  
10 confines of rationalist discourse but based on ethical considerations is not novel. Many  
11 predecessors have endeavored to do so by incorporating and converting many Western  
12 elements to explain and objectify the Orient into some positive features. But he is no longer  
13 pointing at one alternative that follows or precedes another in space and time. The historical  
14 necessity of a universality always turns out to be an imperial and monolithic order that  
15 englobes all differences and imposes an order on them. Against the rational principle of  
16 non-contradiction or excluded middle, Takeuchi proposed a semblance of universality or a  
17 concept of equivocal duality that allows mutual convertibility of A (A for Asia?) and not-A. It  
18 is a concept that naturalizes the excess of negativity, allows the other as stranger to cross my  
19 threshold, penetrate and become a part of me, inside me, but outside my control. Contrary  
20 actualities only set things apart in exclusive disjunction. But it is the reciprocal convertibility  
21 without distinguishable border that gives rise to an a priori locale for cooperation and struggle  
22 to act out at the same time. Such reciprocity undoes the closure of reason and enables a new  
23 relation to create one's subjectivity by suspending and reconsidering the meanings of alliance  
24 and enmity. In a way, the subject fully identifies with or embraces the external force that  
25 threatens to annihilate him or her. The self-formation of the subject, as Takeuchi proclaimed,  
26 would have the presence of the real/objective other within it. The other does not originate in  
27 the subject but comes from outside and acts as outside agent taking effect or taking charge  
28 within. Perhaps, 'Asia as method' is designed to recognize this objective alterity and institute  
29 it as part of the reality. At the end, 'Asia as method' may mean that Asia is not necessarily  
30 embracing the positive values. Instead, it courageously embraces the negativity (ie the  
31 annihilation of one's particular content or essence) brought by Europe as the only path to a  
32 higher stage of freedom and equality. It is an affirmation mediated by negation.

33 Denying himself a Marxist,<sup>10</sup> Takeuchi did not see 'Asia as method' an unending  
34 conflict between Asia and Europe, reaction and progress, tradition and modernity, past and  
35 future. Neither is it a dialectical struggle of the opposites. The manner of taking sides is only  
36 illusory. But re-rolling of idealism and universal values, with the rejection of false ideals, is  
37 also not an easy line to tread. What should be overcome is not capitalist modernity brought  
38 by the external force but the subject's immanent 'pathological' content / essence. To  
39 re-embrace the West for Asia is to alienate itself from its presumed natural givenness. Europe  
40 in such method is seen as a supranational universalism in opposition to narrow or even  
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warring nationalist identification. 'Asia as method' as an openness is not regulated by any governing theory, pre-existing transcendent order, or enforced closure of system. That 'Asia as method' cannot be fully accounted for by the set of pre-existing conditions may suggest that we encounter the limitation of our totalizing epistemological frame of reference or abstract objectification. But it also refers to something more than the ideational, that is to say, the incoherence of material reality.

The recent rise of some Asian nations, China and India in particular, may create hopes that their successful economic developments can lay ground to the emergence of a different structure of knowledge. What may happen is a working through of many of the ideas and concepts that have been influential and governing since the nineteenth century, in order to decide what needs to be renewed or kept and what discarded. It can be recognized in the calls for cultural studies not only to be concerned with real politics but also be critically self-reflexive. While "Asia as method" is by no means a reversed hierarchy of "Europe/the West as method," the ongoing project of many Asian scholars to look at a wide range of categories and frameworks developed from multiple contexts in order to advance a different understanding of world history would continue Takeuchi's vision in a convoluted way.

### Notes

1. The 'kindai no chokoku' (Overcoming Modernity) debate aimed to overcome limitations brought by modernization modeled on the West in order to reconstruct Japan's own cultural wholeness and uniqueness. Pacific War was interpreted as a revolt against modern West and its hegemony over Asia. For detailed discussion of the historical background and ideological implications of the 'Overcoming Modernity' symposium held at Tokyo in 1942, see Harootunian (2000) and Calichman (ed.) (2008).
2. See Saneshige (1942: 158-192). Quoted from Chang (2004).
3. Civilization, a European concept borrowed by the East, historically is another rallying point for the supranational link of Asia, although its discourse both transcends nationalism and serves the territorial nation-state. See Duara (2001). On the other hand, religious affiliation and commonality also strengthened the idea of pan-Asianism. Many Asian thinkers have endorsed Buddhism as a means of allying Asia.
4. See the works of Hamashita Takeshi (2008) in English translation, for instance. Prasenjit Duara's recent essays on Asia could also be understood as a similar attempt. See Duara (2010).
5. See, for instance, Yuzo (1996 / 1989); Nobukuni (1999); Sun (1995); Chen (2005). English version is in Chen (2010: 211-255).
6. Takeuchi's talk, in the lecture series by Maruyama Masao, Otsuka Hisao and other scholars, was given at International Christian University on methodology in intellectual history. These lectures were published as *Shisō shi no hōhō to taishō – Nihon to Seiō* (The Method and Object of Intellectual History: Japan and the West) edited by Takeda Kiyoko in 1961. For English translation of Takeuchi's essay, see Takeuchi (2005: 149-165).
7. See Takeuchi (2005: 165)
8. 'Nothing' is not necessarily bad in the tradition of Japanese philosophy. Nothing can be anything that constitutes a higher form of universality. In pre-war periods and during the wartime, many Japanese thinkers attempted to theorize Japan as neither Asia nor Europe but being the only



nation knowledgeable in both Oriental and Occidental civilizations, therefore serving as the ultimate symbol of universalism. Instead of suffering from either cultural indebtedness to China/Asia or cultural borrowing from Europe, Japan as nothing can transcend the distinction between the Orient and the West by providing a higher ontology in nothingness.

9. For Hegel, what is crucial is the self-liberation of the slave. Even if a person is born a slave and raised by a master, as long as they become conscious of their freedom and wills it, they are free in the moment. 'For the personality and freedom of my will are essential parts of myself', writes Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*. Requoted from Buck-Morss (2009: 61).
10. Takeuchi wrote that he lacked any beautiful memories of communism in Japan since he 'had in fact seen quite a few former communists commit tenkō [ideological conversion] during the war, after which they collaborated more actively than did many noncommunists. Thus [he] did not join in when communism became popular after the war but rather stood back and kept an eye on the movement, all the while feeling [himself] slightly old-fashioned' (Takeuchi, 2005: 152).

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