

Eurasia Foundation International Lectures, Fall 2021 Semester
The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology” Lecture Series (14)
Title: East Asian World Theory in the Humanities Discipline in Japan

For the 14th lecture of the Eurasia Foundation International Lecture in the 110th academic year of the Chinese Culture University, we invited Professor Lee Sungsi from the Faculty of Letters, Arts and Sciences at Waseda University to give a lecture on the topic entitled “East Asian World Theory in the Humanities Discipline in Japan.” The lecture was conducted in an online format.

Professor Lee first elaborated on the key points of this lecture. “East Asian World Theory” is a historical theory created by Professor Nishijima Sadao of the University of Tokyo in the 1970s, which aimed to position Japanese history in world history. In Post-war community of history studies in Japan, this theory was viewed as a grand theory. The discourses in history textbooks in Japan and academic articles have been still following the framework of this “History of East Asia” until now. However, this theory has been criticized by Japan, South Korea, China and other countries since then. Although criticized, at least the regional concept of “East Asia” used in the community of history studies in Japan is still influenced by the “East Asian World Theory” framework.

It has been half a century since the theory was created. The main axis of this lecture will be the critique of the “East Asian World Theory” and the “investiture system,” which was the origin of “East Asian World Theory,” and try to demonstrate the scope and its effectiveness of this theory.

The history and culture of “East Asia” as demonstrated by others

Professor Lee first defines what is the so-called “East Asia.” The history education and the community of history studies in Japan defined “East Asia” as China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. The news media refer “East Asia” to ten ASEAN countries plus the three countries (China, Japan, and South Korea). Scholars have developed their interest in East Asia again because of the economic development of NIES (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore). This area was viewed as the Chinese character cultural circle, Confucian cultural circle, and Chinese cultural circle; thus, it was viewed as the same cultural circle.

The indicators of East Asian cultural circle proposed by Professor Nishijima are as follows: ① Chinese characters (means of communication), ② Confucianism (political ideas, ideological system that regulates the family system), ③ Chinese-translated Buddhism (sinicized Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism), ④ Laws (legal system). An area that shares the above indicators can be set as a cultural circle. The definition of “East Asian World = Region” refer to the area that the “investiture system” that represents the relationship between the Chinese emperor and his subjects (political circle) and the above-mentioned cultural circle overlapped.

Critical thinking about the validity of the East Asian world theory

Professor Lee pointed out that the criticism of Professor Nishijima’s “East Asian World Theory” can be sorted into the following two points:

① Question directly related to Professor Nishijima: Some criticized that this theory confuses the political circle with the economic circle. Because Professor Nishijima himself also said that this “area” should not be regarded as a fixed one, this led to the problem of confusion and ambiguity in the geographical scope of this theory.

② Questions derived from Professor Nishijima's theory: This theory only validates and theorizes the implementation of the era of investiture (6th-8th centuries) and of a limited region (China and Eastern countries). However, its applicability cannot be examined in other regions.

The problem consciousness of East Asian world theory: Why is the formation of East Asian cultural circle=Chinese character circle a problem?

From what kind of problem consciousness has the East Asian cultural circle and the East Asian world become a research problem? To solve this problem, it is necessary to remove the ambiguity of the regional scope of "East Asia," and take a clear view of the problems in the formation of this cultural circle.

Nishijima's Concept of World History

Professor Nishijima was influenced by Uehara Senrokub (上原專祿), a historian who co-authored the textbook with him in the 1950s. Professor Uehara constructed his world history view based on his research interests that by including Asia and Africa to the world, he challenged the Europe-centric view and focused on the structure of control and subordination. Professor Nishijima applied Professor Uehara's theory to think about the complex facet of world.

The aims of East Asian Theory

The East Asian world theory proposed by Professor Nishijima aims to prove that China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan have been closely intertwined with each other from the ancient to the present in the regional world. Therefore, the research aim of Professor Nishijima's world theory is whether it can convincingly explain the process by which the Chinese character cultural circle is formed. Demonstrating this process is also the history researcher Professor Lee's research.

To overcome the East Asian world theory as the goal

The East Asian world theory is inseparable from the problems faced by Japan and the world in the 1950s and 1960s. Therefore, in the modern era of the 2020s, it is impossible to discuss the East Asian world theory in the same way. This means that we must consider the significance of the formation of the East Asian cultural circle at this juncture in time. Without this premise, the "formation of the East Asian cultural circle" cannot be discussed. When looking for the solutions to problems that cannot be overcome from a single country perspective, we should observe from a wider regional perspective to find the commonalities and solutions to problems. Professor Lee believes that it is necessary to think through historical perspectives to achieve this goal.

(Web Leenk: <https://eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/index.php>)

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