

**A REGIONAL COMMUNITY THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL FLOW OF
HUMAN RESOURCES
AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION***

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1. The Northeast Asian Cultural Community

In recent times, notwithstanding existing structural differences between nations, there has been an upsurge in corporate and cooperative ventures that strive for increased exchange of capital and technology. Also, the proliferation of information industries coupled with the spread of new communication and technological systems has largely facilitated a cross-boundary expansion of knowledge and culture. An increase in migrant labor and interracial marriages in both Korea and Japan has aptly shattered the myth behind a singular and homogeneous base of their ethnicity. As a whole, the promotion of socio-cultural exchange, widening mutual economic relations, and the new 'ethnoscapes' imbedded in the process possibly predict the formation of a new international order among the nations involved.

In 2004, the Korean National Research Council for Economics, Humanities and Social Sciences established a Special Committee for a Northeast Asian Cultural Community. The purpose of this committee was to promote, through various movements, the designation of Northeast Asia as a proper and unified cultural community. The committee has endeavored to build up the regional

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concept of Northeast Asia and the concept of cultural community, and carried out various research projects to find out ways to construct a transnational cultural community in the region of Northeast Asia.

These issues are linked to the growing competition and conflict over the amassing of energy resources; the military and diplomatic tensions surrounding the Korean peninsula; the mutual dependency within market economy systems that strive towards common prosperity; the protection of the environment against degradation and pollution accompanying the rapid development of China; the expansion of cooperative technological systems and the exchange in human resources. Thus, it is fair to say that without an expansion of communitarian relations based on a philosophy of coexistence, these important issues cannot be properly addressed and fully resolved.

National leaders have reiterated their rhetoric of regional community, but their assertions are based around the common recognition of possible gains in military security or the economy. These are nothing more than strategic words imbued with a sense of prudence and caution. Today, we find ourselves in a stage of planning out our future world from a rational and discerning perspective, trying to construct a transnational society or a cross-boundary regional community of cultural understanding and respect. Let us assume that the first stage is an individualistic mind frame that considers basic feelings and actions. This first stage would then be followed by one where rational thought and practical knowledge coalesce to form a world based on general ethical values. This would be further developed by the emergence of a cultural community characterized by mutual respect and recognition.

The community we envision does not revolve around a notion of singularity, nor does it opt for a singular form of dominance and control. Instead, it is based on the ideal of multiplicity, one predicated on the facets peculiar to each nation and ethnicity. At the same time, once we go beyond

the boundaries of a given nation and ethnicity, we can then begin to imagine a borderless world, one based on a common ideal and a set of reciprocal values shared by its members. This effectively takes shape around a common discourse of universal ethics and morals. However, it is hard, if not impossible for people to go one step beyond the confines of an individualistic and laissez-faire stance. In order to construct and maintain the multifaceted, heterogeneous aspect of an ethnically diverse community, it is first necessary for all of us to practice reciprocal and mutual relations in the context of daily life so that we can build up our fundamental conceptions of diversity. Secondly, it is important to nurture our capacity to accommodate and adapt to the increasing multicultural environment.

Until now, these ideas of 'cultural community' have been underestimated on account of the significant political and economic relations existing between nations. However, it has become urgently necessary to acquire adaptive ability to a new inevitable environment where transnational flow of cultures and human resources constitute an everyday social reality.

2. Difficult Conditions for the Northeast Asian Community

Yet there are many difficulties on the road to our dream of regional community. The difference in perspective between China and Japan has amounted to a veritable clash in the advancement of a regional community, both in terms of power and physical boundaries. Furthermore, the notions of ethnicity and nation in Northeast Asia are invested with an ethnocentric bias.

Since the 1980s, people in Northeast Asia have increased awareness of their neighboring countries through participation in various international sports tournaments, cultural festivals, and economic cooperative networks. A change in consumer culture following economic growth has evidently contributed to the widening of a certain worldview. The growth and proliferation of the tourism

industry, in conjunction with the popularization of visual and information technologies, has animated exchange, especially in the field of popular culture. This in turn has made it possible to envision a regional cultural community, one that is effectively larger than immediate national boundaries.

In spite of this development, there is a need to confront the often-concealed, hidden forms of ethno-nationalism that still exist today and sometimes emerge with explosive force. This spirit of ethno-nationalism not only is responsible for hindering a just or impartial understanding of history but also has given rise to conflicting histories. This has led to the aptly named ‘wars on history’ that take place between countries within this region of the world. National leaders as well as the media take advantage of this conflict to devise a ‘proper’ version of history, one that is based on the centrality of one’s own motherland so that a sentiment of ethno-nationalism is revived and reproduced. Therefore, we need to properly address and deconstruct these issues from a regional perspective rather than from a limited historical frame of a single homogeneous nation-state.

The recent explosion of the ‘Korean wave’ phenomenon has raised the possibility that ‘ordinary people’ from all regions of Asia can develop an Asian emotional base to create a transnational space for mutual understanding. At the same time, however, the emerging growth of a shared consumer culture is prone to a set of problems. These problems stem from how this shared medium of popular culture can exacerbate a country’s image based on a set of linkages made between a country’s economic growth and its possibly belligerent national strength. Notwithstanding this superficial development, one finds nestled within these very foundations a space that separates and maintains cultures in their heterogeneous state. This could turn into an expression of sheer hostility towards a close and neighboring culture or nation.

If we take this latter point into consideration, we should call for the establishment of transnational networks of civil movement in the region of Northeast Asia. This, in due course, will initiate a movement based on exchange among peoples whereby we can establish a cultural foundation for reciprocal understandings across national boundaries.

Nations of Northeast Asia have endured the ravages brought on by the historical memories of colonial violence and the post-colonial cold war. The last fifty years were marked by a feeling of hostility among these nations, whereby distrust and distorted images of one another further created a void in between these national boundaries. In the 1980s, this foundation of ignorance and bias began to be radically replaced by an increase in trade relations which broke open these formerly closed spaces and borders. Thus, until the present day, this exchange was largely based on trial-and-error attempts. Furthermore, when regional networks of civil movement began to take shape, their emergence took place in disparate situations. The situations were marked by differences in the worth and attributes of civil society, as well as differences that each country had vis-à-vis its own population. It is imperative to state that the ability for such civil movement networks to exert an influence across borders is based on a precedent of understanding, itself the result of effective consolidation in the exchange amongst people.

3. The ‘Cultural Abilities’ for Construction of a Community

The transnational cultural community that we strive for is based on the ideal that each member enjoys an enriched quality of life within it. In other words, an individual should be able to incorporate elements not ‘native’ to his or her own world so that they become part of that very world he or she inhabits. In order to achieve this goal, the first necessary step is the implementation of cultural exchange. To be more specific, exchanges in the realm of popular culture have become the most effective vehicle for creating a space for communication and understanding among peoples

and nations. By consuming other cultures in everyday life, people are unconsciously brought closer to someone else's world.

Expansion of communal life beyond national boundaries ultimately is possible only through the efforts made between and amongst people opting for an exchange of cultures. This type of contact will take various forms until mixed marriages, employment, and migration become more commonplace. In other words, a regional community can only be realized when people 'localize' their contacts with others to the extent that other people's problems are perceived as one's own. In order to attain this, we must develop the philosophy that we can survive only when we are able to adapt ourselves to surrounding cultures. Simply stated, community is something that allows us to live together while acknowledging our differences.

Needless to say, under the wave of globalization, transnational flows of culture and migrations of people have gradually expanded. However, the cross-border movement of people and resources is quite often blocked by the self-protectionism of nations. Migrants are easily degraded to a new category of social minority in the host country as they fall victims to social marginalization; thus they are not allowed proper economic and legal opportunities and are unable to break out of the cycle of poverty. Since the government of the host country applies citizenship as the legal criteria to grant access to formal social and economic activities, the immigrant communities are excluded from the social guarantees that others enjoy by virtue of being citizens, and thus their voices are not heard. Their status as outsiders is cemented to a further extent as it becomes hard to adequately 'fit in' a certain society. Citizens of the host country explain this marginalization in terms of the immigrants' foreign and different cultural characteristics rather than on the host country's often complex and highly bureaucratized legislative mechanisms of isolation. Furthermore, citizens overlook the fact that these immigrant groups find employment in areas that many other people refuse to engage in,

and it is these same people who then raise the objection that these ‘new arrivals’ are a source of anguish and frustration.

In order for these immigrant societies to acclimatize and ‘fit in’ to their host country, they need to learn the cultural differences inherent in the host society, and they also have to overcome the bias and prejudice against them. Furthermore, the host government or state should make specific legal provisions to accommodate these groups. On top of that, the host country should provide instituted means through which these newly arrived peoples can retain and ‘practice’ their own cultures. A cultural center should function as a space where immigrants and ‘natives’ come to understand one another through cultural exchanges and experiences. Also, educational institutes are needed to provide special vocational and cultural training for immigrant peoples, especially of the younger generation, to qualify them as members of a newly forming multicultural community.

In this context, I would emphasize that universities and other research institutes have to take the role as centers that promote cultural diversity and function as a locus in bridging cultural differences. Universities can no longer confine themselves to the task of raising the so-called competitive edge of the nation. Rather, they must take an active role in creating transnational cultural flows and promoting dissemination of science and technology common to all member nations of the regional community. Thus, it is important to institute cooperative networks across universities in Northeast Asia that are devoted to such enterprises.

4. Conclusion

In order to construct a regional community for peace and common prosperity in Northeast Asia, peoples in the region have to overcome their inherent and self-centered views that prioritize issues of political hegemony and maximization of economic power centered on their nation-state. One way

in which this 'common idea' can be created is to facilitate transnational flows of people and cultures in everyday life. Also, this should come about not only through the forms of a market economy but also through communal efforts developed in a broader scheme. A network of intellectuals in the region should be established as a most efficient body of practice to mobilize and provide impetus for this type of exchange.

In today's world, it is evident that intercultural exchange across borders has become a fixture of reality that does not discriminate in favor of elites. Nevertheless, a network of intellectuals is needed to set the stage for a future where a powerful group of elites cannot raise and maintain borders with the intention of keeping individuals trapped within politically charged boundaries. In reality, this dream of greater cultural community may not easily or necessarily materialize in full-fledged form, as nations in this region vary widely in their systems of administration and state ideology. However, the movement toward this idea cannot be blocked by any type of political power, and it is important for us to realize that the multifaceted transnational flow of cultures, information, and technology, and most of all, the migratory movement of people are slowly creating a new world, which cannot be put on hold by political agendas or economic interests.