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From Comparative Studies to Intercultural Studies: How Could East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies Inform Us Today?

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“East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies” is a seminal academic concept put forward by the research team of Kansai University, Japan. The rationale behind choosing “interaction” (交渉, Chin.: Jiaoshe; Jap.: kōsyō) over “communication” (交流, Chin.: Jiaoliu; Jap.: kōryū) when phrasing the concept is the research focus the team has positioned: cross-border, interaction, and reciprocal views between the periphery and the center. In June 2007, the program of the Institute for Cultural Interaction Studies (ICIS), jointly applied by the scholars of history, ideological history, and East-West language contact research at Kansai University, was approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan. In October of the same year in his keynote speech at the preparatory conference of Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia, Professor Yu Ying-shih (1930–2021) presented a sophisticated discussion on the theories of civilization by Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975) and Samuel Huntington (1927–2008). He pointed out the significant contribution that the promotion of cultural interaction studies and the establishment of such an international institute have brought to the development of relevant research domains. In June 2009, the Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia (SCIEA) was formally established in Osaka, Japan. The tenets of the Society are: to keep finger on the pulse of the dynamic cultural formation, interaction, conflict, transition, and integration in East Asia; to provide multi-dimensional insights into cultural interactions, i.e., formations of mutual interferences, drawing upon a myriad of methodologies of the humanities; and to promote the academic exchanges among scholars in East Asian countries.

With respect to academic research, the team scholars advocate global perspectives and creativity in research activities. Despite its research object on

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“cultural interaction in East Asia,” the focus also involves “cultural interactions between the East and the West in the scope of East Asia” as well as “cultural interactions across East Asian region.” Meanwhile, in the analysis of the substantive characteristics of cultural interaction, the scholars transcend and break through the boundaries of so-called “one-to-one” comparison between two countries or regions, and thus, appropriately apply methodologies that feature “many-to-many” approach to analyzing multiple countries and regions. The geographical division by countries, civilizations or territories can no longer draw the line for research scope of today.

Since 2010, the Society has published annually the English version of the *Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies*, mainly on the research findings obtained by the members of the Society and current developments of the Society.

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The comparative religionist Max Müller (1823–1900) argued that a person who knows only one religion knows nothing in his quote, “He who knows one, knows none” (Müller, 1872, p.11). This view does not only apply to the field of comparative religion; in fact, studies of world history and cultural history in the 20th century are basically carried out drawing on the methodology of comparative research. In the field of sociology, the most profound achievement of comparative research is by Max Weber (1864–1920) in the sociology of religion. Weber started his research in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he showed that some ascetic Protestant sects, particularly Calvinists, gradually adapted their doctrine to justify their pursuit of rational economic profits as a manifestation of their blessings by God. Later, in *Religions in China: Confucianism and Taoism*, *Religions in India: Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, and *Ancient Judaism*, he continued to focus on the impacts of religion on economic activities and the relationship between social classes and religious ideals. It is through comparative study that Weber established the unique characteristics of Western civilization. Comparative studies allow us to go beyond our own cultural boundaries and to engage in dialogues between different historical trajectories and experiences. Such dialogues could evolve from either a comparative study with clear reciprocal influences or a parallel study with no clue of any effect. In today’s view, although the comparative approach is an effective way that researchers often adopt, it also bears some apparent pitfalls: The first pitfall is the tendency of teleology. While conducting the comparison, researchers would naturally resort to current common standards as yardsticks. For example, since the 19th century, almost all historians have based their studies of German history from the Middle Ages to the Age of

Absolutism on the understanding that the ultimate goal of German history is to establish a unified nation-state. As thus, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) characterized the German peasant war as a failed revolution (MEW, 1976, Bd.7, p.248). The second one is to ignore internal differences of the research objects. Given that the comparison often depicts discrepancies and variations in the grand view, it is less sensitive to detect the uniqueness from the inside of each case. Philosopher Liang Shuming (1893–1988) grouped human cultures into three categories: Western culture, Indian culture, and Chinese culture. In his view, Western culture values material life and continuous exploration with scientific spirits and democratic consciousness; Chinese culture emphasizes ideological content, a state of coexisting with nature; Indian culture focuses on spiritual life, which leads to a culture with sophisticated religious activities. However, such induction completely obliterates the heterogeneity and differences among the three cultures (Liang, 2011).

Therefore, the “interaction” perspective can potentially address the problems caused by comparative studies. Kenneth Pomeranz’s (1958–) *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* is an exceptional work in this field. Through a thorough investigation of England and the south of the Yangtze River regarding the social and economic situations of Europe and East Asia in the 18th century, Pomeranz argued that the world existed as a pluralistic society before the 19th century; there was no economic center and the West did not possess any prominent and unique endogenous advantages. It was after the full development of European industrialization in the 19th century that a dominant Western European center had practical significance. This leap was mainly due to the British making the most of raw materials from North America and coal resources in the adjacent areas where the steam engine invented by James Watt (1736–1819) came into play. In the book, Pomeranz did not only employ the standard of British Industrial Revolution to measure the Yangtze River Delta, but reversely using the south of China as a measurement to examine England (Pomeranz, 2000, pp.111–207).

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“Cultural Interaction” intends to identify the relevance among cultures, whereas “the Study of cultural Interaction” is an in-depth and systematic research domain of the relevance. Of course, studies of related topics should make sure they draw upon appropriate and corresponding research models. After the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1840, Chinese intellectuals began to realize that the transition was “a fundamental change unseen in centuries” in their history. From 1860 to

1900, dozens of Chinese scholars and officials brought up the transition in their articles or memorials to the throne. The awareness of the “transition” was due to its uniqueness from the changes of previous dynasties. That is to say, the changes in China’s political, cultural, and economic environment were substantially different from the past, and barely any experience could be drawn upon from the past to inform their interactions with Westerners. The German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) referred to the transitional period between early modern time and modern time as “Sattelzeit” (saddle period), which means a curvy valley between two mountains rather than a straight line. In his opinion, there must be an interim period in the transition from tradition to modernity. In the German context, it refers to the late period of the Enlightenment and the period around the French Revolution, i.e., from 1750 to 1850 or 1870. This period is marked as the watershed of European society transitioning from the pre-modern time to the modern time, as well as the divide between the collapse of the old world and the rise of the new world (Koselleck, 1979, p.15). Looking back at China, although Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666) had introduced the world map and the Western calendar to the Chinese at the end of the 16th century, Europe had not yet begun its complete transition to modern society. As thus, Matteo Ricci’s world map *Kunyu wanguo quantu* (坤輿萬國全圖, “Great Universal Geographic Map”) ended up as just an ornament in the palace of Emperor Wanli (萬曆, 1573–1620) (Li, 2015, pp.51–52). Only by the second half of the 19th century, when the European powers had successfully entered modern society, the “cultural input” as part of their overall transformation, along with the political and economic reforms, was able to be embraced by Chinese society. In this sense, without the theoretical model of “saddle period,” it is difficult to examine the “interaction” of different times in connection with the structural level embedded in social change.

Despite the significance of comparative methods, the results are limited to the comparison between two parties, which does not change the party per se. “Interaction” is different as it indicates an intertwined relationship. It embodies an entangled history and connected history, a history of transformation and change.

Suppose we refer to the development of cultural research as a transition from national cultures to comparative culture and then intercultural studies. In that case, intercultural research must be grounded on the premise of acknowledging the multi-subjects. It focuses on the reciprocal interaction and impacts among multiple cultures, explores the rich intercultural potentials embedded in each other’s culture, and ultimately accomplishes the transformation among one another. In other words, although comparative culture involves the comparison between different cultures, it is only possible to achieve the transformation in intercultural research.

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Global history emphasizes the relevance among historical events, a perspective similar to the philosophy of “Yuanqi” (緣起, Jap.: engi) in Buddhism. The Chinese Buddhist term is a translation from the Sanskrit word *pratītyasamutpāda*. The Chinese character “yuan” literally means conditions, while “qi” means origination. The literal meaning of the two characters together refers to taking place subject to certain conditions. That is to say, all the objects, phenomena, and social activities in the world arise out of combinations of causes and conditions, existing in the continuous cause-and-condition relationship. Thus the essence of “Yuanqi” philosophy is a theory about causal relationships among objects. As a result, there comes the saying “because there is something here, there is also something there; because this thing exists and that thing exists” in the *Samyutta Nikaya* (雜阿含經, Chin.: *Za a han jing*, Jap.: *Zō-a-gon-g yō*, Skt.: *Samyuktāgama*, Taishō No.99). It literally means that the existing things are interrelated, which leads to the genesis of things. “Yuanqi” represents the origins of Buddhism and the theoretical underpinnings of all Buddhist schools and sects.

The Chinese Buddhist Huayan School often refers to the concept of “Yuanrong 圓融” in the phrase “Liuxiang yuanrong 六相圓融”. It means mastery, no bigotry, and no obstacles. More precisely, things can maintain their original positions as perfect and complete as one mode, whereas they can interact with one another without contradiction or conflict. It certainly does not mean a simple insert. Instead, essential changes take place on both parties. Buddhism refers to separated, independent parties as “Geli 隔歷”. Basically, “Geli” will never bring about any essential change. From the perspective of “Geli,” even if people accept a thought or a method, it will remain as a separate part instead of merging into their own system. At most, it exists in a state of “inlaying,” that is, embedding one object into another but will never merge into a whole. Therefore, Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), the founder of the Tiantai School, believed that “the distinction lies in the subtlety of dharma. The superficial dharma deals with the three truths separately, while the subtle one perfectly interfuses them” (Editorial Board of Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture, 2020).¹

Therefore, many concepts in Chinese Buddhism provide insights into understanding the research object in the broad context of reciprocal relationships. These concepts are not only embedded in Buddhist philosophy; they also hold significant implications in cultural studies. Therefore, it requires continuous effort to reveal their profound meaning and apply them to research.

¹ Zhiyi, 1924–1929 (Taishō, 33-182a): 分別者，但法有龜妙，若隔歷三諦，龜法也；圓融三諦，妙法也。 Cf. Key Concepts, 2020, 1016.

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Obviously, the studies of “cultural interaction” should not constrain themselves to a single discipline. We strive to carry out integrated investigations through perspectives outside the traditionally classified research methods. Any discipline is the artificial product of a particular era. Therefore, to achieve more remarkable research progress, we need to break through disciplinary division barriers and embark on interdisciplinary research at a broader and higher level. The intercultural “cultural interaction studies” stress problem awareness and devote to understanding history from the interactive network perspective; therefore, substantiating the necessity of breaking original disciplinary boundaries. Meanwhile, its research focuses also displays the discipline’s structural complexity, characterized by diversity, multi-level, openness, nonlinearity, instability, and uncertainty.

Since its establishment in 2009, the Society has held annual academic conferences promoting interdisciplinary themes. For example, the third conference themed “Revolution of 1911 and Asia,” the fourth one “Calamities in East Asia,” the fifth “Writing a New World: East Asia’s Cultural History and Vision,” the ninth “Global View of History and East Asia’s Knowledge Transfer,” and the tenth “East Asia’s Knowledge Transition and Transcendence: the Global Network in the History of Science and Technology.” All the themes mentioned above could not be accomplished by any single discipline, nor any scholars of the same country. Meanwhile, these problems are interrelated; therefore, they need integrated and joint research efforts with multi-disciplinary and multi-faceted academic resources. “Cultural interaction studies” leads the research trend towards multi-objects and multi-disciplines, thus, will inevitably made interdisciplinary research an indispensable and generally adopted research model. Consequently, the research paradigm will transit from the previous “non-discipline” stage to the stage of a dominant discipline with interdisciplinary nature and then to the stage of integrated interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary research has genuinely become a new phenomenon, “Paradigm Revolution” coined by Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996).

The renowned publisher, De Gruyter, will take over the publication of the “Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia” in 2021 and aims to develop the Journal into a prominent periodical in the foreign language journal array of Beijing Foreign Studies University. The initiation builds upon cross-language, cultural, regional, and disciplinary research cooperation and resource integration in the spirit of exploration. It will explore new visions and methods for the research in East Asian cultural interaction.

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