

Preface

East Asia as a Unit in Historical Research

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It is without doubt worth considering how to understand and situate East Asia as a unit in historical research. Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History*, took the unit of historical research as his point of departure in his comparative study of the basis for the development of civilizations. Toynbee raised the issue of the unit of historical research because research limited to the national perspective greatly restricts the historian's outlook. Indeed, Europe does not have a single people or nation that can articulate the challenges it faces. For this reason, he advocated comparing and investigating the phenomena of history under the broader concept of civilization.

From this perspective, it makes even greater sense to regard East Asia as a unit of historical research, for East Asia is not only a composite culture; it is also a physical space. The new academic research field of East Asian cultural interaction studies broke through the former notion of analyzing historical issues in terms of nations and peoples, established East Asia as a composite cultural unity, focuses on cultural formations, contacts, diffusions, and changes within this region, and seeks to interpret the entire pattern of cultural interaction from a multipolar yet overarching perspective.

Of course, merely taking East Asia as the unit of historical research is far from sufficient. We also have to determine how to carry out historical research. Here Pierre Bourdieu's field theory is an analytic framework and observational perspective worthy of our attention. As Bourdieu said, "A field can be defined as a network, or configuration, of the objective relations between positions." Obviously, East Asia forms a complex field comprising many aspects, such as economics, politics, culture, etc. From this perspective, we can say that the following topics of historical research are worth expanding on:

First, how did the field of East Asia form? Establishing past spatial connections creates a foundation for carrying out research on East Asian culture.

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Research on the Mediterranean Sea region by Fernand Braudel, the most outstanding representative of the Annales School of history, provides hints for the development of East Asian research. Only by revealing the interactions among the countries of East Asia via land and sea routes, and clarifying the means by which contacts were made within East Asia and between East Asia and the rest of the world, can we provide a foundation for explaining the cultural interactions that occurred in this space.

Second, what were the media connecting the field of East Asia? Scholars have long recognized that the new media play an important role in promoting progress in human societies. Two often cited examples of such theories are Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere and Benedict Anderson's notion of print capitalism. Binding East Asia together were not only changing modes of transportation but also a network for circulating publications. Such media have had the effect of increasing the influence of events in the region and of causing parties outside the region to take notice of East Asia. Hence, we should closely examine the history of Catholic and Protestant missionary activity in East Asia, the spread of books on Western learning in East Asia, the history and influences of linguistic contact in East Asia, etc.

Third, how should we situate East Asia in the framework of world history? Research on East Asian cultural interaction has often been influenced by historical research. In addition to the history of new cultural contacts and the history of books, the theories and methods of world history have also helped us to better understand East Asia. But how should we combine regional history and world history? The case of East Asia provides an example worthy of study. For example, in the spread of Western learning, the General Conference of the Protestant missionaries of China, an organization central to the diffusion, was an international organization of no one particular country and people. Likewise, the appearance of newspapers transcended national borders, in that newspapers arose from Protestant missionaries' expansion of their efforts to proselytize.

We can thus say that discussing world history together with regional history is a new topic that should further our understanding of East Asian culture interaction. The Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia established as topics for research "Using the Media to Look at Various Features of Cultural Interaction" and "Regional Aspects of Cultural Contacts and Their Influence." These topics offer new directions and themes for future research on East Asian cultural interaction.