Special Contribution

Basic Issues of Cultural Interaction: A European Perspective

Jörn Rüsen*

Abstract

The paper concentrates on the issue of ethnocentrism in cultural interaction. It briefly mentions the East Asian case and mainly tackles the European one. It gives examples of ethnocentric attitudes in history, but its main point is presenting examples of overcoming the unbalanced evaluation in expressing cultural identity and difference by means of new forms of generating a sense of history. Examples are discussed as indicators of new approaches to dealing with morality beyond the highly problematic distinction between good and evil along the line of self and other.

Key words: ethnocentrism, historical culture, identity, Europe, morality in history

1. Cultural Interaction in East Asia: The Issue of Identity

I would like to focus this paper on a very specific issue of cultural interaction, the issue of identity formation through historical thinking. History is an important element and medium of cultural interaction. By representing the past for the sake of the present and future, it tackles the very specific and fundamental relationship of a people to their own selves and self-awareness. This relationship is called cultural identity, although the term is highly controversial. But if the term "cultural identity" is defined as an answer to the question of who somebody is, we should not have any difficulties in using it. Its existence as a cultural phenomenon and its importance for human life are evident. I think we all can agree that it is history, in its various forms and

* President Emeritus, Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, Essen; Professor Emeritus of History, University of Witten/Herdecke,Germany.

manifestations, that tells people who they are.[1]

I am deeply convinced that in cultural interaction in East Asia, elements that matter to identity are involved.[2] This is already the case when the term "East Asia" is used. It defines a certain kind of belonging, of communality, of sharing something important for the order and set up of the life of the people. It defines borders beyond which others who do not belong to one's realm of life live. So when we discuss the issue of East Asian relationships, there will always be a silent participant in this discussion: the non-East Asian. Since I belong to a people outside the borders of East Asia, I am interested in reflecting on my role as a member of the excluded peoples in contributing to a definition of the realm of East Asian interaction.

It would be too easy to define the realm of interaction we call East Asia by the otherness of non-East Asians. Even discourse within East Asia has elements of belonging and of being different, of self and otherness. The reason is simple: East Asia is a network of relationships of different peoples and nations, and they can convincingly speak about their common ground only if they are aware that their internal differences—being Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, etc.—are minor in respect to a major form of otherness. (I do not have to tell you that even Taiwan itself is such a network and not a coherent unified culture.[3])

The major otherness is, of course, the Western one. East Asia is different from South Asia as well, and I believe that the cultural differences between India and China are in many respects deeper than those between China and the West (e.g., in historical thinking). But when it comes to defining a cultural realm of interaction, the West has more power to demarcate than all other non-Western cultures.

I now wish to tackle an element in establishing cultural differences shared in most, if not all, cases of dealing with cultural differences. It is a certain way of using values to characterize self and otherness. In most cases of identity formation, the reference to oneself is brought about by self-confidence and a fundamental interest in creating a positive self image. So the idea of one's own cultural identity is loaded with positive values. Bearing these

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1 See Jürgen Straub, ed., *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).,

2 Huang Chun-Chieh addressed this issue correctly as the interrelationship of self and other and calls it a major theme of cultural interaction in East Asia. See Chun-Chieh Huang, "Some Observations on the Study of the History of Cultural Interactions in East Asia," *Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia* 1 (2010): 11–35, esp. 24–26.

3 This can easily be demonstrated by the role of the Aborigines in Taiwanese cultural identity.

values, in one's own image as presented in one's own history, has the positive potential of serving practical purposes in cultural orientation. So identity is loaded with values, and this impact of values has consequences for the image of others. For a people to clearly distinguish themselves from others, the others must be attributed values of minor esteem; their image may even bear negative traits and values.

2. The Power of Ethnocentrism

In the use of history to create a cultural identity, a specific term characterizes this unequal attribution of values and its consequent evaluation. We call it *ethnocentrism*.[4] There is general consent concerning the problematic impact of ethnocentrism on intercultural communication and cultural interaction. Since all participants in intercultural communication use the same ethnocentric logic, they create tensions and even conflicts in encounters. Mutual devaluation constitutes what Samuel Huntington has called a "clash of civilizations."[5]

In the East-West encounter, this clash is evident. There is a growing tendency in non-Western intellectual life to criticize Western cultural domination in the various processes of modernization and globalization. This tendency ends up seeking to get rid of Western domination, mainly in the realm of culture. Postcolonialism is a very prominent example of this. Another tendency is the emphasis today on indigenous traditions in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.[6] The problem in these widespread tendencies of intercultural discourse lies not in the fact that criticism is directed against Western ethnocentrism, but in how it is so directed. In this negative antithetic, the logic of ethnocentrism is not given up, but rather is reproduced and confirmed. In non-Western orientations, Western approaches to cultural orientation in trans- and intercultural communication are evaluated

4 See Jörn Rüsen, "How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the 21st Century," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 2004): 59–74; also in "Historians and Ethics," theme issue, *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 118–129; Jörn Rüsen, "Tradition and Identity: Theoretical Reflections and the European Example," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (December 2004): 135–158.

5 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

6 See, e.g., Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "New Approach of Indigenous Social Psychology in the Age of Globalization," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (issue 12) (December 2009): 111–130; Bor-Shiuan Cheng, Yi-Cheng Lin, Li-Fang Chou, "Chinese Organizational Behaviour Studies in the Age of Globalization," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (issue 12) (December 2009): 131–161.

as aggressive and devastating, or they are marginalized, if not suppressed, so that non-Western orientations can come to the fore as alternative values. Engaging in a thought experiment, we can observe a well-established strategy of reproducing an ethnocentric attitude by exchanging the values in one's own image for those of the other. Defining qualities are replaced by making new definitions. Thus white is turned into black, black into white, or civilization into barbarism, and barbarism into civilization. but the ethnocentric structure remains.

Take for example the general trend of victimization in present-day identity politics. When characterizing the other as perpetrator, as it is done with the domination of Western culture in modern history, victims consequently and automatically appear as innocent. They are the good guys, no matter what the background is. Shared universal morality makes this strategy of victimization possible and gives it intellectual power.

A short look at the discussion about intercultural comparison in historical thinking may bring the power of unequal evaluation to the fore. Recent interpretations of East Asian historical thinking claim as a new insight the achievements of East Asia in developing the historicity of the human world. With their argumentation, they break the power of the old academically established Western paradigm.[7] Yet as the paradigm for historicity, they only replace the Western model with an East Asian one. The dichotomy remains.[8]

3. Some Examples in the East and West

The logic of ethnocentrism in forming cultural identity is universal and deeply rooted in the human mind. Hence, we find it in cultural interaction in East Asia as well as that in the West. The history of the Sino-Japanese relationship is full of ethnocentric devaluation of the other. And the strategy of victimization plays an enormous role even today. This can be seen in how the

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7 See Chun-Chieh Huang, "The Defining Character of Chinese Historical Thinking," *History and Theory* 46 (May 2007): 180–188; Masayuki Sato, "The Archetype of History in the Confucian Ecumene," *History and Theory* 46, no. 2 (May 2007): 218–232.

8 I think that the only way of avoiding the dichotomy is the construction of a parameter of comparison based on anthropological universals. See Jörn Rüsen, "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparison of Historiography," "Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective," theme issue, *History and Theory* 35 (1996): 5–22; revised version in Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), pp. 109–128; Chinese translation: "Kua wenhua bijiaoshixue de yixie lilun quxiang," in Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Axel Schneider, eds., *Zhongguo shixueshi yantaohui: Cong bijiao guandian chufa lunwenji* (Taipei: Taoxiang Chubanshe, 1999), pp. 151–176.

Chinese and Japanese refer to the horrific events of their common contemporary history.

The most shocking incident was, of course, the Nanjing massacre. Its symbolic representation in the Nanjing Memorial includes heart-rending pictures, culminating in the statue of a woman, presumably a mother. This statue may represent the loss of husbands and brothers and, most heart-breaking, of innocent children, but it may also represent the nation itself—mother China complaining of the murder of 300,000 people. What do her features express? Not suffering, not mourning, but energetic strength (look at the set of her legs) and a kind of heroism. And cannot we even detect the desire for revenge in the clenched fist? There is an inscription commemorating the murder of 30,000 disarmed soldiers and 20,000 commoners at the riverside of Swallow Cliff in December 1937: "Let those of future generations use this tablet as a mirror into the past and let us strive to make the nation strong, to revitalize China and support peace throughout the world." Here, along with exasperation, we can detect symbols of power and language suited to ethnocentric discourses.

Similar ethnocentrism can be seen in the Korean-Japanese relationship on the level of images. In a comic strip e.g. Japanese figures have round eyes (like Westerners'), whereas Korean figures have slanted eyes (as most East Asians have). This example is interesting in two respects: On the level of Japanese popular culture, it shows the traditional anti-Korean prejudice prevalent in Japan. But on a hidden level, it shows an internalized Western element in the Japanese self-presentation. Here with a widespread and mentally powerful physiognomic dichotomy between East and West, we see Western preeminence internalized. On a subconscious level, authors of these images have already taken sides with the Western other. Even within the dichotomy between self and the other, the other can become a part of one's self image.[9]

4. Good and Evil in Intercultural Relationships

Discrimination against the other is a necessary mental operation of identity formation. So we cannot simply negate or completely overcome it. But this does not mean that ethnocentric attitudes are unavoidable and always the

9 In a brilliant analysis Shingo Shimada showed that in the process of Japan's modernization, the Japanese concept of national peculiarity, emphasizing its fundamental difference from the West, genuine Western ideas of what Japan is about played an enormous role. So the West was effective even in another culture's attempts at becoming different from it. See Shingo Shimada, *Die Erfindung Japans: Kulturelle Wechselwirkung und nationale Identitätskonstruktion* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000).

same in containing aggressive elements. They can be tamed, civilized, and even overcome without giving up the categorical distinction between self and others. (Such is tried in topical intellectual discourse on identity. Here the plausibility of a basic and insurmountable difference between self and others is contradicted by introducing the category of hybrids.[10]) I have discussed elsewhere the logical possibilities of such a change in the strategy of identity formation.[11] I will not repeat that argument here. Instead, I will concentrate on one essential element, the use of moral criteria in distinguishing self and otherness.

How does ethnocentrism treat moral evaluation? The distinction between good and evil in history is usually cast so as to ascribe good to the image of oneself and evil to the image of the other. There are numerous examples in historiography all over the world. I will only present one case in European history, namely the war cemeteries in France after World War I. The dead German soldiers were given black crosses with their names inscribed on them, whereas the French soldiers killed in action against the Germans got white crosses (on a subconscious level, white stands for innocence, black for the contrary). Thus the living, in their commemoration, ascribe national identity even to the postmortem existence of dead soldiers.

5. Civilizing Ethnocentrism

How can such inequality in evaluation be transformed into a more balanced relationship between self and others? I would like to present two answers to this question.

a. Equality and Equity

The first answer is, By founding this relationship on the principles of equality and equity. These principles, a rather late achievement of cultural evolution, are not at all about self-understanding. They say that every human being has value, or in the words of Immanuel Kant, that every human being is always more than a means to the purpose of others, that he is a purpose unto himself.[12] Where these principles stem from is an open question.

In the West, they were essential ideas behind a structural reorganization

10 The metaphor says it already: hybrids are infertile.

11 See note 4.

12 "Now I say: man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end." (Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* [1st edition, Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1785], p. 65)

of social and political life in the second half of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Before this change took place, human life was organized along the lines of social inequality (only in the field of religious belief were matters different). In fact, this was the case all over the world. Social differences determined all the main fields of culture. Confucian ethics, for example, established rules for human relationships by addressing social difference. The rules for parents and children were different, as were the rules for nobles and peasants. Western equality expressed itself in rules transcending these differences, like Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.

Since they stem from the West, is it problematic for non-Western intellectuals to accept these fundamental principles? If they refuse to accept them for this reason, they confirm the evaluative differences that they are criticizing in Western cultural domination. So these principles ought to be agreed upon in a transcultural way. There are enough starting points for their legitimation in non-Western traditions as well.[13]

Take the idea of equality and its consequence of mutual recognition, for example. The idea of equality is a necessary condition for replacing the ethnocentric logic of unequal evaluation with a humanistic logic of mutual recognition. Ethnocentrism negates the possibility of ascribing high human qualities to others simply because they are different. Equality does not exclude moral discrimination and devaluation; it only demands principles of evaluation that are valid for everybody, despite differences between self and others. Equality negates any attempt to ascribe moral qualities to ethnic affiliation as a means of differentiation. It also forbids any double morality based on different standards of treating people.

b. Self-Criticism: Integrating the Shadow

The second way of overcoming ethnocentrism involves a specific mental strategy of identity formation. Specifically, it involves treatment of those elements within oneself that cannot be integrated into a positive image of oneself. One's self-esteem is usually stabilized by means of a strategy of exporting and projecting these dark elements onto the image of others. One thus makes others a part of oneself, like a shadow cast by oneself in the light of self-affirmation. It is this self-alienation in constructing the other that gives ethnocentric attitudes their aggressive bitterness and makes them politically so dangerous. To overcome this conflict-generating mental strategy, it is necessary to accept the existence of a shadow within oneself. We all know that this is one of the most difficult tasks in doing history and establishing a public

13 A striking example of transcultural validity is the invention of zero by the Indians. No one outside India feels culturally alienated when using it.

historical culture. Such critical self-reference requires a good deal of self-empowerment. It demands humility, ambivalence toward the self, and the ability to accept unwelcome facts and insults to one's self-esteem.

But such ambivalence toward the self may lead to a new relationship between oneself and others. Only if you acknowledge wounds you have inflicted upon others, crimes you have committed against them, can you prepare the ground for reconciliation. Recognizing injuries is a necessary precondition for reconciliation, without which the continuity of moral exclusion in cultural interaction cannot be broken. Recent trends in historical culture show that this is possible.

6. European Approaches to a New Historical Culture[14]

Acknowledging the dark elements in one's own history to the victims can motivate them to overcome the moral exclusion that is a natural consequence of their suffering. A remarkable example of accepting the shadow of one's own history is the German treatment of the Holocaust in the postwar development of its collective identity. In the end, Germans were able to establish a memorial for the murdered European Jews close to the center of their national representation, the Reichstag, their parliament in Berlin.[15]

There are trends in other countries of Europe to enlarge this attitude of ambivalence and give it a European dimension.[16] Let me give you a remarkable example for addressing and expressing a national dark shadow, a gesture aimed at a new logic of cultural interaction, reconciliation. On December 7, 1970, during his visit to Poland, German Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt down in front of the Warsaw War monument, which commemorates the German destruction of the Polish capital. A similar gesture can be seen in an act of the former minister of domestic affairs in South Africa, Adriaan Vlok. He washed

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14 See Sharon Macdonald, ed., *Approaches to European Historical Consciousness: Reflections and Provocations* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2000); Jörn Rüsen, "Future-Directed Elements of a European Historical Culture," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 4, no. 2 (issue 8) (December 2007): 209–223; also in Q. Edward Wang and Franz L. Fillafer, eds., *The Many Faces of Clio, Cross-Cultural Approaches to Historiography: Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 163–171; Internet: http://www.talaljuk-ki.hu/index.php/article/articleview/428/1/62/.

15 See Jan-Holger Kirsch, *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales "Holocaust-Mahnmal" für die Berliner Republik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

16 Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander, eds., *Echoes of the Holocaust: Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003); Klas-Göran Karlsson and Ulf Zander, eds., *Holocaust Heritage: Inquiries into European Historical Culture* (Malmö, Sweden: Sekel, 2004).

the feet of the mothers and widows of black people killed by the apartheid forces, which he was responsible for. These gestures express guilt and respect for victims, as well as a profound change in looking at others.

Within the framework of a unifying Europe, the French-German relationship has undergone a thorough change and may serve as a good example of a fundamental change in historical culture today. For centuries the two nations looked upon each other as "hereditary enemies." But after two world wars and an incredible amount of bloodshed, this hostility between the two nations has changed into a relationship of cordial neighbors, if not friendship. Neither has given up its nationality, of course, but its character has changed. Nationality has adapted an inclusive quality, instead of an exclusive one, and is on the way toward a feeling of common Europeanness. On September 22, 1984, French President François Mitterand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl shook and held hands on the battlefield of Verdun, the site of the bloodiest encounter of the two nations during World War I. They thereby symbolically staged this new paradigm of attitudes and feeling.

These examples illustrate overcoming exclusive moralization as an ethnocentric strategy for shaping self and otherness in recent times. It is an open question whether and how such progress will be used to change established ethnocentric attitudes of identity formation in favor of more humane elements. This question ought to be put to scholars working in the humanities and especially history. Here is an area where new elements for generating a sense of history can be developed. Here, where scholars are working on dimensions of identity formation, the humanism of mutual recognition can be shaped. Their work has nothing to do with kneeling down, washing feet, and shaking hands, of course, since these gestures are not modes of academic discourse. But by analyzing them and the factors and forces behind them, like mourning and forgiving,[17] they transfer these mental attitudes into the realm of cognition. They prepare these attitudes for another platform, that of argumentative discourse. The potential of these attitudes has not yet been applied to the distinctive nature of historical thinking. I know that this application is difficult, but it is all the more necessary. As I see it, ignorance is one of the most powerful obstacles to humanizing the processes of identity formation, along with refusal to recognize human suffering as one of the main categories of historical experience. There is considerable awareness of human agency in

17 See Jörn Rüsen, "Emotional Forces in Historical Thinking: Some Metahistorical Reflections and the Case of Mourning," *Historein: A Review of the Past and Other Stories* 8 (2008): 41–53.

historical studies, but hardly any of human suffering.[18]

Cultural interaction, wherever it takes place, whether within East Asia or between East Asia and the West, ought to become much more aware of the influence of ethnocentrism and suffering in historical-identity formation. We should thus become more engaged in developing the possibilities of humanizing these basic forms of understanding when we pursue our work as humanists and social scientists. It may lead to new forms of understanding one's own culture and past, as well as those of the other.

18 A simple look in the dictionaries and encyclopedias of the humanities and social sciences may prove this blind spot. But there are exemptions; see, for example, Young-Tsu Wong, "Chinese History in the Age of Globalization," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (issue 12) (December 2009): 39–69, esp. 53–58.