

## Preface

# Two Tensions and Their Resolution in Cultural Interaction in East Asia\*

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Mr. Chairman, President Tao, Dear Colleagues,

Good morning! On behalf of National Taiwan University, I would like to welcome you once again to this university, the oldest university on this island. Since 1928 Taiwan University has made every effort to foster and nurture intellectual growth, so we are most honored to cosponsor the second annual meeting of the Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia this year.

Today I would like to share with you some of my thoughts on two tensions exhibited in the history of cultural interactions in East Asia and the approach Japanese scholars employed to resolve these tensions. In approaching this topic, I “discard the bricks to discover the jade” (拋磚引玉), as the Chinese idiom puts it. I make this presentation in the hope of sparking your ideas in the study of East Asian cultural interaction.

The first tension appears in the polarity between the universal values in the Chinese Confucian classics and the local conditions of peripheral countries, be it Japan, Korea, or Vietnam. In the eyes of Japanese and Korean Confucian scholars, the so-called “universal values” of the Chinese classics, values such as the kingly way (王道), loyalty (忠), filial piety (孝), and the middle kingdom(s) (中國), are all site-specific and time-specific. These “universal values” are nothing but the products of classical China some two thousand years ago, developed as so-called “universal values” mainly under the hegemony of the Chinese empire, which dominated East Asia. To make the Chinese classics more congenial to the political, social, and cultural zeitgeists of their own countries, Japanese and Korean scholars reinterpreted, or even creatively misinterpreted, the Chinese classics. Yi T’oegye (李退溪,

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1502–1571) of sixteenth-century Chosŏn Korea and Itō Jinsai (伊藤仁齋, 1627–1705) of seventeenth-century Tokugawa Japan are two examples of those who strove to reinterpret the “universal values” of Chinese Confucianism to suit the contexts of Korea and Japan.

The second tension in cultural interactions in East Asian history is the clash between the cultural identity and political identity of readers of the Chinese classics. The most representative case of this tension is the thought-provoking dialogue between Yamazaki Ansai (山崎闇齋, 1618–1682) and his disciples on the possibility of a Qing cultural invasion of Japan headed by Confucius and Mencius. When Korean and Japanese scholars encountered such ideas as the distinction between the Han and barbarians (華夷之辨) and the concept of the middle kingdom(s) (中國), they could not but experience serious inner conflicts. On the one hand, they identified with the lofty spiritual ideals created by Confucius and Mencius. On the other, as Korean or Japanese citizens, they politically identified with their own native lands.

To cope with these two tensions, Japanese and Korean scholars engaged in an intellectual enterprise that I term the “contextual turn” in cultural interaction in East Asia. Let me explain what I mean by the contextual turn. The context of the Confucian classics in China was latent, tacit, and almost imperceptible, but this context became salient and explicit once the Confucian classics were transplanted into a foreign land, such as Tokugawa Japan (1600–1868) or Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910). Many a Japanese or Korean Confucian took ideas and values expressed in the Chinese classics and transplanted them into the context of Japanese or Korean politics and thought, in the light of which these Japanese or Korean scholars would carry out new interpretations of the classics. In this sense and to this extent, we are warranted in referring to this interpretive phenomenon as a contextual turn.

Two steps can be observed in this contextual turn. First, there was a *decontextualization*: taking the classics out of the Chinese context tacitly assumed by Chinese Confucians. Second, there was a *recontextualization*: situating the Chinese classics in the Japanese or Korean context. As mentioned above, this transcultural contextual turn was effected at two different levels: the political order (e.g., the Chinese world order) and political thought (i.e., the ruler-minister relationship). And it stirred up many transcultural problems of interpreting the classics, which warrant our attention.

Let us consider the contextual turn in the East Asian world order. This kind of contextual turn can be divided into two types: a turn executed to suit the East Asian world order (realpolitik), and fresh interpretations executed to suit the East Asian intellectual context. The most common examples of the former type are “new” Japanese interpretations of the term “middle kingdom” (中國). The latter type is best exemplified in the account of the noble kingly

way (王道) presented in the *Mencius*.

The term “middle kingdoms” appears frequently in the Chinese classics. In very early classics, like the *Book of Odes* (詩經), the term carries mostly political or geographical meanings. However, in the three commentaries on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋)—the *Zuozhuan* (左傳), *Gongyang* (公羊), and *Guliang* (穀梁)—the term also has rich cultural connotations. The term “middle kingdoms” always appears in a cultural context distinguishing between Han and barbarian regions, with “middle kingdoms” denoting the region with the highest cultural standards. Before the formation of the modern East Asian political order, “middle kingdom” always referred at once to the Chinese Imperial Court and to the Chinese cultural homeland.

When Tokugawa Japanese Confucians read the Chinese classics, they faced this idea of a middle kingdom from a Japanese perspective. Hence, given the classics’ presupposition of a distinction between Han and barbarian regions based on the East Asian political order and its intellectual content, they were bound to propose a new interpretation so as to reduce the dissonance between their cultural self and their political self, and to adjust the Chinese classics to suit Japan’s overall cultural zeitgeist.

In executing a transcultural contextual turn of the term “middle kingdom,” Japanese Confucians adopted at least the two following methods:

First, in considering the cultural meaning attached in China to the expression “middle kingdom” in light of the term “middle way” (中道) or the text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Yamaga Sokō (山鹿素行, 1622–1685) executed a bold contextual turn from the perspective of his “other” culture. He regarded “middle kingdom” as referring to Japan, because “the moist earth of the middle kingdom [meaning Japan] is superior to that of the myriad other tribes, and her officials are more refined and elegant than the other men of rank,” to which, in fact, the “foreign court” (geographic China) could not hold a candle.

Second, Japanese thinkers adjusted the Chinese classics out of ideological considerations to make them more congenial to their native intellectual milieu. In interpreting Mencius’s “kingly way” as the “way of the former kings,” Ogyū Sorai (荻生徂徠, 1666–1728) stressed that the king had priority over the Way. He aimed to disarm the potential risk that Mencius’s political ideals posed to the Japanese governing authority, thus making it suitable to Japan’s Tokugawa feudal order.

In summary, the two types of contextual turn mentioned above both antecedently require decontextualization. Ideas from the Confucian classics such as “middle kingdom,” “the Way,” and “kingly way” were lifted from their original contexts in ancient Chinese politics or in Confucius’s and Mencius’s thought and were transplanted into the context of the Tokugawa feudal polit-

ical order, where they were endowed with completely new interpretations and meanings. While this kind of decontextualization and recontextualization yielded completely new views and interpretations, from the perspective of the original linguistic meaning and context of the Chinese classics, they were a great falling out from the original ideas.

To conclude my presentation today, I would like to suggest that we need to shed more light on what I call the contextual turn that appeared in cultural interaction in East Asia. The deeper we delve into the methodological issues and problematiques involved in the contextual turn in East Asian cultural interaction, the more fruitful research outcomes we may expect in the future.

Thank you very much for your attention.