

Asian Regional Integration Review



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Remembering or Overcoming the Past?: “History Politics,” Asian Identity and Visions of an East Asian Community

Torsten Weber

Abstract

The East Asian region is at the center of debates on Asian integration. It is often viewed as the core and engine for further political integration. It also serves as the main potential source of an Asian identity. In fact, many political and research initiatives by governments (East Asia Vision Group, East Asia Study Group), as well as non-governmental organizations (Korean East Asia Foundation, Chinese-led Network of East Asian Think Tanks, Japanese Council on East Asian Community, etc.), have focused on this region, with attention awarded mainly to Japan, China, and South Korea in Northeast Asia and, to a lesser degree, the Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN. Yet, East Asia is also a region of fierce competition for regional leadership, particularly between China and Japan, and continuing nationalist ambitions impede the formation of an integrated political body and a shared Asian identity. History, or more precisely, the political usage of history, has been identified as a major limitation to these integrative and formative processes. “History politics” appear to obstruct the creation of a transnational consciousness which is deemed necessary to strengthen Asia, both vis-à-vis other world regions, and against rivaling nationalisms within Asia.

Against this background, this article examines the current state of “history politics” through an analysis of the activities and publications of government representatives (“track 1 diplomacy”) and foreign policy related think tanks (“track 2 diplomacy”) from Japan, China, and South Korea that exert a major influence on public debate and political decision-making domestically and across Asia. A particular focus is placed on how the past is employed as “political currency” (Heisler) in the triangular relationship between history, integration, and identity. The article thereby addresses the wider, and potentially positive, implications of East Asia’s contested past for the debate on further political integration in Asia and the formation of an Asian identity.

1. Introduction

Any observer of East Asian politics and society will be aware of the role history plays in any aspect of the contemporary bi- and multi-lateral relations as well as in the respective domestic political spheres in that region. Both in the context of actual history-related topics, such as war guilt and compensation, textbook controversies, or territorial disputes, and with regard to less directly history-related issues, such as economic or strategic cooperation, history has become an omnipresent parameter in contemporary discourse and practice that has prominently surfaced on numerous occasions in the past decade. In some aspects historical arguments have become so central and forceful that the disputes between and among various state and civil society actors in China, Japan, and South Korea—and sometimes other countries, such as Russia and the USA—have come to be called as “East Asian ‘history wars’.”¹ Particularly between China and Japan, the intensifying political, economic, and strategic rivalry, together with the unresolved historical legacy, continues to overshadow the relations between both countries and peoples.

This contemporary rivalry and historical legacy has been identified as a main obstacle in

the various processes of regional integration. Fierce competition for regional leadership and continuing nationalist ambitions impede the formation of an integrated political body and a shared Asian identity.² The creation of a transnational consciousness, however, is deemed necessary to strengthen Asia both vis-à-vis other world regions and against rivaling nationalisms within.³ Regional identity formation therefore constitutes a vital and essential part of the process of regional integration while both are conditioned by the way the past is remembered or forgotten in these processes.⁴

2. National Precedent, European Precedent: History, Integration and Identity

In his famous essay on the nation and national identity, Ernest Renan (1823-1892) identified two fundamental principles constituting the nation: (1) “the possession in common of a rich legacy of remembrances,” and (2) “the actual consent, the desire to live together.”⁵ While the latter represents the essence of Renan’s well-known voluntaristic conception of the nation (“an everyday plebiscite”), the former stresses the role of history in the processes of national integration and identity formation. In fact, Renan puts great emphasis on the role of the past, which he views as a positive model for the present and future will of the community “to continue to value the heritage which all hold in common.” He evokes the “common glories in the past,” “a heritage of glory,” and “heroic past” as the historical basis for the unity of one people, but also concedes that “common suffering” is a greater force of integration and identity than shared happiness. Importantly, he refers to “*common suffering*” and “*having suffered together*” (my emphasis).

If we transfer Renan’s analysis of the 19th century’s *nation* to the 20th and 21st centuries’ *region*,⁶ we could probably agree with his present- and future-oriented voluntaristic conception of communal life. Without the will to implement regional integration (regional institutions, etc.) on the level of political decision-making, and without the will to identify, to at least some degree, with this regional framework on the popular level—that is, in Renan’s words, without the “desire” (from above) and the “approval” (from below)—neither integration nor identity formation may work. The role of the past, however, appears to be strikingly different in the case of the region when compared to the nation. Neither in the European nor in the Asian case can regional identity convincingly resort to “common glories in the past” or to having “accomplished great things together.” On the contrary, if the nation’s experience was “*having suffered together*,” the region’s experience may more appropriately be defined as having suffered *at the hands of one another*. Regional identity formation, therefore, appears a much more complicated process than national identity formation because the positive role of the past as one “essential condition for being a nation” (Renan) cannot easily be invoked in the case of the region. The historical dimension in the essential condition for being a region is not that of remembrances of the glorious past but the overcoming of past enmities and divisions.

In 1973, the then nine member states of the European Community formulated a *Declaration on European Identity* which explicitly addressed this historical dimension of the European project of regional integration. In addition to listing “common values and principles” (representative democracy, rule of law, social justice, human rights) as “fundamental elements of the European identity,” it stated:

*The Nine European States might have been pushed towards disunity by their history and by selfishly defending misjudged interests. But they have overcome their past enmities and have decided that unity is a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilization which they have in common.*⁷

This declaration openly acknowledges that a European identity cannot resort to “common glories of the past” but, on the contrary, gains its historical essence from having *overcome* previous divisions and past enmities. Still, in 2004, in the preamble of the EU Constitution, the appeal to unity in the present and to a “common destiny” was complemented by an explicit reference to enmities of the past:

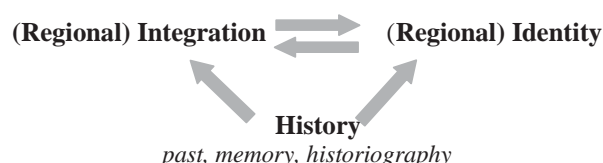
*While remaining proud of their own national identities and history, the peoples of Europe are determined to transcend their ancient divisions, and, united in an ever closer fashion, to forge a common destiny.*⁸

As Fabrice Larat has demonstrated, these references are representative of numerous attempts “to root European integration in the fertile, yet contaminated soil of European history.”⁹ Indeed, history portrayed as an anti-regional force that had unnaturally pushed the Europeans apart (the “misjudged interests” appear to be a consequence rather than a reason) constitutes a vital part in the attempt at creating and propagating a regional, European identity. It serves as an important pillar in the justification of the present project of regional integration and as a source of regional identity formation.

How can we make sense of the way history is used or abused in official political discourse on regional integration? And how does the instrumentalization of history as a political tool work? Within the framework of “the politics of history,” Martin O. Heisler has introduced the metaphor of “the political currency of the past” in order to analyze “the present uses of the past for political ends,” as in the above-quoted official EU or EC declarations.¹⁰ By ‘the currency of the past,’ Heisler refers (1) to the omnipresence of the past, “its pervasiveness and intrusiveness,” in the sense that “it is current,” and (2) to history as a medium of exchange that, like real money, may be converted into different forms of capital, mostly moral capital, but also with economic and financial benefits (reparation payments, development aid, creation of foundations, etc). In order to profit most from the political currency of the past, attempts must be made to “control its framing, storytelling, and interpretations, and to shape public or collective memories for current partisan, factional, national, or ideological advantage.”¹¹ For the Sino-Japanese context, Yinan He has demonstrated that “ruling elites” are particularly influential in “the intentional manipulation of history..., or national mythmaking, for instrumental purposes.”¹² This “elite mythmaking,” she argues, involves “distorting of historical facts” but also includes the intentional—and often only temporary—neglecting of controversial historical issues. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

History as a Parameter in the Processes of (Regional) Integration and (Regional) Identity Formation



The significance of this instrumentalization of the past in projects for regionalism has thus far been studied best in the European context. While proponents of forging a European identity have emphasized the role of the past in the promotion of permanent peace, stabilization, and reconciliation in a previously war-torn conglomerate of nations and peoples, critics have deconstructed official, top-down European discourse as “a political idea and mobilizing metaphor,” or even “an ideology,” with “subtexts of racial and cultural chauvinism.”¹³ As with all collective

identities, regional identities combine *eclectic* and *relational* elements. But due to the great diversity of possible sources of identity in the case of the supranational region, the degree of eclecticism exceeds that of national identities to a considerable extent. As Aleida Assmann has pointed out, the problem with eclectic identity formation in Europe is that “we emphasize humanistic values but when thinking of Europe we must not forget Auschwitz and Bosnia.”¹⁴ No less problematic is the process of relational identity formation which usually relies on “xenostereotypes” derived from “autostereotypes” (or vice versa) in order to “other” other parts and regions of the world.¹⁵ This “othering” rarely takes the form of an encounter of difference driven by neutrality or curiosity; more often, at least implicitly, it appears as a process of self-ascribed superiority and relegated inferiority.

3. The Politics of History in the Discourse on East Asian Integration

The above-outlined considerations regarding the role of history as a source and means of legitimization (and critique) of regional integration and identity can be well observed in contemporary discourse on Asian integration in general, and on the creation of an East Asian Community (EAC), in particular.

In the past decade, particularly after the first ASEAN+3 summit in 1997 and the subsequent establishment of the East Asia Vision Group (1997) and East Asia Study Group (2001), discourse on Asian integration has been thriving. While the Southeast Asian countries of ASEAN constitute an important part of many conceptions of Asian integration, they are clearly dwarfed by the role of “the Northeast Asian Three,” comprised of the People’s Republic of China, South Korea, and Japan. There is wide agreement among scholars and politicians alike that without the joint support of the political and economic powerhouses of China and Japan, the process of political integration will be abortive.¹⁶ Yet, as briefly outlined above, the mutual relations between the three countries—and between China and Japan in particular—are tense, and sparking nationalisms continue to fuel the immense rivalry in this region.¹⁷ Most conflicts have historical roots (territorial disputes, naming) or concern the treatment of history in contemporary society (textbook problems, apology policy). These debates have taken a central place in political discourse and diplomacy over the past decade and reached their peak in the violent anti-Japanese demonstrations in China in spring 2005, triggered by Chinese protests against Japanese history textbooks, and further fuelled by the visits of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirô and his cabinet members to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

Partly in reaction to the escalation of Sino-Japanese history disputes, various private and semi-official initiatives were founded to deal with the so-called history problem. Scholars from China, Korea, and Japan, many of them historians, worked on bilateral or trilateral history research groups, engaged in history dialogues with their Asian counterparts. They produced reports, articles, and a popular tri-national history textbook.¹⁸ In this context, the past—problematized as history and memory—attained a larger presence in public consciousness than it had previously; its presence has become more prominent in daily life.

Most, if not all, of these private projects and civil society initiatives bear a clear political dimension, too. They have a political agenda and their occupation with history can be characterized, at least partly, as “partisanship.”¹⁹ However, with regard to their status, their limited means of implementation and influence, as well as the depth of analysis they reach, show that they clearly differ from official and semi-official participants in this discourse. Therefore, it has been suggested to subsume such activities more appropriately under the category of “memory culture” (*Erinnerungskultur*) which denotes the bottom-up cultivation, led by civil society actors, of history and historical knowledge for the wider public.²⁰ “History politics,” on the other hand, denotes

the top-down and politically intended homogenization of history and memory to forge a collective identity based on a homogeneous historical consciousness. The dividing lines between both may sometimes be blurred and not even the best-intended projects of cultivation of “memory culture” can ever be objective. In general, however, most bottom-up initiatives lack the background and means to disseminate their work to the degree of their top-down counterparts.

Following this distinction, roughly three levels of actors or “tracks” can be distinguished in this discourse, namely (1) political decision-makers (government representatives and leading officials) as so-called track 1 diplomacy; (2) private initiatives with none or no notable financial or political links to government authorities (track 3); and (3) think tanks on the in-between level (track 2). Due to their personal and financial links, as well as their realm of influence, the latter is normally more closely linked to official discourse than to private initiatives. The following case studies will focus on contributions to this discourse by political decision-makers and think tanks, i.e., roughly, the scope of actors that Yanan He refers to as “ruling elites” (though I propose a wider understanding of “ruling elites” in the sense that they also include “oppositional elites”), in consideration of their impact on (oppositional) published opinion.

4. “History Politics” in Official Discourse on Asian Integration and Identity in China and Japan

(1) Hatoyama’s Advocacy of an East Asian Community

In Japan, public political discourse on Asian integration in its affirmative has taken on a new dynamic after the end of Koizumi’s premiership in 2006, and in particular, after the election of the new DPJ-led coalition government in 2009. In fact, the creation of an East Asian Community (*Higashi Ajia Kyôdôtai no kôchiku*) was a central item on the political agenda of Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio and it was also an explicit part of the DPJ’s election manifesto in 2009.²¹ After his election, Hatoyama even proposed East Asian regional integration as one of the core themes of his “political philosophy.”²²

In his elaborations on a future EAC, Hatoyama indirectly likened himself to Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, the founder of the Pan-European movement in the 1920s.²³ At the high time of nationalism, Italian fascism, and Soviet communism, Coudenhove-Kalergi’s proposal of European unity, of course, was rather illusionary. Despite the existence of some other inter-war proposals for European collaboration and integration, such as the Briand Plan of 1929/1930, notable regional integration in Europe only started in the 1950s, after the horrendous experience of the Second World War. Hatoyama’s references to Coudenhove-Kalergi are twofold. First, they link his “political philosophy” to his grandfather, Hatoyama Ichirô, himself a Japanese prime minister in the 1950s and translator of one of Coudenhove-Kalergi’s books. Following Hatoyama (senior), Hatoyama (junior) redefines one of Coudenhove-Kalergi’s political key concepts, “fraternity” (*yûai*), as “the principle of independence and coexistence.” Second and interlinked, Hatoyama’s references to Coudenhove-Kalergi allow him to discuss the project of regional integration, namely that of East Asia, in relation to that of Europe and as the realization of his conception of “fraternity.” As Hatoyama puts it,

another national goal that emerges from the concept of fraternity (yûai) is the creation of an East Asian community (Higashi Ajia Kyôdôtai). [...] Unquestionably, the Japan-US relationship is an important pillar of our diplomacy. However, at the same time, we must not forget our identity as a nation located in Asia. I believe that the East Asian region, which is showing increasing vitality in its economic growth and even closer mutual ties, must be recognized as Japan’s basic sphere of being (waga kuni ga ikite iku kihon tekina seikatsu

kûkan).²⁴

Here, Hatoyama portrays East Asian regional integration as an instance of the realization of fraternity, the assumed underlying principle of European integration. In addition, he explicitly links regional integration to the question of the formation of an Asian identity, by calling attention to the further development of Japan's traditionally neglected consciousness of being a part of Asia. Hatoyama's conception of an Asian identity will be addressed in more detail below.

The creation of an East Asian Community in 2010 may not be quite as utopian or illusory as the pan-European project in the 1920s. After all, a number of steps into the direction of regional integration in East Asia have already been taken, most notably, on the political level, the establishment of ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit. Also, Hatoyama's call for "the creation of an East Asian Community" is not the first such proposal from a leading politician in East Asia. Since the 1990s and increasingly after 2000, politicians as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir (East Asian Economic Group, East Asian Economic Caucus), Korean President Kim Dae-jung and even Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, have made official affirmative statements. Recognizing, however, that (too) little has been achieved since then, Hatoyama referred to the combined argument of history and the European model to appeal to the Japanese and other Asians to realize the "utopian dream" of regional integration.

*I would like to conclude by quoting the words of Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, the father of the EU, written 85 years ago, when he published Pan-Europa: 'All great historical ideas started as a utopian dream and ended with reality.' And, 'whether a particular idea remains as a utopian dream or it can become reality depends on the number of people who believe in the ideal and their ability to act upon it.'*²⁵

In the conclusion offered by Hatoyama, he once again portrays the history of European integration as a model for Asian integration. Interestingly, he employs this spatial rather than temporal analogy to push the general public and political decision-makers towards a pro-East Asian stance. By doing so, he avoids having to address the negative legacies of concepts of Asian integration—negative legacies, at least for the Japanese audience, because they would either refer to the traditional Sinocentric tributary order in Asia or to Japan's own imperialist project of regional order in the first half of the 20th century ("Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere"). In addition to his neglect of historical conceptions of Asian regionalism and regional identity, Hatoyama also ignores the historical development of the European integration process between Codenhove-Kalergi's pan-European movement of the 1920s and the start of the actual integration process in the 1950s. The instigation of the latter was not aided by the former, but happened, rather, despite it; it was completely independent from Codenhove-Kalergi's visions of European unity.²⁶ In other words, Hatoyama implies a possible historical analogy between the processes of European and Asian integration on grounds of historical actors and ideas that were largely irrelevant to the formation of a united Europe.

Avoidance of the Asian historical context and elevating the European idea to the ranks of a model for Asian integration, however, are two strategies that cannot be transferred to the framework of Asian identity formation. Not surprisingly, history and "the West" therefore take on quite a different role in Hatoyama's conception of an Asian identity. In one of his last speeches as Prime Minister, Hatoyama addressed issues of East Asian characteristics and identity which revealed a number of inconsistencies compared to his previous elaboration on political integration.²⁷

First, although he had portrayed the history of European integration positively, he now criticizes the "Western dualism" of perceiving the world in a self-other, dichotomous manner. Obvi-

ously, this statement is contradictory in itself, as Hatoyama himself, as an Asian who assumedly does not share this “Western” trait, employs a dualistic distinction between people from the West and Asians. As Assmann had noted, these relational factors, such as the Europe-Asia or West-East distinction, inform attempts at regional identity formation to a large extent. More generally, such dualistic thinking is prone to oversimplifications on both the side of the “Self” (autostereotypes) and the “Other” (xenostereotypes), as in Hatoyama’s statement on the assumed difference between the culturally and religiously diverse East Asia, on the one side, and an assumedly homogenous Europe on the other side.

Second, Hatoyama’s historical rationale for shaping a common East Asian identity is much more Asia-centric than his previous appeals to the project of Asian integration. Similarly to the passages from the EU Constitution and the EC Declaration of the European Identity, Hatoyama concedes the negative dimension of Asian history:

*I firmly believe that we must not repeat the unfortunate history of the past hundred years (hyaku nen no fukô na rekishi) in which the seas of East Asia were made into seas of conflict.*²⁸

and

*I believe now is the time to overcome the past that turned our seas into seas of dispute and to set off on a voyage to weave a history of prosperity in which we coexist in a sea of fertile abundance and a sea of fraternity.*²⁹

Hatoyama, however, does not limit his excursus of the modern period of Asian history to “the unfortunate history” that must be “overcome.” Instead, as Renan had postulated for the nation, Hatoyama manages to identify a historical period that may indeed serve as Asia’s own “heroic past.”

*If we trace history back still further in units of several hundreds or thousands of years, we see that these seas have also yielded prolific rewards, transmitting knowledge and skills and fostering the development of rich cultures in East Asia by facilitating human exchanges. The sea did not create differences in language or antagonism among religions; instead it blended such differences and served as the foundation for mutual development. Had this not been so, we would not have so many people living in this region with an awareness of themselves as Asians (Ajiain toshite no jikaku) [...] Whether viewed from the history of Japan at the far eastern edge of Asia or from the other countries of East Asia, East Asia is a fusion of cultures (bunka teki yûgôtai).*³⁰

By evoking an assumed golden age of peaceful coexistence and exchange in the distant past, Hatoyama manages to put the modern period of nationalist antagonism, conflict, and war into perspective. This implies that Asian history itself can serve as a model for the projects of further regional integration and regional identity formation. However, the shortcomings of such explanations are blatant: neither did people living in Asia possess an awareness of being Asian before the modern period introduced and spread the concept of “Asia” in the region, nor was pre-modern Asian history free of violent antagonisms and rivalries, major disputes and wars. Only the above-quoted simplifications allow for a portrayal of the past as a history of fortune rather than of suffering and misfortune. The past of the supranational region, more frequently employed as *negative* political currency, in Hatoyama’s conception, is designed to serve as a *positive* political currency which may be converted into public pro-Asian sentiments and agreement to the project

of building an East Asian Community, the ultimate aim of Hatoyama's political vision.

(2) Chinese Affirmations of New East Asian Regionalism

Interestingly, a comparable review of history has recently been employed in a similar context in official Chinese political discourse. Previously dismissed as the re-enactment of Japanese imperialist policy, Asian integration and discourse on regional identity has gained more importance in China during the past decade. With its increasing weight on the stage of world economy and politics, China has not only become more pro-active in these projects but also explicitly self-assertive. A leading official voice in this debate is the diplomat Wang Yi, the current director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the PRC's State Council and a former vice foreign minister (2001-2004) and Chinese ambassador to Japan (2004-2007).³¹ On frequent occasions, Wang has affirmed his positive stance towards Asian integration and Asian identity and—importantly—has not only done so towards foreign, in particular Japanese, audiences; he also acts as the Chinese mastermind of pro-Asianist thought at home.³²

While Wang has refrained from formulating a concrete aim in regards to the creation of an EAC, his affirmation of the project of developing a “collective Asian consciousness” and of further cooperation and interaction in Asia is beyond doubt. In Wang's conception of Asian integration, history takes an even more prominent position than in Hatoyama's, but their rationales are quite similar. Like Hatoyama, Wang refers to an assumed golden age of Asia as the historical fundament of recent trends of integration and collective identity formation.

For a long period, Asia stood at the forefront of history and made some distinguished contributions to the human race. Among the four great ancient civilizations of the world, three are in Asia: China, India, and old Babylon. The three great religions of the world, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, all have their origins in Asia. Asia's classical Eastern philosophy continues to inspire human thought, and a number of outstanding inventions by Asians have influenced the progress of global civilization. Also, for a long time Asia was leading the world economy. [...] At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the West, Asia accounted for two thirds of the world's GDP.³³

As Hatoyama, Wang employs the terms “Asia” and “Asians” without consideration of their anachronistic nature. How could “Asia” have led human or world history if there were neither Asian institutions nor any consciousness of being “Asian” or being part of a region that would, only in the distant future, be called “Asia”? As Larat has criticized in the context of similar narratives of Europe's past, the existence and unity of the region here are presupposed as a “natural entity.”³⁴

Following this golden age, Wang attributes Asia's decline to its self-seclusion and the subsequent invasion by the Western powers as well as to internal dispute. With Japan's expansion into Asia from the late 19th century onwards, the Asianist project began to lose credibility as it served the “invasion and monopolization of Asia” at the hands of the Japanese. Assuming a “learning from past mistakes” manner, Wang scrutinizes the reasons for the failure of both pre- and post-war Asianist projects to suggest how Asian integration should be pursued in the 21st century. As prerequisites and methods, Wang proposes: an economically and politically strong China; a carefully considered master plan; gradual implementation without haste; stable environment and material base throughout Asia; proper coordination between the major players; a leading force. The result of this development would be, according to Wang, open regionalism (*kaifang de diquzhuyi*) based on cooperation (*hezuo*) and harmony (*hexie*).

Interestingly, Wang's “new Asianist” perspective on Asian integration is shared by many historians in China who have labeled the renaissance of Asian regionalist plans “New Classical

Asianism” (Wang Ping)³⁵ or “New East Asian Regionalism” (Zhang Yunling).³⁶ In these narratives, the historical precedents of Japan-driven Asianism are partially reevaluated and rehabilitated, but the re-invention of Asian history as an object of study in general and the positive evaluation of Asian regional integration in particular is mainly centered on Chinese historical conceptions of Asian unity, such as Li Dazhao’s, Sun Yatsen’s, Mao Zedong’s or Zhou Enlai’s.³⁷ Although recent Chinese scholarship and public discourse on Asian history has become more nuanced, a strict dividing line between China’s assumed positive contributions and Japan’s assumed negative contributions regarding Asia’s modern history—together with the respective implications for the contemporary project of Asian integration and identity formation—still prevail. This explicit national compartmentalization of an assumedly *regional* history constitutes a notable difference from the mainstream of discourse on European integration in Europe.

Similar to Hatoyama’s analysis on an Asian identity, Chinese top-down discourse on regional integration also emphasizes (1) the significance of identity formation for the progress of economic and political integration and (2) relational arguments in the construction of such an identity. In this context, Wu Jianmin, President of China Foreign Affairs University and Vice President of the Committee for Foreign Affairs under the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, has rejected the often assumed lack of a common basis for an East Asian identity because of “too extreme differences regarding Asian cultures (*Yazhou wenhua chayi taida*)” and different stages of economic development.³⁸ According to Wu, the degree of difference regarding common values and identity does not differ from that within the European Union. As a specific and unique Asian characteristic—that to some degree resembles Hatoyama “holism” (as opposed to “Western dualism”)—Wu proposes “communal comfort” (*shushi du*, literally “degree of feeling comfortable”). By this, Wu means that in situations that make other people or countries feel uncomfortable, decisions will be postponed until everyone reaches the degree of feeling comfortable with the result or new situation; in this way tough decisions that split groups or lead to confrontations within one group would be avoided. “In my work of many years at the United Nations, in Europe, and in America,” Wu explains, “I have learnt that in the Western world (*Xifang shijie*) there is no such thing as ‘communal comfort.’” In a nutshell Wu presents the common rationale of referencing the EU or “the West” in discourse on East Asian integration and Asian identity formation. Regarding integration, East Asia may achieve what the EU has achieved because the criteria for successful integration are not dissimilar; regarding identity, however, both “entities” are mutually so heterogeneous that shared values can easily be derived for both the Self and the Other.

5. “History Politics” in Semi-official Discourse on Asian Integration and Identity in Korea and Japan

The reluctance of some historians to engage in the field of contemporary history may in part be due to the opinion that speeches and publications by politicians and officials still in office or seeking offices are irrelevant. While contemporary historians certainly have to engage with these materials with all due care, one should not underestimate the richness and influence of many of these sources. This stature is partly due to the speakers’ close linkages with political think tanks that work at the hinge of scholarship and journalism on the one side and government and administration on the other. Similar to industry lobbyists, think tanks aim at influencing political decision-makers at all levels and, in the context of history issues, they often serve as a filter of scholarly output for informing and influencing politicians and bureaucrats.³⁹

With the increasing activities in matters of Asian integration since the beginning of the new millennium, think tanks in different countries that explicitly deal with the project of East Asian

integration have started to emerge. These include the Japanese Council on East Asian Community (2004), the Korean East Asia Foundation (2005) and the North East Asia History Foundation (2006).

(1) The Korean North East Asia History Foundation (NEAH)

As the name suggests, the Korean North East Asia History Foundation (NEAH) most explicitly deals with history problems in the region. The NEAH was founded in 2006 “with the goal of establishing a basis for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia by confronting distortions of history that have caused considerable anguish in this region.”⁴⁰ It was initially headed by Kim Yong-deok and is now led by Chung Jae-jeong, both professors of Korean history. Apart from a general research department, it has established a separate research institute dedicated to research on the island of Dokdo (called “Takeshima” in Japan), whose territorial possession is disputed between Japan and Korea. Despite its naming as a research institute, its political character is more than obvious as it predefines its aim as “enhancing Korea’s territorial rights to Dokdo.” In its own words, NEAH seeks to promote “the correct understanding of history” through research projects and the publication of research results. Explicitly it also links the necessity of possessing a “correct” and “shared understanding of history” to the political project of integration and identity formation.

*As regionalism intensifies across the globe, the importance of exchange and cooperation is also growing for Northeast Asian nations. Nevertheless, unresolved historical and territorial issues are obstacles to the region’s trust-building efforts. The Foundation strives to diagnose the precise causes of the region’s historical and territorial disputes and prescribe appropriate responses and strategies. We are steadfast in our efforts to expand historical dialogues to foster mutual understanding and growth in Northeast Asia. The Foundation will continue to spare no effort to protect historical and territorial sovereignty, advance a shared understanding of history for mutual development, and build a Northeast Asian regional community that pursues peace and prosperity.*⁴¹

Obviously, one of the foundation’s aims is to provide rhetoric and political ammunition to representatives of Korean national interests in the various bilateral history disputes as well as in the discourse on regional integration and identity formation. Interestingly, the topics chosen for research and debate by the foundation are those that have been at the center of the “East Asian ‘History Wars’,” such as the Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute, the status of Yasukuni Shrine, the naming of the East Sea, and the postwar reparation system. They are rather unlikely to be resolved in the near future and because they are less concerned with history, these political disputes can hardly serve as examples of creating “correct” and “shared” understandings of history. Also, in the larger picture of Asian history as portrayed, for example, by Wang Yi, these issues are relatively marginal. Consequently, the foundation’s focus on history and the use of history appear a rather strategic focus that—in view of Korea’s historical victimization at the hands of both Japan and China—guarantees a constant surplus of morale capital through the political currency of history. The general stance of NEAH therefore is one that stresses “Korean pride,”⁴² a form of Korean nationalism that enables Korea to emerge and act from a position of national strength in the international arena and that, consequently, takes a negative view towards the creation of an EAC. The “history research” undertaken by the foundation is more likely to provide Korean critics of regional integration with political currency than it will recruit proponents of Asian integration through the creation of a common historical consciousness. On the contrary, the NEAH facilitates the increasing influence of negative “history politics” in the discourse on the EAC throughout the region.

(2) The Korean East Asia Foundation (KEAF)

The Korean East Asia Foundation, founded in Seoul in 2005, takes a more de-nationalized stance and sees itself as “a truly trans-regional organization.”⁴³ Through its activities and publications, it functions more as a platform “playing a midwifery role of shaping collective wisdom,” in its own words, than an institutionalized think tank. Its role therefore is similar to that of the Australian East Asia Forum (AEAF),⁴⁴ which also serves as a platform or forum for researchers, politicians, and other think tanks to articulate and discuss opinions and policies pertaining to East Asia as a region in general, and regional integration in particular. Nevertheless, the studies produced, published, and sponsored by the KEAF or through KEAF-affiliation are as much Korea-centered as the AEAF’s focus lies on Australia’s links and role in the process of East Asian integration and identity formation. In addition, through the KEAF-sponsored Council on East Asian Affairs (CEAA), “devoted to common causes in East Asia,” the foundation transcends the mere function of providing a forum for debate but possesses its own think tank as an instrument of agenda-setting.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the KEAF takes a much more constructive stance towards regional integration and the formation of a regional identity than the NEAH. Among its aims it lists “contributing to the formation of an East Asian community by enhancing mutual understanding and trust among countries and peoples in the region” (KEAF), and contributing to a “common regional identity in East Asia” (CEAA). One important tool for the promotion of these goals is the English-language journal *Global Asia* published as a quarterly since 2006. It is no coincidence that its first issue chose “the future of East Asian regionalism” as its cover story, which, among others, featured articles by the former Korean President Kim Dae-jung, the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and the former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. In his essay, Kim himself unmasked the political usage of history in contemporary discourse and practice of regional integration in East Asia. He criticized that “the complicated and often tense relationships between Korea, China and Japan over historical issues have combined with domestic political interests to stir up nationalism, undermining the atmosphere of cooperation in the region.”⁴⁶

In the following issue, *Global Asia* even took up history and “history politics” as the topic of its cover story (“Barbs of Nationalism: How Asia Can Reconcile its History”), and its editor-in-chief, Chung-in Moon (together with Suh Seung-won) contributed an extensive article on the “Burdens of the Past: Overcoming History, the Politics of Identity and Nationalism in Asia.”⁴⁷ Moon and Suh argue that “building a collective identity” constitutes an important element in “shaping and sustaining a regional order.” As collective identity draws much on collective memory, however, overcoming “the fractured pain of the past” must be seen as a prerequisite to regional integration.⁴⁸ While Moon and Suh criticize the usage of history by some politicians—“to pursue parochial nationalism at the expense of regional cooperation”—as “a Faustian bargain with the forces of the past,” they, too, readily employ mainly negative references to the modern past to justify their pro-integrative stance. In their analysis, the historical existence of “Northeast Asia” as an entity of some sort is presumed since the 7th century. Although they admit that regional order underwent major transformations in the following 14 centuries—from China-centered hegemony, Japanese imperial order, the Cold War bipolar system to the post-Cold War era—East Asia’s presumed natural entity is never questioned. Rather, they argue that the concrete realization of regional order was flawed in all of these four historical regimes because of their domination by “great power politics.” Therefore, while the meta-narrative of historical unity remains unchallenged, on the micro-level, history serves as a negative example; it is the burden that needs to be shouldered and the past that needs to be overcome in order to achieve “transnational solidarity” and “a new regional identity of co-existence, harmony, and cooperation.”⁴⁹ The narrative of regional integration, therefore, becomes as teleological as previous narratives of national integra-

tion, national identity formation, and the state building process. Moon and Suh finally prescribe,

[D]espite bitter historical memories of domination and subjugation, Northeast Asia shares a common cultural and historical heritage that should be emphasized more than contentious past insults.⁵⁰

As opposed to the NEAH, the KEAF appears to be less interested in explicit debates about the sufferings of the past and the creation and preservation of a collective memory based on conflict and negative perceptions of other Asians. The KEAF's political currency of the past is not the rivalry of the more recent past but the assumed commonality of Asians in the pre-modern era.

(3) The Council on East Asian Community (CEAC)

The most prominent Japanese think tank on Asian integration, the Council on East Asian Community (CEAC), takes a rather unique position in this discourse. While the CEAC acknowledges the importance of regional integration, particularly in the economic sphere, it explicitly rejects the aim of promoting an East Asian Community. Its self-declared aim is "not to promote, but to study the concept of an East Asian Community" and "to pursue what the strategic response of Japan should be."⁵¹ The Council was inaugurated in 2004 as "an all-Japan intellectual platform covering business, government, and academic leaders," and is as Japan-centered as the NEAH is Korea-centered. It is led by its president Itô Kenichi, a professor of International Politics and former director at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The CEAC's focus on Japan also determines its temporal and spatial historical consciousness vis-à-vis the issues of regional integration and identity formation. Rather than Japan-in-Asia and macro-historical approaches, the CEAC prefers to discuss Japan's role in "the international community" in the post-WWII context. It sees the most appropriate historical model in Japan's economic success in the 1960s and 1970s when "Japan began to assume its status as leader in the global community." As Japan's strategies in this context are summarized as having "generally achieved success," with the attitude that "with few exceptions, the Japanese are liked and admired worldwide," attempts at revising this order are viewed skeptically.⁵² This critical view, on the other hand, facilitates a discussion of the existence, definition, and demarcations of Asia which most other contributors to this debate fail to address.

In fact, it is rather difficult to consider 'East Asia' as a regional concept. At any rate, it is a fact that there is not even an agreement on 'Asia' as a geographical division. When it comes to considering a common 'Asia' within the framework that includes identity, such as 'cultural bloc,' 'religious bloc' or 'political bloc' the concept becomes even more ambiguous.⁵³

Instead of presupposing a historical entity called Asia, the CEAC emphasizes the diversity of geographical conceptions within Asia and Asia's cultural and religious diversity. Consequently, it dismisses attempts at defining an East Asian identity prematurely. If regionalism in East Asia is to include the United States and/or Australia, neither Wang's Confucianism nor Hatoyama's dichotomous approach (Western dualism, Asian holism) may work as a fundament for an Asian identity. And if concepts of a unified "Asian" history or "Asian" culture are de-emphasized for the sake of diversity, any attempts at defining an "Asian" identity that embraces, in the literal meaning of the term, sameness, are deemed to fail. As the CEAC prefers to perceive Asia or East Asia historically as not having constituted an entity, references to an assumed glorious past or golden age are neither necessary nor possible. Instead, even the more distant past serves as proof of Asia's diversity, not unity. According to the CEAC, two fundamentally different cultures together with corresponding political and social orders co-existed in pre-modern Asia, namely East

Asian ancestor worship societies and Southeast Asian transmigration societies.⁵⁴ In the modern period, the differing degrees of modernization and Westernization at different times throughout Asia further aggravated the cultural, political, and economic gap between the countries in the region before the Cold War further diversified East Asia by its strict ideological divide between East and West, socialism and capitalism. In short, according to the CEAC, history may serve to explain why the region is as diverse as it is, but it certainly will not serve well as an argument for East Asia as a natural entity, or for the eventual aims of integration and unity of the East Asian region.

6. Conclusion

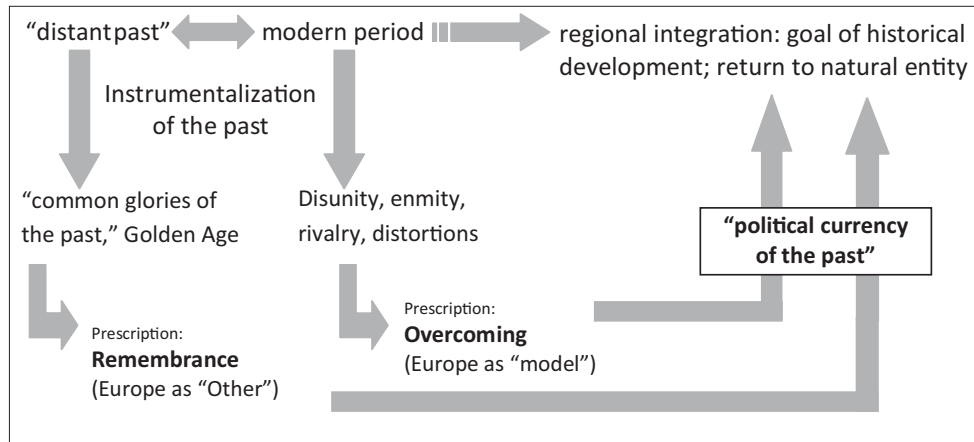
Focusing on the recent political discourse on East Asian regional integration and the formation of a regional identity in East Asia, this article has examined how and why history is employed in justification or rejection of certain conceptions of regional integration and identity formation. Taking the examples of leading politicians and officials from Japan and China, and think tanks from Korea and Japan, this paper has demonstrated the special relevance of historical arguments in contemporary discourse on regional integration in East Asia, a region that is characterized by notable political, economic, cultural, and social differences and imbalances.

Following European scholarship on the role of history in the process of European integration, this paper has suggested we define the employment of historical references for political ends and the construction of assumed historical analogies together as “history politics.” Within this framework, it has adopted Heisler’s metaphor of “the political currency of the past” to analyze the context and intentions that inform the respective historical references.

As the main and recurrent referential points in history, this paper has identified: the negative portrayal of the more recent past which must be sought to overcome; a golden age of Asian co-prosperity in the pre-modern era; the positive model of European integration; and the presupposition of the existence of “Asia.” In general, the distant past or pre-modern history as pre-national history portrays Asia, however defined, as a natural, given entity; modern history as national history, by contrast, is viewed as a history of conflict, dispute, unnatural separations, divisions; future history is envisioned as regional history (or a return to the assumed natural unity). But history not only works as a means of justification and/or rejection of political integration and identity formation. It also serves as the rationale for prescriptions for the present according to which the common glories of the Golden Age ought to be remembered while the enmities of the past must be overcome or de-emphasized.

The past, as a consequence, is omnipresent in today’s discourse, and it is often present as “political currency.” This depiction is quite similar to the way the nation was historically constructed, invented and imagined, and also to how the region is constructed, invented, imagined, and frequently portrayed as the *telos* of historical development. In this process, Europe can both serve as a model (namely for integration) and as the “Other” (namely with regard to identity formation). (See figure 2)

Figure 2: Towards a Systematization of “History Politics” in Track I and II Affirmative Discourse on East Asian Integration and Asian Identity Formation



It is not the aim of this paper to simply uncover and deplore the often inaccurate usage of history for political ends. Rather, it seeks to call attention to the fact that history is instrumentalized in contemporary discourse on East Asian regional integration and Asian identity formation. In particular, it has sought to examine the ways history is employed in political discourse and for which political ends. It has also revealed some similarities between the way history has been used in the past as justification for nationalism and the contemporary usage for the promotion of various conceptions of regionalist projects. I contend that an awareness of the political usage of history for the goals of regional integration and identity formation is important in order to be able to question the rationale of both affirmative and dismissive argumentation that informs this political discourse.

If nations have relied on “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm/Ranger) and “imagined communities” (Anderson) in their processes of regional integration and identity formation, it shall be no surprise that on an even more abstract level, like that of supranational regions, encounters with history take place in the constant presence of imaginations and inventions. This caveat does not mean to imply that the project of regional integration should be abandoned. On the contrary, any analysis of the usage of historical concepts of commonality for the political end of integration in previously war-torn regions must acknowledge the potentially positive effect of such discourse and activities. But if we can indeed learn from history we may be well advised to consider learning some lessons for the future of regionalism from the history of nationalism. While idealism to some extent may be necessary to achieve long-term political goals, a pragmatic attitude towards such goals may help to prevent the abuse of political ideas for ideological purposes. As Ernest Renan had prophesied more than one hundred years ago:

*Nations are not something eternal. They have begun, they will end. They will be replaced, in all probability, by a European confederation.*⁵⁵

What Renan predicted for Europe may become real also for Asia, and what applies to the fate of nations may also be true for the future of regions.

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Notes

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- ¹³ Bo Stråth, “A European Identity: To the Historical Limits of a Concept,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2002), p. 388.
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