Nationalism, the Rise of the Vernacular, and the Conceptualization of Modernization in East Asian Comparative Perspective

Since coming to Santa Barbara, my job description has been “comparative East Asianist,” rather than historian of China or Japan; as a result, I have had to do a great deal of reading in the histories of the other countries in the region. Among the many things that have struck me in this connection over the past few years are not only how so much of what I initially learned in Chinese history classes has startling resonances with the other major areas influenced by Chinese culture (everybody knows that), but also how remarkably similar was the conceptualization of pressing issues in those countries with China as well as how much less extraordinary China’s historical experience becomes through comparison. The differences as well as the similarities are thrown in a fascinating relief and potentially tell us much about not only high Chinese culture but also the social and economic systems in which it found a home.

I am still very much in the process of sorting all this out toward writing a much longer work in the general area. Here I would like to focus tightly on two manifestations of the larger problem: the linkage between the rise of nationalism and the emergence of the vernacular as a literary vehicle; and the East-West mix in the conceptions of modernization. These issues were faced by all four East Asian civilizations and in remarkably similar ways.

Let me say just one further thing by way of introduction. I think this sort of comparative analysis, whether or not I do it well, leads us to far more important and interesting conclusions than does the imposition of all the foreign-origin theories that have been sweeping the field of late—the infestation has been most grotesque in the Japan field in this regard. By the same token, I want strongly and openly to disassociate myself from the regional-cultural approach that has been applied principally by social scientists using hypocoristics like NICS and NIES and Pacific Rim and whatever else.
Modernization and the Rise of the Vernacular

Many scholars in East Asia and elsewhere have identified the rise of nationalism with the transformations characterized by the modern experience. Nationalism has usually been seen as a positive force in China, as well as in Vietnam and Korea, whereas in Japan it has been seen as antecedent to imperialism. I think a more meaningful comparison, which is impossible here, would start with a level playing field and look at Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese nationalism in comparative terms, examine their mutual interactions, and look at the consequences of their emergence over the entire course of the 20th century, not just the first few decades.

One manifestation of nationalism that can be found in all four East Asian nations is the rise of the vernacular in its relationship both to literary Chinese culture (even in China) and to modern political movements. In China the rise of baihua (the vernacular) in the New Culture Movement is usually understood as part of the rising tide of nationalism, demonstrating a concern on the part of early Chinese radicals to bring culture to the people, and usually ignoring the fact that China already had traditions of vernacular drama and fiction that had made major strides several centuries before Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu claimed to be pioneering it.

Scholars have tended to stress to excess the differences between baihua and wenyan (literary Chinese), probably because the latter is so extraordinarily difficult, but in comparison to what readers and writers in the other countries of East Asia were working with, the differences recede rapidly. After all, both baihua and wenyan are Chinese; they are members of the same language group; they occupied clearly delineated spheres as languages; and while use of one or the other might raise political or cultural issues, it brought into question no issues of national or ethnic identity. The effort to bring baihua into a monopolizing position as linguistic hegemon early in the 20th century reveals much more of a conscious political assault on the elite culture that had so long used (many different varieties of) wenyan to communicate.

In the other countries of East Asia, what had taken one step in China would require two or more steps. First, a native written language had to be invented to compete with the imported literary Chinese—this occurred before the putative modern period—and later, a written vernacular had to be developed to contest with both the domestic literary language and Chinese. But we should keep firmly in mind that, until recent times, Chinese literary culture was East Asian literary culture to a large extent, and even into our own century it remained the medium of international discourse within East Asia.