CHAPTER 5

A Jointly Regional-Global Approach to Rethinking Early Modern East Asian History

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Below I try to undo the earlier globalized ‘rise of the West’ narrative circa 1500–1800 and begin to see things in East Asia regionally as they were dynamically developing from the inside, rather than seeing them passively in hindsight from the outside. That is, by shedding new light on the global ‘beginnings’ of the early modern period it is possible to have a shift in perspective not only regarding the history of East Asia as a region but also including world history as a whole. One outcome of such a shift, I suggest, is that the West in particular would no longer find so ‘surprising’ or ‘miraculous’ the rise of China or India in the twenty-first century.1

What we are trying to do here, I think, is to change the current ‘failure’ narrative of East Asian regional history first and then re-conceptualize world history in that light. In saying this, I am not appealing to a ‘new’ triumphal narrative for the ‘rise of China’, to replace earlier triumphal narratives of the ‘rise of Japan’ in East Asia or the ‘rise of the West’ in world history. But such new perspectives do imply that in many ways the global system remains more complicated than we originally thought. Moreover, Chinese and Indian success in the twenty-first century is not a miracle; it is due to longer-term economic, social, cultural, religious and intellectual developments that we need address.

During the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), for example, conspicuous consumption based on global commerce vicariously impacted on literati life and elite taste in gardens, paintings, books, and antiquities. The expanding literati appetite for conspicuous consumption carried over to the eighteenth century. The patrons of late Ming and early Qing (1644–1911) garden estates, for example, lived in a world where New World silver was exchanged to pay for Chinese commodities, principally silk, porcelain, tea, and jade. The Ming economy was further transformed by an agrarian revolution in which cotton displaced rice production in southern coastal provinces. The influx of Japanese silver heightened the monetization of the sixteenth century economy in unprecedented

1 Said 1975.
ways. Ming Chinese unwittingly faced a global marketplace. Their arts and letters would never be the same again.

In other words, rewriting the narrative of world history requires us first to impartially assess the East Asian region and its components of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese history. When we look at the global economy in light of Asian local history, we recognize that the velocity of money, for example, was redirected in cultural terms via the commoditization of daily life. Chinese, Japanese, and Indians first invented this translation of economic into cultural ‘resources’ for economies of scale. We will explore how silver as ‘money’ during the seventeenth century transition affected Ming dynasty literati taste and Confucian values. The global market place fueled local cultural changes that empowered local classicists in China to move in new and unprecedented directions. Money increasingly ‘talked’ for the many.

Ming elites were living through a decisive shift away from the traditional ideals of sagehood, morality, and frugality. Within an inter-regional market economy of exceptional scope and magnitude, gentry and merchant elites transmuted the impartial investigation of things for moral cultivation into the consumption of objects for emotional satisfaction. Ming painters presented the contemporary fondness for and connoisseurship of antiquities as a genre called ‘Broadly Examining Antiquities’ (Bogu tu 博古图; see Figure 5.1 below). The paintings valorized the literatus as a collector of exquisite things.

Late Ming antiquarianism in particular drew its strength from the economic prosperity that pervaded the Yangzi delta. There and elsewhere merchants and literati used their increased financial resources to compete for status through noticeable consumption. Merchants and literati on their travels searched for ancient works of art, early manuscripts, rare editions, and magnificent ceramics. They paid extravagant sums when they found what they wanted. The rise in value of ancient arts and crafts also touched off increased production of imitations, fakes, and forgeries of ancient bronzes, jades, and ceramics.

‘Reinventing the Wheel’

In retelling the narrative of global history, we need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ of history! What I mean by that is that hitherto we have granted the primacy of the ‘rise of the West’ by appealing to its economic, political, intellectual, and