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Understanding Globalization: Historical Roots of Civilizational Exchanges between Asia and Europe

Three centuries, from 1500 to 1800, were marked by an extensive and fruitful exchange between Europe and Asia and vice versa, an encounter that was mental (ideas, concepts) and material (products) alike. Geoffrey Gunn, professor of international relations on the Faculty of Economics, Nagasaki University, and an outstanding scholar on Southeast Asia, succeeds in debunking the myth that the first globalization was nothing other than westernization. The first globalization never used one highway; instead it was a “global circle” that encompassed Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. This textbook gives an excellent narrative of cultural geography. From Gunn’s analysis, we can conclude that different geographies create different human cultures, but regardless of geographical barriers (oceans, mountains, deserts) geography never separates cultures. Another important conclusion from Gunn’s work is that the Eurasian dialogue never resulted in giving up one’s own identity. Europe never became asianized: China, India, the Muslim Orient and Japan kept their distinctive cultures. Sinocentrism, Islam-centrism, Hindu-centrism, and so forth were a kind of response to the European challenge. Asia wanted to be equal partners. This resulted in a dynamic dialogue between European and Asian partners. Asia used a certain strategy in order to stabilize this equal partnership on a long-term basis. It was a very flexible strategy of inclusion and exclusion of European influences. However, in some cases Eurasian encounters also resulted in hybridity and creolization. First becoming fascinated by the “alien,” it was only a step further to adopt certain features of livelihoods that were combined with traditional (indigenous) ways of life. Moreover, this documents the great potential of three hundred years of globalization.

The Copernican and Galileic revolution challenged European cosmology, the mental map of the universe and the earth alike. European discoveries arose from visionary thought. Nevertheless, Gunn shows that the era of discovery not only evoked a boom of scientific research of exotic landscapes, but it also created a market for travel literature, written by fabulists, that was a type of “science fiction” that made a serious understanding of Asian civilizations difficult and became an ongoing source for later orientalism. Gunn’s book is divided into ten chapters. In his introduction, Gunn develops his theoretical matrix with the main argument that the geographical classifi-
cations (for example, East Asia, Southeast Asia), effective until recently, were created by European discoverers. Gunn calls this "European canon" nothing more than an eurocentric concept that serves to separate European and Asian cultures rather than drawing them nearer. Instead, he suggests the concept of a "Eurasian maritime world." The great oceans between the Arabian peninsula and the coasts of Indonesia and Japan were the trans-cultural highways that facilitated the exchange of men, ideas, and products.

Chapter 1 deals with the medieval heritage of European discoveries and travel literature. We have the phenomenon that in the Age of Renaissance Europeans overcame their geographical and cultural separateness from the rest of the world through their great discoveries. We usually have the idea of the medieval ages as an period of "limited space," "limited time," and therefore rare contacts with the outer world. However, numerous travels of Europeans to the Mongol court in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries debunk this misconception. Travelers like the famous Marco Polo, Pian del Carpine, and others opened Europe’s mental horizon toward Asia. Gunn is correct in the statement that these travel reports represented a kind of "canon" for future discoveries. Inspired by the work of Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus was enthusiastic to find a sea passage to Cathay. Instead, he discovered America. This was a most significant event in world history. I myself would like to call it the "big bang" of the first globalization. Inspired by Asian fantasies, a European navigator discovered the New World.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the phenomenon of historical confabulators, on the one hand, and the amalgamation of geography and literature, on the other hand. As Gunn shows, the exotic places became a kind of utopia, a kind of spiritualization and healing that contrasted with the brutal military and economic forces on outer worlds. There are several examples for historical fabrications like Fernão Mendes Pinto’s Peregrination, published in 1614. Like Marco Polo, Pinto was a merchant who spent twenty-one years in Asia and then fabulated his own "Odysseus" lost in Asia. Why merchants, with their "business skills," wrote imaginative, very popular texts is an interesting question. Some confabulators wrote about dog-headed human races with tails, living in various parts of Asia. Gunn develops the very interesting thesis that the so-called monkey-myth of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a forerunner of Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

Chapter 3 concerns European reflections on exotic nature. The European approach to exotic nature was predominately pragmatic. The search for gold, silver, and furs became a mania. Renaissance pharmacists were looking for exotic herbs and drugs. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European pharmacies were booming in Belgium (Antwerp), Italy (Venice), Spain (Madrid), Netherlands (Amsterdam), and England (London). At a time when an institutionalized European medicine was being born, natural explorers were attracted by alternative Asian healing from China and Japan. This had a very pragmatic reason: travelers, merchants, and missionaries on long-distance routes were exposed to hostile and unknown diseases. It was, therefore, a condition of survival to learn from indigenous medicine.

Chapter 4 gives a very interesting insight into "Catholic Cosmology." As Gunn correctly writes, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the "Golden Age" of Catholic mission. Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and many other orders were spreading out. The Jesuits especially were outstanding scientists. This shows that the Catholic Church, often portrayed in common historiography as an encrusted authority, revealed a striking frankness to exotic cultures and mentalities. On the one hand, Jesuits learned from Asian cultures, and on the other hand, they founded a respective press in Asian countries. Jesuits, therefore, became a kind of multicultural promoter of a global science. However, one important question that Gunn does not touch is why, in the Renaissance, the Catholic Church was expanding into outer-European worlds, becoming a kind of "global power." I believe that "the Protestant revolution" in Europe forced the Catholic Church to seek new fields of engagement and reputation in Asia and on other continents.

Chapter 5 is devoted to European mapping of Eurasia, but does not deliver new insights. Gunn describes extensively how European cartography of Asia was booming. The imperial courts in Asia (for example, in China) were very interested in an accurate mapping of their empires, although emperors were not completely receptive to modern European cartography. Until the nineteenth century, Chinese map production combined Western cartography with Chinese cosmology. Chinese cartographers were still rooted in Sinocentrism.

The next chapters of the book (6, "Enlightenment Views of Asian Governance"; 7, "Civilizational Encounters"; 8, "Livelihoods"; 9, "Language, Power, and Hegemony in European Oriental Studies"; and, 10, "A Theory of Global Culturalization") would best be rearranged to make this part of the book more concise. For example,
combining "Enlightenment Views of Asian governance" with "Language, Power, and Hegemony in European Oriental Studies" would give new insights. For example, French philosopher Montesquieu considered "Asian Governance" in China and Japan and the slavery of women in the Oriental empires as sources of "Oriental Despotism" (chapter 6). However, Asian governance was based on paternal structures, a dynamic dialogue between local bearers of power and the oriental emperor, the "Oriental despot." A look on Asian court polities shows that it was a power game of "bargaining" and the right "networking." This was of course another kind of separation of powers, very different from Montesquieu’s concept. Without a deep understanding of Asian power mechanisms that were far from centralist, Montesquieu was convinced of the superiority of "European governance." Besides philosophy, language also creates "European hegemony" (chapter 9). With the influx of European traders into Asia, the first bilingual dictionaries were produced, predominately English-Japanese, English-Chinese, and so on, but not Japanese-English, or Chinese-English. Gunn has overlooked that Asian cultures had a long tradition of lexicology. Asian lexicologists, however, were not involved in the compilation of dictionaries. And if European scientists used the knowledge of Asian lexicologists, they obviously did not mention their sources.

A symbiosis of chapter 7 and chapter 8 shows that European travelers were keen observers of Asian culture, from food and sexual mores to fashion, dance, music, and other amusements. This is all very interesting, but judging from Gunn’s description it seems to me that European travellers were onlookers into imperial courts and street scenery alike. They often had no deep understanding of the meaning of Asian rituals. Furthermore, Europeans observed the life of rich Asian people (for example, Japanese women in fine kimonos). Why did they not describe the “ordinary life” of the poor, the peasants, and so forth? The reader may also wonder where and how European travelers lived in Asian countries; had they a circle of indigenous friends? Authentic reports on Asian cultures are only possible on the basis on “insider information” from Asian partners and friends. Every modern scholar in Asian history knows that serious research in Asian archives and libraries is difficult without access to native informants. Furthermore, Europeans settled in Asian communities. What did the Asian neighborhood think about the “aliens”? Only field work on social labor conditions of European explorers and scientists in Asian archives can provide us with answers. Most reports of European travelers are descriptive, not really analytical.

I want to give some examples from Gunn’s book: Englishman William Dampier (1699) wrote like a gourmet on Vietnamese cuisine, even though shrimp were ordinary food in Vietnam. But for an Englishman, tired of English stews, pies and puddings, shrimp in a delicious sauce were certainly a pleasure for his palate. European travelers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were almost elitist tourists. Concerning sexual mores, the reports were not always purely scientific, but also had a pornographic touch: “The Malayan women are said to be great whores, of which they are not ashamed. They are soon ripe.” Gunn is right in saying that there existed European sex tourism in Asia. It would be very interesting to investigate Asian archival sources to find out how Asian governments dealt with this problem. The problem of sex tourism is one of the dark shadows of globalization, in the premodern and the modern ages.

Finally, it would have been better to put “A Theory of Global Culturalization” into the conclusion. Gunn is right in saying that the first globalization resulted in a hybridization, or creolization of cultures. But in my opinion, it was not a complete fusion. It is striking that we find creole communities in Asia, but predominately in the trading zones where many Europeans lived, and to a lesser and even ignorable degree in the heartlands of Asia. There were still, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, indigenous communities in Asia not touched by European influences. For the period 1500 to 1800, we seldom find real creole communities in Europe. The majority of the European population like the peasantry and craftsmen, had no clear understanding of foreign cultures and of globalization; instead they lived a regionalized world, seldom going beyond their home region. As a scholar in Russian and Eurasian history, I want to refer to the Russian role in the first globalization, which is unfortunately not mentioned by Gunn. Whereas Western and Central Europe are separated by geographical barriers (oceans), Russia has no natural barriers to Asia. It is, therefore, the sole "Eurasian empire." Especially in Siberia there were, since the conquest of the vast lands behind the Urals in the sixteenth century, numerous creole communities, characterized by a coexistence of trappers and peasants with the indigenous population. For example, Russian peasants adopted native healing. Russians and Siberian natives celebrated together the famous bear festival. In European Russia, bear festivals were very popular and when Russian peasants came to Siberia they found a similar feast among the indigenous population. I am wondering why Gunn has marginalized Russia as the sole “Eurasian empire” in a book entitled First Glob-
alization: The Eurasian Exchange, 1500-1800. Between 1500 and 1800 there was also a great Eurasian Exchange in Russia. Kazan’in the Volga region, Semipalatinsk in the Ural-Central Asian steppes, Irkutsk, and Kiachta on the Russo-Chinese border were melting pots for Russian, Muslim, West European, Chinese, and Indian merchants. The main shortcoming of Gunn’s book is the pre-dominant focus of “Eurasian exchange” along sea routes, but not along land routes. Peoples, ideas, and products came not only by ships, but also by caravans. Although Gunn’s book is very appreciable, it is far from a “metageography” as praised by the publishers. A “metageography” needs to include the role of land (intercontinental) routes. Focusing only on seas while marginalizing the vast hinterlands of the continents, metageography will remain a floating raft bereft of firm ground. Moreover, by marginalizing Russia—with the conquest of Siberia in the sixteenth century becoming the sole Eurasian empire—and its vast Asian borderlands, which were a intercontinental bridge between Europe and Asia, Gunn’s First Globalization is, in fact, a partial globalization.

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