

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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William H. Thornton. *Fire on the Rim: The Cultural Dynamics of East/West Power Politics*. Lanham and Boulder and New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. xi + 215 pp. Notes, index. ISBN 0-7425-1706-3 (cloth); ISBN 0-7425-1707-1 (paper).

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Cultural Pitfall of East Asia Politics

This book is part of a series entitled "Pacific Formations: Global Relations in Asian and Pacific Perspectives," edited by Arif Dirlik. Dirlik here is saluted as "the best researcher in the field" (p. xiii), "whose influence on my thought is a patent element of every chapter of this book" (p. xiv). The chair of Sociology at Cambridge recommends this book. "*Fire on the Rim* is a compelling blend of astute political analysis that is based on a detailed understanding of different political regimes and processes in Asia." Bryan Turner in his foreword claims that the book "should be read by everybody who has a serious concern with democracy and social justice as necessary preconditions of sustainable economic development" (p. xi).

This book is a typical case of cultural approach to East Asia power politics. It has five parts: one each on "Asian values," Japan, South Korea, China, and East Asian power politics.

Part 1 includes "Introduction: The Geopolitics of 'Asia Values'" and "The Postmodernization of Asian Values." Here the author tries to offer readers a new angle from which to consider the politics of culture and the culture of politics in East Asia. For readers (such as this reviewer) who are not familiar with cultural studies, the arguments here represent a fabulous contribution to the study of international relations. There are many new decorative terminologies (such as "postmodern culturalism" or "cultural realism of the Right") to digest. Readers can also learn such things from the author as "postmodern culturalism gained momentum as the Cold War waned. By the 1990s, effusive respect for 'difference' was all but obligatory in academic circles" (p. 1). It is as if one were reading Foucault: even though one might not quite understand his language, one has to take him seriously because he deals with matters of universal concern.

However, readers familiar with East Asian politics will become suspicious of the author's many unsupported political statements. For example, the author claims, "sometimes, as in Vietnam, this cultural myopia has led the United States to treat a potential ally as an enemy; whereas recently, in the case of China, it has reversed that error by treating a geopolitical rival as a 'strategic partner'" (p. 3). He does not bother to tell readers how he concludes that the Vietnam war was the result of any "cultural myopia," either from cultural study or political research; nor does he explain how the United States treats China as a "strategic partner." Is he unaware that in the world of international politics a "strategic partner" can also be a geopolitical rival? In other cases, politically sensitive readers may notice the hidden agenda of the author's interpretations, such as "when Clinton chose Winston Lord as his assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, he was effectively offering Taiwan to China in return for human rights.

It was well known that Lord had broken with Kissinger over human rights while endorsing his appeasement policy concerning Taiwan" (p. 33). Throughout the book, it is typical that the author arbitrarily inserts similar political claims when he is dealing with other unrelated issues. Is it, then, the privilege of cultural study to disseminate subjective political statements without political analysis?

Part 2 includes "Japanese Postmodernism and the New 'Japan Problem'" and "Reactionary Globalization: Local, Regional, and Global Implications of the New 'Japan Problem.'" Here the author seems to have "discovered" the "New Japan Problem;" namely that Western attitudes toward Japanese development tend to be blind toward or silent about political authoritarianism and lack of democratic openness. He blames the American "Chrysanthemum Club" writers, following in the tradition of Edwin O. Reischauer, in downplaying any notion of a "Japan problem" (p. 56). Thornton also asserts that "now established scholars in the field stand accused of flaccid apologetics: research tainted by years of Japanese funding" (p. 38).

The author tries to show his perspective of "Japanese Postmodernism" by raising odd questions, such as "was [the economic miracle] worth even a fraction of its cultural, political, and ecological cost" (p. 55)? He supports his argument by claiming that "a growing number of Japanese believe that the high price of miracle was foisted on them by their supposed benefactor, the United States" and the United States "is widely regarded as the postwar Judas" (p. 55). Some of his statements, such as "Ozawa not only stands for individualism and pluralism, but suggests that corporate Japan never was the faithful representative of traditional value" (p. 81), are simply not true. The author is assuming that readers have no knowledge of Japan, but the argument here shows that the author himself has only superficial knowledge of the subject. It is also troubling that the author spares no opportunity to criticize China, but at the same time fails to mention other critical issues affecting Japanese politics, such as SOFA (Status of [American] Forces [in Japan] Agreement) or the anti-Ampo (U.S.-Japan Security Treaty) movement. Old or new, the root of the Japan Problem originated not in Beijing but rather in Washington.

There are many traditional books about Japanese politics which should be read by anyone who writes about the so-called "New Japan Problem." For example, Maruyama Masao's theoretical work has become a classic in the history of Japanese political thought [1]; Iyasu Tadashi is the authority on Japanese political operations [2]; and Asai Motofumi gives explicit explanation of post-Cold War Japanese foreign policy changes.[3] This book does not mention them, but this is not surprising given the author's apparent inability to use Japanese-language sources.

Part 3, which contains two chapters on South Korea, is the most valuable section of this book, perhaps because (as the author proudly mentions several times) he has a South Korean wife. The author highly praises South Korea as the most successful example of a postmodern democratic system in East Asia, since it is possible for a typical bureaucratic-authoritarian regime in East Asia (advocated by Lee Kuan Yew) to be challenged by grassroots oppositional forces (represented by Kim Dae Jung). Indeed, from the author's anti-IMF, anti-TINAism (the Thatcher-inspired idea that "there is no alternative" to globalization) and anti-New World Order arguments, this book reveals the "progressive" aspect of postmodernism and its allied discourses--postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and cultural studies. The reviewer is confused why the author again concludes chapters on South Korea with false statements

regarding Sino-Japanese relations, which include: "Along with the United States, Japan has gambled heavily on the hope that an affluent China will become a liberal democratic member of the Rim community;" and "Japan pumped in U.S. \$23 billion in aid to China between 1979 and 2000." In fact, by the commonly understood interpretation of the word "aid," the official Japanese government data shows that Japan aided China \$0.756 billion from 1979 to 1998.[4]

Part 4 includes only one chapter, "Selling Democratic Teleology: China as Reverse Domino." Many of the examples and themes appearing here are biased and repetitive, and the whole tone is didactic. For example, regarding the Chinese democratic movement, the author cites some second-hand "inside" information criticizing President Clinton's human rights policy, but he does not mention any Chinese dissident who knows the West well. The author shows sympathy to Chinese dissidents but he displays little interest in knowing how the regime in Taiwan treats the Chinese democratic movement.[5] Regarding America's China policy, as Clinton's security advisor Sandy Berger admitted, "America's material resources can be stretched only so far" (p. 180). In other words, the United States has insufficient leverage to do more than request certain symbolic compromises from China (such as the release of a few famous activists). There is nothing complicated enough here to require the assistance of "cultural politics." Moreover, this section suffers from a weakness similar to that found in part 2, namely the author is apparently unable to read Chinese-language sources.

Part 5 includes "Getting Past Huntington and Fukuyama: Cultural Realism in East/West Power Politics," "Back to Basics: Human Rights and Power Politics in the New Moral Realism" and a conclusion, entitled "A Concert of 'Others.'" The reviewer has not read the work of Huntington or Fukuyama, thus is unable to assess this book's arguments on them. The author is right to criticize Henry Kissinger as "the most egregious China Card player" (p. 201) who "assists corporate clients in setting up business ties in China" (p. 161), as well as Alexander Haig (Kissinger's "protégé," "a mere opportunist," p. 161). "Haig's continuing role in the defense of MFN and as a critic of anyone who defends Taiwan has earned him a good deal more than praise from the Chinese." "[B]ut what counts are the contracts" (p. 201). However, why does the author not mention the Taiwan lobbyists in the United States? For example, would Cornell University have invited Lee Teng-hui to speak there had it not been for the \$4,000,000. that Taiwan gave to that institution?

This book is potentially useful in offering Political Science students an example of how cultural studies may be applied to political issues. As for its specific arguments, different readers may read this book differently. Some readers--such as the author's own students in Taiwan's National Cheng Kung University--who have certain political stances, such as Taiwanese separation from China or Japanese rearmament, will no doubt appreciate it. However, with its selective use of facts and frequent erroneous and misleading statements, this book contributes little to the knowledge and debates of East/West or East Asia power politics.

Notes

[1]. As the leading scholar of Japanese political thought history, Maruyama's many writings, include his major works Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan (Princeton, 1974), and Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics (Oxford, 1963), both of which have been translated into English.

[2]. From 1988 to 1991 Iyasu led a research group (of which the reviewer was a member) to conduct Japan's largest political survey of Japanese local politics. The result was published as *Local Society's Political Structure and Political Consciousness_ vols. 1-2* (1992).

[3]. Now a professor at Meijigakuin University, Asai was MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) China section chief and Envoy to the UK. In his numerous writings, such as *The Choice of the Giant Japan: The UN Security Council and Japan_* (Tokyo: Rodojupo Press, 1995), Asai illustrates that the Japanese ruling class is still the same as before, except it learnt the only lesson from the lost war: to obey the United States.

[4]. For details, please check the official site of the Japanese Foreign Affairs Ministry at http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/seisaku/seisaku_3/sei_3f.html and select "China." The official Japanese record shows that in twenty years from 1979 to 1998, Japan transferred to China a total of \$13.184 billion in ODA (Official Development Aids/Assistance). It includes \$9.900 billion in interest-bearing loans that required repayment; \$2.528 billion in "mutually beneficial technical cooperation" funding with strings attached to buy from Japan; and only \$0.756 billion without strings attached or repayment requirements.

[5]. A few internationally famous dissidents were invited to Taiwan, and some dissidents received money from Taiwan (which is one main reason of overseas Chinese democratic movement's decline). However, every ordinary Chinese democratic activist knows that he/she should not enter Taiwan, even though the regime in Taipei still claims to represent "the whole China." One democratic activist was so brutally beaten by Taiwanese police that his leg was broken, for the "crime" of fleeing from the mainland to enter Taiwan.

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