

Notes on Strategy

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Young Country, Old Country

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The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games kicked off on February 4, 2022, with a dazzling opening ceremony directed by globally-acclaimed Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, captivating the global audience. Against the backdrop of this Olympic buzz, comments made by Korean movie director Song Seung-hwan during the live stream broadcast made headlines. The COVID-19 pandemic forced Tokyo's 2020 Summer Olympic Games to be delayed by a year. With only a few months between the Summer and Winter Games, it was not out of the ordinary for an audience to compare Beijing to Tokyo. The opening ceremonies of the two host countries showed a glaring disparity in arts and culture, differing in various aspects including direction, the balance between art and technology, illumination and color, structure and level performance, etc. Director Song's remarks on the two ceremonies included an interesting and witty observation: "A youthful China was displayed in comparison to an aging Japan."

The youth or maturity of a country is not represented by the age of its government or its population. Furthermore, it is not determined by how long-established a country's history

is. That said, China's history is far longer than Japan's. It is generally understood that the origins of East Asian civilizations, including those of Japan and Korea, are based on various Chinese strands. The "young China" and "old Japan" remark does not necessarily affirm this historical lens, but most Korean viewers nodded their heads in agreement with Song nonetheless. The audience of both opening ceremonies undoubtedly sensed the difference in vitality. These impressions are the composition of various state factors. On a deeper level, the national images of China and Japan are intertwined with their historical responses to Western civilization. The promulgation of Western norms and values; the process of acceptance; and their histories of development, decline, and stagnation are inextricably linked to the countries' national images.

As the Western-centric world order expanded to East Asia, its civilization came into contact with China, Japan, and Korea respectively. Interestingly, the East shared similar early responses to initial encounters with the West. National seclusion — that is, refusal of Western standards — was a common response during initial stages of contact. In addition, all three countries endured external pressures, namely in the form of imperial plunder. Their subsequent responses were also structurally and logically analogous. They put their own spin on the Western process and incorporated a binary approach by holding on to moral values and national tradition, while adopting material and instrumental means.

The Chinese called it *zhongti xiyong* (中體西用: Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application). Japan labeled it as *wakon yosai* (和魂洋才: Japanese spirit, Western learning). Korea (Josun) propagated *dongdo-seogi* (東道西器: Eastern philosophy and Western tools). All three countries struggled to withstand foreign pressures and after the first and second stages of contact, each chose a different method of acquiescence.

Japan was the first to yield to the incoming tides of Western civilization which seeped into many areas of its institutions, culture, and philosophy. The Civilization and Enlightenment movement, led by philosopher Fukuzawa Yukichi, began during the early period of the Meiji Restoration; the Meiji government's national strategy was established on its core tenets. A transformation came later in China — only after its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War did China attempt to reconstruct itself through the Reform Movement. Even so, China had yet to rev up its engine as a modern country. At the same time, the country had become a hot market coveted by Western imperialist countries. China soon became a semi-colony and consequently, underwent a series of revolutions in the 20th century. As for Korea, valuable time was wasted on pitiful arguments between scholars promoting “civilization and enlightenment” and those advocating “Eastern philosophy and Western tools.” By the late 19th century, the Josun Dynasty was confronted with unbearable foreign pressures that resulted in annexation. Historians

generally agree that the Sino-Japanese War marked a critical turning point for the three Eastern countries, each taking different paths: an imperialist Japan, a revolutionized China, and a colonized Korea.

The Meiji Restoration adopted Western civilization in its entirety under the push for “civilization and enlightenment.” During this period, the Japanese elites described China as an old and incapacitated country. China was referred to as an “undesirable companion” and treated with contempt as Japan tried to sever ties. This approach closely aligned with Fukuzawa’s logic of “escaping Asia and entering Europe (脱亞入歐).” The Japanese believed emulating the West aligned with the zeitgeist and strived to incorporate Western values. Accordingly, China and Josun were viewed through a Western-tinted lens. Orientalism — a prejudiced view against the East — was in fact reproduced and reinforced by Japan. Distorted and biased views were propped up under the guise of “Oriental Orientalism” and “Orientalism within Us.”

At that time, Japan was a young country. Western countries also treated Japan as a new member of their country club and Japan internalized this worldview. Japan was vibrant and full of energy — a colt without reins. Puffed up about its victories from the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, Japan mounted its tiger’s fangs of imperialism. However, the country soon lost resilience and forgot how to get off the very beast that had once served them. Choosing the path to

militarism, Japan rushed into war. Japan's pride and belligerent decisions resulted in deep wounds for not only its people but also the entire East Asian region. After the fall of Imperial Japan, the Japanese seized another opportunity for revival through the Cold War and the Korean War. However, Japan remained trapped in its West-focused worldview. During the 1960s to 1970s, albeit growing in size, Japan's body essentially carried a 19th century brain. Shortly after, Japan's body followed suit and started to atrophy. Signs of aging were detected during its 30 year economic recession as Japan lost its ability to nimbly respond to change. Critics from both home and abroad attributed the "Galapagos syndrome" to Japan's isolated technological advancements. Worth noting is Japan's slow entry into the digital age.

On the other hand, China was buffeted by the whirlwinds of revolution and convulsions in the 20th century. After experiencing the Chinese Revolution of 1911, the Communist Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution, China chose to open and reform. However, the country began to turn its potential into national capacities only after it entered the world capitalist system. In the beginning, China was on the periphery. Eventually, it used its huge market as a growth engine to become the world's factory. Taking advantage of its latecomer status to speed industrialization, China's rise to the center of the world came faster than expected. China's GDP reached the level of Japan in 2010 — 115 years after the Sino-Japanese War. The socio-economic hierarchy

between the two countries that had been in place since the late 19th century was inverted. This fanned the flames of fear in Japan, in proportion to China's growing self-esteem. Against this backdrop, China cultivated a youthful image while Japan acquired an aging one.

National age is different from human age in that it is able to age or de-age — the process can go both ways. This is partly due to fluctuations in national capacity that form social dynamics reflecting a country's image. Why do countries age or de-age? Why do changes in global status occur? This is a long-standing question for historians as well as an area of research interest for social scientists. There are various interpretations regarding this issue. Renowned historian Paul M. Kennedy contended that the secret to the rise and fall of great powers lies in the gap between military expansion and economic capability. When a great power is tempted to reach beyond its borders, it is destined for decline if the country does not have the economic capabilities to back up its display of prowess. Political scientist Robert Gilpin also explained the inevitable decline of hegemonies with a similar thesis. An unbalance arises between the rate of economic growth and the ballooning costs to maintain hegemonic status. A hegemon's economic growth will not be able to keep up with accruing maintenance costs, and thus will start declining.

As a result, the relative deceleration of a country's economic growth is the main factor that determines national age. Historian Eric Hobsbawm attributed England's decline after the mid-19th century to domestic economic issues — propelled by the reluctance and conservative investments of capitalists. The lagging investment and profit cycle made a speedy transition to new industries difficult, comparable to the leap from the 1st Industrial Revolution to the 2nd Industrial Revolution.

What are the advantages of latecomers or challengers, then? Most notably, they can integrate technology with economic development at a relatively low cost. A sizable budget for development is funneled into sourcing technology, but technology can also cross borders, not to mention industrial expansion. Latecomers have the advantage of applying advanced technology at a relatively low cost, resulting in optimal productivity. In some cases, direct entry into the field of high-technology is even possible without having undergone a technical evolutionary process — technological leaps are possible and costs are saved. This is the reason China has a strong presence in the new industrial sectors of IT communications, semiconductors, batteries, and electric vehicles.

Amidst a young China and an old Japan, what path did Korea choose and how did that affect Korea's current age? Korea received the most intense level of foreign pressure

among the three Eastern countries in the late 19th century. As Western imperialism grew more competitive, the level of foreign pressure grew more intense. In addition, China and Japan exerted unimaginable amounts of pressure to occupy the Korean peninsula. Korea was like a weak child placed between a young yet ruthless Japan and an old and stubborn China, not possessing the power and strategy to endure their tightening grips. It was only natural for the country to experience social and economic degeneration during the Japanese colonial period. Through colonization, Japan exploited the economic structure of Korea and after its liberation Korea faced even greater turmoil with the Korean War and its subsequent confrontation on the divided peninsula. However, during the 1960s to 1970s, South Korea industrialized and democratized, equipping itself with a great engine for national growth. South Korea successfully utilized the latecomer advantage. It was a development symbolized by its description as one of the “Four Asian Dragons” and “Four Asian Tigers” during the 1970s. South Korea has managed to take a leap forward and garner attention as the future leader in the economic, military and cultural domains. As a young country since the 1970s, South Korea succeeded in combining its growth engine with national strategy sooner than China. South Korea is still in its youth with great potential for growth and is full of social vitality — a trait Japan is surely wanting in. Today, South Korea confidently displays its outstanding vibrant energy on the global stage.

Fifty years from now, what will be the ages and national images of the three East Asian countries? It is not easy to imagine or predict. It is ill-considered to assume that past patterns of change will be repeated in the future. We cannot exclude the possibility that an old Japan may get even older or a young China may experience decline; Korea may very well maintain its fountain of youth. The three Asian countries may have their tables turned several times. The key to taking the lead is building economic capacity, but this is not the only factor. Various factors include the political capacity to resolve disputes; diplomatic capacity in cultivating economic security, communitarian citizenship, social consensus and national pride; these indicators will determine the age of a nation. It remains strategically critical for a nation to nurture creativity in the fields of science and technology to spearhead leading industries. National capacities have a multi-dimensional influence on the competitiveness of leading industries. If a young country's pride devolves into narcissism, resting on the laurels of its past achievements and refusing to accept new challenges, it will quickly become a grumpy geriatric yearning for the good old days of years gone by.