

# **Introduction : Precarity in an Inter-connected Northeast Asia**

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## **1. Precarious Northeast Asia**

Despite expectations of more harmonious and friendly relations after decades of ideological confrontation and stagnant politics along the fault line which had separated the West and the East, a sense of precarity still pervades twenty-first century Northeast Asia.

It is ironic that this anxiety was caused by the acceleration of globalization and the growing economic intimacy between the countries of the region after the end of the Cold War. When national borders ceased blocking the flow of people and capital, people more frequently became exposed to opportunities to encounter “others.” While pursuing globalization, the neo-liberalist economy created instability in the region’s economic life through the so-called liberalization of labor markets in which “precariats” occupy an essential part.

Despite the overwhelming fear of the outbreak of nuclear war, the Cold War years were strangely and ironically accompanied by a sense of stability (or stagnation) , which was achieved by nation states based on the fragile power balance of the super-powers on both sides of the “iron curtain.”

The end of the Cold War and a profound change in the power balance replaced the sense of stability (or stagnation) not with a sense of freedom, but with a sense of precarity.

## **2. Familiar-looking Precarity**

What are the essential qualities or meanings of this precariousness from historical and present perspectives?

The phenomenon of precarity is neither unfamiliar nor unprecedented in the economic, social, and political life of the region. We also know that any kind of transformation can destabilize the familiar milieu of life and cause a surge of anxiety. Northeast Asian countries (including Japan, China, Korea, Russia, and Mongolia) have all experienced paradigm shifts in their international and domestic circumstances in their respective modern histories.

Recent disasters also demonstrated the fragility of modern civilization and clearly accentuated the precariousness of life. The scope of their impact is not limited to the physical damage of infrastructure, but more profoundly extends to basic notions about the human milieu.

The problem to be discussed is not “precarity” itself, but clarification of the distinctive characteristics of its different forms from regional and historical perspectives, because “precarity” has a different meaning in every time period and nation. This conference is about the nature of precarity in Northeast Asia and reveals the murkiness of anxiety by discussing experiences in the past and present of the region.

## **3. Cross-cultural Contact**

The present geopolitical composition of Northeast Asia emerged in the seventeenth century with the advent of Russia and the establishment of the multiethnic empire of the Qing. The region is

characterized by sharp differences between the diverse cultures which were formed during its history. The region's history made precarity one of its basic characteristics.

The Manchu conquest of China in 1644 caused the destruction of the then existing East Asian world view because the "civilized" China was replaced by the "barbaric" Manchu. The Manchu's notion of the world was more multicultural and basically different from the monocentric world view of China. This made Manchu statecraft more successful in incorporating various cultural entities, including the agricultural, sedentary Chinese, the nomadic Mongols, or the religiously different Buddhist Tibetans and Islamic Uighurs into its multifaceted ruling system headed by a single emperor.

Advancing into the vast landmass of Siberia and its Far East, Russia integrated various peoples and different cultures. Because of the small portion of the Russian population living on the frontier, indigenous cultures remained intact for a long time. As Igor Saveliev's report shows, the labor shortage necessitated the introduction of laborers not only from the European part of Russia, but also from East Asian countries. As he says in his report, precarity has characterized this part of Russian empire, especially in an economic sense, for a long time. Norio Horie's report clearly shows that similar problems are still present in the Siberian and Far Eastern economy, and foreign laborers play a crucial role in the region's economy, as shown by the pandemic.

The Chinese population has been advancing into the Northeast Asian frontiers including Manchuria and Mongolia since the seventeenth century. The Chinese were the driving force in economic development, especially in the field of agriculture, but their success gradually caused an ethnic confrontation between the immigrants and the indigenous people. The history of Chinese frontiers clearly shows that massive migration had already begun in this region before the advent of "Western imperialism" in the nineteenth century.

The multicultural nature which had characterized Northeast Asian imperial rule underwent a profound change in the region's statecraft in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Imperial rule of China was replaced by the nation state, and a nationalistic tone began to dominate the region. The process of "modernization" compelled indigenous societies to reform themselves in line with an utterly "foreign" system of culture. This process was accompanied by a strong sense of destruction of their familiar milieu.

After the turmoil of successive wars in the first half of the twentieth century and ideological confrontation between the blocs of the West and the East, the region still lacks a regional framework for international politics and is divided into strong nation states. Even after the end of the Cold War, political tensions still dominate. On the other hand, globalization accelerated cross-boundary economic exchange, and the flow of human migration between countries is still quite strong.

Such a precarious situation makes us skeptical about whether Northeast Asia has the ability to solve foreseeable problems like those caused by the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. As Kumiko Haba warns us in her report, we have to be cautious about the threat of populism, which may seize on the precarious situation in the region.

#### **4. Unfamiliarity and Displaced Identity**

Contact with "others" caused confusion in the people involved. The Russians may have experienced such a feeling in Northeast Asia. Russia's advance to the East was a history of encounters with

cultural “others.” After Russia reached the northern border of China in the mid-seventeenth century, it successfully established a “foreign” relationship with the Qing. The sustainable relationship between these two continental empires developed a meaningful notion about Chinese civilization on the part of Russia. The thriving of Russian oriental studies owed much to this long-time relationship with China. However, according to Petr Podalko’s report, Japan remained unfamiliar to the Russians up to the beginning of the twentieth century, because Russia’s “China filter” prevented it from understanding the reality of Japan. This also applied to the notion of Russia on the Japanese side.

The cultural shock caused by the unfamiliarity of a “foreign” culture was well described in the report of Martina Sorge about a modernizing Japan in the beginning of the twentieth century. The menacing train depicted in Soseki Natsume’s novels is a symbol of the horror felt by contemporary Japanese, who saw it as a threat that terrorized their familiar milieu.

The difficulties in constructing cultural identity on an individual level are discussed by Fabio Lee Peres. The case which he introduces in his report shows how children who have “foreign roots” try to position themselves in Japanese society. The importance of his study lies in his cases showing that multiculturalism has become an everyday matter in Japanese society.

Yu Ai’s report also shows the ongoing effort for social integration of diverse cultures, illustrated by the case of Muslim women living in Japan.

On the other hand, as Michi Fukushima’s report shows, globalization creates a space for the success of cross-boundary entrepreneurship, as occurred in the process of modernization. Its cultural consequences are still open to further debate.

## **5. Precarity in an Environmental Context**

People’s sense of safety is formed in the natural and social environment in which they manage their livelihoods. When the environment suddenly shows them a hostile face, the existing order collapses and people come under pressure to rebuild it. A disaster is such an event.

Debra Jane Occhi and Jugo Sato discuss the precarity caused by natural and man-made disasters with a focus on the East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Sato addresses what happened to a group of wild-food-gathering Fukushima residents when their wild food was contaminated by the accident at the Fukushima nuclear plant. Occhi’s report is related to the same event and focuses on the mascot “Tritium-chan,” which was created by the Japanese government to calm people’s anti-nuclear anger. Both cases show how people’s attitude changes when they face a devastating threat to their natural environment.

Typically, Maksim Kuzovkov’s report discusses the current crisis in Japan’s international educational exchange policy caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The shutdown of the border to foreign visitors to protect the nation from the global pandemic showed the vulnerability of globalization and the precarity of national security in the globalized environment of international relations.

War as a man-made disaster is discussed in Arthur Wattjes’ report. Focusing on the description of Japanese war widows during World War II, he discusses how their loss was exploited by the state’s effort to place them in the context of ongoing war propaganda.

## **6. Reestablishing Order**

From ancient times, human beings have strived to find the underlying order in the universe they

live in. They believed that knowing this order would enable them to rule the world. That is the reason why astronomy was given special status in the ruling structures of pre-modern empires. Time symbolized universal order, and its control was in the power of rulers, who were considered to be Sons of Heaven. Besides the divine rulers of empires, the ordinary people of Northeast Asia also developed various kinds of technology for time measurement. This topic is discussed by Elena Voytishchik in her report focusing on the incense clock.

The European notion of time, or history, deeply affected modern thought in Northeast Asia, including Japan. The theory of the Hegelian school was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, together with the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, and gained authority in Japanese liberalist discourse in academia. The case of Samezo Kuruma, one of the leading Marxist economists of pre-war Japan, is discussed in the report of Elias Bouckaert. His argument on Kuruma brings up the question of how Marxist thought was introduced in the Japanese philosophical framework and how it contributed to Japanese philosophers' efforts to find a position in the system of the European philosophical milieu.

Sora Hoizumi's argument about the conversion to Catholicism of Japanese Christians shows that it was a response of the Japanese people to the anxiety caused by the modernization process and an effort on their part to restore epistemological order.

The case of the incorporation of Western astronomy regarding the creation of the world into the *Kokugaku* discourse discussed by Tomoya Masuda's report also shows a bid to restructure Japan's identity in transforming circumstances. Conversely, investigating certain Ukiyo-e prints, Elena Fabbretti's report demonstrates how the hybridity of the traditional culture made cultural intercourse between modern Japan and the West possible. Finally, Alina Zinchenko's report about Zen-Buddhist concepts integrated into the Japanese tea ceremony may point to another example of a sophisticated integration of an originally foreign culture into the Japanese spiritual milieu.

The reports presented to the conference revealed that precarity has been ubiquitous and simultaneously accompanied by efforts to restructure order. It causes anxiety and at the same time encourages people to create something new. Thus, precarity and creativity are coincidental. Northeast Asia abounds in experiences which can be referred to in this regard.

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The essays published in this book were digests or parts of the outcomes of presenters' studies. Full-scale articles are expected to be published by each speaker in the future.

The editors