

# ■ Contested Theory in East Asia— A Case of Inter-determined Constitution of Proletariat in the 1920-1930s

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## Abstract

This essay problematizes East Asia with theory by simultaneously problematizing theory itself. In such understanding, theory by nature is self-reflexive and self-contesting, ceaselessly questioning the legitimacy of established rules. Since theory remains the bearer of questions to all things it encounters (including itself), any attempt to provincialize theory (as European or as Asian), or to claim ownership over it with a national, racial, or civilizational identity would not be possible because theory is something other than itself and intrinsically aporetic. This paper takes the case of theory exchange in East Asia of the 1920s-30s in relation to the proletarian arts movement by looking at how the very meaning of “proletariat” is grasped in order to understand the contested nature of theory.

**Keywords:** theory, contestation, East Asia, proletarian arts movement

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In general understanding, “theory” in the modern history of Asia tends to take an approach that has privileged praxis in the dialectical process of theory-practice-theory. While “Western Marxism” has made a drastic turn toward philosophy and non-action, Maoism, which is often oversimplified as sinicization of Marxism, stands for the attempt to establish a possible way by which the universal theory of Marxism could be tempered with the specific practice of revolution and ap-propriated in a particular socio-political context and culture without abandoning the universal claim of that theory. Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and his followers were reputed for taking the concepts of Marxism as a guide to action by applying them to China in order to create a theory from painstaking explorations on the realities of the Chinese Revolution and Chinese history (Knight 17-33). However, it does not lead to the formation of distinctive “Asian theory.” The drive for such an identity perhaps implies an inferiority complex and a futile effort in crafting a derivative discourse of European or western theory. Takeuchi Yoshimi’s (竹内好) notion of “Asia as method” in Japan of 1960 is understood as an exemplar of European theory to testify its truth. But he does not set up a predictable binary of “theory Europe / method Asia.” Instead, Takeuchi put forward his concept of “rollback” by arguing that Asia should re-embrace the West in order to realize the theory and universal values of equality and freedom produced by the West that however has failed to deliver them (Lo 31-43). Both Maoist practice and the rollback move proposed by Takeuchi seem to confirm the comment that “theory is something we do not normally expect of Asia” (Sakai 441).

To problematize East Asia with theory, given the pairing of the two entities would also generate a rigorous scrutiny of them, cannot at the same time not also problematize theory itself. Theory by nature is self-reflexive and self-contesting, ceaselessly questioning the legitimacy of established rules. Theory remains the bearer of questions to all things it encounters (including itself), but it does not necessarily belong to any individual. Any attempt to individualize or provincialize theory (as European or as Asian), or to claim ownership over it with a national, racial, or civilizational identity would not be possible because theory is something other than itself and intrinsically aporetic. Such aporia means more than an ambiguity or undecidability but is intertwined with some kind of internal discrepancy, conflict or contradiction. In some ways, the aporia may weaken the theory but, in many respects, would also strengthen it. In a sense, it is a double-bind condition for theory. Any claim to build East Asian theory may give rise to refusal, which is not only a refusal of national or geographical identity but more importantly a refusal of any idea of unity, easy harmony or enclosure, because theory is more of immanent (self-)negation.

The conjoining of theory, engagement, and East Asia always presents a problem by itself. This is not only because that there had been a strong sense of crisis in and about East Asia, especially in the modern era, that solicited some difficult choices for engagements, given the historical reality that the concrete world system provides the means to characterize and determine the theoretico-political agencies and the system of relations assigns them their respective places. Rather than simply a geographical location or an identity, "Asia" is more a problematic or the other constituted by the West particularly in the course of modern world history. The Western aggressive expansions and encroachments have turned many countries in such a category into crises and also forced them to undermine and negate themselves from within. If theory would have any connection with Asia in crisis or in a (self-)negating mode, it is because theory is distinctive from a traditional system of knowledge which is equipped with its consistency and steady grounds to describe and perceive the world. Theory is probably defined as a traditional epistemological mechanism against itself because theory challenges its transcendent perspective, its conventional cognitive structure, and always entangles with contradictions.

More importantly, there long exists a crisis in theory – theory often crumbles in the face of the reality in the dimensions of generality (of causal laws) and singularity (of individual cases) it does not manage to fully and coherently explain, let alone have any possibility of putting itself into concrete praxis (presuming, problematically, the classical opposition of theory and practice). Theory crumbles or falters for intrinsic (theoretical aporia) and/or extrinsic reasons (distrust or attacks from institutions and the public). More problems arise when theory endeavors to intervene in the social reality that it takes for an object of analysis and contemplation, while the conventional opposition of theory and practice (or application), or theoretical construction and empirical procedures, is inadequate to understand the meaning and the function of theory. The binarism is inadequate because, if practice requires any external materiality, it is always such materiality that has to be subjected to the scrutiny of theory, although theory is materially immanent to practice. Sooner or later every theory is destined to be challenged and contested. Far from signifying a failure, the contestedness or conflictuality is actually the very mode of theory's constitution. Such contestation carries a dimension of reflexivity, which also leads to the making of certain positions (or the objective of intervention or transformation) as one of the conditions for its own critique and judgment.

What theory always tries to contest is the model of its experimental verification and rectification, that is to say, how truthful its description can be. Yet, the contestedness of theory also involves its critical function. The conjoining of

truthfulness and critique may tentatively define what theory is. The question of how truthful (or even how scientific or objective) theory can be always depends on the ideological situations of its own enquiry, which is actually its own ideology, not the ideology of others it usually examines. On the other hand, the critical function takes up a political role to intervene so as to change some given situations perceived as unjust and intolerable. It tells (the) truth(s) while confronting with or being confronted by authority or power by means of producing some form of knowledge that unconceals something that has been mutually overlooked and discounted by the dominant power and the subordinated group in the relations of struggle and domination. The production of theory is thus not entirely possible without ideological influences. Neither can its critique of ideology not generate any ideological and political consequences. Such circularity indicates theory's self-contestation and constitutive aporia.

Hence, because of its essentially contested nature, theory is not merely a constructive, explanatory model of objective knowledge, or just an assertion of the emancipatory, transformative forces. Rather, it is at the crossing or intersection of a project of seeking / speaking truth and a critical engagement, which also embeds internally with a self-critical dimension. In other words, theory is not merely a practice of identifying problems, but an act of (self-)problematization, which strategically interrupts the continuity and stability of existing practice by both exploring the contradictions inherent in it and revealing its own ideological conditions. While it aims to theorize the epistemological horizon and possibility of socio-political transformation, its theorization is nurtured by and becomes part of political struggle that it keeps questioning. What theory invokes is a dialectic of knowledge and politics, of which the two terms are always already inside each other in changing circumstances. The continual work of refutation and contestation in theory implies its relation to the historical circumstance in the sense that it could not be reducible to the effect of the agreement or consensus of the dominant ideology in the time theory is produced.

Theory can hardly separate itself from specific historical events or conjuncture. On the contrary, it consistently attempts to connect and reconnect the exemplary circumstances, crises, or events with its theoretical intervention. But it does not mean that theory has any meta-critical stance or privileged vantage point in relation to the elements of the conjuncture it endeavors to frame and tie up. Neither can theory constitute an overarching structure to determine all the features of the conjuncture. Its relation to the critical event or the historical transition is always uncertain and exceeds all determination. However, with the force of the urgent present, the drive to theorize or to know critically is generated in the way that theory not only tries to rectify its conception about the external matter but also

to find something new and different in order to contest others' as well as its own (pre-established) views. In fact, historical conjuncture is profoundly ungraspable since it always produces more contradictory and divergent positions and narratives than any strategic theorization can capture. The crisis or event may even generate some unexpected excessive realities that exceed or contradict any possible representations. That may explain why there can be no clear-cut demarcation between theory and ideologies (undoubtedly the material handled by theory is always ideological), although distinction remains in their practice. Theory is close to ideology, yet not exactly so, not only because it is always self-contesting and not pretending itself to be the absolute truth but also for the reason that it keeps interpretation open and renders prediction impossible.

The contested nature of theory and its other implications could be concretely comprehended in the theory exchanges in East Asia in terms of their reactions to the international proletarian politico-arts movement of the 1920s-30s. The early twentieth century cultural movements in China, Japan, and Korea somehow converged in seeing art and literature as significant way to transform the human world, while simultaneously seeking to change the form and function of art and literature itself. However, the object of transformation is not necessarily something external but could be an integral part of the subject effecting the process of making changes. East Asia seems to have a Confucian tradition as a pre-established epistemological and ethical foundation among its intellectuals to see virtue in the common people and to appropriate cultural production as an ethical practice. In some historical conjunctures, ordinary people, or the masses, could always be inspired for realizing some virtues and determining the orientation of certain political practice, although they are more often the object of distrust and hate, serving as the other for the self-constitution of elite intellectuals. In regard to their aesthetic formal experiments, the proletarian arts movements in East Asia might have been associated with the campaigns of modernists or avant-gardists. But it is the very socio-political circumstance, i.e., the logic of the world governed by the capitalist system, against which such kind of art and literature emerged that was the major target for the movements to be transformed, particularly through the means of raising class consciousness and class-based struggle. One theoretical idea is to emphasize the internationalism of the proletarian movement. Such movement in East Asia brought together the voices demanding emancipation, revolution, anti-war, and anti-imperialism in the manifest form of embracing the newly imagined community of international proletarians while showing ambivalent attitudes toward the nation-state. In other words, the theorization of forming the proletariat as subject is no longer simply constituting the people as "nation" but more as the "mass" (with the

implication of being the poor or the underprivileged) or as a collective ideality with a historical mission that does not necessarily involve a struggle on the purely national terrain while allowing a passage to transnational resistance and liberation.

The circulations of Marxism (mainly the Soviet Russian version) and other left-wing radical ideas in East Asia are usually mediated by regional historical and cultural interactions. But the dissemination is not always conducted on an open and equal basis. It had been carried out through some specific forms of power relations, i.e., the world system of unequal nation-states in the hierarchy of core nations and the peripheral states. Such inequality in the global flow of modern ideas (usually from West to East or to the rest), when arriving at the early twentieth century East Asia, was also similarly expressed in the dominance of hegemonic Japanese terminologies and its re-configurations of classical Chinese vocabularies in the modern Chinese and Korean languages (Duara 2-3). While reversing the sino-centric cultural flows that had ruled the region for centuries, the new hierarchical dissemination of modern ideas could get complicated in the relationships among the imperial Japanese, semi-colonial Chinese, and colonial Korean in that era. Although the intra-East Asian cultural, an intellectual contact network was made uneven and ambiguous by Japan's dual position as imperialist power and gateway to modern Western ideas, the Chinese and Korean engagements with the (re-)imported Japanese ideas did not necessarily show any subaltern indebtedness to the unbalanced power relationships but often revealed some fundamental ambivalence and negotiation. The very condition of unevenness lived by all (Asian) societies, both the putatively advanced and the backward, has been the norm of the world system brought about by the expansion and globalization of capital. If capitalism has failed to eliminate uneven development and to assert its totalizing sameness, it is because it needs to produce everywhere immense unevenness which is its constitutive condition. Although frequent transnational interactions may reinforce the real and psychological borders of cultural, linguistic, and national identities, the paradigm of national cultures or literatures that lays the foundation of difference has somehow been displaced and subverted by the dynamics of spatial and textual contact nebulae among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and even Taiwanese writers and intellectuals (Thorner). Indeed, many Chinese and Korean intellectuals were actively seeking inspiring alternative visions from their Japanese counterparts for their resistance to Japanese imperialism, holding an inherently split position toward modern Japan.

The proletarian arts movement in Japan proper began with the participation of heterogeneous and individual artists, writers, filmmakers, and local reading

groups, and then shifted to the intellectual leadership of the 1931-founded Japan Proletarian Culture Federation (Nihon Proletaria Bunka Renmei), or the Esperanto-named KOPF (Federacio de Proletaj Kultur Organizoj Japanaj), which included organizations in the fields of art, literature, theater, motion pictures, music, photography, education, etc., and which aimed at spreading communist ideas among cultural circles in order to strengthen the ties between these circles and the international communist movement. About the same time, many Chinese writers and students returned from Japan to Shanghai to bring back the socialist ideas and debates they learned there. One Japanese proletarian concept advocated by these returnees was Fukumotoism, named after Fukumoto Kazuo (福本和夫), a Marxist thinker influential in the 1920s, who urged people primarily to engage in the theoretical aspects of socialism rather than to develop mass struggles in the working class. He argued that it was necessary to have a separate warfare which should first concentrate on the clarity of ideology and purification of all participants by expelling the anarchists and non-Marxists from the movement (Scalapino 333). Under the impacts of Fukumoto's concepts, many left-wing Chinese writers emphasized how they could use "theory warfare" (理論鬥爭 *lilun douzheng*) as the foundation for constructing revolutionary literature in China. The younger members of the Creation Society (創造社 *Chuangzao she*) and the Sun Society (太陽社 *Taiyang she*) began to promote the consciousness of proletariat in the proletarian literature and to use such consciousness to define the writer of proletarian literature. They also radically criticized established left-wing writers like Lu Xun (魯迅) and Mao Dun (茅盾) as spokespersons of petit-bourgeois since they lacked the proletariat consciousness.

In an article entitled "Spontaneous Development and Directed Consciousness," Li Chuli (李初梨), member of Creation Society, in order to refute Lu Xun's thesis that proletarian literature has to be written by proletarians themselves, stated that "our criterion for the writers of proletarian literature is only on the question of their consciousness, not about their class background . . . . I believe the pioneering task [of proletarian literature] is to combine the spontaneous development of the masses and their directed consciousness, not merely to listen to the spontaneous voices of the masses" (15, 20). Whether spontaneous or acquired as the outcome of a process of formation and coming to consciousness, the proletariat is transformed into a subject not only for the working class but also for the bourgeois artists themselves who endeavor to represent it as the revolutionary form of subjectivity. Such a "people-to-come" is articulated with respect to the potential of art and literature. Perhaps, not unlike the nation-state's discourse on a people to serve as tools for legitimizing the socio-political order, the intellectual advocates of proletarian literature attempted to conceive an alternative

community based not on national commonality and to constitute a new subject for revolutionary politics. It is artworks that provide the possibility of a leap into new modes of identification and subjectivation.

The term “proletariat” is featured in this transnational arts movement, but the way how the very meaning of “proletariat” is understood has shaped the revolutionary vision in different political contexts. There was indeed some confusion over the word “proletariat” itself circulated in Europe before the term has been transmitted and translated perhaps grudgingly into an East Asian discourse. What is amazing, as Etienne Balibar points out, is that “the very word ‘proletariat’ almost *never* appears in *Capital* . . . this is true not only of the universal term ‘proletariat’ as a singular substantive implying the representation of a personality responsible for a historical mission, but also of the more ‘empirical’ plural term ‘proletarians.’ The latter is also almost absent from Marx’s eight hundred pages, the result of twenty years of work and line-by-line corrections, and the text in which Marx wanted to concentrate his theory most systematically” (125-6. Emphasis in the original). It may not be entirely surprising because “proletariat” indeed is a mysterious entity. The proletariat, in order to struggle for its own political existence, has to go through the passage from the “proletariat in itself” to be “the proletariat for itself” in the Hegelian language. As the “class in itself” only means the sheer fact of similar conditions of social life, only when the proletarians organize themselves, with revolutionary consciousness, into a political movement, can they convert themselves into the “class for itself,” or the so-called subject of history. The problem for the proletarian arts movement in East Asia was that, not only that the proletarians would rarely organize and equip themselves with the needed consciousness, but also the artists and activists themselves have to reeducate and redefine themselves to become such a class for itself.<sup>1</sup>

Given the fact that there was relatively a smaller urban working class population in East Asia (including Japan, the leading industrialized nation in the region), the proletarian movement has been regarded as an idealist projection of the intellectual elite class, negatively suggesting the insincerity and self-interest on the part of the educated elite (Perry). However, what is revealing is how these bour-

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<sup>1</sup> Balibar has offered a view that the proletariat is actually the “nonsubject of history” because the working class cannot be presented as facing capital symmetrically if the subject is “capital” which is capable of becoming an individual and collective character as the capitalist. However, labor and the totality of working-class practices are all part of the movement of capital. The proletariat is thus not exterior to the mechanism of capital. Balibar writes: “In *The German Ideology*, at the limit, only the bourgeoisie is a ‘class’; the proletariat, on the contrary, is defined as a ‘mass,’ as the last product of the decomposition of society. This definition precisely makes it the agent for a *communist* revolution in which no ‘particular’ interest (no ‘class interest’) need be advanced” (144. Emphasis in the original).

geois intellectuals, through their participation in the movement, have themselves undergone a self-transformation process. In other words, the revolutionary project of changing the world and awakening the working class through arts and literature has to be preceded (or to be carried out simultaneously) by the commitment of these elites toward self-transformation. The political mission of the proletarian art movement in East Asia can only find its place and legitimacy in the formation of the proletarian subject. Hence, the constitution of this subject of history (history here means change), i.e. the proletariat, is a constituted effect that performs a constitutive function. The formation structure is always already creating an inter-determination between “I” and the “other,” that is, between “self” and “other,” the other of the subject that constitutes it, thus making the proletarian community actually into an open problem but not a given resolution. “I is another” therefore is never an equation of the determining form of an entity insofar as it is distinguished from the exteriority in which it is embodied. Rather, it is a question of the historical force that distinguishes between the act of the I and the other to which this revolutionary act is attributed, that is to say, an inter-determined, if not entirely undetermined, modulation. History moves into the subject in order to constitute the other from the I in it. It is the structure within which the I affects and constitutes the other (which also becomes the ego) and is being affected and constituted. The other or the ego itself is in history, and thus constantly changing, being a passive or receptive entity that experiences changes. Yet, the I cannot constitute itself as a unique and active subject either, but rather as a passive ego which represents to itself only through its own act; that is to say, the I, as an other which constitutes it.

In the context of the early twentieth century when endeavors have been made to render possible the becoming-subject of history with the construction of international proletarian community, there are also opposing forces from the established institutions that (re-)inscribe individuals within the framework of norms and disciplines, resulting in the two great rival ideologies of class and nation. Although nationalism is criticized by the Marxists as an instrument manipulated by the bourgeois state to exploit its people, there are very little alternative for the working class to go beyond the imagined community of nation-state. While the leadership of the Communist International (Comintern) saw nationalism as a strategically progressive force for the oppressed people to accomplish the bourgeois revolution which was a necessary step for the realization of a socialist revolution, its instructions offered to East Asia were contradictory and even hypocritical, because Japanese nationalist imperialistic aggression in Asia did not merely constitute significant threats to the plausibility of Chinese revolution but also endangered the national security of the Soviet Russia. Yet,

not all Japanese Marxists were willing to preclude nationalistic elements from the proletarian movement as prescribed by the Comintern (Hoston).

After the severe debate with the younger members of the Creation Society, Lu Xun translated an article on film by Iwasaki Akira and published it in *Mengya Yuekan* 萌芽月刊 (Seeding Monthly), which later became the official journal of the League of Left-Wing Writers in Shanghai. The works of the left-wing Japanese film theorist Iwasaki Akira (岩崎昶) had been translated and received in China and Korea in the 1930s. Iwasaki was a founding member of Japan's left-wing film organization, Prokino (Nihon Puroretaria Eiga Dōmei, Proletarian Film League of Japan), established in the early 1920s. Under the influence and inspiration of Soviet Revolution, Prokino had introduced to Japan avant-garde films and theories of the Soviet Union in connection to proletarian art movements in order to promote social consciousness and to resist against bourgeois ideology by means of film theory. This left-wing film movement also endeavored to liberate the camera from the dream factory of the studio and take it to the streets by using the camera as a weapon of struggle for improving labor conditions and workers' rights in Japan.

Iwasaki's article on propaganda film, which first appeared in a Marxist magazine and then was included in his book *Film and Capitalism* (Eiga to shihon shugi), is translated into Chinese by Lu Xun as "Xindai dianying yu youchan jieji" (Modern Cinema and the Bourgeois Class) published in March 1930 in the third issue of *Seeding Monthly*. In the original essay, Iwasaki points out how Hollywood, European, and Japanese cinemas, like reformed religions, were appropriated by the ruling class in the capitalist countries as instruments of mass propagation for bourgeois values and ideas to the proletarians and ordinary spectators who would be aroused to identify with the bourgeois class and submit to the established authorities in support of their aggressive wars and patriotic ideology. But Iwasaki also describes how the Soviet Union attempted to use movies to counteract the bourgeois propaganda by turning films into a tool of mass education and political mobilization. Cinema then becomes a site of struggle where the capitalists in collaboration with the state manipulate ideology as if they were the directors of the film by assigning audiences to their roles and ensuring that they act according to the written script, whereas the revolutionary politics attempts to introduce another script to the film in order to subjectivize the spectator as a new actor.

In his translator's notes, Lu Xun, though finding the essay very useful to him, suggests that the class politics of Iwasaki and his critique of bourgeois manipulation of the proletariat through mass entertainment are somewhat not adequate to understand the semi-colonial situation of Shanghai. If Iwasaki only focused on

the issue of class, Lu Xun, who had been sneered at by the young radicals as an unqualified Marxist, attempts to bring in the problem of race or nation to reflect on the Chinese society of the time. While those foreign films released in Shanghai, as Lu Xun argues, were not originally targeted at the Chinese audiences, similar ideological effects could still have happened on the Chinese viewers. However, in such a Chinese semi-colonial context, the Hollywood cinema, in Lu Xun's ironic tone, did not exactly reproduce the bourgeois consciousness on its Chinese audiences, but it made the Chinese viewers feel inferior and rendered them into slaves vis-à-vis the foreign heroes on screen. The grafting of bourgeois desire and value on the individual viewer was not only a class issue, according to Lu Xun, it was also the colonial and imperialist structure that had been embedded in these Hollywood and foreign productions which accidentally incited the Chinese moviegoers' desire to pursue bourgeois pleasures that were essentially impossible to them as racial subalterns.

If Iwasaki's film theory aims at analyzing the way in which ideological consciousness as an artificial device has been transplanted by the bourgeois class through popular cinema to general audiences, Lu Xun with his reflexivity of the Shanghai semi-colonial situation deconstructs the epistemic boundaries of class analysis by inserting the dimension of nationalist struggle to contest such proletarian film theory. The subjectivizing effects of those foreign movies work on the Chinese viewers not in terms of identification with the bourgeois consciousness, but through the dis-identification with it, which is perceived as something more national (or racial) than of class. What Lu Xun has brought up is that the one who is subjectivized or indoctrinated may fail to hear or misread the call, acting outside the ideological script, if not even against it. Iwasaki in his essay implies that the form of resistance toward the bourgeois propaganda was the Soviet cinema that helped build the working class consciousness, whereas Lu Xun's argument about the feeling of national inferiority may have demystified the identification model of consciousness and punctuated the illusion of proletariat identity. That is to say, real freedom or liberation could not result from just shifting from one identification to another, or just from the bourgeois ideology to the revolutionary one. Film scholar Victor Fan, with his detailed commentary on the whole incident, has even gone so far to say that "these Hollywood films in fact generated displeasure, shame, and a sense of failure among the Chinese spectators...[because of] their own sense of emasculation" (53).

However, it does not mean that Lu Xun wants to thoroughly replace class politics with national politics. He refers to another incident in the translator's notes that some Chinese film organizations invited Douglas Fairbanks to dinner during his visit to China but were rejected by the actors, while he accepted all the

itinerary arrangements by the Japanese on his Japan trip and agreed to meet the Japanese audiences in the theatre at Tokyo. In addition, some Chinese critics felt offended by the derogatory representation of a Mongolian prince in the film *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924) starring Fairbanks, in which the white character played by Fairbanks himself but not the Mongol succeeds in marrying the Arabic princess. The Chinese film industry took these as a humiliation to the Chinese people (given the self-perpetuating nationalist ideology in the Chinese republic was that the five races, including Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan, are under one union) and wrote an open letter to Fairbanks, not to make a public protest however, but only to ask him to preach love and respect to the world in his future productions and to understand the kindness of Chinese people since it was a nation with four thousand years of civilization. Lu Xun comments that the letter precisely showed these Chinese people were so colonized that they could only beg their colonizer to tell the world about them. Such national pride was only a cover-up of utter humiliation. Instead of substituting class consciousness with nationalism, Lu Xun's reflection pries open the existing ideological foreclosures of both class struggle and nationalist passion, hence subverting the unproblematized vision constructed in accordance either with class or national interest. Neither working class consciousness nor nationalist sentiment could fully explicate the intricate relations of Shanghai film audiences to the Hollywood cinema in Lu Xun's understanding. In other words, the "masses" Lu Xun describes as the Shanghai audiences are actually external to the world of ideology, of which its abstractions and representations of social relation could not fit them well. For this reason, the masses could not have the ideologues coming forward to instruct or guide them, implying Lu Xun's fundamental ambivalence toward the masses – sometimes they could be awakened, but sometimes they could not be trusted and relied upon at all.

Lu Xun's reflexive and critical self-contestation, unfortunately, was not a sustainable pathway to support any clear-cut political engagement from the perspective of the League of Left-Wing Writers under the increasingly dominant influence of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese communists adopted the strategy of acquiring state power in order to transform its ideological apparatuses by channeling its subjectivation toward a proletarian politics in the way they understood. Iwasaki was invited by Chinese left-wing writers to visit Shanghai in 1935, but he didn't have the chance to meet Lu Xun, who was very cautious of seeing foreigners under the Shanghai white terror at the time. Facing the severe persecutions of the socialists by the government in Japan, Iwasaki later sought refuge in Japanese colonial Manchukuo in the early 1940s and worked

for the Manchurian Film Production (Man'ei 滿影), which welcomed converts from the left. A respectable advocate of transnational class-based revolutionary alliance in a critical moment had to find political shelter in Manchukuo, which was an incarnation of the complicity between state-nationalism and the interest of capital and was a colonial state that privileged its citizens of simply for being Japanese.

In 1931, Iwasaki's *Film and Capitalism* was reviewed in a daily newspaper in colonial Korea by Seo Kwang-je (徐光霽), a member of the Korean Artista Proleta Federation (KAPF) which promoted the proletarian film movement. While praising the contributions made by Iwasaki's film theory in sharply analyzing the complicit and antagonistic relations between cinema and the capitalist system, Seo also took the opportunity to lament that the theorizing effort of colonial Korean cineastes remained "armchair critique" or "empty talk" (Kim 46). Although the Korean critics called for a proletarian film movement in Chosen equivalent to the one in Japan, they were facing a harsh condition that there was film theory without (adequate) films since the ruthless Japanese colonial government's censorship policy had made local Korean film production extremely difficult. Such a yearning for a more empowered and substantialized film theory to theorize film that was never produced could be understood to be nearly a type of nationalism. But both the nation and the proletariat were perhaps merely im-aginaries in colonial Korea to relieve some of sufferings brought by capitalist modernization and imperialist exploitation. The difficulties faced by the Korean intellectuals when they attempted to develop a pro-Korean independence position within the international proletarian movement were that they had been condemned by their Japanese comrades for emphasizing the issue of nation-state. The Korean artists could not help exclaiming: "we've just started making national histories, and you want us to stop already?" (Bowen-Struyk 263). Seo Kwang-je seemed to have made adjustment to his political leaning after going to Japan. When he returned to colonial Korea, he directed *Military Train* (1938), which was regarded as a pro-Japanese propaganda film though there were some subtle messages about the Korean situation passed along (Nie & Zhu 16-17).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The film tells the story of three young Koreans, Lee, Kim, and Kim's younger sister, in Japanese colonial era. Lee and Kim are best friends, and Lee is a lover of Kim's young sister. In order to support her brother's studies, Kim's sister has become a prostitute. Lee sells information about the military train to a Chinese spy in order to get the money to save his loved one from continuing her prostitution. But Lee feels guilty about his connection with the Chinese spy and confesses it to Kim, who reports to the police in time. The plot of blowing up the military train has been stopped and the Chinese spy is arrested. At the end, Lee is so persecuted by his guilt that he commits suicide. While the film highlights the harmony between the Japanese and Korean peoples and uses the military train as an optimistic symbol of marching toward the future, it also significantly narrates the tragic lives of its Korean protagonists.

He might have prioritized the objective of increasing the real figures of Korean productions over holding onto “armchair” proletarian film theory. To create a people-to-come through filmmaking (spectators in this context), either they are preordained or inscribed by national boundaries or proletariat consciousness, is far more important to Seo than to continue the fact that the community or the people remain missing.

Proletarian internationalism emerged out of the context of the new imperialisms of the 1920s and 1930s, a conjuncture that was critical for the formation of knowledge about the proletariat. New technology and urbanization allowed left-leaning artists and activists to travel widely and to circulate their ideas with increased ease. The special circumstances of East Asia made the countries in the region more prone to a national revolution against colonialism and imperialism than a sheer socialist revolution, though there also emerged a drive for making a united front with all the nationalists in a joint effort to repel imperialism. Chinese and Korean intellectuals (theorists alike) and revolutionaries looked to Japanese Marxist thinkers for an inspiring source to resist Japanese imperialism, but they also looked to Japan for a model of successful nation and state building. It is because to achieve self-consciousness against any ideological subjection and to apprehend oneself as free, one has to take possession of himself and becomes his own property. Holding onto the possession needs the protection of the powerful state. The socialist politics in East Asia was not strong enough to make the anti-imperialist nationalists overcome the notion of nation-state and the ideology of nationalism, although they were not unaware of the fact that it was the nationalist ideology which allows the nation-state to monopolize resources, co-opt the working classes, and discipline the population for economic and even military competitions with other nation-states with similar national interests. When the Japanese imperialist aggression became more widespread in the late 1930s and China had to struggle desperately for national survival in the total war with Japan, the option for imagining an international proletarian community had been shut down. However, the formation of the proletariat as the subject of history was getting its momentum under the strict guidance of the communist party for the obvious reason that the party is the essential form to guarantee the existence of the proletariat and the continuity of the class struggle that head toward the socialist revolution and the seizure of power after the revolution. East Asia was no longer conceptualized as an emerging imagined community based on class interest, but only as a contested site for the brutal competitions for national interest.

Theory cannot be a Western or Eastern (national) property. Neither can it belong to any particular class even though some socially and politically sanctioned

moral imperatives are necessary to uphold theoretical stances. Theory is aporetic, eccentric, and something other than itself, but it also allows people to communicate and co-imagine because it is not some positive and empirical knowledge stated as unchangeable facts. While theory is so radical as to undermine and alter certain established co-ordinates and relations as well as to question even its own assumption, its (self-) contested nature can turn it into its opposites, and herein lies the danger of being integrated. In the modernization process of East Asia, theory has been continuously turned into academic and intellectual pursuit of disciplinary studies within the institutional framework defined by nation-state. However, if there had emerged contesting theoretical voices in the midst of subjugating globalization under the logic of European expansionism in the early twentieth century, we could optimistically expect new kinds of theoretical articulation that would transcend national, geopolitical interests, challenge the current dominant forms of knowledge, and transform globalization into a liberation.

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## 東亞理論的爭議：以20-30年代 東亞無產階級內在自我矛盾為例

### 摘要

本文同時對「東亞」與「理論」進行互相扣連的思辯。「亞洲」不斷被質疑其實質存在性，而「理論」本質是自省與自我爭辯的，又不休止地向既有秩序提出疑問。正因為這種特質，任何把理論加上歐洲或亞洲標籤的企圖，或將理論視為某個國族、文化身份的設想，都變得不太可能，因為理論往往只能成為自己以外的東西，是內在的自我質疑。本文以二十世紀二、三十年代東亞的無產階級文藝運動作為例子，追溯「理論」在當時中、日、韓等地的互動反思，以至對「無產階級」這個觀念的不同反響。

**關鍵字：**理論、爭議、東亞、無產階級藝術運動

