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The Formation of East Asian World during the 4th and 5th Centuries: A Study Based on Chinese Sources

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Abstract  Adopting the historical periodization and the “ethnic awakening” theory of Konan Naito, this essay discusses the early formation of East Asian states such as Koguryō, Paekche, Silla and Wa during the 4th and 5th centuries, as well as the political order within the East Asian society shaped by the enfeoffment of the Eastern Jin and the Southern dynasties by using Chinese sources. It argues that the cultural influences of the Qin and Han dynasties promoted the ethnic awakening of East Asian peoples, and during the turmoil periods of the Wei, the Jin, and the Division Era these ethnic groups leaped rapidly in their roads of state-formation. The enfeoffment system of the Eastern Jin played significant role in this process, and therefore set up the basic structure of the international relationship in early modern East Asia.

Keywords  East Asia, burgeoning states, ethnic identity, the Eastern Jin, the Southern dynasties, international relationship

The Cultural Influence of China and the Ethnic Awakening in East Asia

From the perspective of cultural history, Dr. Konan Naito (1866–1934) periodizes the pre-modern Chinese history into three stages: the ancient period, the medieval period, and the early modern period. According to Naito, the ancient period lasts from the prehistoric time to the middle Eastern Han. The period from the late Eastern Han to the Western Jin is the first transitional stage, which is followed by the medieval period starting from the Eastern Jin. After the
Division Era, the Sui and the Tang dynasties China enters the second transitional stage, the turmoil time of late Tang, and the Song dynasty announces the beginning of the early modern period.\(^1\) Developed by his disciples, Naito’s theory gradually resulted into a new periodization of Chinese history: an ancient time lasts till the Wei and the Jin, a medieval time ends in the Sui and the Tang, and an early modern time starts from the Song.

As for the ethnic awakening of the neighboring non-Han peoples, Naito analyzed the problem in details in the chapter “The Failure of Wang Mang’s Polices towards Barbarians and the Awakening of Barbarians” in *Shina jōkoshi* (The ancient Chinese history). He states that “the wrong policies of Wang Mang towards the barbarian groups exerted great influence to the political situation of East Asia. We may say it was the false of Wang Mang that had changed the Chinese history into an East Asian history.” “The brutality of Wang Mang towards the barbarians actually stimulated and promoted the latter’s self-awakening. There were accounts of the origination of various ethnic groups in *HouHanshu* (The history of the Later Han dynasty). Since then, a new phenomenon has emerged: The East Asian history was no longer the history of Han-Chinese but the histories of different ethnic groups”; it “not only showed the cultural dissemination of China to other areas and the Chinese conquering of non-Han peoples, but also reflected the resistances of the other ethnic groups that had impacted the China proper.”\(^2\) Naito thus rightly points out a significant phenomenon in Chinese history: after the reign of Wang Mang, the non-Han groups of neighboring areas experienced the initial ethnic awakening and began to ask questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where am I from?” Naito’s analyses of these historical changes since the Eastern Jin not only provides a theoretical base of Chinese historical periodization, but also throws new light on the problem of ethnic identity during the early state-formation processes in East Asia.

In historical reality, the 4\(^{\text{th}}\) and 5\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries had witnessed great political turmoil in East Asia. Because of the geo-political reasons, ethnic groups led by Xiongnu, Xianbei, Jie, Di and Qiang invaded the central plain and established their own power bases along the Yellow River. These foreign forces battled with each other and vicedissipated periodically, while the traditional Han polity was forced to move southwards, showing similarities with the early Medieval Europe. At the same time, the Koguryo in northeast China, Paekche and Silla in the Korean peninsula, and Wa in the Japanese archipelago also expanded their territories with great valor stimulated by the newly-awakened ethnic identity;

\(^1\) Naito Konan. For the Chinese version, see Xia Yingyuan, 1–224. The following citations are all based on the Chinese version.

\(^2\) Naito Konan.