

Multiple and successive modernities: Rethinking the issue from an East Asian Perspective

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Abstract: The emerging paradigm of "multiple modernities" needs further clarification in many respects, not least in relation to the question of "successive modernities", in the sense of a sequence of overall configurations. The best starting-point for discussion of the latter issue is Peter Wagner's analysis of the transitions from liberal to organized modernity and beyond. But the broadening of the frame of reference beyond Western societies is bound to raise new questions: is there a way of fitting the multiple modernities that crystallize in different regional or civilizational settings into a more general sequence, or should multiple modernities be theorized more systematically in terms of their specific sequences? Moreover, the inclusion of both Western and non-Western cases will bring in the problem of "entangled modernities", constitutive interconnections between different patterns and sequences. For a whole range of reasons, the East Asian experience seems a particularly promising starting-point for reconsideration of these issues.

It illustrates the momentous impact of Western ascendancy and expansion, even without colonial domination, but also the scope of autonomy achieved through reinvention of patterns originally pioneered by the West. Moreover, the East Asian encounter with modernity has resulted in very divergent trajectories within the region, more specifically those of Japan and China.