

VIEWING THE EAST WITH EASTERN PARADIGMS: CHINA'S PEACEFUL RISE

Interview with Professor Choi Young Jin

Choi Young Jin is a distinguished professor at Yonsei University. He served as the former Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Côte d'Ivoire and the Head of UNOCI (United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire), where he oversaw the Ivorian presidential elections and the post-electoral crisis that followed. A former career diplomat prior to his academic career, he served as the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations and the Ambassador of Republic of Korea to United States. Previously, he was the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea, Ambassador to Austria and Slovenia, and Permanent Representative to all international organizations in Vienna, Austria. He served as Assistant Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations at the United Nations and was Deputy Executive Director of Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). He was a resident scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Editor in Chief Siri Sung and Junior Staff Editor Hyowon Shin had an opportunity to sit down with Professor Choi.

Y: What motivated you to switch paths from a medical student at Yonsei University to a diplomat?

Curiosity and youthful inspiration. I wanted to know what was going on in the world. Korea is a really isolated country just like Japan. The North Korean presence blocks our connection to the continent. South Korea is like an island, very much isolated. It was more so in the 60s and the 70s when I was growing up. I could not control my curiosity about what's happening around the world. Between medical doctors and diplomats, at least among the two, foreign policy officers enjoy a better chance of going abroad and knowing and observing what is happening around the world.

Y: You used to be a practitioner of foreign policy and now you are a theorist, an academic. The question of the gap between theory and practice is centuries old. How do you think your roles have changed, and do you have any idea on how the gap between theory and practice can be narrowed?

Ideally, there should not be a gap. In other words, a practitioner must be well-versed in theory and theoretician must have experience of practice. The best example is in Washington, the think tanks and administration, they are very close, and they exchange all information for the benefit of the nation. Korea, I think, I see a lot of gaps because academia and government they are separated, which is not good for the nation. What is to be done? The practitioners must study theories and try to formulate their experiences in the framework of understanding theories. On the other hand, those in academia must try to get experience as practitioner; participate in the government exercises, if possible in the government itself. With that kind of effort, you can reduce the gap for the benefit of the entire population. I will borrow the terms power and truth studied by Hans Morgenthau. Between power and truth, there was, is and will be struggles because it reflects the fundamental egos, as you mentioned, and from our search for self-interest. So it is inevitable but what we have to aim at reducing the gap between power and truth. Power should not ignore the truth and truth must recognize the exigencies of power and the limitations of power.

Y: How did your diplomat career shape your outlook of the world, especially in terms of your book *The East and West: Understanding the Rise of China*?

We are living in a time of Western paradigms which thoroughly dominate the entire world. This is because the West conquered the entire world and physically dominated for the last centuries. The rise of East Asia is changing this, so we have to correctly understand the fundamentals of East Asian civilization and how it is different from Western civilization. This allows us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both civilizations. I think using Western paradigms to view East Asia will depict a very different picture from reality. Had I remained inside Korea, I could not have observed and compared the two civilizations. So my diplomatic career allowed me to widen and deepen my search for the understanding of the two civilizations.

Y: How is your upcoming book different from your first book, the East and the West? How is it different from other authors that have written on the same subject?

My book is very different from the views of Samuel Huntington or Francis Fukuyama, because in my opinion, they are still very Western centric. My work views the East and West on an equal footing. A predominant number of thinkers place the West on higher ground than the East. Even some Eastern thinkers view the East as an appendix of the West, in line with Hegelianism. I have only found two books, in my last thirty year of research, that compare the two worlds on equal footing. One is by Professor Richard Nisbett of University of Michigan called "Geography of Thought: Why We Think the Way We Do". It is the only book in North America, as far as my knowledge goes, which compares the East and West on an equal footing. The other book is from Europe, written by Professor Francois Jullien of University of Paris Seven. He also compares the East and West on equal footing.

I challenge the notion that the East is simply a part of the West. Without a balanced perception of the East and West, one is not equipped to properly navigate the complexities of the twenty first century. We have to have this balanced perception. We have to compare the strengths of the two worlds, and the weakness of the two worlds, rather than comparing Western strengths with Eastern weaknesses. This was the habit of the West for the past two hundred years, such as Hegelian philosophy of the world.

Y: Some call for non-Western international relations theories as opposed to only having Western theories of international relations. Would you agree?

The difference between the East and West when it comes to international relations, cannot be more contrasting. But people ignore this. They think that the East has no distinct paradigms of international relations, and all you have to study is the Western paradigms. This is only half true. We have Eastern paradigms, based on preserving the status quo as opposed to expansion, deference to hierarchy instead of exploitation, and ethics rather than law and force. It values the prevention of conflict as opposed to resolution of problems, and focus on "the day after" as opposed to "D- day". We have such contrasting paradigms between the East and West. The Western

scholars, naturally, refer to their own experiences. What is regrettable is that Eastern thinkers and scholars copy Western thinking.

Even scholars that are in a position such as Koreans. Which country do you think is in the best position to understand China; its past and its future? No other country, except Korea, has better and a deeper experience with China. By virtue of its unique historic experience and its current proximity, both geographical and cultural, it is in a better position to not only know China, but also predict China. Despite this fundamental characteristic that is favorable for Korea to speak out about China's past, present, and future, we do not do this. Instead we import perceptions from outside, the West, and America. This I do not understand.

Y: The West currently holds the position of knowledge hegemony, and this possibly explains the simple importing of Western thinking by Eastern scholars. Do you think this hegemony will shift to the East in the future?

Knowledge hegemony is a Western concept. Let us say Western paradigms. It is true that Western paradigms reign over the globe, even in the East. But do not forget that Eastern paradigms supported the rise of the East. Concepts such as market economy and democracy, why do you think the East digested them so successfully unlike any other region? Compare China with the Soviet Union, for example. Both communist countries, faced with the challenge of adopting the market economic, China succeeded and Soviet Union failed. Why? Because of fundamentals. Eastern paradigms such as *wu wei*, philosophy of non-interventionism, or *zunxi*, philosophy of man, were lacking in the Soviet Union.

Eastern paradigms are rising, and it will become more and more relevant. The world of the twenty first century, will be more like the Eastern traditional environment. Circumscribed. There is no more place to explore, to conquer, or expand your power. We all live in a global village, just like East Asia for the last three thousand years. So I would like to see the interaction between Western paradigms and Eastern paradigms, not in the form of conflict or showdown. Western paradigms are reigning supremely, but the Eastern paradigms are rising. That is the most fascinating interaction we are going to see in the twenty first century.

Y: The concept of the “nation-state,” which is considered by some as a Western concept not fit for all regions, such as in the case of Africa, based on tribal traditions. Do you agree with this view?

You raise a very interesting idea regarding the concept of the “nation-state,” which emerged in the West after the Westphalia treaty in 1648. What is your concept of state formation in the East? Do you think we are still following the footsteps of the Western nation-state? I would disagree. You have to really study in the depth the cultural history of the East. The state formation took place in the East more than two million years prior to Western state formation. The state formation took place in the East very early. For example, during the Warring States period, in fifth century B.C. The significance with the state formation is that it gives birth to the concept of political economy as well as democracy and the people-first politics. The reason why I am teaching East and West civilizations comparisons is because we do not know much about ourselves and because we are dominated by Western paradigms. We have to have a deep reflection and have correct perceptions regarding the East and West.

Y: Based on your time spent as the Special Representative of the United Nations in Côte d’Ivoire, do you think the reason a lot of the issues ongoing in Africa cannot be solved is because the Western paradigm dominates the world?

I would like to say without condescending intention a statement of observation facts most of the African countries, most of them still suffer from tribalism. They had no historic experience to move from tribalism to state formation, the way the East did from Warring State Period in fifth century B.C., and the nation-states of the West in sixteenth century. They are making a transition from tribalism to state formation. That is what Africa is now. The West then imposed nation-state models in Africa. There is a mismatch of what Africa is and what the West wants to make Africa to be. And that’s all you see now, the turmoil and disorder Africa is suffering from due to this discrepancy.

Many say the continent is a lost cause, therefore not worth the effort. China, however, has been recently investing heavily into the country. Do you think that this is a region worth concentrating on and do you think Korea should do the same?

First of all, the perception we have regarding Chinese economic involvement in Africa is a view by the Western press. In other words, why should we distinguish Chinese involvement from European Western involvement? There is no difference. Why the Western press focus on China is because somebody outside the West is doing the same thing. The West may ask the question but the fact that Eastern students and intellectuals ask this question surprises me. There is no point distinguishing between Chinese involvement and Western involvement. So, that I wanted to correct. Beyond that, the idea that Africa is a lost cause, I do not buy it. Rather, it represents the future. Africa has yet to trace the step taken by the West for the last several centuries. Africa is young. Currently, the West wanted to help Africa with their typical perception of models, democracy, human rights but that needs some infrastructure to work, which is education. Africa needs education and training and learning. It takes times, generations, if not centuries. So the current approach from the West to Africa will have certain limits. I hope China and other countries, such as Japan, Korea and other Asian countries, will make contributions to Africa in terms of education, training rather than a developmental model approach or an institutional approach.

Y: How do you view the region we are in, East Asia? Do you think it is stable? What do you make of the future of the regional order in face of changing power dynamics such as the rise of China?

I think the region is absolutely stable, and a military confrontation between China and the US will not happen. There is a disparity between the Eastern and Western paradigm regarding foreign policies. For example, the East, for thousands of years, evolved around the preservation of the status quo as opposed to the expansionism of the West. With expansion, we are bound to have struggles, wars and conflicts. But when the goal is to preserve the status quo, the default mechanism at play is peace.

The East's default mechanism is peace. You need motivations, intentions and outside input to have conflicts and wars in this region. People may point out the territorial issues in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. When I was in Washington, people always asked me, "When do you see the possible collision surrounding these issues?" I said, no you're not going to see any conflict or military confrontations. It will be resolved or managed in the frame of diplomacy or negotiations, not with armed conflict.

For this you have to have historical perspective; the default mechanism in the East was peace, not war or confrontation. For the West, the default mechanism was confrontation and war. This is not because they were moralistically bad but the environment. The West is in an expansive and open environment so they have to struggle for survival. You have to attain this attitude, of conflict and victory. It is unavoidable. On the other hand, in the East, we live in a circumscribed and contained environment. We do not have to expand to survive. There is no need to struggle for survival, the status quo is sufficient. Do you see the difference when you see the West and East? All the empires, Athenian, Delos alliances, Sparta, the Roman Empire, Charlemagne Empire, they are gone. You see nation states only beginning only after the Westphalia system in seventeenth century and Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. But in the East, Korea and Japan existed two thousand years ago. The predilection towards status quo versus expansion, that will help you understand a great deal in understand what is happening in the region. Peace not conflict. You have to be wary about what the Western theoreticians are saying. They will ask you to interpret what is happening the East with Western concepts which is not relevant. It is not a moralistic judgment. If the Eastern people were born in the West and lived there, they will behave exact same way; conquests and exploitations. If the Westerners were born in the East, they would act exactly like the Eastern people; preferring the status quo, peace as the default mechanism. So, it is the context which determine how the national person would behave. Have this distinction in your mind in the twenty first century to be relevant, or you will make mistakes. Such as trying to analyze the Eastern regional issues with the Western concept.

Confrontation between China and the US will not happen. They will compete for supremacy because it is in their blood, in the formation of nations. What is new is the modality with which they will compete for supremacy. The competition for supremacy is inevitable, but the game will be played as a game of *wei chi*, which is predicated on a fait accompli without confrontation. It is different from the Western game of chess, which is based on threats, confrontation, and direct collision with a view to securing a victory. The game played by US and China will be a game of *wei chi* in the twenty first century. They will compete for supremacy, but without confrontation. But this competition, to my mind, is secondary. The primary element in the future will be of the cultural exchange between the two paradigms, the Western and Eastern paradigms and the resulting interaction. We can hopefully have a productive synthesis out of the interaction.

Y: In comparing White Papers of China and US, there was a clear difference between the assumptions regarding the region. The “Chinese Military Strategy” assumed that the region was very unstable and thus China needed to develop military capacity to maintain Chinese sovereignty and create a conducive environment for its growth. The “American National Security Strategy”, on the other hand, believed that the Asia Pacific was peaceful and wanted to concentrate on economic and cooperative measures to ensure and maintain peace in the region. How do you make of this difference?

I am not sure that what is described really reflects the Chinese foreign policy posture and American foreign policy posture. I challenge the notion that America is peaceful and China may not be peaceful. The best description you can discern from their foreign policy posture from is their decoration about the “new type of major power relationship”. What does it say? It contradicts what you explained- the relationship between big countries in the Pacific era will be quite different from those in the Atlantic realm for the last five hundred years. The Atlantic era in the five hundred years was about imperial expansion and therefore conflict and confrontation was inevitable. On the other hand, according to Chinese perception of the “new type of major power relations” is what China has been doing in the old times, there will be competition but there will not be confrontation. And I think this goes very well with America’s “pivot to Asia” or “rebalancing towards Asia”, and I agree with your description, it is peaceful fundamentally. So I would like to argue on behalf of trans-Pacific compatibility, which is very important for you studying International Relations in this century. We saw trans-Atlantic incompatibility with Imperial Japan and American involvement in East Asia. But I argue that Chinese rise and the American Pivot to Asia are compatible because both nations will use their soft power, as opposed by hard military power.

Compare China with Prussia of the eighteenth century, Imperial Japan of nineteenth century, and Soviet Union of twentieth century. Where do you see the difference? You mentioned China enforcing its military capability, yes, but it is quite different from the three cases I just mentioned. Not Prussia-like, not Imperial Japan-like, not Soviet Union-like. China has a civilizational fundamentals, which will dictate her to demonstrate different pattern of foreign policy. How many ICBM do you think China has now? As reference, the US and Soviet Union still possess 1,300 ICBMs, and China as you say

has great economic capability, out of this how many ICBM did they produce and possess now? Sixty. Do you see the difference between China now and militaristic nations of the past? China's militaristic capabilities will grow certainly because it was so low in the past, because of the lack of economic resources. Now that they have the economic resources, it will grow but not in the same way as Prussia, Imperial Japan and Soviet Union.

You are born in East Asia and you are bound to know much better than Western people about Eastern cultural fundamentals. For example, would you believe and has anybody told you that China proper, excluding dynasties under Mongols and Manchus, has never stepped out of their frontiers for territorial or economic gains for the last one thousand years. If this is news to you, this means that you really have to make the distinction between East and West. Do you see any other country in the West that did not venture out of its frontiers over the last one thousand years and still preserve its existence? Not a single example. But China is there, Korea is here. Japan, unfortunately tried to emulate the West two times in the past, but these are the exceptions. International relations in East Asia, in general, have been regulated according to a different paradigm, based on preservation of the status quo instead of expansion, deference to hierarchy instead of exploitation, and ethics rather than law and force. It values the prevention of conflict as opposed to victory in conflict, management of the situation as opposed to resolution of problems, and management by default as opposed to resolution by design.

Y: If there is a renewed Pax Sinica in the future, how do you think it will be different from Pax Americana or Pax Britannica?

Pax Sinica will be very similar to Pax Americana, and very different from Pax Britannica or Pax Mongolica. Pax Britannica and Pax Mongolica were based on expansion, imperial colonialism, and conquest of other countries. On the other hand, Pax Americana, is and was based on a trade paradigm. In other words, America wanted to have commercial opportunities just like any other country. China, historically, relied on soft power like the United States. America and China each rely on soft power as opposed to military power as the principal means of securing its national interest. China's millennia old tributary system was precisely based on the balance of soft power vis-à-vis neighboring nations, and America is built on the moral principle that repudiates the European realpolitik of balance of hard power that dominated international relations from the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in

1648. So in this sense there is a compatibility between Pax Sinica and Pax Americana, a trans-Pacific compatibility. Pax Sinica and Pax Americana are different from the peace mechanism of the Atlantic era- a paradigm of war and conquest that relied on hard power, a balance of military power, for the last five hundred years.

Y: What about China's expansion in the South China Sea? Can you still argue that China's efforts to build artificial islands in the South China Sea is an example of its soft power at play?

What is happening in the South China Sea is too early to tell. I do not accept that this is part of their imperial design of the region. Every country wants to secure their next door territory, not just imperial countries. What China is doing is in their next door territory. If China does this in the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean, I would reexamine what I have put forth. Better wait to see whether China has aggressive intentions or is simply acting defensively. What is the perception of China's intervention in the Korean War and Vietnam War? Is it seen as offensive or defensive? Absolutely. It was defensive, both in the Korean War from 1950-1953 and in the Vietnam War in 1979. For a country like China, which has fundamentals of a civilization with premises of favoring the status quo, to engage in imperialism, they would have to convert its fundamental characteristics of foreign policy into one of hegemonism. It would take generations if not centuries to change this.

Do not try to import Western paradigms or Western concepts and apply it directly to the East. We have different paradigms and we are fundamentally different. We have to use Eastern paradigms to understand what's happening in the East, and Western paradigms to understand what is happening in the West. Thankfully, America, across the Pacific, stands between the Western and Eastern paradigms. Remember that America was built on the moral principle which repudiates European imperial colonialism. It is very fortunate for us to have such an America, not like a traditional European power. Do not let yourself easily taken in by the Western press. Not the entire Western press, but they want to paint an alarming picture using Western paradigms and applying it to the East.

I challenge the notion that America is peaceful and China is aggressive. I think China is as peaceful as America, if not more. Without due regard to Chinese civilization, one is apt to make the mistake of interpreting China's

moves in terms of the paradigm of the Atlantic Era. But compare the military spending between America and China and the number of ICBMs.

Y: China's military spending has remained stagnant at 2.5 per cent of their GDP whereas the US has gone up and peaked at 5 percent in 2011. It has only come down to 4 per cent. Are you saying that if China was as aggressive as some think, the percentage should have grown?

Both countries are peaceful. China, because of the peace loving fundamentals of its civilization, and American because the nation was built on a different moral principle than Western imperial colonialists.

Y: This is an oldie but a goodie. If you had President Obama's ear for ten minutes, what would you suggest as an alternative to the Asia Pacific strategy?

I would express my compliments. I agree with his policy to rebalance to Asia. I know that there are people who want to interpret it in terms of containment or encirclement of China, but I do not agree. Look at East Asia from an American perspective. What is East Asia? It is the future! East Asia produced only 10 per cent of the global GDP after the Second World War. Now, the number has approached 30 per cent. It is among the three geopolitical centers of the world along with North America and Europe.

Look at the demographics. In the region we have 1.6 billion people, North America has 400 million people, and Europe has 400 million people. East Asia has twice the number of people, North America and European Union combined. That is not all. People in this region have better motivation for education, hard work, thrift, and what I call default gratification. The fundamentals are better than the Western countries. Economic growth is faster in this region so it will become one of, if not the only, geopolitical centers of the world in the future. It is an economic engine. What would you do as the leader of the US? Focus your attention to this region. I think it is correct to interpret this "pivot to Asia" as America's expression of their will to participate in future trends. So I would express my compliments to American leadership.

Y: Realism posits a pessimistic view on the role that can be played by a relatively smaller power such as Korea. What do you think of the role Korea can play as a middle powers such as agenda setting and role playing?

A middle power such as Korea does not enjoy any margin of error. It should be extremely wary of any unrealistic, audacious, intrusive, or interventionist diplomacy. However, Korea must be aware that there are certain foreign policy areas in which she must act to secure her core national interests, and must take a proactive stance in these areas. Korea should be proactive in what is happening around its own country, such as issues regarding North Korea, Korea-Japan relations, and most of all the balancing act with alliance with US and cooperation with China. The balancing is not between China and US per se, but its alliance with US and its trade with China. Korea needs to balance these two relationships, which is primordial for its foreign policy. I believe Korean foreign policy now is solid in its fundamentals. It can be improved in regards to better managing multipolar relationships. I would recommend to be very careful in stretching its capabilities beyond its purview. **Y**