

CL-8

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

THE YIN AND YANG OF EAST ASIA

Part I

"East Asian Threat?"

Shanghai, China
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Dear Peter,

*"This is the place that the sun rises first,
This is the place that civilization was born the earliest,
This is the place that the population is the largest,
This is the place that the people are the most diligent."*

I don't know what your reaction will be as you read the above lines. I was deeply disturbed when I first heard these words of a Chinese song, "The Rise of East Asia." This song was adopted as the official music for the East Asian Games held in Shanghai last year. Although I was born in that "place" and was a member of the diligent people, of which I am proud indeed, I was annoyed by the arrogant and *East-Asia-centric* views reflected in these lines.

The song seems very popular here in China. It is often broadcast on television and radio programs. Its tape has been on the list of best sellers. During a recent taxi ride in Wuxi city, the driver asked me if I would like to listen to some "exciting Chinese songs."

"Why not," I replied.

The first song on the tape that he chose, however, was the "Rise of East Asia." I immediately told him that I changed my mind. "I'm afraid you will get too excited when you listen to this song," I said. "It's not a good idea to do so while you are driving."

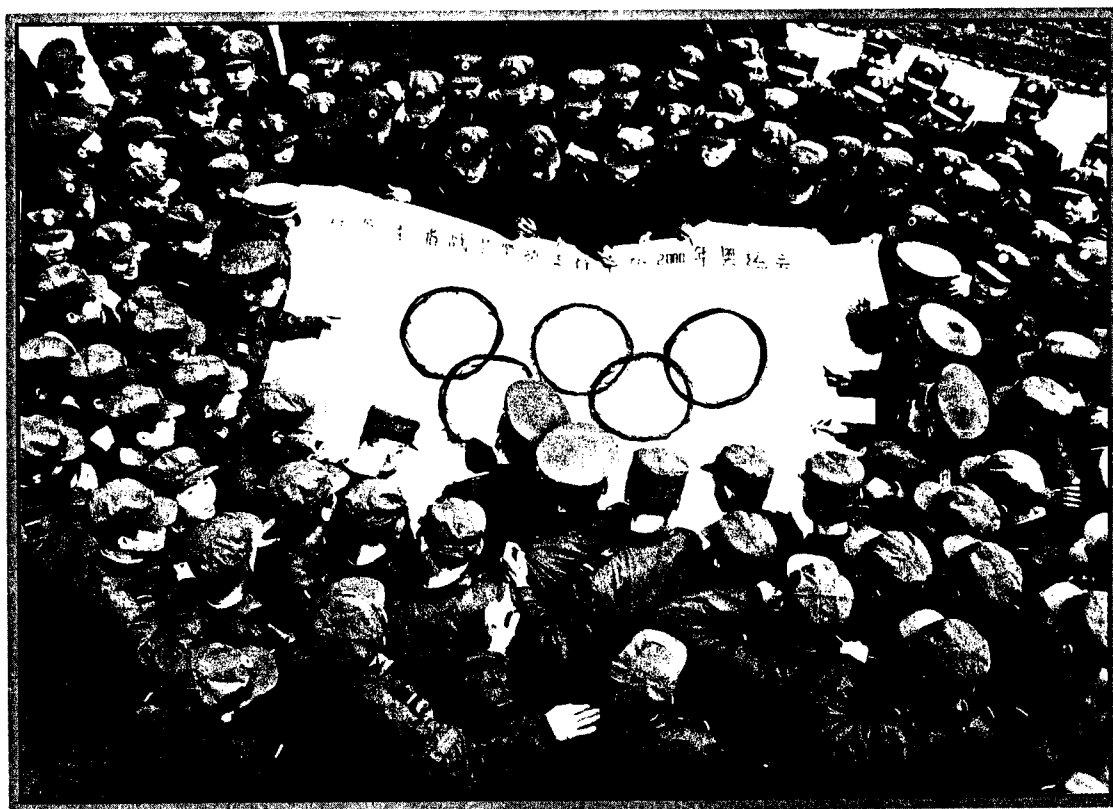
Cheng Li is a an ICWA fellow studying the political economy of the coast of China.

A few weeks ago, several friends of mine invited me to a bar in Shanghai. The bar attracted a lot of sport fans because it had a large TV screen which often showed sports. The night we went there was a big night for soccer fans – South Korea played against Germany in the World Cup.

In that bar, I had a very exciting night indeed. Yelling, damning, crying, throwing glasses, people in the bar were unanimously for the South Korean team.

“Why do all of you wish the Koreans would win the game?” I asked a young man who behaved like a cheer leader.

He looked at me contemptuously and said, “We are the same color, isn’t it obvious?” He made me feel that I had asked a dumb question.



Many Chinese wished that Beijing had succeeded in its bid for host city of the Olympic Games in 2000. A Beijing Olympics would have been a coming-of-age and victory party for the country, as the Tokyo Olympics were for Japan in 1964 and the Seoul Olympics were for South Korea in 1988.

“Chinese soldiers’ hope for a Beijing Olympics”/ taken by Ben Daochun.

The Chinese fans were very proud of the Korean team, which gave an unparalleled challenge against its European rivals – the defending champions of the World Cup. For the following few days, the hottest topic in the country was neither the soaring increase in the inflation rate, nor the rumors about Deng Xiaoping's health, but the "greatness of our Korean brothers."

I loved to watch soccer games and enjoyed the great performance of the Korean team in the World Cup. But to be honest, I didn't experience the excitement, fanaticism, the ethnic pride, which my Chinese friends had as we watched the South Koreans playing in the World Cup games.

"Li Cheng, you have changed." A former college classmate said to me. "Do you remember the time we watched the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics on TV?"

His reminder brought back to me the days and nights when we celebrated the 15 gold medals that the Chinese mainlanders obtained in the games – the first Olympics that the PRC athletes had ever attended. When the Chinese Women Volleyball team won the Gold Medal, we were so excited that some of the students in our dormitory burned brooms, mops, and even their bed sheets as substitutes for fireworks.

My friend was right. I have changed – I have become indifferent to the things which electrified me ten years ago. I'm not sure whether the change was due to my increasing age or to my altered identity and loyalty. But I do know that the education I received in California and New Jersey has had a strong impact on my personal growth. I have accepted some new values – chauvinism has given way to globalism, and internationalist visions have replaced provincial attitudes.

I grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution. This was the time that nationalistic fanaticism reached its peak. We were taught to believe that China was the center of the global Communist movement and the Chinese people were *the* most diligent, intelligent and courageous people in the world. Almost anything foreign was considered decadent, dirty, and dangerous.

My grandfather worked for a foreign bank as a clerk prior to the Communist victory. He was labeled "the running dog of foreign devils" during the Cultural Revolution. Simply because of this, my aunt's family who lived with him was ruined when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. My aunt's husband, an engineer in Shanghai's Nanshi Electric Company, was persecuted because he refused to condemn his father-in-law. Under great pressure, he committed suicide by jumping into the Huangpu River. My aunt, a high school teacher, was rusticated to the countryside.

The person who suffered the most in my aunt's family was probably her 11-year-old daughter. Dad died, mom left home, grandpa, who could speak four foreign languages, seldom spoke to anyone, even in Chinese. My cousin had an extremely lonely childhood. What confused her the most was the toys with foreign images which her grandpa had given her. She really cherished these toys, but the Red Guards told her that these toys were all evil things. An 11-year-old girl could not stand such mental torture – later she became schizophrenic.

Now she is 40 year-old, still regularly receives treatment in a mental hospital. Without a family, she has to support herself by working in a toy factory. Ironically, in this factory my cousin makes Mickey Mouse dolls and other toys, some of which are exported to North America and some are sold in China.

The times have changed. Mickey Mouse has become one of the favorite toys of Chinese children. Working for a foreign bank is likely on the top of the preferred job list among China's college and high school graduates. Foreigners are no longer called "foreign devils." All kinds of foreign products are available in Chinese cities. Yet, China has remained an exclusive society. Foreigners in China have a new name, *lao wai* (foreign folks, literally means "old outside"). Although this is a neutral term, most foreigners feel uncomfortable and irritating when they are referred to *lao wai* by the Chinese.



Staring Squads – non-yellow-foreigners can get stared at in any East Asian country. China is particularly phenomenal for the size and enthusiasm of its staring squads.

"You don't have to do anything to get a crowd. Stop for a minute or two on the street to look at something and several local people will also stop. Before long the number of onlookers swells until you're encircled by a solid wall of people," a China travel expert noted.

This happens to two Americans who just stopped to look at a map in front of the Forbidden City in Beijing.

These two Americans are irritated as the number of spectators has increased exponentially within a couple of minutes.

"Why were we treated like circus freaks?" They ask a interpreter.

"Because you are foreigners." The interpreter answers.

"If you are a non-yellow-foreigner, you feel that you are an alien here in China every day, no matter where you go, what you do, and how long you stay." A Canadian who works for an English newspaper in China said to me. She has been living in Beijing for 12 years.

"As a foreigner in China, I have to pay much more money than the Chinese when I go to a concert, visit a museum, make a long-distance phone call, or purchase a train ticket." She complained to me. "My Chinese host family and I were so angry when I visited Shanghai last year. As a foreigner I was not allowed to stay with a Chinese family because of the government's segregative policies."

All these "special treatments" reflect a deep-rooted "we-they" attitude in Chinese society – an explicitly parochial ideology – towards foreigners, particularly towards those of different colors. This "we-they" dichotomy has also determined the way that the people in China look at international affairs. For me, only after I had studied in the U.S. for a few years, did I gradually realize the problems with this attitude.

I will never forget the thrill of revelation that I experienced when I first read Woodrow Wilson's motto in the Firestone Library of Princeton University: "We are all citizens of the world; and the tragedy of our times is that we do not know this." I don't mean that I no longer love my native country because I have become a globalist. The subtle distinction is that I love China, though not quite in the "Chinese way," or for the "middle kingdom mentality."

Because of this change, I found the song "Rise of East Asia" annoying. Also because of this change, I was amazed at the strong regional identity of East Asia.

East Asia's regional identity and aspiration have recently aroused great concerns among people around the world, especially those in the West. Probably no one has made these concerns more straightforward than Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State. He recently wrote that Asia, especially East Asia, is "both the most dynamic region of the world and the one with the greatest potential to threaten world peace." (International Herald Tribune, March 28, 1994, p. 7).

As scholars in world politics have observed, East Asia is "the most striking case of 'sea-changes' in recent history." An area known for chronic war and economic backwardness has been transformed within less than half a century into the "world's foremost model of rapid development."

While the global economy has experienced recession during the past few years, East Asia has enjoyed robust economic growth. According to a report recently published by the Asian Development Bank, East Asia's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at an average annual rate of 8 per cent for two decades, more than double the world average.

Using purchasing power parity, the World Bank recently calculated that East Asia's GDP reached \$7 trillion in 1992, surpassing North America's \$6.9 trillion and the European Union's \$5.9 trillion. East Asia's GDP is growing so fast that experts

estimate that it will exceed that of the US and European Union combined in the year 2005. (China Daily, Jan. 8, 1994, p. 4; Cankao xiaoxi, Nov. 24, 1993, p. 8; and Nov. 25, 1993, p. 8).

The economic record of the so-called "Chinese economic community" (*huaren jingji quan*) was particularly impressive. Foreign trade of Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan was respectively ranked No. 8, No. 11, and No. 13 in the world in 1993. The total foreign trade of these three regions accounted for 8.5% of world trade. The combined foreign reserve of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan is \$140 billion, close to the \$163 billion – total combined foreign trade of Japan and the US (Baokan wenzhai, May 16, 1994, p. 4).

Other regions in the world, especially Western countries, become vulnerable as their economic interdependence with East Asia increases. US trade with East Asia, for example, amounted to \$348 billion in 1992 – 53 per cent higher than its trade with the European Union. This trade with East Asia also meant 2.5 million jobs for Americans.

In Australia, the government is set to take advantage of the geographic proximity to East Asia. According to the Australian government's statistics, the East Asian market accounted for more than 60 per cent of Australia's exports in 1992 while Europe absorbed 25 per cent. This was the reverse of what had been true 30 years ago.

The World Bank estimates that by the end of this century, three-fourths of world trade will take place within the Pacific area. Not surprisingly, there has been much talk in East Asia and elsewhere about the coming of a "Pacific Century."

In the contemporary world, the rapid growth of a geographic region in terms of economic power and political influence, for example, 19th century Europe, post World War I North America, and the Soviet bloc after 1945, often aroused suspicions and anxieties among other regions. Today, there is growing suspicion in many parts of the world about East Asia's intentions and aspirations.

Perhaps most alarming has been the trend towards increasing arms purchases in East Asian countries in recent years while there has been a notable decrease in defense budgets elsewhere in the world. As a recent Morgan Stanley report showed, for defense manufacturers, Asia is now a more promising market than the Middle East and East Europe.

This suspicion is probably most strongly felt in the United States, the remaining superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Chalmers Johnson, distinguished political scientist and the former director of Pacific Studies at UC San Diego, recently observed, East Asia's economic achievements are embarrassing to the United States. "The Americans did not cause them, did not anticipate them, still cannot fully explain them, and are politically and ideologically threatened by them."

Yet, the Americans are not hesitant to criticize them. In his well-known article published in Foreign Affairs last summer, Samuel Huntington, political science

professor at Harvard, tried to characterize the nature of world politics in the coming decades. What global politics is likely to be, in his view, is: "A West at the peak of its power confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways." Huntington argued that

The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations (p. 22).



The trend towards increasing arms purchases in East Asian countries in the recent years is a disturbing factor to Westerners. China is the fastest growing economy in the world, with what may be the fastest growing military budget, as some Western observers have perceived.

An exhibition of tanks is displayed in China's Military Museum in Beijing /taken by Stephen Hess.

According to Huntington, Confucian culture, or oriental civilization that East Asian countries have embodied, will form an economic and political bloc. The bloc, which is likely to be centered on China, will be a major threat, not only to the political and economic power of the West, but also to its value system – Western civilization. Furthermore, Huntington argues that another major threat to global stability is from Islamic fundamentalism. Confucian countries and most Islamic fundamentalist states are located in Asia. Therefore, Asia will be a source of conflict and threat in the future.

Huntington's article led to a heated discussion of so-called "Asia values" and "Asia threat" in the West. Many leading journals in Europe and North America have continuously published articles on the topic in the past year. A recent issue of The Economist, for example, had a cover story about "Asian values."

There is no general consensus on what "Asian values" really mean. The definitions range widely. Some believe that a cohesive Asian world-view is "one of imperialist pretensions, ideological fervor, totalitarian paranoia or superpower hubris." Others perceive "Asian values" as the "Asian consciousness," which is animated by "workday pragmatism, the social awakening of a flourishing middle class and the moxie of technocrats" (Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, No. 5, Nov./Dec., 1993, p. 75).

Some reject the concept of Asian values for its all-inclusive generalization. As a British reporter argues, with not only 60% of the world's population but also four or five major cultures and three or four main religions, Asia is a "bigger and more diverse place than Westerners think." It may make more sense to talk about Confucian values and other Asian value systems such as Islam separately. Therefore, searching for the distinctive characteristics of the "chopstick area" in East Asia (Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and two Koreas) has become a fad among journalists (and some members of the academic community as well) reporting on East Asian affairs.

The regimes of the "chopstick area," however, also differ greatly. They are in the different stages of economic development, and they have adopted different political systems. Consequently, political culture and value systems vary within the area. The East Asian states, as some scholars have observed, see each other as potential strategic competitors. East Asian nations have not developed the pattern of cooperation that emerged in Europe after World War II.

Despite of all the difficulties and confusions (and in some cases contradictions as well) in the definition of East Asian values, most writers seem to believe that East Asian values consist of (among other things) an emphasis on the family and education, high savings, hard work, hierarchical social structure, male dominance, a denial of individualism, a strong nationalistic mentality, and insensitivity to racism.

James Fallows, an editor of The Atlantic Monthly, observed when he was a correspondent to Japan several years ago that East Asia is a region accustomed to viewing others as superiors or inferiors but rarely as equals. He wrote that one timeless argument in this region is whether the people there feel inferior to Westerners, or superior to them. "Feeling equal to them – different in culture, but

equal as human beings – somehow does not emerge as a possibility.”

With the countries of East Asia having scored one economic miracle after another for the past two decades, the people in the region – the Japanese, the Taiwanese, the Koreans, and the Chinese, as some Westerners have perceived, have more “justifications” to believe the superiority of Confucian values over those of the “decadent West” (The Economist, May 28th, 1994, p. 13).

The observations made by the Westerners seem valid because politicians in Asian countries did explicitly claim the “superiority of their value system.” Throughout the 1980s, top leaders of the “chopstick area,” for example, presidents of Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, protected the value systems of Asia and rejected the interference of foreign countries in the region. They called their economic success as the “way of Asia” which has a strong sense of family, respect for authority, the harmony of individual interests with collective interests.

A Korean political leader recently argued that Confucian culture has emphasized collectivism while the Western culture has respected individualism. In his view, today’s world is entering an era of collectivism, for example, the EC and NAFTA. The cultural Renaissance of Asia will lead to a Confucian-oriented world. Leaders in this region often claim that Asians have their own concept of human rights; they should be united to deal with the West (Cankao xiaoxi, Dec. 11, 1993, p. 4; and Nov. 27, 1993, p. 2).

Is the world really entering a new era which is characterized by the conflicts between Western and oriental civilizations, as Huntington and others have noted? Are East Asian countries on their way to becoming new hegemonic powers, which therefore will be a major threat to world peace?

In my first newsletter to ICWA, I criticized Huntington’s thesis about the threat of Confucian civilization, but his arguments have been constantly on my mind since I started my journey across the Pacific. Every once in a while, I almost agreed with Huntington’s thesis, for instance, when I first heard the song “The Rise of East Asia,” or when I talked with those Chinese who had xenophobic views. But as I have stayed in China longer and have contacted more people – people from different backgrounds, people with various world views, I have a better assessment of the problems of Huntington’s thesis.

Confucianism may foster a strong nationalistic, hierarchical, and self-centered mentality. But East Asian tradition includes Daoism, Legalism, Buddhism, and other value systems, in addition to Confucianism. Daoism and Confucianism, for example, advocate almost exactly opposite world views. Using today’s words, we can say that Daoism has a strong environmental and global concern. According to the Daoist value system, people should order their lives to keep in harmony, not only with other people, but also with the natural order of the universe.

Confucianism itself can be subject to contrasting interpretations. It can be praised for a sense of organization and discipline, or be criticized for an acceptance of arrogance and authoritarianism. As Samuel Huntington himself wrote elsewhere, Max Weber and other Western scholars argued at the turn of the century that

countries with Confucian cultures would not engage in successful economic development. But ironically, by the 1980s, Western scholars saw Confucianism as a major cause of the economic miracle of East Asian societies.

The main problem with Huntington's thesis lies in its simplistic interpretation of East Asian values. He puts undue emphasis on certain aspects of the so-called Confucian civilization.

"What Huntington failed to understand is the *yin* and *yang* of East Asia." Mr. Chen, a philosopher who teaches Chinese ethics at a university in Sichuan commented as we discussed Huntington's thesis about "East Asian values."



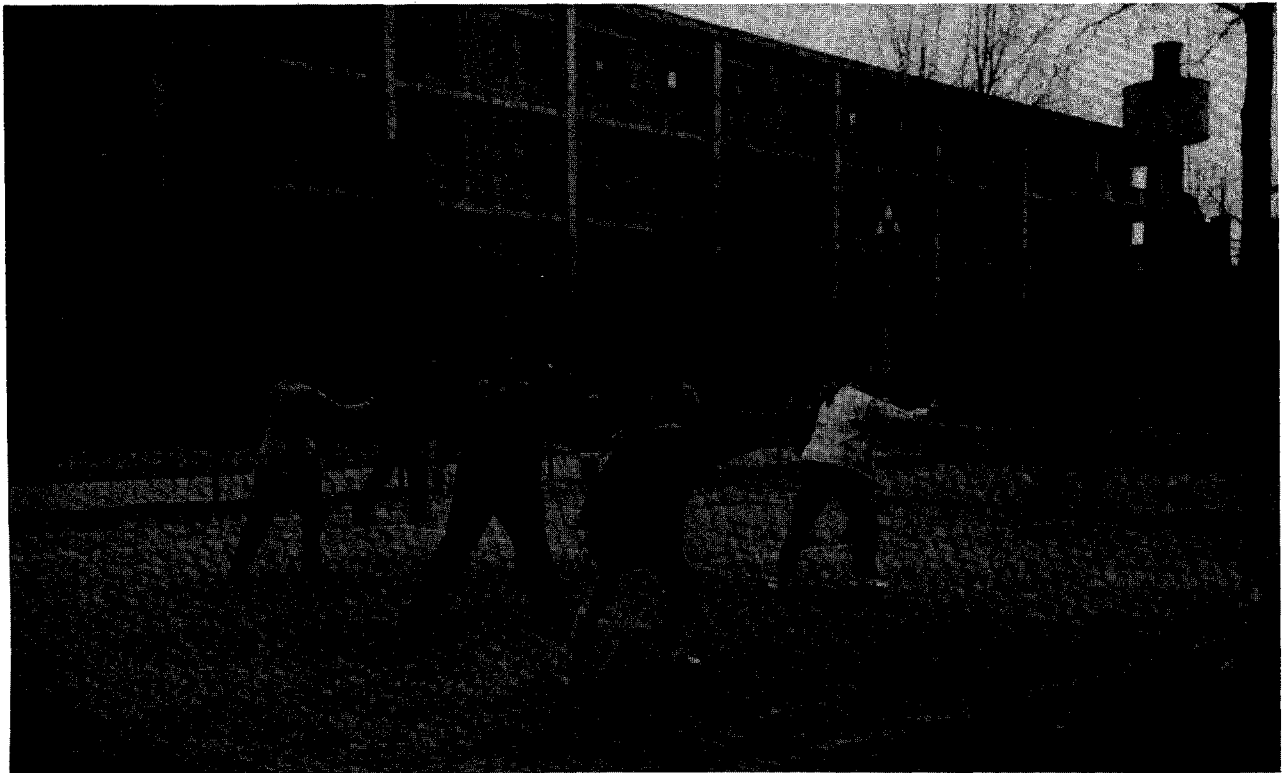
The yin-yang symbol – an interlocking figure representing the two opposite but balancing forces of nature and the two contrasting aspects of social reality.

The notion of *yin* and *yang* originated from the cosmology of ancient China and later became a philosophy and an important way of analyzing Confucian culture. According to this dialectical philosophy, everything can be seen as a product of two interacting complementary elements, *yin* and *yang*. In other words, *yin* and *yang* represent two opposite but balancing aspects of nature or social reality. For example, *yin* may represent the feminine principle and gentle behavior while *yang* may exhibit the masculine attitude and aggressive conduct.

"The concept of *yin* and *yang* suggests that in analyzing any social phenomenon we should not overemphasize one force while neglecting its counter force." Mr. Chen explained. "The East Asian values that Huntington has characterized may be relevant, but they are incomplete. East Asian tradition, like a hodgepodge, includes diverse human values."

"It is inappropriate to assume that people in East Asian nations are homogeneous in terms of their values and world views." Mr. Chen continued. "The *yin* and *yang* is still relevant in our time, because *yin* and *yang* forces always coexist, though one force may have greater influence than the other at a certain point."

Based on my own observations in China, I can say that I absolutely agree with Mr. Chen. It took me a long time, however, to realize that no society exists without internal contradictions. This is probably why many brilliant historians are more interested in exploring specific details and subtleties than in making generalizations



The Chinese are practicing the waltz and disco, while Westerners are learning taijijuan, a traditional Chinese martial art. I saw both groups one early morning on the campus of the Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Unlike Samuel Huntington, I have seen an integration, rather than a clash, of civilizations.

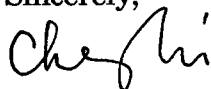


about a civilization, a country, or a tribe that they study. The more one understands a society, the less generalities one can confidently offer.

I remember that I had a fixed image about Americans prior to my arrival in the United States. This fixed and biased image was gradually replaced by multiple and concrete images of Americans when I came to know Andy, Bob, David, John, Tom, Allison, Jennifer, Linda, Sally, Patty and others individually. I realized that American society consists of different people – kind and rude, poor and rich, conservative and liberal, powerful and powerless.

Internal contradictions and diversities exist, more or less, in all societies. East Asian countries are certainly not exceptions. Nationalistic and *Realpolitik* world views are still strong in these societies. Yet, unconventional and globalist values have increasingly become articulate in this region. My other two newsletters of this series on “The Yin and Yang of East Asia” will show how global-minded scholars and practitioners in international affairs in East Asia have risen to challenge conventional thinking in the region and have called for a more integrative and cooperative world.

Sincerely,



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