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EMBRACING EUROPEAN SOCIAL SCIENCES IN EARLY MODERN ASIA

Abstract:

This paper analyzes why and how European social sciences were introduced in East Asian countries, especially China, Japan and Korea, during the early modern period. In the second half of the nineteenth century, East Asian intellectuals were eager to introduce Western social sciences to help overcome a national crisis they faced. To the extent that the crisis originated from internal deteriorations and external threats, they needed to find ways to transform their traditional political, economic and social systems into modern ones. Based on a perspective of evolutionism quite prevalent among East Asian intellectuals at that time, they believed that the competition among the nation-states could be determined by the consequences of modernization efforts. Although the slogans they adopted were heterogeneous, like zhongtixiyong in China, wakonyousai in Japan, and tongdosoki in Korea, they commonly implemented various measures to modernize their systems with the belief that the success of European states could be attributed to the modern institutions and techniques.

One very effective way of modernizing the traditional systems in East Asia was to learn from the historical experiences of European countries and to introduce Western social sciences. East Asian intellectuals regarded European social sciences as the black box in which they could find the key secrets of European success. In this sense, they tried to make their nations strong and wealthy by studying European politics and economics as presented in various social science textbooks. Modern state formations and capitalist economy were the two key concepts they maintained in the attempts to modernize their countries. For instance, just as Japanese economics were dominated by liberalist economics and neo-historicism, respectively imported from Britain and Germany, these two trends ended up strongly influencing Chinese and Korean intellectuals. European economics taught East Asian intellectuals various ways to transform their economic structure: the implementation of national census, the construction of social infrastructures, the establishment of business firms, and the promotion of foreign trades. All these measures encouraged the introduction of modern capitalist economy in this area.

Keywords:

European social sciences, East Asia, modernization

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