

Communications to the Editor

Donald E. Brown has sent the following response to the "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies," *JAS* 50.1 (February 1991): pp. 29–83:

The February 1991 issue of *JAS* contained essays addressing "the issue of whether the scholar should use a universalist or relativist standard when studying and judging other cultures" (Editor's Note, p. 1). This either-or phrasing of the issue is misleading.

There is no way that a debate about universalism versus relativism can be decided meaningfully on one side or the other. Universals clearly exist: all peoples have language; all languages have phonemes, morphemes, and grammar; statuses and roles exist in all societies; smiles, and probably much more complicated facial expressions, are understood much the same way everywhere; and so on. One can go on at quite some length with other examples (Brown 1991:130–41; this work provides references for most of the points I make here). More importantly, *no* intellectual activity—certainly including intercultural communication—takes place without reliance on universals. Often they are features of human nature so taken for granted that we are scarcely, or not at all, conscious of them.

And yet, just as clearly, some things are relative: Chinese has tones while English does not; many Asians presume cycles of rebirth while most Europeans do not. Each of these contrasts has numerous ramifications in the cultures involved. One can go on at very great length in this vein, as Asianists are fully aware.

Thus what *is* a crucial issue is truth or accuracy: *Which* things are universal and which are not? Which are the theoretical frameworks or assumptions that have universal validity? Critics of universalistic approaches are surely correct in noting that some matters that are treated as universals very likely are not, and that the assumption of universality then leads to error or inefficiency in the attempt to understand affairs in other societies. Critics of relativism are just as correct in noting that not everything is relative and that it is both accurate and useful to discover and utilize universals as conceptual tools.

Unfortunately, and this is partly what fuels the debate over universals, it is often difficult to determine by oneself what is or is not universal. Asianists, as well as other area specialists, are not particularly well-equipped to deal with the difficulty. Of course, it is true that a scholar who has come to understand two cultures is better off than one who understands one culture only (see Staal 1988 for a most relevant example). But the investment one must put into understanding an Asian culture, certainly those with long and rich literate traditions, leaves relatively little time for the wide reading in the ethnographic and historical literature on peoples throughout the world that is often required to discover or verify particular universals. This is a job more likely to be undertaken by anthropologists with broad comparativist interests than by Asianists.

The other side of this coin is that, just as an area specialization does not in itself equip one well to study universals, so, too, the study of universals does not in itself equip one to be a good area specialist. The result is that area specialists and students of universals have a tendency to go their separate ways. But in each case they are like the drunk in the night who has lost his keys and confines the

search for them to the area illuminated by a street light. The keys may be out there in the darkness but it seems easier to search where one sees best.

To compound the problem, anthropologists have not been very consistent in the exploration of universals. In fact, for some decades relativism has been much more congenial to anthropologists. The result is a degree of confusion about universals and what they imply that unnecessarily complicates and hinders the understanding of human affairs. The notion that we can understand a culture and the affairs of its bearers in either a universalistic or a relativistic framework is perhaps the clearest marker of that confusion.

But Asianists *can* contribute to the study of universals (again, see Staal 1988 for an extended example). And, like anyone trying to make sense of other peoples, Asianists most certainly will profit by being aware of universals, including the universals they assume unconsciously. In that dialectic between the search for universals on the one hand and the exploration of their relationships to cultural particulars there is every reason to expect enrichment of Asian studies. A general polarization of universalism versus relativism will do no good anywhere.

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List of References

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- STAAL, FRITS. 1988. *Universals: Studies in Indian Logic and Linguistics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marilyn B. Young has sent the following response to Bertrand Renaud's review of Jung-en Woo's *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean Industrialization*, published in *JAS* 50.3 (August 1991): pp. 711–13.

I fear readers will have a very poor grasp of Jung-en Woo's powerful study of the political economy of Korea, *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean Industrialization*, from Bertrand Renaud's *JAS* review (August 1991). Renaud charges that the book is "without a clear, convincing perspective." On the contrary, the perspective is very clear, though for reasons he does not explore, it did not convince Renaud.

Race to the Swift is the first English-language analysis of the history and politics of Korean development to make use of Korean sources; the first fully to incorporate an analysis of the colonial period; the first to explore the interstices of the alliance between state and business; the first fully to weigh the contributions of Japan and the United States to the Korean "miracle." As Chalmers Johnson notes, with its publication "American studies of the high-growth Asian economies finally begin to come of age." Dr. Woo is critical of neo-classical economics, impatient with euphemisms, ironic in style. It may be that one or all of these qualities were distressing to Mr. Renaud.

This is a vigorous and provocative book. Scholars and teachers searching for ways of understanding East Asia in comparative terms will find *Race to the Swift* essential reading.

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