

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rethinking materialism and Asia: Miki Kiyoshi and Hiromatsu Wataru

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the interwar Japanese Marxists Miki Kiyoshi and more contemporary Hiromatsu Wataru each moved towards developing this perspective beyond simple distinctions between idealism, which is confined to concepts, and materialism, conceived as presupposing that ideas are determined by matter. Japanese Marxism was in a unique place to affect such a synthesis because of the existence of Kyoto School philosophy, with whom both Miki and Hiromatsu were associated. The proponents of the Kyoto School combined Eastern and Western philosophical perspectives, which had the aim of criticizing modernity. Miki Kiyoshi and other members of the Kyoto School eventually supported Japan's wartime effort, which delegitimized their concerns about modernity during the postwar. However, in postwar Japan, Hiromatsu developed a creative reading of Marx's materialism and in the 1994 surprised everyone by advocating a pan-Asianist critique of modernity. Hiromatsu suggested that despite problems that Miki and the Kyoto School represented, one had to grasp the rational kernel, which could save Marxism from slipping into an equally dangerous modernization theory. This task remains for us today when the dystopia of globalized capitalism seems to have become a reality that threatens the survival of our planet.

**Keywords:** Idealism; intellectual history; Japanese philosophy; Marxism; materialism; modern Japanese history

Most scholars of Marxist cultural theory are silent about Asian Marxism, and this lack of interest is unfortunate because it is in the encounter with Asia that we see both the global significance of a critique of reification, the reduction of people to things, and how one might mobilize Marxist critiques of epistemological dualisms against Eurocentrism and imperialism. To respond to the absence of Asia in most studies on reification and materialism, I focus on two prominent Japanese Marxists, Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) and Hiromatsu Wataru (1933–1994), both of whom created a perspective beyond simple distinctions between idealism and materialism, and eventually combined their respective theories with a politics of pan-Asianist resistance against imperialism.

Japanese Marxism provides a unique arena to examine transformations of materialism and “Western” Marxist theory because, throughout much of the twentieth century, Marxism was the dominant ideology among Japanese intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, within East Asia, Japanese intellectuals were

<sup>1</sup>For a general discussion of Japanese Marxism, see Walker 2021. Of course, Marxism was suppressed by the American Occupation and the Japanese government during the postwar period. However, Marxism was still quite popular during the postwar period, especially in departments such as sociology and also in the field of social history. Sebastian Conrad makes the following perceptive remarks. “The end of the war in 1945 also marked a decisive caesura for historical studies: from this point onward, not historicist political history but rather a Marxist-oriented social history would be the dominant paradigm of Japanese historiography. Within a short time, Marxist historiography advanced to become the hegemonic interpretation of Japanese history. More powerfully even than in France or Italy, Marxism dominated the intellectual discourse in

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perhaps most familiar with German philosophy and its related criticisms of modernity. There are of course many Japanese Marxists who have written about materialism; however, Miki and Hiromatsu enable us to grapple with the problem of materialism, because they engaged deeply with German idealism and drew on Kyoto School philosophy that at times appears un-Marxist. Precisely because of this influence of German idealism, Miki and Hiromatsu provide a window onto how much Marx and Hegel's respective theories overlap. Although I will not discuss the Kyoto School in this essay, both of the above philosophers' understanding of German idealism was to different extents mediated by the Kyoto School. The philosophers of the so-called Kyoto School combined Eastern and Western theoretical perspectives to reflect critically on Western ideas of progress, culture and industrialization. The Kyoto School fell into some disrepute after 1945 because some of their members supported Japan's wartime effort.

However, they had an important influence on the Japanese Marxists and in particular, Miki and Hiromatsu. Nishida Kitarō, the founder of the Kyoto School of philosophy, was Miki's supervisor at Kyoto Imperial University in 1920, when Miki wrote a graduation thesis on critical philosophy and the philosophy of history. Drawing on Nishida, Martin Heidegger and others, Miki constructed a unique brand of Marxist materialism in the late 1920s; however, by the mid-1930s, he had turned towards supporting some version of pan-Asianism over Marxism. Although scholars usually think of this as a moment of his turning from left to right, we should keep in mind the continuities between his Marxist phase and his pan-Asianist phase.

In the 1970s, Hiromatsu Wataru published an important critique of Miki and the Kyoto School's attempt to overcome modernity, and claimed that they failed to come up with a framework to grasp capitalism. Hiromatsu's own re-readings of Marx and materialism aimed to make good on Miki's promise.<sup>2</sup> In 1994, shortly before his death, Hiromatsu wrote a short article in the *Asahi Shinbun*, which suggested that Japan needed to resuscitate earlier pan-Asian ideas and create a new world order.<sup>3</sup> Because Hiromatsu was known for his materialism and Marxism, this article caught the Japanese intellectual world by surprise. However, by focusing on the continuities between pan-Asianism and Marxism, we can understand Hiromatsu's turn towards Asia as an endeavour to deprovincialize Marxism<sup>4</sup> and rethink materialism from the standpoint of Asia. Miki and Hiromatsu's respective theories of materialism and reification should be seen as part of a global culture of Marxism, which seeks to grasp critically and think beyond our present moment. However, their turn to Asia uncovers a blind spot in Western Marxism, namely how to make the critique of imperialism part of a global socialist project.

This article has two parts, which are connected to two claims of the paper. The first shows how Miki's idea of materialism goes beyond the dichotomy between idealism and materialism through rereading Hegel and Marx. This section later turns to texts where Miki promotes pan-Asianism and an Asian alternative, and explores how this shift in his thinking continues his underlying concern with the problem of capitalism. Through the above analysis, I argue that Miki's texts bring out the continuities between Hegel and Marx that are often overlooked. In particular, Miki appears as Hegelian as he is Marxist. The second part examines Hiromatsu Wataru's reconstruction of materialism as a relational theory, along with his own attempt to envision an Asian alternative. This brings us to the present and the possibilities of materialism and pan-Asianism today. Given the fate of pan-Asianism during the Second World War, most Marxists have relegated it to the dustbin of history, as something that is necessarily fascist and imperialist. However, I contend that while pan-Asianism did and could again support imperialism, it could combine with Third Worldism and be part of the struggle for a better international system. This was precisely the possibility that the post-war thinker

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the early postwar period." Sebastian Conrad, *Quest for Lost Nation: Writing History in Germany and Japan in the American Century*, Alan Nothnagle trans., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 28.

<sup>2</sup>Hiromatsu 1989.

<sup>3</sup>Hiromatsu 1997b.

<sup>4</sup>I borrow the term "deprovincializing Marxism" from Harootunian 2017.

Takeuchi Yoshimi stressed and Hiromatsu somewhat incompletely continued this trend. Some of the limitations of Hiromatsu's treatment of pan-Asianism concern his insufficient attention to concepts such as Asia and its links to the Third World.

### Miki Kiyoshi's materialism

Miki Kiyoshi is difficult to situate in Japanese intellectual history because his works intersect with both Kyoto School philosophy and Marxism. He graduated from Kyoto Imperial University in 1920, and in 1922 he went to Germany to study with major philosophers such as Heinrich Rickert and Martin Heidegger. In 1927, a couple of years after he returned, he was appointed to the position of professor at Hōsei University. He was arrested in 1930 for donating money to the Communist Party and consequently had to resign from his teaching position. After this, he supported himself by writing more popular essays and newspaper articles. This was the period when he committed a political "turn (*tenkō*)," changing from being a Marxist to supporting the Japanese imperial government.<sup>5</sup> In 1936, he joined the Showakenkyūkai (the Showa Research Institute), which eventually became Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro's think tank for studying Japan's national and foreign policies. Miki was primarily associated with the Institute's Department of Culture, but also wrote pieces in favour of pan-Asianism and a new international order. In 1945 he was again arrested for giving shelter to a Communist friend who was running from the police. Miki would die in prison one month after the war.<sup>6</sup>

Miki's willingness to help his Communist friend after his so-called turn suggests that there are continuities in his political thought. Despite his varying political positions, he did not waver from an overarching critique of capitalist modernity, for which he initially mobilized a new form of materialism. His materialism embodies what Hegel calls idealism or ideality, which means seeing things as a larger process, and then show how this converges with certain trends in Marxism more globally. Eventually, Miki came to associate this Hegelian holism with Asia, which enabled him to support pan-Asianism during his later career. About fifty years later, Hiromatsu develops a more contemporary version of this constellation of philosophy and politics.

Miki's early reconstruction of Marx's materialism responded to prevailing interpretations at the time. Early Japanese Marxists' conception of materialism often opposed materialism to idealism based on early unimaginative readings of Marx. In their book, *Saikin shakaimondai jūni kō* (Twelve Lectures on Social Problems), published in 1919, Ikuta Chōkō and Honma Hisao devoted a chapter to Marx and in it they define materialism in the following manner. "According to materialists, only matter exists independently ... Spirit is nothing but a reflection of matter."<sup>7</sup> The above interpretation of materialism is fairly standard and could be supported by certain texts by Second International Marxists.

However, from the mid- to late 1920s, many of Marx and Engels' works dealing with Hegel were translated into Japanese, including *The Poverty of Philosophy, A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and *Feuerbach and the End of the Classical German Philosophy*.<sup>8</sup> During this period, Japanese Marxists such as Fukumoto Kazuo and Kawakami Hajime began to stress the human element in materialism. In 1924, recently returned from Germany, Miki drew on German idealism to respond to the above commonplace interpretation of materialism. Miki begins his 1927 essay, "Marxism and Materialism" by separating different forms of materialism. He notes:

Marxism is first of all not a biological materialism. It does not claim that consciousness is produced by the material structure of the brain or that thought is secreted from the brain just like the kidney excretes urine. Marx rejected such materialism with the label metaphysical.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>For recent discussions of the phenomenon of *tenkō* from different perspectives, see Hayter, Sipos, and Williams 2021.

<sup>6</sup>The above summer of events in Miki's life is based on the sketch in Krummel 2016. Specifically, Miki was detained for hiding the communist Takakura Teru who had violated the Public Peace Ordinance Act and had evaded parole.

<sup>7</sup>Funayama 1999, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup>Funayama 1999, pp. 58–59.

<sup>9</sup>Miki 1966, p. 43.

In Miki's view, materialism did not refer to any attempt to reduce the ideal to the material. Indeed, he contends that materialism refers to something always already mediated. Here we must delve into the complexity of the Japanese translation of "materialism," *yuibusturon* (唯物論), which combines three Chinese characters: only (*yui*), thing (*butsu*) and theory (*ron*).<sup>10</sup> Miki investigates the implications of this translation and explains: "The thing (*butsu*) in Marx's materialism (*yuibusturon*) is from the beginning a concept of the self-interpretation of human beings ... this thing is a hermeneutic concept and does not imply pure matter."<sup>11</sup> Miki follows Hegel in asserting that matter fundamentally has an ideational character to it. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel poses an important challenge to materialism by showing that matter itself is ideal and introduces phrases that anticipate Marx's writing about commodities. He writes:

*matter is not an existing thing but is rather being as a universal or being in the mode of the concept. Reason, which is still instinct, correctly makes this distinction without being conscious that it, as it seeks the law in all sensuous being, sublates therein their merely sensuous being, and, as it construes the moments of the law as matters, their essentiality has become universal, and, in such a way of putting things, has expressed them as a non-sensuous sensuousness, an incorporeal and nonetheless objective being.*<sup>12</sup>

This passage is crucial for understanding Marx, but not because he inverts this logic; rather, it is because he follows it in a new context. This Hegelian dimension saves materialism from becoming reductionist or positivist. Hegel contends that those who assert that "only matter exists independently" posit matter lying beneath our sensuous experience as a type of substratum. Therefore, he further explains that we do not feel or taste matter, but rather a stone or salt. The materialist connects sense-experience to a non-sensuous matter that causes what we experience. He further claims that, "Matter is instead pure abstraction, and as a result, what is present is the *pure essence of thinking*."<sup>13</sup> Miki continues this Hegelian point as he reconceives Marx's materialism and its critical potential.

In Miki's view, the "thing" in materialism does not imply so-called brute matter and involves human mediation. By concealing human activity, capitalist ideology makes invisible the manner in which people are seen as things. According to Miki, many recent theories emerge because scholars see social processes as things, or reify them. For example, people reduce consciousness to the brain or conceive of it as religious interiority, locating it in a specific space. Miki develops a new conception of materialism through historicizing the emergence of the opposition between things and consciousness. He writes:

In this way, by discovering the connection to the most religious interiority, consciousness ... is then separated from its roots. It becomes pure theory and is tasked to give a foundation to formal logic, mathematics and natural science. Moreover, consciousness is only developed from this perspective. Through this process of inversion, consciousness becomes universal. However, the universality in question lies in, to use Marx's expression, "a spectral objectivity (*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*)."<sup>14</sup>

Consciousness is separated from its roots – namely historical activity – and now posited on the other side of things. We see this in the case of Kant, where consciousness becomes the ground for the objectivity of the various sciences and knowledge. The separation between things and consciousness is the historical condition for many philosophical frameworks. Such philosophers begin with a separation of subject and object and then ask how consciousness can objectively know something.

<sup>10</sup>Interestingly, even apart from the East Asian context, in fact even in Tamil, the term for materialism – *porulmodulvadam* – uses the term "porul," which again means thing rather than merely matter.

<sup>11</sup>Miki 1966, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup>Hegel 2018, p. 152, para. 252.

<sup>13</sup>Hegel 2018, p. 335, para. 577.

<sup>14</sup>Miki 1966, pp. 54–55.

Miki contends that such philosophies fail to register that what they take as objectivity actually has a spectral character to it.

By using the term “spectral objectivity,” Miki points us to a key passage in Marx to push materialism beyond not only the reductionist reading proposed by scholars such as Ikuta and Honma, but also Kawakami and Fukumoto’s respective attempts to interpret Marx’s materialism in relation to class. Miki gestures in a Hegelian direction by connecting materialism to more general ontological and epistemological issues that go beyond class struggle. However, through Marx, Miki historicizes appearances such as the sensuous, super-sensuous or spectral objectivity.

Marx uses the term spectral objectivity in the context of his discussion of value, which he distinguishes from the more concrete use-value. Use-value represents the concrete object, such as a table, which can be used in a specific way because of its structure. However, thinking of value requires us to abstract from all such concrete characteristics, such as having four legs or having a flat top. The only thing that remains when one abstracts from such sensuous characteristics of the commodity is that it took a certain duration of social labour to make it. This socially necessary labour time becomes the basis of a purely quantitative idea of equivalence between entities as different as a table and broom. But if there is nothing concrete to ground the value of a thing, how can we talk about objectivity? It is at this point that Marx mentions the idea of spectral objectivity. Marx writes:

Let us now look at the residue of the products of labour. There is nothing left of them in each case but the same spectral objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour (*bloße Gallerte unterschiedslose menschlicher Arbeit*—literally a jelly of undifferentiated human labour remains), i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure.<sup>15</sup>

Notice that when we consider the object from the standpoint of value, the commodity has become abstract without any sensuous characteristics and this is because the labour power contained in it is abstract labour without any clear form, such as the labour to create a specific good, such as computers or houses. Abstract labour that we cannot see, hear or touch becomes the ground of value. Marx calls this a spectral objectivity because, unlike most sensuous objects, value cannot be perceived until it is embodied by some material sign, such as gold or paper money. This sign represents the jelly-like mass of undifferentiated abstract labour and denotes value, a quantitative determination that makes things commensurable and exchangeable.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, when products are exchanged people do not see the active labour behind the various products and project the value onto the object itself, which Marx calls fetishism. Miki cites the following passage Marx’s *Capital* to explain how people reify social processes.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things ... Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra- sensible or social.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage, Marx discusses the commodity as possessing a type of phantom materiality. Social relations take on the relation of objects existing outside of producers, which Georg Lukács called reification. Miki had read Lukács when he was in Germany in the early 1920s and he follows Lukács in reading Marx through Hegel.

Marx’s language in discussing the commodity echoes Hegel’s discussion of matter. Marx uses the term “*sinnliche übersinnliches Ding* – sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible” – while Hegel

<sup>15</sup>Marx 1991, p. 128. I am translating *gespenstig* as spectral in lieu of “phantom-like.”

<sup>16</sup>Marx refers to this at times also simply as “value.”

<sup>17</sup>Marx 1991, pp. 164–65; Miki 1966, pp. 62–63.

describes matter as “non-sensuous sensuousness (*ein unsinnliches Sinnliches*).” By connecting this form of consciousness to the commodity, Miki and Lukács both follow Hegel in reading non-sensuous sensuousness as a general structure of thought, but they further contend that this structure is historically specific to capitalism. From this perspective, they historicize Hegel’s discussion of matter such that it comes to define the ideational structure of capital, which is reification. However, in capitalist society, people do not see the processes behind the production of spectral objectivity, and therefore take things to be independent and separately existing. Miki connects reification to a social self-alienation, which – unlike class oppression – is an impersonal process that encompasses all humans living under capitalism.

Through social self-alienation, the bourgeoisie affirm their existence. Through the necessity of their existence, the phenomenological form of this alienation separates from its capitalist foundation and its historicity. In this way, human relations structured by the commodity form are eternalized as the timeless paradigm (*tenkei*) of human relations. Through the development of capitalism, the structure of the commodity incessantly goes deeper, more fatefully and formally into human consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

Although the commodity form is connected to the benefit of a specific class, it goes beyond this. This form causes capitalist social relations to appear ahistorical. The necessity of the existence of the bourgeoisie in capitalist society presents itself as ahistorical; consequently, human relations in capitalist society seem timeless. This accounts for why so many disciplines – especially economics – assume individual self-interest as a universal presupposition of history. As capitalism develops, it becomes more difficult to question the assumptions of capitalist social relations because commodified relations are taken for granted in our everyday lives.

Miki’s critique of self-alienation and the commodity form has implications for political practice and the way we understand modern philosophy. He draws on the commodity form to criticize Descartes’ idea of the cogito, namely his famous argument that he could derive his own existence from the fact that he was thinking. Descartes concluded that even if he doubted his own existence, there had to be a subject doing the doubting. Miki suggests that Descartes actually provides an argument for the existence of a reified abstract individual that capitalist society presupposes – for example, in contracts and the idea of the citizen. Lukács, who was Miki’s inspiration during this period, describes alienation and atomization in capitalist society in the following manner:

Consumer articles no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community (as for example in a village community). They now appear, on the one hand, as abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members and, on the other hand, as isolated objects possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculations. Only when the whole life of society is thus fragmented into isolated acts of commodity exchange can the “free” worker come into being; at the same time his fate becomes the typical fate of the whole society.<sup>19</sup>

As society transitions from premodern to capitalist society, the previously organic nature of production, such as in a village community, is replaced by a situation where both consumer articles and the people who buy and sell them are seen as isolated members of society. This isolation emerges because relationships between human beings appear as relationships between things. We can see this reification in the manner in which Descartes divides the world into “thinking things (*res cogitans*)” and “extended things (*res extensa*).”

According to Miki, isolation and reification are appearances that cover up the larger processes that make them possible. Here Miki invokes one of the key aspects of what Hegel calls ideality. Hegel

<sup>18</sup>Miki 1966, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup>Lukács 1971, p. 91.



defines idealism during his discussion of true infinity and explains that, “Negation is thus determined as ideality; a content, a distinct but not a subsistent existent, a moment rather.”<sup>20</sup> To say that an entity is determined as ideality implies that it is a moment of a larger process. This is precisely the sublation of finitude – the idea that finite things show themselves to be part of the infinite, which is “essentially the process of becoming.”<sup>21</sup> So ideality does not refer to being abstract or as an idea rather than matter; it is not what we usually call “idealism.” Rather, it implies seeing things in terms of moments and processes. In capitalist society, atomization and reification cover up their existence as moments of a larger historical process and present themselves as universal.

In Miki’s view, reification is not just a result of a mental lapse, but is conditioned by our practices in capitalist society. When people buy and sell commodities, these necessarily appear as reified things. Consequently, the only way to overcome reification would be to transform capitalism. In the late 1920s, Miki claimed that such a transformation was possible because reification and atomization conceal a society divided into classes. He notes that although both classes – workers and capitalists – are alienated, atomized and experience reification because neither of them can control the processes to which they give rise, workers can point the way beyond.

Workers’ own existence is negated through contemporary society and it is precisely because of this negativity that they can grasp society in its historicity – and must do so. They understand that what is currently taken as universal theory stands on the conditions of capitalist society. Through following the necessity of existence, the proletariat becomes necessarily critical. I believe that the specificity of this critique is related to a key feature of Marx’s materialism.<sup>22</sup>

Miki follows Lukács in seeing the working class as having the potential to move beyond reification. His basic critique of reification remained the same even after he turned to the belief that one should draw on other resources to overcome capitalism. In the 1930s, after numerous major global and domestic crises including the Great Depression of 1929 and the severe persecution of Marxists by the government, Miki moved away from Marxism. By the mid-1930s, the Japanese empire had also become deeply involved militarily in Asia under the banner of Asian brotherhood, and Miki notoriously supported some form of pan-Asianism during this time.

The turn that we see in Miki is thus not a turn away from a basic critique of reification, but a move towards a different means of overcoming reification, atomization and alienation. Specifically, Miki argues for a form of cooperativism against atomization and even class struggle. We can again see parallels with Hegel, but this time not with the *Phenomenology* or the *Logic*, but with the *Philosophy of Right*. In that text, Hegel repeatedly criticizes abstract freedom and democracy, which consist of atomized individuals pursuing their interests.<sup>23</sup> Hegel argues for some type of corporatism, where the people are not merely an aggregate mass, but already organized into interest groups based on profession – which he calls corporations. He points out that, “The state ... is essentially an organization each of whose members is itself a group of this kind, and hence no one of its members should appear as an unorganized aggregate.”<sup>24</sup> Miki’s turn away from Marxism is partially a turn towards a Hegelian type of corporatism.

Miki combines corporatism and pan-Asianism in an essay he wrote in the midst of the war in 1939, entitled, “The Principle for New Japanese Thought: The Foundation of Cooperativism (*kyōdōshugi*).” In this essay, he explicitly moves away from class struggle towards a corporatist position. He writes:

<sup>20</sup>Hegel 1986, p. 165; Hegel 2010, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup>Hegel 1986, p. 166; Hegel 2010, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup>Miki 1966, p. 66.

<sup>23</sup>Hegel 1954, p. 198, para. 303. Hegel explains: “The Many, as unity – a congenial interpretation of ‘people’, are of course something connected, but they are connected only as an aggregate, a formless mass whose commotion and activity could therefore only be elementary, irrational, barbarous and frightful. When we hear speakers on the constitution expiating about the ‘people’ – this unorganized collection – we know from the start that we have nothing to expect but generalities and perverse declamations.”

<sup>24</sup>Hegel 1954, p. 198.

It is a fact that the problem of class exists in modern societies. One cannot turn a blind eye to this. However, one should not solve the problem of class through class struggle, but find a new way to resolve this crisis through cooperativism.<sup>25</sup>

During a time when it appeared as if class struggle was not leading anywhere and the Japanese state was also clamping down on leftist activism, Miki conceived of cooperativism as an alternative. He saw cooperativism as an answer not only to the problem of class, but also to materialism. He writes:

If one merely criticizes Marx's historical materialism from the standpoint of liberalism or cosmopolitanism, it will be ineffective. It will also be useless to oppose it only holding on to the tradition. At the base of historical materialism lies dialectical materialism. One cannot overthrow this with idealism, which has the same abstract presuppositions. We seek a higher position that sublates both materialism and idealism.<sup>26</sup>

Cooperativism transcends materialism and idealism because it goes beyond subject and object, thus creating a new type of harmony that has political consequences. Miki eventually contrasts historical materialism with organicism, which sublates the opposition between the individual and the totality or the whole of society. He does not provide readers with great detail, but notes that the basic new principle of thought is "neither a mechanistic egalitarianism, nor an authoritarian use of state power. It must stand on a real principle of ruling and organically synthesize this with the spontaneity of the masses."<sup>27</sup> The idea of organic synthesis evokes the Hegelian idea of coordinating the masses into a rational state while continuing to respect their individuality and spontaneity. He gives us another hint about this position when he explains that human beings both create and are created by historical society.<sup>28</sup>

By appealing to humanity in general Miki suggests that cooperativism is not merely domestic, but fundamentally international, and we see this in his pan-Asianism. Suzuki Tadashi contends that Miki's idea of a new international order based on Asian unity is similar to the Chinese theory of *tianxia*, or "all under heaven" – the Chinese empire that could constantly envelop difference.<sup>29</sup> Miki's description of Japanese culture resembles this idealized version of porous identity in premodern China:

we must note that the specificity of Japanese culture lies in its tolerance. Since ancient times, Japanese culture has taken in and developed Chinese, Indian and even Western culture. Moreover, when it incorporates foreign culture it does not formally unify them in a strained manner. It allows the various aspects of each culture to exist simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

The above passage expresses the Chinese ideal of incorporating various ethnicities into an empire that harmonizes differences. However, in Miki's view, there is a goal to this East Asian unity, which is the unity of the world, beginning from Asia – Japan and China. He explains this unity as follows:

One must think of the unity of East Asia as part of the unity of the world. This unity cannot lose the particularity of Japan and China. Even if we say that in the past, the thought of nothingness (無) united Chinese and Japanese thought – the basis for this unity might be what Marx labelled

<sup>25</sup>Miki 1968a, p. 522.

<sup>26</sup>Miki 1968b, p. 536.

<sup>27</sup>Miki 1968b, p. 537.

<sup>28</sup>Miki 1968b, p. 552.

<sup>29</sup>Suzuki 2007, p. 221.

<sup>30</sup>Miki 1968a, p. 530. For a further discussion of how the Japanese empire made use of the idea of fluid identities, see Sakai 2017.



the Asiatic mode of production – in order for this to have power today, we must spread it through the world and must especially connect it to the culture of science.<sup>31</sup>

Miki's mention of the Asiatic mode of production suggests that he would like to draw on traditional practices to combat capitalism. This point echoes Kwai-cheong Lo's contribution to this issue, where he shows how Gandhi and Mao each drew on traditional East Asian concepts to resist capitalism and imperialism. Like Mao and Gandhi, Miki envisioned a global project stemming from Asia, which would resist capitalist imperialism. This is explicitly on Miki's agenda as he states, "From the standpoint of space Japan has to unite with East Asia and from the standpoint of time, it must overcome capitalism."<sup>32</sup>

Miki explains that one must follow the way of corporatism and East Asian unity because of the failures of the existing communist movements to overcome capitalism. His remarks about Russia and China in 1939 seem prescient today:

Communists see communism as necessarily following from capitalism. However, actually on the contrary, in those countries where capitalism developed the force of communism subsides. In Russia and China where feudal remnants remain, the influence of communism becomes one of modernizing. This is evidence to show that communism is not a principle to overcome capitalism and create a new period.<sup>33</sup>

Although the various communist movements aimed to overcome capitalism, they ended up reproducing it, and consequently their main contribution ended up being merely modernization. Miki believes that if East Asia could draw on its traditions to construct a unified resistance against the West, it could open a way towards a new world order beyond capitalism and imperialism.

If Miki's critique of existing communist states appears prescient, his support for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere seems misguided at best. However, recent studies of the Co-Prosperity Sphere warn us against judging attitudes towards this sphere ahistorically. The Co-Prosperity Sphere was a story of imagining a regional order – it never consolidated into a system and its meaning was unstable, which could explain why some hoped to invest it with a new significance. Because its significance often changed, it was constantly reinterpreted.<sup>34</sup> Matsuoka Yosuke, who was Foreign Minister during the time, believed that the world would divide into blocs. His goal was to modernize and develop East Asia into a whole, which was clearly a part of the Japanese imperial project. However, following the Japanese sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi, we must note the two-sided nature of Japanese imperialism, which was always enmeshed with anti-imperialism or anti-colonialism.<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, we can understand how the Co-Prosperity Sphere could appear as anti-imperialism even as it paved the way for a new configuration of capitalist imperialism led by the Japanese state. The war ended the Japanese empire, but American imperialism controlled much of the former Co-Prosperity Sphere, which made pan-Asianism increasingly relevant.

Despite the dominance of American imperialism after World War II, Japanese leftist intellectuals were often disillusioned with pan-Asianism and consequently Marxist materialism took a position hostile to pan-Asianism and related phrases such as "overcoming modernity." Marxist intellectuals often overlooked how Miki literally did not know what he was doing when he supported the Co-Prosperity Sphere<sup>36</sup> and merely distanced themselves from the project.

<sup>31</sup>Miki 1967, p. 462.

<sup>32</sup>Miki 1968a, p. 508.

<sup>33</sup>Miki 1968a, p. 523.

<sup>34</sup>Yellen 2019.

<sup>35</sup>Takeuchi 2005, pp. 124–25.

<sup>36</sup>We can understand Miki's support for Japanese imperialism as tragic in the sense that Hegel describes Sophocles' Oedipus, who did not understand himself to be killing his father or marrying his wife. These acts were not his intention, but they were the consequences of his action. See Hegel 1954, p. 81, para. 118.

Hiromatsu Wataru was one postwar Marxist who returned to Miki's critical vision and hoped to complete his project of overcoming modernity. He develops many of the themes that are in Miki's work; however, he does this in a different context, when the world socialist movement is in crisis and consequently both the options that Miki proposed to move beyond reification, working-class movements and the state, seem implausible. Like Miki, Hiromatsu pushes beyond simple materialism and in this context invokes Marx's analysis of the commodity.

### Hiromatsu and the commodity form

Hiromatsu was born in Kyushu in 1933. He was brought up on the outskirts of Japan and then moved to the major city, where he always felt out of place.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps because of this, he was critical of capitalist modernity at the centre of Japan, which attracted him to scholars such as Miki Kiyoshi. Like Miki, Hiromatsu's writings emerged from crisis. Miki's work was punctuated by the Great Depression of 1929 and various dimensions of Japanese imperialism. Hiromatsu's major works date from after the late 1960s and early 1970s, which witnessed the restructuring of capitalism – a global shift from a state-centred mode of capitalist accumulation to a neoliberal period.

These larger transformations accompanied different political movements. The 1960s brought the rise of the new left. Hiromatsu's own intellectual trajectory intersects with such social changes. He was involved in student movements from the age of 14 (in 1947) and eventually became interested in Marxism. However, he distanced himself from orthodox Marxism associated with the party and began rereading Marx to create a new philosophy that would be attractive to the new left. This is the point at which he pushed Marxism from being a theory supportive of modernization to one that emphasized political practice against capitalist modernity. He had a position in Nagoya University teaching Marxist philosophy, but resigned in 1970 out of solidarity with the student movement. He eventually became an assistant professor of philosophy in Tokyo University in 1976, where he continued to reconstruct Marxism.

Throughout most of his career, Hiromatsu was known as an innovative Marxist philosopher, who constructed an ontology drawing on figures as diverse as Ernst Mach and Alfred Schutz to produce unique social philosophy. He was not considered a scholar who engaged with Japanese thought, but during 1974–1975, Hiromatsu published a series of articles on Miki and the Kyoto School, which were later compiled into a book entitled *Kindai no chōkokuron: showa shisōshi he no shikaku* (On Overcoming Modernity: A Perspective on Showa Intellectual History), which was first published in 1980 and then revised in 1989. When he originally wrote the chapters, he wanted to warn that the affirmation of Japanese values could lead to fascism, just like the overcoming of the modernity discourse during the war. At the same time, he was interested in rescuing the basic impulse of the Kyoto School, to criticize modernity, while explaining how they lapsed into fascism and imperialism.<sup>38</sup> Taken together, the chapters of the book present a sympathetic critique of the attempts of Miki and other philosophers to overcome modernity. Briefly examining this critique will help us situate his own reading of Marx.

Hiromatsu's most important claim is that the Kyoto School and Miki misrecognized the object of their critique – namely, capitalism. He contends that although they correctly pointed out problems associated with capitalism, they did not understand capitalism as a dynamic process. Consequently, they attacked liberal capitalism when the world was already transforming into monopoly capitalism. Addressing Miki Kiyoshi directly, Hiromatsu writes:

Of course, one cannot claim that something like Miki Kiyoshi's cooperativism aimed at establishing a state-monopoly capitalism. However, one must judge that his idea, despite everything, in

<sup>37</sup>Kobayashi 2007, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup>Imamura 1997, pp. 502–03.

actuality, confirmed the historical tendency to reconstitute state-monopoly capitalism and the economy of the East Asian bloc. His ideas became a decorative cover for this tendency.<sup>39</sup>

From this perspective, we can conclude that Miki and other Japanese critics of modernity backed into a future that they did not understand.<sup>40</sup> In other words, they aimed to overcome capitalism and modernity, but they ended up contributing to the transition from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism or state-centred form of capital accumulation. This is the sense in which, as Harry Harootunian points out, although the Kyoto school philosophers aimed at overcoming modernity, they were eventually “overcome by modernity.”<sup>41</sup> Precisely when these philosophers were criticizing liberalism, the world was itself shifting to state-centred forms of capitalism, and we can see this not only in interwar and wartime Japanese states, but also in the postwar Japanese political configuration, which continued to be state-centred until the 1980s.

During the postwar period, Hiromatsu aimed to reconstruct Marxism and continue aspects of Kyoto school philosophy while avoiding their historical near-sightedness. To accomplish this, he returns to Marx and draws on some of the same passages that Miki cites about the commodity; however, he pushes them in a different direction. In particular, while Miki historicizes Hegel’s idea of matter and consciousness by invoking the commodity form, Hiromatsu uncovers a structure of meaning and being in Marx’s analysis of the commodity. This allows him to configure a theory of value that includes class, but also opens the way to discuss the value of art and nature.

Hiromatsu invokes Marx’s analysis of the commodity as both sensuous and supersensuous, and in some of his writings, he follows Lukács and Miki in showing how the universalization of the commodity form in society reproduces the domination of capital over labour. For example, in his essay, “Kokumin kokka no mondai kōsei [The Construction of the Problem of the Nation-state],” he explains that commodity exchange in capitalism appears to be premised on freedom and equality, but it actually implies a new form of slavery. He elaborates this point by drawing on Marx’s distinction between real and formal subsumption. In his *Capital*, Marx distinguishes between formal subsumption, where capitalists make use of existing modes of production to create surplus value or profit and real subsumption, when capitalists transform the structure of labour to increase productivity. This restructuring of production includes the introduction of machinery and new forms of cooperation, which standardizes the production of commodities. Hiromatsu asserts that such real subsumption turns labourers into “spokes in a wheel,” completely “binding them” and making them similar to slaves.<sup>42</sup>

However, even after real subsumption, the labour–capital relationship does not exhaust the significance of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form. Hiromatsu extends the dual nature of the commodity form to make more general comments about meaning and eventually power in modern society. He notes that although Marx only discusses reification in the context of his analysis of value,

if we examine the self-sustaining image of cultural values, namely what the philosophy of value calls truth, beauty, virtue and religion (outside of economic value) or so-called “philosophical value”, it is easy to see that there is not “one atom of natural matter therein” and that it is different from “things that belong to nature ... such as geometrical, physical, chemical and biological objects.” We must also say that such objects are “supra-natural and supersensuous.”<sup>43</sup>

This passage expands the two-sided nature of the commodity form or its non-sensuous sensuousness to encompass a whole range of cultural phenomena. Hiromatsu argues that when Marx argued

<sup>39</sup>Hiromatsu 1989, p. 242.

<sup>40</sup>I borrow this phrase from Postone 2009, p. 82.

<sup>41</sup>Harootunian 2000.

<sup>42</sup>Hiromatsu 1997a, p. 392. Cf. Shibuya 2006, pp. 125–26.

<sup>43</sup>Hiromatsu 1996, p. 106, citing Kobayashi 2007, pp. 86–87.

that “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values,”<sup>44</sup> he uncovered something more general about value as such, beyond merely the production of commodities. We can immediately understand Hiromatsu’s point when we think about a specific sensuous object and then apply an adjective, such as “beautiful,” to it. Although we may reify beauty and experience it as inhering within the thing, the value judgement “beautiful” belongs to a realm that is beyond brute sense and must be explained socially.

Hiromatsu pushes this argument further and suggests that even basic determinations of objects go beyond mere sense experience. He notes that “from our position (*fur uns*) physical existents themselves are products of reification,”<sup>45</sup> and consequently will also have the sensuous-supersensuous structure. Hiromatsu provides numerous examples of when we see an object and apply meaning to it, but are also wrong about this object. For instance, a child might look at a cow on the road and shout “doggie.” The adults watching a child calling a cow a doggie would point out that the child has mistaken a “dog” for a “cow.” Here the adult in question is not a particular person, but represents a more general someone who points how things should be perceived. We then realize that the simple perception of a “material object” involves an abstract perceiver.

The child takes the way in which people grasp something and makes it their own, assimilating their self to them. That is, the way things are grasped, or the way conscious activity is made manifest, turns into a collective subjectivity.<sup>46</sup>

The above passage shows that things stand in relations of material incompatibility and consequence.<sup>47</sup> If something is a dog, it cannot at the same time be a cow. There are also some characteristics that are compatible with being a cow, such as being white or being four-legged. Similarly, if it is cow, it must have certain characteristics, some of which might be common with dogs. For example, both cows and dogs must be mammals and so on. To be a thing or an object implies standing in such relations to properties and such relations are both subjective and objective. For Hiromatsu, human beings and objects mutually mediate one another.<sup>48</sup> Humans and things exist as part of a dynamic web of relations.

We can now return to the definition of materialism as stemming from the three characters in Japanese *yuibuttsuron* (唯物論). Hiromatsu warns that if one does not grasp the relational nature of things, materialism (*yuibuttsuron*) will dwindle into “a theory of only things (*tada no mono ron*),” which is a different reading of the same characters.<sup>49</sup> Such simplistic materialism, which Miki also criticized, takes things as independently existing substances. Depending on how one understands the term, materialism can either reproduce or resist reification. On Hiromatsu’s reading, materialism does not assert that there are first things, which then enter into relations; rather, there are first relations and one identifies things out of these relations.<sup>50</sup> Things are dynamic and constantly transforming in terms of their relations.

The above example shows that Hiromatsu was not only concerned with people’s relations to things, but also intersubjective and social relations. From this perspective, Hiromatsu’s perspective echoes the social interpretation of materialism that Laikwan Pang discusses in her contribution to this special issue. The child eventually learns that it has seen a cow through an intersubjective history, which is guided by an abstract someone.

In facing the phenomenal world, we immediately and of ourselves suppose that we are viewing the world from the perspective of some kind of universal subjectivity. We say that there is a pen here, that it is three o’clock now or that that tree over there looks small but it is actually large, and so forth. None of this is simply data given for “me as myself.” We suppose it to be a universally applicable “fact” that

<sup>44</sup>Marx 1991, p. 138.

<sup>45</sup>Hiromatsu 1983, p. 270.

<sup>46</sup>Hiromatsu 2011, p. 975. This text is taken from Hiromatsu 1991.

<sup>47</sup>Robert Brandom discusses the concept of “material incompatibility and consequence” in Brandom 2019.

<sup>48</sup>Ara 2004, p. 179.

<sup>49</sup>Kobayashi 2007, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup>Kobayashi 2007, p. 102.

holds true for others as well. Things that are only for “me as me” are generally discarded. That a phenomenon is something means that it is for a “me that is more than me.” Thus the I as a kind of someone takes precedence over the simple “I.”<sup>51</sup>

This passage describes a collective subject, which mediates the individual subject. Hiromatsu also continues the discussion of error: the phrase “the tree over there looks small but it is actually large” shows how phenomenal objects are constantly changing. In the above case, we have two different appearances, which are materially incompatible. As one learns that the house is “actually” large, one has to reinterpret the first appearance of the house as merely an appearance. One could give many examples of such a transformation, such as seeing a mirage and then realizing that there is no water before us. Because such judgements are supposed to hold true to others as well, they are commitments about a network of related beliefs. New judgements must be compatible with previously held beliefs, which suggest the dynamic nature of the abovementioned someone – universal or collective subjects change with time as we have seen with paradigm shifts in science.

Based on the above description, one might conclude that Hiromatsu has turned Marx’s analysis of the commodity into a phenomenology similar to Heidegger or recent interpretations of Hegel. However, following Marxists, Hiromatsu is concerned with power relations that mediate the endorsement of certain judgements, and we see this in his discussion of roles. To grasp this, we must switch from judgement to action and rethink beliefs in terms of practice. There are normative consequences connected to judgements and actions, and we must understand these in relation to the roles we are expected to play in society. Hiromatsu explains:

In contrast to some sociologists who determine role based on status or position I determine the concept of “role” in regard to the direct – basic self–other relation. That which we call “status” and “position” are things which come into existence for the first time through the configuration of role action being reified and its undergoing a kind of “systematization,” and making these pre-existent to “role” has to be called a reifying misconception confirming the “reified” state of consciousness of those involved.<sup>52</sup>

Hiromatsu contends that the roles for a given society emerge historically, and there are specific consequences if one does not live up to one’s role. The presumed other who is acting is backed by society, which will apply both moral and legal sanctions. He mentions numerous roles, including postman, teacher, husband and wife. In Hegel’s terms, we could think of these roles as part of the substance of society, the moral and legal framework within which people act. We reify roles when we obscure the subjective dimension in this substance or the ensemble of social characters. Hiromatsu criticizes a situation where roles become fixed and people become cogs in a machinery of obligations, statuses and sanctions. Reification takes place every day and people conceive of rules and institutions as given. Reification appears apolitical, but to use Wang Hui’s felicitous term, it is a politics of depoliticization.<sup>53</sup> This problem was clearly on Hiromatsu’s mind as political movements in Japan tended to decline after the 1970s. He sought to counter this by linking roles directly to a self-other relation before they turn into statuses or positions and hoped to use this standpoint to destabilize existing structures.

This does not mean that Hiromatsu advocates abolishing all institutions. He points out that although the state is a product of reification, “people could not live if they were not within a state.”<sup>54</sup> Rather, he urges that there must be a dynamic relationship between social substance or the roles we are interpellated into, and our own reflection on those roles. Although people find themselves always already in roles connected to statuses and institutions, there is a fundamental relationality and agency that go beyond specific roles. For this reason, institutions and roles can be constantly revised and even radically restructured.

<sup>51</sup>Hiromatsu 2011, p. 977.

<sup>52</sup>Hiromatsu 1983, pp. 290–91. I am here using John Hockings’ forthcoming translation of Hiromatsu’s book.

<sup>53</sup>Wang 2009, pp. 3–19.

<sup>54</sup>Hiromatsu 1993, pp. 383–84. Cited from Shibuya 2006, p. 70.

Through emphasizing roles, Hiromatsu connects Marx's materialism not only to a conflict between workers and capitalists, but to an overall criticism of reification, which led to depoliticization. Such a critique required a reactivation of subjectivity and a different type of relational thinking and practice, which he saw emerging in the Kyoto School. The Kyoto School had a vast idea of modernity, which included mechanism, rationalism, liberalism, democracy and capitalism. Unlike liberals, such as the famous Maruyama Masao,<sup>55</sup> Kyoto School philosophers understood modernity as a totalizing system of domination that concealed itself behind the banner of progress. We have seen how Miki draws on Lukács to ground such a theory of modernity in the commodity form. Hiromatsu expands Marx's understanding of the commodity form such that it coincides with the Kyoto School's totalizing vision of modernity as something that needs to be overcome if humans are to live harmoniously with each other and with nature. For Hiromatsu, the critique of reification makes possible the type of politics required to go beyond capitalist modernity. Like Miki and the Kyoto School, Hiromatsu believed that the realization of a new future was not merely a national affair, but would involve rekindling Asian unity against the West; this becomes clear in his final essay. We might say that Miki and the Kyoto School misrecognized the totalizing logic of capitalist modernity as the West, but such misconceptions also articulated relevant goals responding to real problems. We have already seen that Miki underscored that the project of Asian unity implied overcoming capitalism. Moreover, during the postwar era, Third Worldists further consolidated this marriage between anti-imperialism and socialism. Hiromatsu's conception of pan-Asianism attempts to fuse the legacy of pan-Asianism with Third World nationalism and Marxist socialism.

### Hiromatsu turns to Asia

In the early 1990s, Japan's post-war economic development ended and the Japanese stock market crashed. This is often labelled the "bursting of the speculative bubble" that sustained growth in the 1970s and 1980s. In the midst of this crisis, in 1994, Hiromatsu published a short essay entitled "Northeast Asia Playing a Leading Role in History: The New East Asia Regime Based on the Axis of Japan and China." This essay raised eyebrows and, according to Koga Noboru, "at the time, almost all of the leftists believed that Hiromatsu had turned into a rightist and criticized him."<sup>56</sup> The famous critic Karatani Kojin echoes Koga's point from another perspective when he says that Hiromatsu was alone in struggling against Euro-America.<sup>57</sup> Hiromatsu suggests that the world is changing and points out that no one predicted the fall of the Soviet Union or that Japan would have a liberal prime minister, such as Hosokawa Morihiro, who was elected in 1993.<sup>58</sup> In this context, he urged an understanding of American hegemony as a process that could pave the way for something else.

The era in which the United States plays the role of absorbing worldwide productive output in exchange for dollars is ebbing away. The Japanese economy has to place its pivot foot within Asia. The idea of a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere was a patent apparatus for the right wing, where only the confrontation with Europe and America was highlighted, leaving Japanese imperialism as it was. However, today the scene of history has turned around drastically.<sup>59</sup>

Hiromatsu does not expand on this and died shortly after this piece was published, but we can surmise that history's drastic turn concerns the rise of global neoliberalism, the crises of the Japanese economy and the end of the Cold War. Postwar Japan had blindly followed the United States and turned its back on Asia. However, by 1994 the rise of Asian economies appeared as the beginning of a new anti-imperialist movement against the West. One could now remould pan-Asianism such that it avoided the pitfalls of the past.

<sup>55</sup>Kobayashi 2007, p. 140. Maruyama's essay is called "Gendai bunmei to seiji no dōkō."

<sup>56</sup>Koga 2007, p. 125. See also Peng 2017.

<sup>57</sup>Ara 2004, p. 177.

<sup>58</sup>Hiromatsu 1997b.

<sup>59</sup>Hiromatsu 1997a, p. 499. Cited from Nakajima 2011, p. 116. Translation amended VM.



Part of refashioning pan-Asianism involved pursuing a relational vision, which we can see in Hiromatsu's materialism:

[A] new worldview and concept of values will be born in Asia in the end, and they will sweep across the whole world ... it is nothing other than to make a "relation-based doctrine" the foundation instead of a European "substance-based doctrine" that has been in the mainstream ...<sup>60</sup>

Kobayashi Toshiaki points out that, for Hiromatsu, Asia was both a geographical and theoretical periphery, which was connected to relational theory.<sup>61</sup> This relational theory in turn could support ecological values over the blind pursuit of wealth.<sup>62</sup> However, realizing such ecological values would require constructing a new world order. Asia could eventually do this because it was outside of the Euro-American centre and this peripheral space could eventually create a world without clear centres or peripheries. He believes that a Japan–China alliance could initiate such a movement beyond the imperialist present:

A New East Asian Regime in the Axis of Japan and China! A New World Order based upon it! I believe that it is a good moment today to adopt this as a slogan of the antiestablishment left wing, which calls for a radical inquiry of Japanese capitalism itself.<sup>63</sup>

The above lines bring us to the problem of capitalism and the issue of China, with which some of the other articles in this issue have dealt. As Hiromatsu tries to revitalize the idea of a new world order, he anticipates some contemporary Chinese discourse about a new world order based on Chinese philosophy. He dreams of a Japan that has finally entered Asia and overcome its long-time conflict with China. He notes that we cannot think about the unity of China and Japan without inquiring about Japanese capitalism because Japan's imperialist relation to Asia is fundamentally connected with the global rise of monopoly capitalism. After the 1970s and 1980s, Japan and the world were reconfigured and this opened new possibilities. The stage on which one played roles had changed and Hiromatsu urges Japanese to delink from American imperialism and support movements towards a new world order that could transform both Asian and Euro-America.

Reading Hiromatsu's in 2022, critical readers might obviously have some concerns. The Chinese economy is much more powerful than it was in 1994 and with policies such as the Belt-Road Initiative, people might have concerns about Chinese expansion and imperialism. In this case, Hiromatsu's championing of a China-centred pan-Asianism could end up having the same fate as the Japan centred pan-Asianism that Miki supported. These concerns are of course legitimate, but we should keep in mind that although pan-Asianism could turn into imperialism, this is not a necessary outcome. The postwar sinologist and critical intellectual Takeuchi Yoshimi attempted to combine pan-Asianism with Third Worldism, which would be an explicitly anti-imperialist and socialist agenda. Moreover, Takeuchi's vision was also centred on China, but this was during the 1950s and 1960s, when China appeared to be continuing a socialist revolution. In 1994 and especially today, the question of whether China's socialist legacy continues to inform the Chinese Communist Party's policy is hotly debated both within and outside China. Scholars such as the New Leftist, Wang Hui has recently argued that the Xi Jinping's government and the projects such as the Belt-Road Initiative must take a socialist turn if they wish to remain legitimate.<sup>64</sup>

With respect to Hiromatsu Wataru's essay, the above comments are merely speculation, since he died shortly after he published it. We know that he was concerned with getting away from a "Western" world

<sup>60</sup>Hiromatsu 1997b, p. 498; Nakajima 2011, p. 117.

<sup>61</sup>Kobayashi 2007, p. 162.

<sup>62</sup>Hiromatsu 1997b, p. 499.

<sup>63</sup>Hiromatsu 1997b, p. 499; Nakajima 2011, p. 116.

<sup>64</sup>Wang Hui, "Ershi shiji yichan yu yidai yilu," *Wenhua zongheng*, March 29, 2015, Siyue wang <http://www.m4.cn/opinion/2015-02/1263367.shtml>, last accessed 16 July 2020.

view that overlooked relationships and this echoed his understanding of Marx and materialism. With respect to geo-politics, he focuses on China and Japan, without mentioning Third World countries, such as Africa, Latin America or even India and other countries in Asia. We might suggest that he would need to have a more encompassing theory of imperialism, resistance to global capitalism and socialism to continue his pan-Asianist project. Even in Asia, Hiromatsu's project requires dealing with the weaker nations in Asia, in addition to China and Japan. Pan-Asianism was not the focus of his research for most of his life and indeed, such questions often elude the gaze of most academic Marxism. From this perspective, we should see Hiromatsu's final essay as an incomplete, flawed and yet provocative attempt to take global unevenness seriously and make Marxism politically relevant to the non-West.

## Conclusion

We have seen how two controversial Japanese thinkers have brought a revised concept of materialism into dialogue with pan-Asianism as part of a project to imagine a world beyond the present. Their work reveals the polysemic nature of the term "materialism" in both the Japanese context and beyond. Materialism went from referring to a theory that assumes the independence of the material object from the subject to becoming a critique of reification, which shows how human beings constitute their objects in the world and then misrecognize such objects as existing independently. Both Miki and Hiromatsu contend that much materialism actually buttressed capitalist ideology because it concealed the power of human agency by reifying it, thus reproducing the domination of both humans and nature.

Marxism and materialism are usually associated with Europe, but both Miki and Hiromatsu connect the critique of capitalism with Asia. This shows the manner in which geopolitics can mediate the production of theory and its practical political proposals. Although Miki's pan-Asianism has been discredited in light of Japanese imperialism, Hiromatsu's last article in the *Asahi Shinbun* appears to us as a riddle – its future has not yet played itself out. This article appears prescient today because, although there are competing positions about how to interpret the rise of China, few would deny that China challenges US hegemony. We can generalize Hiromatsu's point that we need to not only fundamentally rethink Japanese capitalism, but also retheorize neoliberal global capitalism and a possible post-neoliberal formation. Hiromatsu criticized Miki for failing to see how liberal capitalism was turning into monopoly capitalism. Today, to evaluate Hiromatsu's call for Asian unity, we must grasp the role of Asia in the global rise and crises of neoliberalism. Through such an inquiry, we will be able to imagine more concretely whether and how Asian resistance could be the start of a new world order beyond imperialist and capitalist domination.

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