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An Asian Mediterranean as the Analogy of Archipelagic Ontology

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the concept of islands as utopian spaces in seventeenth-century Asian literature and thought, with a focus on the Korean novel *The Story of Hong Gildong*. In this novel, the main character establishes a society based on equality on an island, in contrast to the oppressive mainland. These island utopias were a recurring theme throughout seventeenth-century Asia, reflecting a collective belief in islands as free and unrestricted spaces. The essay suggests viewing the South China Sea archipelago as an "Asian Mediterranean," a geographical area embodying this literary theme. However, instead of examining the ancient world through an anthropological lens, the essay contextualizes this island imagery within the context of modern globalization and the expansion of capitalism. It primarily focuses on overseas Chinese communities, which have been intricately connected to European colonial enterprises since the seventeenth century. By engaging with Deleuze's concept of "desert islands," the essay explores the ontological status of archipelagos and their potential to resist the ideological territorialization imposed by nation-states in Asia since the twentieth century. It argues that the archipelagic imagination points to spatial ontologies that go beyond and challenge nationalist ideological frameworks. Ultimately, the essay aims to rediscover utopian archetypes of archipelagic ontology and reinterpret them as valuable resources for

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reimagining socio–spatial relationships that extend beyond the confines of nation–state paradigms.

Keywords : Asian Mediterranean, archipelago, weak technology, Glissant, Deleuze, Benjamin

Introduction

In *The Story of Hong Gildong* (洪吉童傳), a seventeenth-century Korean novel, the protagonist, Hong Gildong, takes his band of followers to an island at the end of the story. He overthrows the evil king who rules the island and builds an ideal society on the island where there is no class or discrimination. *The Story of Hong Gildong* can be broken down into three parts, each unfolding in distinct settings. Initially, the narrative unfolds within the Hong family residence. Hong Mo, the high minister, impregnates a low-born maid after a prophetic dream, leading to the birth of Hong Gildong. The tale traces Gildong's upbringing, during which he hones his physical, mental, and magical prowess. This part culminates with Gildong foiling an assassination plot against him and departing from the residence due to discontent with his secondary status.

In the subsequent segment, Hong Gildong assumes leadership of a group of outlaws dubbed the *Hwalbindang* (League of Those Who Help the Impoverished). Together, they plunder wealthy locations like storehouses and temples nationwide. As his audacious heists capture the attention of the King, Gildong is compelled to flee the country, embarking on self-imposed exile. The final part unfolds in the realm of

Yul. Hong Gildong and his *Hwalbindang* gang establish themselves anew on the island of Jae, eventually toppling the King of Yul and ascending to the throne as a just and compassionate ruler. He governs equitably and creates his own family in Yul, treating his offspring without distinction based on birth order.

The location of this fictional ideal state is debated among scholars, but the important thing is that the bandit leader left the mainland for an island in search of utopia. It is no coincidence that islands were often depicted as open utopias against the landlocked territories in seventeenth-century Asia, including Korea. So, what was this seventeenth-century Asian island? Following Fernand Braudel's concept of the Mediterranean, I propose naming the archipelago around the South China Sea as an "Asian Mediterranean" as an analogy for this shared imagination. I oppose this imagined world to the modern landscape created by the globalization of capitalism, in particular the existence of the overseas Chinese, given that this "Asian Mediterranean," formed since the seventeenth century, is, in fact, closely tied to European expansionism. The ontology of archipelagos is irreducible to the ideological actualization of the nation-states that have dominated Asia.

Ⅰ. An Asian Mediterranean

In his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Édouard Glissant (2021) maintains that "the archipelagos of the Mediterranean must encounter the archipelagos of Asia, and the archipelago of the Antilles" (19). The archipelagos are the ontological condition of the contemporary world. As Glissant clarifies, "these archipelagos must encounter each other

because, across their many islands, interdependence and difference coexist – and, in this way, they carry the energy that is necessary for our whole globe, our whole world" (19-20). From this perspective, the analogy of the Mediterranean unveils its capacity to conceptualize the contemporary world effectively. Accordingly, Braudel's significant work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II,* presents the Mediterranean as a substantial analogy, encompassing economic, social, and cultural aspects. In the fourteenth century, cities such as Genoa, Venice, and Barcelona held global influence as they controlled economic activities worldwide, thanks to their strategic positions within the Mediterranean. Braudel's analysis highlights the blurring of borders, the influence of economic flows on defining space, and the clash of developmental stages.

According to Braudel, the Mediterranean Sea acts as a unifying geographic factor, linking the lands and civilizations surrounding it into a cohesive region or world. Braudel emphasized the importance of long-lasting structures or patterns that shape the Mediterranean over long periods, such as its physical geography, climate, and environmental conditions. He identified three different levels of historical time – the *longue durée* (long-term structures), the *moyenne durée* (conjunctures or cyclical patterns), and the short-term *événements* (events). The Mediterranean facilitated the flow of goods, people, ideas, and cultures across its waters, creating a high degree of interconnectedness among the surrounding civilizations and economies. Braudel emphasized the role of maritime city-states like Venice, Genoa, and Barcelona, which formed trade and cultural exchange networks across the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean world was characterized by the coexistence and interaction of various civilizations, such as the Islamic, Christian, and

Jewish cultures, leading to a heterogeneous and dynamic cultural landscape.

Braudel identified a core Mediterranean region and peripheries that were influenced by and connected to the central area through trade, migration, and cultural exchange. Braudel's concept of the Mediterranean world transcended national boundaries and highlighted the shared experiences, connections, and long-term structures that shaped the region over centuries. The notion challenged traditional nation-centric historical narratives and pioneered a more holistic, interdisciplinary, and long-term approach to understanding complex regional systems. He clarified:

> No simple biography beginning with date of birth can be written of this sea; no simple narrative of how things happened would be appropriate to its history. The Mediterranean is not even a *single* sea, it is a complex of seas; and these seas are broken up by islands, interrupted by penisulas, ringed by intricate coastlines. Its life is linked to the land, its poetry more than half-rural, is sailors may turn peasant with the seasons; it is the sea of vineyards and olive trees just as much as the sea of the long-oared galleys and the roundships of merchants and its history can no more be separated from that of the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it. (Braudel 1972, 17)

From this perspective, the Mediterranean could be seen as a theoretical framework for rewriting an alternative contemporary world history. The history of the Mediterranean world began before the rise of nation-states and cannot be limited to a single sea. Moving to the eighteenth century, the South China Sea emerged as a focal point for both European and Asian economic interactions due to the diverse trading networks in the area. Drawing inspiration from Braudel's

concept of the Mediterranean world, François Gipouloux attempted to employ the notion of an “Asian Mediterranean” as a conceptual lens to comprehend and elucidate the intrinsic diversity and heterogeneity that characterizes the Asian region. What appears most notable in Braudel’s analysis of the Mediterranean maritime world is the dematerialization of borders, the emergence of flows as defining spatial parameters, and the clash of different developmental stages. Braudel illustrated the dichotomy between centers and boundaries at a time when national borders seemed blurred. He also highlighted the fluidity of geographical divisions, largely shaped by political partitioning.

In the eighteenth century, the South China Sea became a pivotal hub for economic exchanges between Europe and Asia due to the convergence of trading networks originating from Arabic, Indian, Portuguese, and Chinese origins. This raises the question of whether Braudel’s “Mediterranean” concept can be applied to Asia, specifically to the East Asian economic corridor encompassing interconnected maritime basins such as the Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea, South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea during the late sixteenth and late twentieth centuries. Furthermore, it begs the inquiry of whether networks of independent cities were the primary actors in this maritime space. In medieval Mediterranean port cities, independent cities, merchant communities, and mariners played crucial roles in maintaining maritime security and crafting sophisticated legal frameworks to pursue commercial interests. While instruments like bills of lading, commercial contracts, and the development of international commercial law, as well as a business environment relatively free from state intervention, were largely responsible for the Mediterranean’s success in Europe, it remains to be explored whether the same autonomy of port cities and development of

commercial law can be observed in the case of major trading hubs in East and Southeast Asia. In this regard, Gipouloux questions, “whether it is possible to detect the same autonomy of port cities and development of commercial law when examining the case of the great emporia in East and Southeast Asia” (98). To address these inquiries, one must consider the unique historical contexts of two distinct periods of globalization that stretched between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first period witnessed the regular and stable linkage of the four continents, notably after the Spanish conquest of Manila in 1571. The second period occurred in the late twentieth century due to significant transportation and telecommunication cost reductions and extensive financial deregulation. Gipouloux argues that “the appreciation of the yen, following the Plaza agreement, launched an unprecedented expansion of Japanese industrialization across Asia through foreign direct investment” (98-99). Although the concept of an Asian Mediterranean remains controversial, Gipouloux’s suggestion appears valuable in approaching Asia’s diversity from a perspective that deviates from the normative axioms of official historical narratives. Gipouloux’s point is that Asia lacks a tradition akin to free cities or the Hanseatic League in Europe; it has evolved into a “flexible empire” because of its steadily advancing coastal cities (Gipouloux 2011: 328). Gipouloux’s presupposition, while insightful, presents a limitation by primarily viewing coastal cities as pivotal in shaping the Mediterranean. However, a critical aspect that challenges this hypothesis is the presence of islands within the region. The existence of islands prompts us to contemplate the perspective of the seascape or oceanscape, offering an alternative angle through which to understand history rather than solely focusing on landscapes. In

contributing to this discourse, I wish to draw upon my own experiences to further enrich the discussion surrounding this issue.

II. Archipelagic Ontology

It was January 2006. I was standing on the ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral overlooking the Straits of Malacca in Malaysia, and naturally, I imagined the arrival of the first Portuguese beyond the ruins. The story of the first Europeans landing on the unspoiled beach had been drilled into my head since childhood, but that familiarity was shattered when I visited the Malacca City Museum. Above the entrance hung a painting depicting what Malacca looked like in the sixteenth century, and it was not the beach I had vaguely imagined. When the Portuguese arrived, the beach was already a bustling center of shops and temples, and the painting depicted a marketplace filled with Asians of all colors - Chinese, Indians, Malays, Japanese, and Koreans. Of course, the people in the picture would not have called themselves Asian then. When discussing hybridity in the postmodern era, the fictional sixteenth century I discovered in Malacca revealed the very hybridity we see today. Contrary to what I had vaguely imagined, the Portuguese had not arrived on a deserted island; it was already a trading hub of diverse cultures.

Following my experience in Malaysia, I found myself compelled to reconstruct a theoretical framework from a seascape perspective. While acknowledging the existing scholarship within Asian Studies and related academic fields addressing regional issues, I was dissatisfied with their predominant reliance on sociological methods and geopolitical analyses.

In exploring alternative avenues, I unearthed the potential of an archipelagic approach to understanding the islands, which promises to introduce a fresh epistemological dimension to established knowledge paradigms. Reframing the theoretical foundation becomes imperative in rewriting Asia's history or catalyzing the emergence of a distinctly different narrative liberated from Western perspectives. Looking back in history, only after European colonial policies did the East and the West become distinctly divided. Europe was divided into nation-states and began to struggle in earnest. In this process, the name 'Asia,' which referred to the region outside the Roman Empire, was transformed into a term for Greater China, which lost its identity after the fall of China. In this sense, the name Asia is a product of arbitrary geopolitics that has nothing to do with the region's identity. Japan, which championed Pan-Asianism in the name of opposing European imperialism, was unable to escape the contradictions of the nation-state and became the very imperialism it criticized, plunging into wars it could not afford. However, the post-war Cold War system resurrected a defeated Japan and bisected Asia. The Asian Mediterranean, once united by a common trading sphere, was unable to liquidate its imperialist past and was again divided according to Western interests. Today, the region we call Asia functions as a 'factory' and 'labor market' for global capitalism, far from the new Asia that Asian intellectuals sought to create against European imperialism.

Could the Europe of the sixteenth century have flourished without the influx of prosperity from Asia facilitated by the Portuguese? Similarly, could the post-war reconstruction of capitalism and the emergence of global capitalism have occurred without Asia's pivotal role in providing cheap labor, essential raw materials, and vibrant markets in the

aftermath of the Second World War? The escalating conflict between the United States and China, now reaching a critical juncture, did not materialize out of thin air; instead, its roots trace back over a century. Among its manifold influences, global capitalism has profoundly shaped contemporary China's trajectory. China's abundance of cheap labor, expansive markets, and remarkable technological advancements have fueled the engine of global capitalism, yet paradoxically, these very elements are also corroding it from within. Nonetheless, the era of uninterrupted prosperity for global capitalism has reached its twilight, as another wave of geopolitical forces stands poised to disrupt and redefine global value chains in the region.

We can always rewrite history, but the question is, from what perspective? The given discourses of Asia have focused on those nation-states in the land, and islands were only parts of their territories. The archipelagic ontology invites us to rethink the meaning of Asia and its identity from alternative frameworks to mainstream scholarship. Criticism needs a theoretical engagement from the outside of the established agreement. The region called Asia today is primarily determined by a land-based perspective. A new definition of Asia must move beyond this limitation and be viewed from an islandic perspective. The analogy of an Asian Mediterranean would provide us with an alternative viewpoint to understand the region. Even in a geographical sense, islands are not marginal places in Asia. Islands are a crucial locus for residential territories and trading networks. The analogy of an Asian Mediterranean finds its resonance in the ontological conditions of Asia, akin to an archipelago of interconnected influences and dynamics. Gilles Deleuze is a proper reference for this discussion. Deleuze articulated the ontology of islands, especially deserted ones, as existing in the virtual

space between continent and ocean. The ontological condition of islands is ambiguous, as they simultaneously yearn for separation from the mainland and for integration into territorial domains.

In his early essay "Desert Islands," Deleuze (2004) contends that dreaming of islands involves a desire for separation, detachment from the mainland, and a sense of being lost and solitary (10). However, it also entails a yearning for renewal, the opportunity to start afresh. The island remains drawn towards the mainland despite drifting away from the continent. Deleuze critiques the replication of continental structures on islands and directs his political focus toward exploring the relationship between the mainland and the island. This notion first gave rise to his concept of geophilosophy and later to communism, which manifests uniquely in each location with its territories. Deleuze categorizes islands into Continental and Oceanic types, with the latter originating underwater and the former separating from a continent. He posits that these island classifications reveal a fundamental dichotomy between ocean and land, suggesting that geography inherently encompasses politics, economics, and population control. The study of geography contributes to constructing governmentality, the modern governance technology over territories. Deleuze emphasizes the struggle between land and sea, echoing Carl Schmitt's portrayal of the conflict between two monsters: the Leviathan and the Behemoth. Schmitt delineates a world history of maritime powers against land powers and vice versa, underscoring the establishment of international law as an extension of terrestrial dominance over the sea. To quote Deleuze (2004):

> Humans cannot live, nor live in security, unless they assume that the active struggle between earth and water is over, or at least

> contained. People like to call these two elements mother and father, assigning them gender roles according to the whim of their fancy. They must somehow persuade themselves that a struggle of this kind does not exist, or that it has somehow ended. (9)

Deleuze contends that humans perceive the ocean as peaceful despite its inherent tumult. Islands challenge this perspective by embodying a truth that defies human efforts to annex and domesticate them. They remain deserted, resisting assimilation into continents and political realms. Deleuze asserts that islands, regardless of human habitation, retain their inherent desolation. It is human imagination, rather than geographical origins, that imposes continent-derived narratives onto islands, framing them as marginalized extensions of terrestrial power. Deleuze's conceptualization of islands parallels the critique of colonialism, particularly evident in his analysis of Michel Tournier's *Friday, or the Other Island,* which dissects Robinson Crusoe's colonial ideology as a mythical reconstruction of bourgeois life.

Deleuze makes a clear distinction between continental islands, which arise from erosion and separation from continents, and original oceanic islands, formed by volcanic eruptions. Islands symbolize both separation and the potential for new beginnings—a concept Deleuze refers to as a "second origin." The deserted island serves as an imaginary archetype of the collective human psyche, reflecting humanity's longing to detach from the world and reinvent itself. However, literature often fails to grasp the profound mythological significance of deserted islands, as evidenced in works like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Suzanne*. These novels overlook the layers of islands from the perspective of archipelagic ontology. Deleuze advocates for rediscovering the mythological essence of deserted islands, which represent a sacred space for rebirth and

renewal following a catastrophic flood, akin to the biblical ark narrative. The deserted island embodies the notion of a "second origin," more fundamental than the initial creation, providing humanity with the opportunity to begin anew from an ancient, primordial essence. In this regard, the ontological status of islands transcends mere geographical classification; it embodies a fundamental mode of existence in shaping the world.

Ⅲ. Weak Technologies

The mode of existence inherently involves a perpetual consideration of how to utilize objects technologically. Endorsing Gilbert Simondon, "technical objects" refer to human-made artifacts, machines, and technologies that are characterized by their functional unity and evolutionary process of concretization. I would say that Simondon's discussion of technical objects is important in identifying how an archipelagic ontology can intervene in conventional historical interpretations. Technical objects are not mere assemblages of parts but undergo a process of individuation or concretization, where they acquire functional unity and coherence over time through successive iterations and improvements. They exist within an "associated milieu" – the environment, resources, and conditions that enable their functioning and evolution (Simondon 2017, 59). The associated milieu co-evolves with the technical object. The objects can be open or closed systems. Open systems exchange matter, energy, or information with their associated milieu, while closed systems are isolated. Simondon saw open systems as more evolved and capable of further concretization.

Abstract technical objects are those with separate, disparate functions, while concrete ones have integrated and unified operations, exhibiting functional convergence through the concretization process. What must be stressed is that technical objects belong to evolutionary lineages or "phylum" that undergo progressive concretization over generations, analogous to biological evolution. In this way, humans and technical objects co-constitute each other through their associated milieus, with machines reshaping human experience and capabilities. In essence, Simondon rejected simplistic human-machine dualisms and viewed technical objects as part of an ongoing process of individuation and concretization that redefines the relations between humans, machines, and their environments. In Simonon's terms, the ontological status is always related to the evolution of the technical realm.

Although science and technology appear intertwined since the Enlightenment, their fundamental approaches and outcomes differ. While science is principled, seeking to understand nature's laws, technology is pragmatic, aiming to harness nature's power through application. Technology involves both knowledge and the environment in which it operates – one cannot exist without the other. It emerges from the integration of fragmented experiences into algorithms or methodologies for action. Technology transcends the specialized domain of engineering, permeating society and politics through its multitude of layers. The modern theory of governance draws from the sociopolitics of technology, as exemplified by Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which was based on Galileo's physics. Science makes the invisible visible through prediction and mathematical representation, while technology is the practice or application of scientific principles. However, technology is open to geographical and cultural variations, distinguishing it from the universal claims of

science. Practices like yoga, though techniques for mind-body harmony, may not be considered technology from a Western scientific lens, indicating how technologies are categorized through cultural lenses. This Western-centric view imposed uniform standards and manuals for technology use, overlooking counterexamples that challenge such standardization.

One such counterexample is the experience of an island in Western Samoa after Cyclone Val in 1991. The indigenous community played a crucial role in the resilience and recovery of Western Samoa after the devastating cyclone. When the cyclone hit the island, it caused widespread destruction, crippling modern infrastructure and urban facilities. In this dire situation, the knowledge and skills possessed by the older generations of the indigenous Samoan community became invaluable for survival and rebuilding. The elders of the community remembered and had expertise in traditional practices of living off the land and jungle. This included skills like building shelter, finding food and water sources, using native plants for medicinal purposes, etc. This “primitive” knowledge proved vital when modern amenities were no longer available. The indigenous way of life was more self-sufficient and less reliant on external systems and technology. This self-reliance helped the community sustain itself in the absence of imported goods and services after the disaster. Through generations of living in harmony with their natural surroundings, the indigenous people understood the local environment intimately. This ecological knowledge aided in finding resources and adapting to the post-cyclone conditions.

Indigenous societies often have strong social bonds and collective decision-making processes. This collective capacity and unity enabled effective coordination and mutual support during the crisis. The case

of Western Samoa highlights that when modern technology and infrastructure fail, indigenous knowledge systems and practices can provide vital resilience. The traditional skills acted as a safety net, allowing the community to survive until external aid arrived. This example challenges the notion that only mainstream Western technology can enable progress and development. It underscores the importance of preserving and valuing indigenous knowledge, which can complement modern practices, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. With modern infrastructure destroyed, the indigenous community's "primitive" skills and knowledge enabled survival, demonstrating that multiple layers of technology exist beyond the dominant Western paradigm. I would characterize these alternative technological practices that deviate from mainstream technologies as "weak technologies." This openness and plurality, embracing diverse technological practices existing outside the dominant mainstream paradigm, essentially embodies the spirit and essence of art.

I adapt the concept of weak technologies from Déborah Danowski's and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's discussion of "relatively weak technologies," which refers to the technologies used by indigenous peoples and many other socio-political minorities around the world for their livelihoods. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017) introduced the concept in *The Ends of the World* to refer to the technologies used by indigenous peoples and other minority groups around the world (95). Relatively weak technologies are technologies that are non-industrial, low-impact, and often based on traditional knowledge systems passed down through generations within these communities. These technologies operate on a smaller scale, geared towards local needs and the immediate environment, as opposed to large-scale, resource-intensive

industrial technologies. They have a relatively low environmental impact and resource extraction intensity compared to modern industrial technologies. These technologies are deeply embedded within the specific cultural, social, and ecological contexts of the communities that use them adapted to local conditions. Many of these technologies are sustainable in their use of resources and their integration with natural cycles, having evolved over long periods of human-environment interaction. From the perspective of dominant Western technological paradigms, these are often seen as marginal, primitive, or backward technologies.

Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue that these "relatively weak" technologies, rather than being obsolete, represent alternative technological possibilities that may be more sustainable and appropriate for specific contexts (95). They challenge the assumed universality and superiority of Western industrial technologies. They suggest that the survival and resilience of many indigenous communities can be attributed to their continued use of these "weak" technologies, which provide them with self-sufficiency and adaptation to local environments, especially in the face of environmental and social disruptions caused by "stronger" industrial technologies. Overall, the concept highlights the diversity of technological approaches and questions the technological monoculture imposed by Western modernity, proposing that "weaker" contextualized technologies may offer insights for more sustainable human-environment relations.

In my opinion, the implications of weak technologies can be expanded to Walter Benjamin's concept of "a weak messianic power" (*eine schwache messianische Kraft*). This weak messianic power belongs to the realm of impossibility in the present and unrealized potentiality

in the past - the virtual. According to Benjamin (2003), “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim” (390). The weakness of this messianic power does not signify a lack of power but rather suggests a multiplicity of potential messiahs to come, a power (*Kraft*) open to diverse actualizations and minor practices. It does not mean messianism without a messiah but rather a messianism with many possible messiahs. In German, *schwache* implies openness to the other. Therefore, technical weakness means the flexibility of technology to adapt to any experimental practice of technical objects toward their own multiplicity.

How are such flexible uses of technology possible? Past and present generations reach a secret agreement through actualizing each technical power in their respective experiences, making it a reality. There must be a structural difference between technological design and its actualization - the difference in which the form of participated and individuated worldly entities encounters conditions for the ontological exercise of weak technologies. This ontological mode of technical relations brings forth the operational milieu between users and specialized technical objects.

Technology serves as both knowledge and environment simultaneously, but today’s mainstream understanding of technology itself cannot explain the multitude of technological uses. For instance, knowledge of a bicycle does not inherently enable one to ride it - the established knowledge must yield to its practical exercises. We perform actions with or without prior awareness along particular sequences. These streaming lines of activities constitute techniques, and the theory of techniques is called technology. Technology studies techniques to acquire control over

the environment. Engineering encompasses control over specific machinery, but the scope of technology is more comprehensive than an engineer's specialty. In this sense, technology is inherently social, and the layers of technological development structure society and culture. The interplay between social relations and technology remains perpetually open to political involvement and contestation.

While the Western concept of technology has been grounded in science since the Enlightenment, technology cannot be equated with science. Technical dimensions are always open to planetary differences and diverse possibilities outside the Western scientific framework. For instance, yoga may be considered a technology for cultivating functional mind-body relations but is not regarded as such through a Western scientific lens. Suppose one insists on classifying yoga as a technology. In that case, it must be categorized as an "Indian" technology rooted in religious traditions, highlighting how technologies are classified based on geographical and cultural differences. This one-dimensional, Western-centric understanding of technology has given rise to hierarchical knowledge regimes about technical objects and the imposition of unified manuals dictating their technical reproduction. However, ample evidence challenges this typical approach, which fails to account for the plurality of technological forms and practices across cultures.

The reduction of technology to a narrow Western scientific paradigm neglects the diversity of techniques and knowledge systems that have flourished in various societies. It imposes a universalizing and standardizing framework that marginalizes alternative conceptions and applications of technology arising from different worldviews and lived experiences. The rich tapestry of localized, contextual technologies that have enabled communities worldwide to thrive in their environments stands as a

potent counter-narrative to this dominant yet limited perspective. The archipelagic ontology as an alternative mode of existence necessarily presents a critique of a Western-centric understanding of technology. Archipelagic ontology emphasizes interconnectedness over isolation. In this view, technology is not a singular entity born from a single source (the West) but rather an archipelago of practices and knowledge systems developed in various islands (cultures) across the vast sea of human experience. Each island has its unique ways of knowing and doing. Reducing technology to a single Western scientific paradigm ignores the rich tapestry of technological traditions (agricultural techniques, indigenous engineering feats) that exist outside that framework. The Western scientific approach can be seen as rigid and fixed. The archipelagic perspective highlights the fluidity and constant experiments of technological practices as they adapt to local needs and environments.

Ⅳ. Archipelagic Thoughts and the Asiatic Mode of Existence

The dominant technological paradigm is the frame that has created our world. Let us turn our attention to “Asia,” which was ahead of Europe in the invention of technology, but the situation changed in the nineteenth century. Lu Xun, a leading modern Chinese writer, wrote that the Chinese did not know the meaning of the century until the twentieth century. Of course, it is an easy racist solution to say that Chinese people were barbaric and ignorant based on this historical fact, but it is not an accurate way to diagnose the situation. Lu Xun’s remarks point to the fact that the Chinese of his time had a very different worldview.

This worldview was forged in a context different from the Christian chronology that shaped Europe.

In his play, *The Orphan of China*, Voltaire paid homage to the techniques of classical Chinese theatre, which were much more developed than in Europe. The play was a reworking of a traditional Chinese play created in the 13th century and adapted to the French context of 1753. He unhesitatingly praises Chinese classical theatre as a masterpiece that stands head and shoulders above its French counterpart. However, his praise for China ultimately leads him to blame the laziness of the eighteenth-century Chinese for not correctly developing their great heritage. He literally argues that the Chinese were too obsessed with their glorious traditions to keep up with the changes in the world. For him, Chinese art was evidence of a retarded state stuck in the infancy of the past, in contrast to the progress of European art.

Voltaire's ideas are interconnected with Leibniz's ideas about China. Leibniz insisted that China should be understood, even if it was incompatible with the Christian worldview. He believed that on the path of predestined harmony set by God, China would ultimately merge into the Christian world. Like Voltaire, Leibniz also held Chinese medicine in high regard and said that he could not help but recognize that China was ahead of Europe in that field. For him, China was a much more advanced civilization than Europe. So, from the perspective of the Christian Europe of his day, it would have been difficult to acknowledge the superiority of such a pagan group. However, Leibniz believed that China's heterogeneity could ultimately be understood in terms of the utopian project of the Middle Kingdom. On God's appointed path, he saw China as the manure for the Christian kingdom that would come later.

Leibniz's source of information about China was the letters of Jesuit missionaries who traveled to Asia on missions. The Catholic mission approach was indigenized and premised on pragmatism, with missionary strategies varying according to the local culture. The question of tolerance is essential here, and Leibniz viewed China through this anti-papist lens. As such, Leibniz had no hesitation in portraying China as a great nation ruled by the wisest of rulers. Voltaire, on the other hand, sees China and Europe as equal rivals, with only geography separating them. From this perspective, China is both a tutor and a rival to Europe. In contrast to Leibniz's optimism that there is much to be learned from China, Voltaire's view reflects the changing European perspective in the eighteenth century.

However, Leibniz and Voltaire did not view China completely antagonistically. For Leibniz, the dominant Christian kingdom was only different in form; for Voltaire, it was predicated on the law of progress. For both, European domination of China was only a matter of time, an inevitability of natural law. The glories of the past could not triumph over the laws of progress. They believed that the geographical differences that separated Europe and China at the time would disappear with the development of technology and eventually merge into a single civilization. Leibniz's concept of the monad reinforced this belief. A monad was a self-sufficient body of individuality in the Leibnizian sense. In this sense, for Leibniz, a mere collection of objects could never be an object, so he did not consider the Dutch East India Company an object. It is not difficult to see here the problem of the European Enlightenment, represented by Leibniz, in that it saw the East India Company, which made Asia the primordial accumulation space for developing European capitalism, as a fiction without substance.

Leibniz saw groups, such as armies, as conceptual units. In other words, there is no unit other than the monad. In my opinion, Leibniz's perception is the core logic that underpins the Western or developmentalist view of Asia today. From this perspective, Asia is reducible to cultures or identities based on geographical differences rather than having substance. Asian things like Confucianism and Buddhism are made to appear to be what defines Asia. But is Asia really nothing more than a stagnant region that remains stuck in this pre-modernity or non-European individuality?

Of course not. To conclude, China and Asia today are part of a vast web of relations in global capitalism that Leibniz's modes cannot explain. At this point, it is worth referring to Graham Harman's commentary attacking Leibniz's interpretation of the East India Company. In *Immaterialism* (2016), Harman argues that this international trading company, the world's first joint stock company, was an objective entity that fundamentally transformed Asia (41). In fact, it is hard to deny that it was only because of this company that Leibniz or Voltaire recognized China.

Before the arrival of the East India Company, Asians, including the Chinese, did not refer to themselves as Asians. It was only when the East India Company took control of the spice islands of Indonesia that Asia gained the status of being "Asia." This means that Asia was invented through the eyes of Europe. It suggests that a massive transformation had begun in a region that was once under the influence of the Chinese Empire. This does not mean that Asia is a "pseudo-object" like Leibniz's relatives. Rather, it means that the deployment of capitalism has reorganized Asia.

In this light, we must revisit Lu Xun's statement about the twentieth century in China. In other words, before the twentieth century, Asia was

the primordial accumulation space of European capitalism. In this sense, it was only in the twentieth century that Asia finally emerged from the status of nothingness and was recognized within the world as a unit. I believe this recognition was achieved through the universal system of capitalism. However, many discussions, even by Korean philosophers like Han Byung-chul, for example, have not abandoned the view of Asia as a vague region still haunted by the remnants of the past, such as Confucianism. This view was internalized as a logic of modernization when Asians began to call themselves Asians.

The Japanese enlightenment thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi illustrates the blindness of this Asian internalization of the Western gaze in his 16 March 1885 essay, “Datsu-A Ron” (脫亞論). In this short essay, Fukuzawa assessed China and Korea as the remnants of archaic spherical systems that were captive to the ideas of the Confucians and argued that Japan should take the lead in reforming Asia by embodying the logic of Western civilization. Thus, the logic of imperial Japan’s construction and colonization, which began in earnest in the 20th century, was nothing less than a process of othering pre-modern Asia. Fukuzawa’s perspective is the same as that of Leibniz and Voltaire.

They all understood the progress of Western civilization in terms of natural law. How far is the current view of the West from this pre-20th-century perspective? The post-colonial movement once raised this question, but it is hard to say that it has achieved much. Asia is an invention, but it is all the more real. It is not Confucianism or Buddhism but global capitalism. In this sense, Asia’s capitalism is not less mature and deficient but full of capitalism itself. To think about Asia as an object means putting this issue on the table.

Suppose technology such as artificial intelligence represents the

ultimate realization of Western metaphysics as described by Heidegger. In that case, the machine signifies the end of the world as we know it, but this ending only holds meaning in the context of the West, and the non-West, which has internalized and pursued Western modernity, cannot escape the aftermath of this end. But an end is a condition for another beginning. Where, then, can we look for signs of that beginning? This beginning will be possible in a void, in a place where technology can be used in a different way. If that space was a geographical gap until the early twentieth century, it is now more of a symbolic gap. This symbolic difference, or an "Asian Meditteranean" as an ontological condition that cannot be signified, may need to be reinvented. It is because "archipelagos are able to diffract, they create diversity and expansiveness, they are spaces of relation that recognize all the infinite details of the real" (Glissant 2021, 20). If we can revive the original meaning of the word "Asia" and create a 'place that is not the West,' we may be able to open up many possible archipelagic thoughts that go beyond continental thoughts.

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국문초록

군도적 존재론의 비유로서 상상 가능한 아시아 지중해

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한국 소설 <홍길동전>의 주인공은 억압적인 본토를 떠나 섬에 평등주의 사회를 건설한다. 이런 섬 유토피아는 17세기 아시아 전역에서 반복되는 모티브로, 섬을 제약 없는 열린 공간으로 여기는 공통의 상상력을 반영한다. 이 논문은 남중국해 군도를 이와 같은 문학적 비유를 구현하는 지리적 영역인 "아시아의 지중해"로 설정할 것을 제안한다. 그러나 이 논문은 고대 세계에 대한 인류학적 연구라기보다는 17세기 이후 유럽 식민지 기업과 복잡하게 연결된 화교 커뮤니티의 렌즈를 통해 현대 세계화와 자본주의 확장 세력 안에서 이 군도의 상상력을 맥락화하고자 한다. 이 논문은 들뢰즈의 "무인도" 이론을 바탕으로 20세기 이후 아시아를 지배해온 민족-국가의 이데올로기적 영토화에 대항하는 군도의 존재론적 지위와 저항적 잠재력에 대해 질문할 것이다. 이런 방식으로 군도적 상상력이 민족주의 이데올로기의 틀을 넘어서 공간적 존재론을 향해 제스처를 취하는 지점들을 밝히고자 한다. 궁극적으로 이 논의의 목표는 군도적 존재론의 유토피아적 원형을 회복하고 이를 민족-국가의 패러다임을 넘어 사회-공간적 관계를 재구성하기 위한 자원으로 재구성하는 것이다.

주제어: 아시아 지중해, 군도, 약한 기술, 글리산트, 들뢰즈, 벤야민

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