

Is East Asia Global North or Global South? Rethinking from a More-than-Human Border

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Abstract

While the Global North/South framework has replaced the West/East divide, ideological struggles over competing utopias appear to have yielded to a shared orientation toward development. Yet, as the South reinterprets its own conditions and questions the Northern path, the East — marked by an alternative desire — has subtly resurfaced. Rather than asking whether East Asia belongs to the Global South or North, this paper addresses the issue differently by exploring how alternative development might be possible in East Asia. Drawing on more-than-human border thinking, I argue that the pursue of darkness opens space for inter-Asian referencing and for reimagining development itself.

Keywords

more-than-human; divisions of the globe; border; Blue Tears; East Asia

Replacing the East–West with North–South?

In 1980, the Brandt Line was first proposed as a way to reframe the world into the Global North and Global South (Brandt 1980). That year, however, the world remained firmly divided between East and West at the height of the Cold War, a moment when few could have imagined that such a geopolitical order would shift so dramatically within the following decade. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, globalization replaced the Cold War as the dominant global framework in the 1990s, and the North–South categories effectively supplanted the earlier East–West divide. If the East–West divide represented an ideological confrontation between rival blocs envisioning

competing utopias, the new globalized framework reflects a singular consensus around the pursuit of development. Development is upheld as both a universal value and a fundamental human right in globalized discourse (Chant and McIlwaine 2009; Dados and Connell 2012; Gray and Gills 2016). The categorization of North and South, as it purports, simply reflects different moments within a developmental continuum, indicating transitory standings within a global scale of advancement.

Once situated within opposing Cold War blocs, East Asia is now increasingly interconnected through integration into a globalized world. Since East Asia is no longer divided along East–West blocs, the question now becomes: in the current context of globalization, should it be considered part of the

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Global North or the Global South? This question may involve issues ranging from international power dynamics and regional security (Buzan and Segal 1994; Goh 2007) to the global division of labor and prospects for democratization (Friedman 2019; Glassman 2018; Yeung 2010).

However, if we seriously adhere to conventional North–South definitions, this question becomes may turn out to be less significant than it initially seems. Under this framework, North and South are merely categories along a single developmental continuum, with each country positioned somewhere along the spectrum. Moreover, such classifications are provisional, what is considered “South” today may be reclassified as “North” tomorrow. The one-dimensional North–South classification in this sense might serve practical purposes, such as comparing development levels, but it provides limited insight into what East Asia is, what development entails, and how development takes shape within the region.

But can we really say that the divide between the West and the East has truly vanished in the tides of history? When the South begins to realize that the path taken by the North, often upheld as a set of universal norms, may not be suitable for its own development, and thus seeks to break away from dominant knowledge frameworks, reassess its own conditions, and explore alternative trajectories, this shift points to the persistence of a hidden East–West distinction (Dados and Connell 2012; Grovogu 2011). The seemingly unified consensus on development may, in fact, obscure the power relations embedded within it. In other words, within the Global North–South framework there lies the East–West divide. If this is the case, then the question of whether one belongs to the Global North or South becomes all the more crucial, as it may reveal a deeper and enduring colonial relationship between the West and the rest.

Then, is East Asia, after all, part of the Global North or the Global South? This paper approaches the question from a different perspective by tracing the East–West power relations underlie the North–South framework. We suggest that the more critical question to ask is how those constructed as the “Other” by the North or the West, whether designated as the South or the East, might embody alternative possibilities. Accordingly, the question may be reframed as: *How is an alternative beyond the established framework possible in East Asia?*

Wouldn’t East Asia, known for its developmentalism, constitute an alternative path to development distinct from that of the Global North? Indeed, it may be an alternative to the laissez-faire market economy represented by the Washington Consensus — if such a thing truly exists in reality (Amsden 2001; Wade 2010). Even so, when East Asian developmentalism seeks to leapfrog and catch up through state-led concentration of efforts, it reveals their continued pursuit of Western recognition and submission to global rankings, implying that their path may be less “alternative” than it seems (Woo-Cumings 1999).

Even more embarrassing is that we East Asians are always at odds with one another. There are lingering tensions between Koreans and Japanese, constantly tries to outcompete Korea, and China has strained relations with many of its neighbors (Chu 2004; Er 2017; Hwang 2003). Perhaps the underlying reason for this discord is that we view each other primarily as competitors in global rankings (Cumings 1999). In doing so, we have undermined the very basis for inter-Asian referencing (Chen 2002).

Blue Tears at the border

Yet in certain contexts, glimmers of the alternative do emerge. When the waves crash against the shore, the sea’s abundant bioluminescent plankton emit a faint, glowing light. To romantic poets, these are the tears of

the ocean. Blue Tears is a phenomenon that occurs at the border.

With the arrival of the rainy season each April, silicate sediments from exposed terrestrial surfaces, which suggest patterns of large-scale urbanization, are washed into rivers and transported offshore. The influx of nutrients triggers diatom blooms and leads to the rapid proliferation of *Noctiluca scintillans*, a bioluminescent plankton species that feeds on the diatoms (Chiang and Tsai 2017).

While bioluminescence of this kind is not uncommon, in highly urbanized areas severe light pollution often renders it invisible. The Matsu Islands are one of the few exceptions. Although they belong to Taiwan, the Matsu Islands are situated just off the coast of Fuzhou, a major metropolitan area in China. The islands' long-standing role as a Cold War frontline has kept them dark enough to witness the ephemeral glow. With the rise of Blue Tears tourism, Matsu has transformed from a militarized borderland into a breathtaking wonderland.

In search of darkness

However, Blue Tears is not entirely a natural phenomenon. It is, in fact, a byproduct of development, reflecting human impact on the environment. Furthermore, the Blue Tears phenomenon has also sparked tourism-driven competition between the islands, some governed by Taiwan and others by China, subtly reshaping cross-strait relations. One point of consensus among these competitors is that light pollution poses a serious threat to the visibility of Blue Tears.

This is the broader context behind the dark sky movement in Matsu. Creating a darker sky requires rethinking and redesigning lighting systems so that they operate more efficiently, conserve energy, and minimize light pollution. The pursuit of darkness is not only about making the Blue Tears visible; along the way, it also brings back starlight and contributes to the creation of a more ecologically friendly

environment. More importantly, the movement can be understood as part of a wider transformation in everyday life, as it resonates with emerging lifestyles such as slow food, mindful consumption, and an appreciation for quiet soundscapes (Lin 2020).

Cross-border connections provide crucial support for this reorientation of local development agendas. Among them, the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA) plays a key role by offering guidelines for improving lighting environments and certifying exemplary cases as International Dark Sky Places (Hunter, 2013). Advocates in Taiwan actively engage with counterpart organizations in South Korea and Japan through the network of dark-sky communities. South Korea's Yeongyang Firefly Eco Park and Japan's Iriomote-Ishigaki National Park, the first two certified Dark Sky Places in Asia, serve as important models for learning and reference (Lin 2019; Lin and Liu 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

This movement opened up new possibilities for inter-Asian referencing, as it resonates with certain forms of knowledge, affect, and memory across East Asia. Whether placed on the frontlines of the Cold War or incorporated into the global division of labor through developmentalism, the people of East Asia have endured the logic of sacrificing the self for the nation, of giving up the small parts for the greater whole, in these contexts. The search for dark skies evokes a renewed attentiveness to one's place and to the interdependence we share with others in the world. It resists the logic of sacrificing the homeland — soil, sea, and sky — for the sake of national development. This alternative form of bottom-up, cross-border interaction can thus be seen as reclaiming a basis for inter-Asian referencing, moving beyond the colonial histories, national identities, and economic comparisons that are deeply intertwined in the region.

Conclusion

Through the Blue Tears at the border and the cross-border search for darkness, I explore how alternative possibilities might take shape in East Asia from three aspects:

First, this case underscores the possibility of darkness as a form of development. It is neither the territorial confrontation that marked the Cold War nor a race among developmental states to climb global rankings. Instead, the pursuit of darkness, aligned with eco-friendly and mindful ways of living, addresses the wounds borne by East Asian peoples and opens up possibilities for healing. In this sense, darkness not only provides an alternative to development but also enriches its meaning.

Second, reflection rarely arises without cause; it is usually triggered in specific sites or circumstances. Here, the encounter and entanglement of silicates, rain, seawater, waves, and plankton, together with urbanization, Cold War legacies, and developmental aspirations, coalesce into the phenomenon of Blue Tears, which sparks such reflective moments. In turn, Blue Tears also participate in the cross-border exchange and learning inherent in the search for darkness. I suggest that they not only lay a more-than-human foundation for inter-Asian referencing but also broaden our very imagination of what referencing itself can be.

Finally, this case foregrounds the geographical stakes of alternative development. It does not suggest that East Asia has transitioned into a post-development stage, nor that the entire region shares identical conditions for pursuing alternative pathways. Following Mignolo's (2000, 2011, 2012) notion of border thinking, I stress the disjunction between knowledge and geography. When prevailing epistemic frameworks cannot adequately capture local experiences, the ensuing in-betweenness, although unsettling, can open up points of departure for actions that exceed existing paradigms. Rather than slotting East Asia into North–South or East–West schemas,

we should attend more closely to the knowledge, affects, and memories circulating at the margins, to those unruly geographies that remain unconfined by such frameworks.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Science and Technology Council, Taiwan [NSTC 112-2410-H-018-046-MY2].

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