

Social justice and the issue of environmental awareness in Northeast Asia: theory and practice

Mika Merviö, Professor of International Relations, Kibi International University, Okayama, Japan

Abstract

Social justice is closely linked to good governance, human rights, democracy, equality and clean and safe environment for all living things. This paper analyses both the theory of social justice and its environmental dimensions as well as the problems in Northeast Asia in addressing these issues and promoting social justice and environmental awareness.

Social justice is closely linked to good governance, human rights, democracy, equality and clean and safe environment for all living things. At least the symbols of most lofty values behind social justice are more or less universally accepted. This certainly is the case in contemporary Northeast Asia and most governments are quick to demonstrate their achievements. However, the reality is more varied and it is fair to say that nowhere in Northeast Asia are social justice and the environmental issues regarded as the most important political goals. Social philosophies and traditions, as well as political and administrative systems, do vary in all regions and between regions and this is very much true in Northeast Asia, where the fundamental differences in political systems make it difficult to compare/contrast issues and talk about them openly. Even the communication within the epistemic communities, such as the academic and professional groups, faces many obstacles. Similarly the NGOs find it difficult to cooperate effectively at the regional level and therefore focus on domestic issues. Furthermore, there is no clear regionally adopted approach to democratically promote new better forms of governance rooted in social justice and this creates a formidable obstacle for regional integration.

In Europe it is such bodies and practices as the European Convention for Human Rights & the European Court of Human rights and the ever-growing number of environment- related directives and (hopefully) the growing importance of the European Environment Agency that have already given substance to European model of social and environmental justice and a

clear direction where to go. Meanwhile, it is very difficult to identify anything similar in Northeast Asia and few Northeast Asians regard the European model as having any particular relevance for Northeast Asia. However, in order to move further there must be ambitious and clear goals. For instance, Asian Union, Asian Court of Human rights and binding Asian environmental regulations/laws are admittedly far away – but should not be regarded as impossible or contrary to local/national/regional values/traditions. The Northeast Asian nations are far more interdependent on each other than ever before and in terms of environmental damage the world can hardly wait to see that far more intense cooperation emerges.

Perceptions of human rights in Northeast Asia: Olympics

The issues of good governance and social justice are very acute and important everywhere in the world since a failure to make improvement in these issue areas will cause obstacles for global and regional co-operation and suffering to people. Furthermore, failures are becoming noticed more easily in the globalised and interconnected world. Although the reaction of the ‘world public opinion’ tends to be unpredictable and subject to whimsical media interest there are signs that the governments of Northeast Asia are paying more attention to their media portrayal.

In the year that China was supposed to appear as an unquestioned greater power and a world centre its leaders face the reality that the Western media seems to be far more interested in the Chinese and especially Tibetan human rights problems than in sports. The Chinese popular reaction speaks volumes (literally) about the differing perceptions. Instead of promoting human rights and international cooperation the Olympic games can turn out to fuel nationalism in China. The whole idea of hosting the Olympic games since the Berlin games, at least, has been to send out some propaganda message for both the domestic and international audiences. If the point is in letting the athletes to compete without political pressure, the best solution would be to move the games permanently to Greece (and for the winter games Switzerland might be a sufficiently neutral location). There is very little evidence that hosting megaevents promotes democracy if the process and momentum is not there from the beginning. I would not give too much credit for the Korean democratization process to the Seoul Olympics since the process clearly involved fundamental changes and great number of grass roots movements that transformed to whole society. Neither do I

believe that the London Olympics will make the British political problems disappear, turn the economy around and make the world forget all the injustices of the British.

Interestingly, in Tôkyô the bid for the 2016 Olympics has already been used to legitimate the launching of a 10- year greenery effort. The Tôkyô Metropolitan government has suddenly allocated funds (this year alone Y 39 million) for increasing tree-lined streets and planting a forest along Tôkyô Bay. The section chief in charge of the projects Kobayashi Motoaki has argued that "to host an Olympics, it is essential that the city be environmentally organized".¹ It is interesting how the idea of foreign pressure (*gaiatsu*) is presented in Japan. The actual host cities of Olympics have not always been exact models of ecocities (Cf. Beijing and Seoul) and in any case the Olympics tourists are largely spending their time watching sports and waiting in lines. This is no Greenpeace world convention and I wonder what the visitors expect from their host city. I also find it difficult to follow the logic that millions of people/taxpayers have had to wait for an Olympics bid and a prospect of foreign visitors before the civil servants see a need to have tree-lined streets. What if Tôkyô does not get the games, then no foreigners are going to see all the trees and landfills.

As for the Australia-Japan relations, the continued Japanese research whaling and the apparent inability of the Japanese government to explain its position to practically anyone outside Japan has already greatly damaged the image of Japan in Australia. When many people outside Japan first encounter Japan in the role of destroying the environment, whether it is the 'science' of whaling or being partner in cutting down the tropical forests, it is difficult to convey the idea that the Japanese people actually may have at least in some respects one of the most advanced environmental awareness in the region and that the Japanese government has done quite a bit both at home and abroad for the environmental protection and cooperation.

When it comes to perceptions of human rights within the region, it is interesting to notice that the governments have often gone the extra mile to keep the "internal" problems out of open discussions while the problems still have an importance, already because there is increasing knowledge about the human rights problems in other countries in the region. Furthermore, the

¹ Nagata Kazuaki, Japan Times, 10 May, 2008, Tokyo ramps up greenery effort, 3.

treatment of minorities, displaced people and abducted people has become an issue of great interest and concern when the sovereignty of two nations is being involved. The issue of abducted Japanese citizens became one of the most intensely followed political issues in Japan for years and at times overshadowed the whole bilateral relations and in the case of Prime Minister Abe was the issue that was used to attract political support and make him the Prime Minister of Japan.

In May 2008 the visit and conciliatory tone of President Hu Jintao was presented by Japanese media as a sign that China is turning to Japan for support when it is facing global criticism. Even Ling Ling the panda of Ueno Zoo made the ultimate service to its motherland and passed away on April 30 just on time to give an opportunity to Hu to offer a couple of new pandas to Japan. At least the Japanese leaders played the role of good hosts and did not openly pose difficult questions or threatened China with any types of boycotts. The only people in Japan to send out a different message were some Waseda students and Ishihara Shintarô (who this time criticized the panda diplomacy but is not known to be a friend of China). By most standards the visit was a success and an improvement over previous attempts to mend the ties. However, just before the visit Mainichi Shimbun released its survey results on Japanese attitudes on China. According to the survey, 51% of respondents want a tougher stance on China and there was very little difference among the supporters of opposition and the government in this issue.² In the Japanese news the riots in Tibet as well as problems in bilateral relations have rapidly turned the popular attitudes quite negative to China. The Chinese government's reaction of denying any responsibility when tainted Chinese *gyôza* dumplings were found in Japanese supermarkets did not go on well with the Japanese consumers. Furthermore, the tough position that China has in its territorial/energy dispute with Japan and Chinese military buildup are obviously factors that do count in Japan as do the reports on periodic bursts of anti-Japanese rioting, looting or hackerism. This does not mean that the Japanese people would be prone to go to the streets to vent out their anti-Chinese feelings or boycott Chinese goods for nationalistic reasons. Many have turned away from Chinese food stuffs, but the reason has more to do with safety and risk perceptions than anything else. Many Japanese are also glad to see the Chinese burn French flags instead

² Mainichi Shimbun 5 May 2008, Mainichi seron chôsa, <http://mainichi.jp/select/today/archive/news/2008/05/04/20080505k0000m010063000c.html>

of Japanese ones. However, there is no denying that the popular perceptions on both sides in Sino-Japanese relations leave a lot of room for improvement. The inability to see the point of the other side means that at best the relations are business-like while turning the face away from problems and from too ambitious cooperation.

Perceptions of human rights in Northeast Asia: immigrants

After all, it is the other Northeast Asian who know their neighbours best. To start with, the only substantial minorities of foreign origin in Japan are from Korea and China. Unfortunately, these minorities have often personally experienced that problems in state relations can be reflected in personal relations and that Japan is not free from discrimination. However, especially the Chinese minority in Japan has been growing rapidly and has integrated to the society quite well as many Chinese newcomers have worked hard to make it in Japan. Among the foreign university students in Japan the Chinese and Korean students have dominated for years and this has great importance for the future of regional relations. Korean students are known to have increasingly turned to Chinese studies and some signs can be found also in Japan. However, Northeast Asian countries are all badly prepared to receive large number of people with different cultural backgrounds.

Japan is the country in the region that most desperately needs more people to fill the vacuum created by falling birth rates and aging society. Yet the issue of accepting larger numbers of immigrants is politically very sensitive and, in fact, the government has moved on to control the existing foreigners more strictly. The media often presents the foreigners as sources of crime, disease and social problems. While Japanese legislation does not have clear bans of racial and ethnic discrimination it is very difficult to protect the human rights of foreigners, if problems occur.³ A slowly increasing minority of foreigners has found a way to settle down more or less happily in Japan, but Japanese government policies are severely restricting the immigration and in some cases directing it to very strange groups of people. If the Japanese government is so worried about foreign crime, it is very strange that for so many years so large proportion of visas has been granted to various types of “entertainers”, who have been particularly prone to become either victims or perpetrators of crime.

³ See e.g. Arudou Debito 2004, *Japanese Only*. Tōkyō: Akashi shoten.

The authorities are regularly taking action to deport some unauthorised foreigners and if the authorities decide to have a campaign to clamp down on illegals any person living in Japan can easily tell where they can go to find their catch. As a result, the statistics on foreign crime tell more about the periodic bursts of activity by authorities to arrest foreigners for visa violations. The Japanese Ministry of Justice and immigration authorities also set up in February 2004 an Internet site, where anyone can anonymously expose or doublecross any suspicious foreign looking person.⁴ By email people can conveniently anonymously report their non-Japanese neighbours for such listed infractions as “creating anxiety” or “disturbing the neighbourhood”. The web-site also works, it reportedly generated more than a 1,000 e-mailed tips in its first 45 days online.⁵ After criticism that some of the pre-filled choices did not have much to do with the aims of the immigration law the Justice Ministry toned down some of the language (but retained the service). However, at the same time the Ministry also waged a poster campaign with the slogan “*rûru o motte kokusaika*” (internationalisation with rules).⁶

Most unauthorised foreigners are working for small and medium-sized enterprises where many employers feel that they would have to cut back or suspend all operations without the presence of low-paid unauthorised foreign workers who are ready to do the three Ks (*kitsui, kitanai, kiken*/ hard, dirty and dangerous) jobs. The authorities apparently have plenty of sympathy for the employers. When the “illegal foreigners” scare first appeared the Japanese government drafted a law that introduced a system of penalties for employers who knowingly hire undocumented foreign workers. However, already then a supplementary resolution was added stipulating that the law was “intended to prosecute wicked brokers and employers, and care must be taken that it is not misused”.⁷ No wonder that little has changed with the realities of life of unauthorised foreigners in Japan after the law, except that numbers have fallen. Most unauthorised and authorised foreigners try to avoid the authorities the best they

⁴ To send your report, <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/cgi-bin/datainput.cgi>.

⁵ Japanese Immigration Web Site Fuels Anger Among Foreigners, Rights Groups. 5 May, 2004. http://www.politinfo.com/articles/article_2004_05_5_3613.html

⁶ For the posters, see them in Ministry of Justice, Japan pdf files, e.g. <http://www.moj.go.jp/nyukan/images/pamph2.pdf>

⁷ Ibid: 5.

can and consequently the general crime rates for foreigners in Japan are, in fact, lower than the average crime rates for Japanese citizens (especially if we do not include crimes related to immigration status).

As my examples indicate, the globalisation of economy has not been followed in Japan by an awareness of the need to culturally adjust to more a multiethnic world and its values, including seeing a need to protect the human rights of newcomers. In Japan the foreigners have probably partly inherited their low status from domestic minorities such as the Burakumin, Ainu and Okinawans. Even these groups still experience problems, although their members are subject to protection as citizens while Japanese legislation often excludes foreign nationals or leaves them in the grey area. In other words the government has done little to promote the idea of universalism of human rights and, in fact, has often sent a message that citizens and foreign residents are subject to different rules. Therefore, it is no wonder that cases of blatant discrimination do happen. There is a reason to worry that this process will be repeated in Korea and China when larger numbers of foreign immigrants will be introduced there as their economies mature and when people from their poorer neighbours go there after economic benefits. Already now there are reports from both Korea and China of North Korean refugees/immigrants being exploited. Any meaningful FTAs would include the area of (more or less) free movement of people and, therefore, the problem of weak awareness of the universality of human rights is a problem that will become of a major political concern in years to come in Northeast Asia.

Perceptions of human rights in Northeast Asia: the Burmese cyclone and North Korea

Myanmar/Burma has emerged as a testing case of how far a government can go in the repression of its own citizens before other governments take an action. The Burmese military junta has repeatedly crushed prodemocracy protests and has done little to promote social justice and welfare in the country. The Northeast Asian countries have to some degree echoed the ASEAN governments that have shown restraint in joining the European and Americans who have outspokenly condemned the actions of Burmese junta. China remains as the most important supporter of Burmese government and even Japan has made every effort to keep some links with the Burmese government. For the Chinese government it may actually be convenient to have Burma diplomatically isolated by the Western countries and under a

strong Chinese influence. At least there is one country that will under no circumstances tell to show restraint in Tibet.

Japan has offered aid and simply reduced the amount when it has wanted to show that it is not happy with the fact that Burmese government is doing little to show that it is improving the human rights situation. In Japan the killing of photojournalist Nagai Kenji on the 27 September, 2007 at point-blank range by a Burmese soldier while Nagai was photographing protests in Yangon as well as the Burmese government's excuses of "stray bullets" and the fact that Nagai's confiscated video camera was not returned all were widely reported in Japan and most likely influenced the public opinion as much as the protests themselves did. It did not convince too many people in Japan that Burma's foreign Minister told in an article published by the government newspaper, the Mirror, that the soldiers could not possibly differentiate between a Burmese citizen and a Japanese because of the resemblance in Asian looks. The Nagai incident taught the Japanese bureaucrats the lesson that Japanese softer approach with Burma does not win too many privileges with the Burmese junta and that there are risks involved in all types of contacts with Burma.

As for the environment in Burma, the economy has been so isolated and ineffective that the country may have escaped some forms of environmental destruction. However, the cyclone in May 2008 demonstrated that, after all, most of the mangrove forests in the Irrawaddy delta have been removed in recent years to make room for rice paddies and shrimp farms - with catastrophic results when there was a direct cyclone hit. In terms of humanitarian efforts to help the people in need the strangest episode took place after the cyclone when there gradually was more information available about the magnitude of the disaster. While many governments were preparing to act in a similar way that they would usually act with other massive natural disasters, the Burmese government demonstrated soon that it was not like any other government when it came to accepting help to its own citizens. While the Burmese government was doing little to help the victims it also prevented other governments from acting and instead seemed to be most concerned about maintaining control and seeing that their questionable constitutional referendum was conducted as scheduled. Quite a demonstration that the Burmese Army should get some training in human security. Furthermore, the situation would require a very effective work to provide clean water, sanitation and safe food for the people. Otherwise the situation will continue to worsen.

rapidly. The psychology at work here deals with some concept of 'losing face' and has a lot to do with rather xenophobic attitudes from the part of Burmese generals. The international aid agencies are usually not suspected as having ulterior motives aimed at destabilising governments. However, the Burmese government seems to treat equally badly both the multilateral and international organisations and aid teams sent directly by foreign governments.

There are some similarities with the North Korean government's attitude when it comes to setting conditions to how it receives humanitarian aid (for victims of famines and floods and bad economic planning). However, the North Korean responses seem to be far more carefully planned and they have played this game already for a very long time. There are also other marked differences between Burma and North Korea. North Korea is far more important for South Korea, China and Japan than Burma and the issue of North Korean nuclear and missile programmes made the issue far more serious. Burma is primarily a human rights problem and solving this problem would be of enormous importance for the future of whole Southeast Asia. However, Burma poses little direct risk for any Northeast Asian country and this shows in their attitude. There are also very few direct links between Burma and Japan/Korea. With North Korea things are very different: any change in the status quo in Korean peninsula has potential to drastically increase human flows in the region. The Koreans already make up a substantial minority both in Japan and China and in both countries the authorities are worried about any prospect of seeing large numbers of Koreans heading to their country. If there is going to be a reunification of Korea, the conditions of it would be of great concern to all Koreans, Chinese and Japanese. As the South Koreans have rejected the Sunshine policy it seems that, for the time being, the Japanese and South Korean governments are both waiting for far more flexible attitude from the North Korean government before cooperation can be increased. It is difficult to say how much the South Koreans and the Japanese are concerned about the human rights violations of North Koreans in North Korea. For the time being it is very difficult to influence the behaviour of North Korean government in its internal affairs when it is so difficult to influence its behaviour in its external affairs. However, everyone should realise that the current situation on the Korean Peninsula is not permanent and that human rights are an important part of any solution.

Theory of social justice and governance

A progress in some of the issue areas can be seen to push forward more general approaches to good governance with social justice. For instance, a democratic approach to environmental problems can substantially promote civil society and add to awareness or reflexivity that helps to recognise intrinsic values in nature as well as in decent human relationships. Awareness of human rights or environmental values are both something that cannot be imposed on people from the top and, instead, societies need to find from within the potential for new alternatives and better future. Environmental protection for the sake of environment itself and its intrinsic values has much in common with human rights in the sense that both are based on universalistic values and have number of international treaties protecting these values. On the other hand from an anthropocentric perspective destroying nature and environment (for instance, in terms of biodiversity) easily turns against humans and therefore human rights. In short, there is a strong link between the two, regardless of how strongly one chooses to believe in the intrinsic value of non-human life. Furthermore, the discourse of human security has repeatedly brought up the connection between environment and human rights. Against this background ignorance of environmental protection or environmental chauvinism can in foreign policy easily be a factor that starts to erode moral high ground and something that could called by the old good term of prestige

In Western political theory it has often been pointed out that liberal democracy, capitalism and the administrative state are the best tools to provide good governance and welfare for people. However, in Northeast Asia this mix is particularly volatile since, due to historical circumstance, all the three above-mentioned components are perceived very differently in each of the societies in the region. For instance, there are marked differences, when it comes to administrative cultures and popular attitudes toward authority and social participation. While liberal democracy, capitalism and the administrative state all will play a major role also in the future of Northeast Asia the big issue will be that what kind of mixtures and variations of these three will allow the realisation of social justice in its different forms in Northeast Asia.

In the IR discourses environmental issues have most usually been understood in the context of international co-operation, first between states and increasingly involving all the different levels of international co-operation. The whole concept of environmental risk or environment in any political sense is far less developed than risk in the context of security policy and

security studies. The risks, threats, calamities and darker qualities of human race have traditionally been inherently associated with the so-called security studies. Security studies themselves have been widened to include more and more “alternatives” and non-military threats to security. Some of the alternatives have simply repackaged old ideas while some others have opened whole new horizons. Theoretically this has been accompanied with a greater interest in constructivist and interpretative approaches.⁸ It has also been pointed out that traditional security approaches do not always work well in such regions and contexts where the greatest threats to security come from disease, hunger, environmental contamination, crime and unorganised violence.⁹ In Asia, there is great diversity of risks and threats and in the actual risk scenarios all these issues tend to mix to produce cocktails requiring interdisciplinary approaches and knowledge ranging from natural sciences, anthropology, ethics and engineering to more traditional confines of International Relations. For instance, any serious analysis of the foreign policies of Japan, China and the two Koreas needs to address such issues as human rights, human security and environmental security –

⁸ See e.g. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver 2003 *Regions and Powers, the Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. In Japanese a pioneering work is Urano Tetsuo 2003 *Anzenhosô no shinchitsujo. Kokka anzen hoshô saikô, tero, kankyô, ningen no anzen hoshô*. Tôkyô: Nansôsha, which includes an analysis how approaches focusing on terrorism, environmental security and human security have changed the understanding of security in Japan. There are also fresh ideas around such as the article on food security in East Asia (as a part of ASEAN + 3 co-operation) by Oba Mie 2004 *Higashi ajia ni okeru shokuryô anzenhoshô kyôryoku no shinten*. In *Kokusai seiji* Vol. 135, 2004, Nihon kokusai seiji gakkai: 24-42. For more on such alternatives as human security and environmental security in Japanese foreign policy, Mika Merviö 2002 *Nihon no kokusai kankei ni okeru ningen no anzen hoshô to kankyô anzen hoshô*. In UNO Shigeaki (ed) *Hokutô ajia kenkyû to kaihatsu kenkyû*.. Tôkyô: Kokusai shoin, 419-448.

⁹ Ramesh Thakur and Edward Newman 2004 Introduction: Nontraditional Security in Asia. In *Broadening Asia's Security Discourse and Agenda. Political, Social, and Environmental Perspectives*. Ramesh Thakur and Edward Newman (eds) Tokyo, New York and Paris: United Nations Press, 1-15.

but there is also a plenty of room for analysing such “conventional” issues as nuclear proliferation, trade relations or territorial disputes. Imagine writing separate books about the risk societies of Japan, China and North Korea and you will have an idea of the diversity of social conditions and socio-political issues facing these societies. In traditional security studies in Japan the term used for security risk/threat/crisis has often been ‘*kiki*’¹⁰ and there is still plenty of work to bring the ideas of risk discourses to Japanese discipline of International Relations.

Most discourses on social justice in the contemporary world draw heavily from the ethical liberalism represented by John Stuart Mill¹¹ and from the thinking of John Rawls¹². According to the ethical liberalism states have clear responsibilities to individuals and need to make sure that the freedoms and liberties are actually available to individuals, including all kinds of minorities. The political liberalism of Rawls has updated the theory to the time when there have been calls to find a balance between tolerance to a wide array of cultural values and universal or general ideals of human rights. The political challenge of the fundamental islam is testing the limits of tolerance in much of Europe and North America and while doing so we can expect to see many more theories on multiculturalism, cultural relativism and human rights. What has become clear is that many minority cultures have many complaints about the mainstream cultures within which they are living. These complaints are to be taken seriously and such criticism should be welcomed. However, at the same time the mainstream cultures and their representatives should be free to critically analyse and even attack minority cultures and their practices if their values are not in line with basic respect of human rights. In short, there is a lot of need for open and constructive dialogue and that dialogue should not take place only among few social scientists or lawyers.

¹⁰ See e.g. Okonogi Masao and Kojima Tomoyuki (ed.) 1997 *Higashi ajia kiki no chizu*. Tôkyô: Tôyôkeizaishinpôsha, which took up the task of mapping all the major security threats of East Asia. Most often ‘*kiki*’ is translated as ‘crisis’ in English but in Japanese discourses it is often used to refer to risks and potential or actual threats whereas the term *risuku* (risk) is widely used when social and environmental risks are analysed or described.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill 1956 *On Liberty*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

¹² John Rawls 1971 *The Theory of Justice*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press and 1999 *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

In Northeast Asia the first problem with ethical liberalism is that it is so strongly associated with the concept of 'individual'. Of course, the Northeast Asians are just as much individuals as people elsewhere but in societies where political liturgy has for millenia emphasised collective virtues it is difficult to talk about personal rights without sounding as being utterly spoiled and selfish. In that kind of culture the most effective way to protect personal rights is not to talk about personal rights but to make the personal right/gain/interest/concern to appear as a common good. When the idea of ethical liberalism has been so foreign to much of Northeast Asia it is a bit premature to expect that there would be much warmer welcome to theories based on the realities of emerging multiethnic societies. The new Europe of a rapidly growing number of nations is in great need of clear ideas of practical approaches to promoting social justice in a multiethnic setting. Cultural relativism and the idea of letting each nation or each ethnic group to live in peace and isolation is something that would not work in Europe and has never worked very well. The concept of 'sovereignty' is *passee* as a political concept although also Europe has its value conservatives and critics of multicultural Europe – but the mainstream is behind further integration based on universalist values of human rights and social justice. It is fortunate that Europe there is no particular European identity being created or forced upon people (along the lines of *homo sovieticus* of the Soviet Union) and this makes the European model all the more relevant for the rest of the world. Once Turkey joins in there is no way of regarding the EU as an experiment that applies only to 'Europe'.

In Northeast Asia there is intense resistance to the idea of multiethnic society. The predominant versions of nationalism in Japan, China and Korea are all based on the idea of some kind of notions/myths of fundamental homogeneity of the nation. These myths make it difficult to admit that there have all along been marginal and marginalised groups of people in all these societies and that in the future it would make sense to prepare for the idea of multiple identities and diverging interests. In short, the Northeast Asian versions of cultural relativism rest of political traditions of conservatism that leave little room for tolerance of other view of culture, ethnicity or lifestyle. Since the very concept of social justice would require this kind of tolerance and solidarity for the weak, it is very difficult to make the political system adopt the concept as a cornerstone for future cooperation and social development.

As for the environmental justice, the Northeast Asian environment has been under attack for years due to spectacular economic growth and processes of modernisation. It is about the time of recognise that the Northeast Asian countries share many of their environmental problems and that a coordinated effort to deal with these problems would be a rational thing to do. Just as it has been seen to be a rational thing to do to raise the economic welfare of the people, it is a rational thing to do to adjust this welfare and economic activities to be sustainable in environmental sense. There is no balance between economy and environment in the sense that one could bargain with the nature. The environment hits back if it is destroyed. Furthermore, people with their supposedly modern reflexivity should be able to understand what they are doing to the environment and to themselves. This reflexivity and rationality should be seen as the motors of social/political and environmental cooperation in Northeast Asia.

Northeast Asia and environmental awareness

Lee Geun has noted that Korea and Japan are gradually approaching the point where people take environmental problems as serious threats to their everyday lives, while China and Russia are still lagging distinctly behind. When a major environmental accident happens, revealing dangers of environmental problems to the public, people generally become concerned about that particular environmental issue.¹³ Examples of sudden surges of interest in maritime pollution in Japan include such accidents as the January 1997 break-up of a Russian oil tanker *Nohodka* off the Japanese coast resulting in serious damage to Japan's sensitive fish and seafood breeding grounds and to maritime environment, including the avian environment. However, since the accident faded from the news there has been little interest in Japan in studying the long-term impacts of oil spills or in promoting international/regional/national standards, which would make similar accidents less likely and less devastating to the environment. Nuclear waste dumping incidents are also prone to attract intensive media attention in Japan and Korea making nuclear waste dumping one of the top political issues related to environmental diplomacy in the region. However, in terms

¹³ Lee Geun 2007 A Regional Environmental Security-Complex Approach to Environmental Security in Northeast Asia, In Hyun In-Taek and Miranda A. Schreurs eds. *The Environmental Dimension of Asian Security*. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press: 23-39.

of marine pollution in general, public awareness even in Japan and Korea is not very high. For example, surveys reveal only moderate levels of concern by the Korean and Japanese publics about marine pollution. While most Japanese and Koreans are at least somewhat concerned about the environment and are likely to feel strongly about international environmental incidents involving their own country and environment, this interest tends to be rather selective.

In Northeast Asia there are also some signs of environmental co-operation being at least partially successful in solving or addressing some regional problems and the trans-boundary air pollution problem is usually seen as the closest thing to a success story. Japanese environmental policy has been most effective in countering domestic air pollution. However, the Chinese sulphur dioxide emissions have drastically increased during the last decades and continue to increase, making it quite possible that already now most sulphur dioxide in Japanese air originates from China and threatens to set at nought the Japanese gains in controlling acid rain if the main source of emissions is in China. Official Chinese recognition of a trans-boundary problem in 1992 after years of denial opened up the possibility for Japan to step up its efforts to engage China regarding the acid rain issue. Japanese economic and technical assistance has helped China to overcome some of the economic and technical constraints it faced in reducing sulphur dioxide emissions.¹⁴ This kind of examples give a good idea of how rapidly and efficiently different Japanese ministries and organisations can change their priorities when political and financial basics change. In the late 1990's it almost seemed that the only major environmental problem in China was acid rain and that the Japanese ministries were competing which was the most active in tackling acid rain in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese official interest was still far more lukewarm. For the Chinese the

¹⁴ Anna Brettell 2007, Security, Energy, and the Environment: The Atmospheric Link, In Hyun In-Taek and Miranda A. Schreurs eds. *The Environmental Dimension of Asian Security*. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press: 89-113. For the issue of acid rain in Japan, see *Kankyô hakusho*, Heisei 15 nenpan, 2003: 100-101. Kenneth Wilkening 2004 *Acid Rain Science and Politics in Japan. A History of Knowledge and Action toward Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, surveys both the scientific and political dimensions of the acid rain issue and in its final chapter concludes with the internationalisation of Japanese acid rain issue, 193-224.

issue of acid rain was primarily a potential economic issue, but once they noticed that the Japanese were prepared to pay for cleaner air in China, they were happy to go along. However, there are now signs that the Chinese authorities are finally taking the issue seriously.

From these examples we can already get the feeling that there is still very little consensus when it comes to global or regional co-operation in environmental issues when regions themselves are little more than abstractions of political convenience. Before there is meaningful and effective environmental cooperation there must also be a widely shared understanding of the significance and urgency of the issues themselves. In societies where the ethical liberalism has never been popular there is a need to explore other approaches if, for instance, the ideas about democratic participation, civil society and modern reflexivity seem to lead nowhere. In environmental issues in Northeast Asia it may be that the rational argument of cost effectiveness to act before it is costlier may work better with existing political systems than anything else. To fix the problems among immigrants, similarly, it may work best to use the argument that the labour shortage caused by aging society leaves no other choice than to treat immigrants humanly. To recognize intrinsic values in nature as well as in decent human relationships is something that is very difficult to present or advocate as a political or administrative agenda if there is a lack of understanding of the universalistic values on which these concerns rest.

In Northeast Asia there is a long list of human rights problems and cases of environmental destruction that could be used to illustrate lack of basic awareness among the decision-makers and the public. However, there are also indigenous or traditional value systems, which have voiced concern for human rights and environment/other living things, most notably the Buddhist thinking. It is interesting to notice how rarely Northeast Asian politicians nowadays are using openly religious terms (without sarcasm). In Japan, the notable exception is the Kômeitô Clean Politics Party, which is closely linked with the Buddhist Sôka Gakkai organization and the Nichiren Buddhism. However, its religious affiliation has clearly set limits to its growth and more secular citizens are often highly suspicious of the non-transparent use of power within the highly hierarchical Sôka Gakkai, where its president Ikeda Daisaku has for decades been the top political and religious figure. The main Japanese parties, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party have both

failed to present a clear ideological platform that would explain their position and ideals in terms of such issues as social justice and environmental protection. Instead, both these parties include people who have shown little respect for these values, without being questioned by their party colleagues.

Conclusion

The recognition of intrinsic values in nature as well as in decent human relationships is something where the Northeast Asian societies are not following the path that theories on modernization and reflexivity have led to believe.¹⁵ For China we should probably give some more time to demonstrate its modernist credentials but Japan was supposed to modernize already during the Meiji period. In the light of history of Northeast Asia it is understandable that particular forms of political cultures and thought/myths were created that did not leave much room to ethical liberalism or political liberalism that herald the arrival of multicultural and multiethnic societies that are at making social justice and environmental awareness their guiding principles. This lack of universalistic values makes effective cooperation difficult both domestically and regionally/internationally. However, there are also more optimistic evaluations claiming that, for instance, the Japanese government is realizing that there is a need to move the society in a more sustainable direction and therefore the government itself is exploring ways to open up the policy-making process to greater citizen participation.¹⁶ It is true that top-down solutions do exist even to promote citizen participation and that there are also dynamic elements and very resourceful individuals in the Japanese environmental management. Consequently, we may already be heading toward more sustainable practices. Maybe it just takes time to turn big ships around.

Note on conventions: Japanese, Chinese and Korean names in this article are written according to the established practice as surname preceding the given name.

¹⁵ See e.g. Ulrich Beck 1986 *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

¹⁶ See e.g. Imura Hidefumi and Miranda A Screurs 2005 Learning from Japanese Environmental Management Experiences. In, Imura Hidefumi and Miranda A Screurs eds. *Environmental Policy in Japan*. Cheltenham and Northampton MA: The World Bank and Edward Elgar: 1-14.

