

Momentum of their own

Analogue structures of change in pre-modern East Asia and Europe

Sponsored in the format 'Resident Group' by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld

Funding period: 1 April to 30 September 2025

In this research project, Korean Studies, Japanese Studies, Sinology and various historical disciplines are cooperating to identify fundamental similarities in the dynamics of change in pre-modern East Asia and Europe. To this end, the concept of momentum of its own (self-propelled processes, "Eigendynamik"), developed by sociologists and political scientists for contemporary societies, will be adapted to pre-modern conditions. As a result, we hope to be able to develop a theoretically sound description of social change that undermines teleological narratives from the outset. Committed to basic research, the project aims to capture processual sequences in order to identify structural analogies that brought about change in specific ways in culturally different regions. On the one hand, the theoretical approach makes it possible to uncover the basic structures of pre-modern dynamics of change shared by many different cultures. On the other hand, the approach enables us to acknowledge the diversity of the different local manifestations of these changes without having to postulate similarities.

We want to analyse three theses: In the pre-modern societies of East Asia and parts of Europe, significant changes, according to the first thesis, resulted from self-sustaining processes, from momentums of their own. According to the second hypothesis, these momentums of their own are based on structural elements that were inherent to the societies of the period before 1800. Thirdly, we assume that these momentums of their own primarily led to the further unfolding of pre-modern structures instead of driving developments towards modernity.

What is momentum of their own?

Social processes can "be described as [having] momentum of their own if they continue to move forward [...] *of their own accord* and without further external influence, thereby producing and reproducing a *pattern* that is characteristic of them" (Mayntz/Nedelmann 1997, p. 87; italics omitted). In other words, momentum of its own postulates the decisive drives for change *from the processes themselves*. In the process, momentum of its own continuously motivates the actors to participate in such processes through "reciprocal stimulation causality" (Knöbl 2022, p. 213). The need to position oneself in the estate-based society would be a typical example of this kind of motivation, from which it was almost impossible to escape.

The concept developed for contemporary societies needs to be adapted to pre-modern conditions. In the period before 1800, three structural elements can be identified for the societies analysed here that shaped momentum of their own: *firstly*, a hierarchical social order based on estates, *secondly*, a culture of presence, and *thirdly*, a general consensus orientation. So far, these three elements have not appeared in research on momentum of its own, as it is focused on contemporary society. In contrast, these structural elements have been intensively analysed in studies for pre-modernity in East Asia and Europe. However, different from the project's approach, they are often seen as the cause of the supposed *lack* of dynamism in pre-modern societies. This may be true if one applies criteria such as social mobility or economic development. Yet, a different picture emerges if one asks what was relevant for the cultures being analysed in their own time. In this respect, the project breaks new ground by reversing the perspective. By combining a new theoretical approach with the internal dynamics that these three structural elements exhibit, we want to show their own functionality and logic for this society.

How are the three structural elements related to momentum of their own?

Hierarchy of estates: We assume that both individuals and groups were constantly challenged to maintain and, if possible, improve their own position in the hierarchical structure of estates. Accompanied by

sometimes violent disputes, positions had to be constantly renegotiated, leading to new rules and changes in the social structure.

The momentum of its own here stems from tension between the ideal of a fixed hierarchical order, which was regarded as fundamental to human coexistence by the societies studied, and the openness of its daily realisation.

Presence culture: The co-presence of the actors in space made the 'daily' communication of hierarchical relationships unavoidable; often the divergent views on one's own position only became visible when people met. Conflicts were pre-programmed, as the perception of clothing and body as well as the positioning in the room were ultimately difficult to balance. Changes were reflected, among other things, in the further development and expansion of the repertoire of communication methods. Elaborate writing, which is important in all the regions of the world analysed in the project, is not in contradiction with the culture of presence, but rather in a productive relationship with it.

The project focuses on the associated dynamics of change, which have hardly been systematically investigated to date and which, under the conditions mentioned, were already inherent in the gatherings themselves and experienced current continuations.

Consensus orientation: For the societies under consideration, consensus orientation is defined as low tolerance for dissenting positions; dissent could hardly claim legitimacy for itself. It therefore does not refer to a romanticised idea of 'the' Middle Ages or a supposedly harmony-affine East Asian mentality. Disputes and violent conflicts were omnipresent; however, they must be interpreted in the light of the normative character that unanimity acquires in the societies observed here. The dispute, which Simmel already saw as a driving force for change, gains its own dynamic in the context of a general consensus orientation.

Seen in this light, consensus orientation does not prevent conflicts that tend to take on a momentum of their own; rather, it drives them forward, intensifies them and imposes a certain form on them.

The three structural elements have often been the subject of research. What is new is identifying them as central drivers of change and linking them to the concept of momentum of its own. We suspect that these three elements were able to motivate the actors to 'co-operate' in self-propelled processes. This gave rise to new narratives about one's own origin, networks were established and investments were made in art and literature. These innovations did not undermine the existing structures but rather supported them so that the impetus for momentum of its own continued to exist.

Consequences

The project aims at encouraging a change of perspective: The changes of the pre-modern era no longer seem to be part of a centuries-long development leading up to the present. Rather, at least for the regions analysed, similar drives for change appear to be discernible, which reveals this period and these regions to be highly dynamic; however, this dynamism was primarily directed towards the further expansion of the structures of these societies. As an outlook, and going beyond the scope of the project, a relatively rapid change in the 'long 19th century' towards the society of the present could be assumed, which could be associated more with terms like 'emergence' than with long-term development.

The elaboration of such abstract descriptions of processes of change, which are committed to basic historical research, also has important political implications. For if commonalities of different world regions regarding the drivers of change can be established, essentialist Sino-, Euro- or Japanocentric narratives can hardly be maintained.

The project is being organised by Franz-Josef Arlinghaus, a historian from Bielefeld, Kai Bremer, a literary scholar from Berlin, Marion Eggert, a Koreanist from Bochum, Ulla Kypta, a historian from Hamburg, Achim Mittag, a sinologist from Tübingen, Jörg Quenzer, Japanologist from Hamburg and Andreas Rüther, a historian from Bielefeld, who have been working on the topic for some time.

From April to September 2025, we will be writing a collective monography in English at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, Bielefeld, together with colleagues from Canada, China, Germany, Japan, the USA and Switzerland, which will elaborate the thesis that processes of change in pre-modern societies show certain specific patterns that distinguish them from modern societies, but link them together.