This essay is about the philosophical foundation of Marx’s civil society theory. Its aim is to reveal the significance of the concept of the individual for Young Marx’s distinctive civil society theory. Concerning the relation between society and the individual, for a long time we have accepted the conclusion that Marx pays his main attention to the concept of society not to that of the individual. In other words, the very element which distinguishes Marx from his processors and lays the foundation for Marx’s civil society theory is his discovery and emphasis on the concept of society, rather than the concept of the individual. However, motivated by Japanese scholars’ careful studies on the structural transformation of Marx’s civil society theory during his early times — from 1843 to 1844, this essay’s central concern can be formulated as this assertion: it is the concept of the individual not society that, in young Marx’s view, serves as the foundation of his civil society theory.

In concrete terms, this essay consists of the following three theoretical points:

(1) Different from the previous studies which take materialism and communism as the two landmarks of Marx’s social theory, this essay lays its emphasis on the concept of civil society, and considers that Hegel’s distinctive civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft) theory, which draws its main inspiration both from Hobbes’s political civil society theory and Smith’s economic civil society theory, is the direct start-point of Young Marx’s thought. But the point is, originally Hegel’s understanding of civil society theory incorporates two main contrast principles, the principle of individuality (or the principle of particularity, which means each individual is his own end and takes others as means owing to the opposition and conflict among individuals in civil society) and the principle of sociality (or the principle of universality, which means each individual can only achieve his own end by satisfying others’ needs through the communication and unity among individuals). Due to the limitation of economic knowledge and Feuerbach’s great influence, at first Marx fails to comprehend and inherit the both principles of Hegel’s civil society theory, instead merely partly accepts the principle of individuality and considers his own civil society as a private sphere filling with opposition and conflict among particular individuals only. Therefore, we could say, when relying on Hegel’s great theoretical heritage to conceive his civil society theory, Marx drives himself on a tortuous way.

(2) However, to some extent, such a tortuous
way should not be regarded as an obstacle but a necessary help for Marx to develop his own civil society theory. In other words, it is through such a tortuous way that Marx has found and accepted the positive aspect of the principle of individuality, namely the subjectivity in philosophy, private ownership in economy and individual rights in politics, based on which Marx further in *Paris Notebooks* discovers the principle of sociality contained in Hegel’s civil society theory. Marx thereby conceives his unique civil society as a social communication formation where the indirect communication relationships among different individuals’ personalities show themselves in the direct exchange relationships of commodity to commodity based on private ownership and division of labor. In other words, in contrast with traditional research’s concentration on the separation and conflict among different classes in capitalist society, this essay focuses on the communication among particular individuals in civil society.

(3) Moreover, Young Marx’s civil society theory belongs to a tripartite social formation theory consisted of traditional society, civil society and future society according to the distinction of “community” (Gemeinschaft) and “society” (Gesellschaft). In a word, according to their respective relations about the individual and its society, Marx’s three social formations can be clarified as follow: in traditional society the individual has to subordinate to the external substantive social relations and cannot get its independence from the society; in civil society the social relations are the products of different individuals’ communication activities and become the manifestations of individuals’ concrete communication relations, the individual thereby gets its independence from the society in appearance; in future society the separated individuals re-associate with each other to re-control their common social relations by inheriting their developed skills and mutual relations created in civil society, and finally get their real independence from the society. Considering Marx’s account of the relationship between the individual and society, civil society and future society belong to the same type, where social relations are created by different separated individuals and could be re-controlled by associated individuals; traditional society is a type of its own, where community as a naturally formed social formation has absolute authority and priority to individuals, meanwhile, individuals in traditional society has neither will nor ability to question the rationality and legality of such natural social relations. For Marx, the social formation he affirms is evidently future society, which shares many elements in common with the traditional, yet it bases on civil society which differs from it almost in every aspect in appearance. However, civil society has kept its consistence with future society at one most important point, asserting the priority of the individual to its social relations.

Given for a long time, the concept of civil society in Marx has been equated with his another famous concept of capitalist society, and has not received its deserved attention, before passing to it, this essay will give a brief description of the two concepts, without which this essay’s point would be unintelligible.

About the concept of civil society in Marx this essay mainly profits from the excellent studies of Japanese scholars. It is Japanese scholars who first distinguish civil society from capitalist society and pay their special attentions to the former. The initial pioneer is Utida Yoshihiko, the Japanese Smith studies expert, who comes to the important conclusion that the concept of civil society means a certain social formation different from capitalist society on the one hand, the general economic foundation of different social
formations on the other. (Utida Yoshihiko, 1953) As enlightened by Utida, the economist Hirata Kiyooaki further explores the concept of civil society in Marx, who considers capitalist society as a certain developing phase of civil society by reemphasizing the significance of several key concepts in Marx, such as “ownership”, “division of labor” and “communication”, etc... To be specific, Hirata primarily defines “civil society” as a social communication formation among different individuals based on the private ownership, labor and division. For Hirata, the capitalist society is only a variant and distortion of civil society, where capitalist ownership replaces the private ownership of civil society and meanwhile wage labor replaces the individual labor. However, even in this “variant” form (capitalist society) which should be fiercely criticized, it is the personality “communication” relationship constructed by civil society that functions as its theory background and operation axis. Therefore, Hirata attempts to divert his research core from the criticism of “capitalist society” to the investigation of “civil society”. (Hirata Kiyooaki, 1969)

Following Hirata’s pioneering studies on civil society, a series of Japanese scholars including Mochizuki Seiji and Utida Hiroshi etc. continue to study on the works of Young Marx, especially Paris Manuscripts and The German Ideology, so as to further reconstruct Marx’s civil society theory in his early years. Thanks to these researches, the applicability and explanation power of civil society theory created by Hirata has been successfully extended to Marx’s all other works. In brief, If we could say that Hirata devotes his researches to defend “private ownership” (Privateigentum) of civil society, which is the premise of “individual ownership” (individuelles Eigentum) in future society by dint of emphasizing the significance of “ownership and exchange” in Marx’s Grundrisse, then as supplementary, Mochizuki’s study is to demonstrate the importance of civil society with “estrangement and division of labor” as the core concept, mainly based on Paris Manuscripts (especially Comments on James Mill and Third Manuscript) of Marx in early years. Considering the importance of Japanese scholars’ studies on Marx’s civil society theory, for the sake of showing this essay’s characteristics, it would be a wise strategy to give a short introduction to Japanese scholars’ contributions and meanwhile point out their limitations.

Firstly, Japanese scholars trace the theoretical origin of Marx’s civil society to Hegel by emphasizing the affinity between Hegel’s civil society theory and classical economics. We all know according to Hegel, the individual freedom or will is presented in three different forms corresponding to three different spheres, the family, civil society and the state. Among which the family is the direct presentation of the principle of universality or sociality, while civil society is the expression of the principle of individuality or particularity. And the state is the real sphere embodying the both principles. However, acting as the medium between the family and the state, to some extent civil society also contains the two principles. In concrete terms, being out of the disintegration of the family that presented the principle of direct intercommunity and sociality, civil society firstly shows itself as the ethical separated status, i.e. atomic isolated individuals or the battlefield for private interests, where all people oppose against all people and each individual regards other individuals as means to his own ends. Therefore, on the one hand civil society is a territory featured with particularity and individuality. On the other hand, for Hegel it is also an economic society in Smith’s sense, which indirectly integrates isolated individuals with each other based on the system of demands and division of labor and exchange, so for Hegel civil
society also embodies the principle of universality or sociality. However, Hegel does not trust in the universality or sociality presented by civil society based on classical economics, so he moreover sets some external elements of universality or sociality such as the administration of justice, the police and the cooperation to lead and coordinate the operation of civil society. This behavior results in the previous Hegelian study paying too much attention to the influence of quasi-political elements such as the “corporations” on the civil society, while much less to the universality or sociality principle based on the classical economics. To the contrary, Japanese scholars (Mochizuki Seiji and Yamanouchi Yasushi) especially emphasize the universality or sociality of this economic “system of needs” included in Hegel’s civil society and explores its affinity with classical economics. In virtue of criticizing Hegel’s philosophy of right, Marx gets his own problem awareness of civil society. Originally, since containing both of the principles, Hegel’s civil society theory could be the best starting point for Marx to conceive his own theory of civil society, but unfortunately, Marx fails to inherit the two principles of civil society from Hegel, but only observes the principle of particularity or individuality simply.

Secondly, Japanese scholars pay their special attentions to the role of Paris Manuscripts (especially Comments on James Mill) in the transformation of Marx’s civil society theory. As mentioned above, though Hegel’s civil society theory has already included the two aspects (individuality in the principle of particularity and sociality in the principle of universality) that Marx needed, unfortunately Marx at first only notices the particularity aspect and fails to inherit the universality aspect due to several causes when writing his Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Therefore, for Marx his civil society theory has experienced a complicated development process. Japanese scholars (Mochizuki Kiyoshi and Yamanouchi Yasushi) are disposed to define this period from Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right to Paris Manuscripts. In other words, they consider civil society as the research focus of Marx when writing Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, but Marx at that time understood Hegel in a totally conservative way owing to the practical political campaign and the influence of Feuerbach, which makes Marx just observe the particularity or individuality principle of Hegel’s civil society, i.e. the separated and opposing individuals, but ignore the universality or sociality elements included in civil society, i.e. the new social integration formation which connects different individuals together based on labor, demand, division of labor and exchange. It is not until Paris Manuscripts Marx discovers and inherits the universality or sociality aspect of civil society upon his own study on the classical economics, and since then develops his grand critical theory against civil society.

The above two points are the contributions Japanese scholars have made to Marx’s civil society theory studies. But they also have their limitations. Firstly, when reconstructing Marx’s civil society theory, Japanese scholars’ overemphasize the principle of universality or sociality results in their comparatively overlook of the principle of particularity or individuality. As we know, Japanese scholars (Mochizuki Seiji and Yamanouchi Yasushi) have no doubt kept a positive attitude to the universality or sociality aspect to the universality or sociality aspect and take it as the foundation of Marx’s civil society theory. However, it is also the fact that they ignore the importance and significance of the particularity or individuality aspect. Generally speaking, Japanese scholars merely acknowledge the particularity or individuality aspect of Marx’s civil society in a limited sense, namely consider that in virtue of it
Marx has reversed the determining relationship between civil society and the state set by Hegel and taken civil society as the economic base of the state. Moreover, according to them, it is the too much attention Marx has paid to the very particularity or individuality aspect in the name of materialism influenced by the estrangement theory that prevents Marx from inheriting the principle of universality or sociality of civil society from Hegel when writing *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. As a result, Marx has to postpone the discovery and inheritance until his direct study on the economics in 1844. (Yamanouchi Yasushi, 2011) According to Mochizuki, if we regard the thoughts development of Marx in early years as the process of understanding of the two principles of civil society, i.e. from the initial understanding of the particularity or individuality aspect to the final understanding of the universality or sociality aspect, then we could say that the particularity or individuality aspect helps Marx reverse the determining relationship of civil society and the state, but meanwhile prevents Marx from understanding the indirect universality or negative elements in social communications among different individuals. Marx in his late years has mentioned the reification of communications and the direct personality communications hidden under commodities exchange in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, and Mochizuki and other scholars view the particularity or individuality aspect of the civil society based on the “indirect” and “hidden” sense. In other words, it is because Marx has not discovered the hidden universality or sociality aspect under the individuality and particularity that he does not understand the sociality or universality aspect of civil society.

On the contrary, this essay considers that it is hard to understand Marx’s civil society theory properly without understanding the principle of individuality or particularity both in its negative and positive sense, and believes that the principle of individuality is not only the presentation of so-called ethical separation that shall be criticized in the theory of civil society, but also the reflection of the autonomy and independence of individuals established by modern enlightenment, which is the most important feature distinguishing civil society from traditional community and shall be promoted. In contrast with the thought that the principle of individuality or particularity prevents Marx from understanding and inheriting of the principle of universality or sociality from Hegel’s civil society theory, this essay believes that it is the acknowledgement of the particularity principle that separates Marx’s theory of civil society from other Young Hegelians and “real socialists” exactly. In other words, it is upon the acknowledgement and establishment of the principle of individuality or particularity — including the consciousness subjectivity in philosophy (labor is the subjective essence of private property), private ownership in economics (private property) and individual rights in politics (principle of free and equal exchange) — that the principle of universality or sociality in Hegel’s civil society could enter Marx’s theoretical perspective. Since then, the unique concept of civil society could become the basis for the individual breaking away from traditional society on the one hand, and meanwhile achieving the leap to future society on the other.

To be specific, for Marx the positive significance of the principle of individuality or particularity of civil society includes at least two aspects. Firstly, the concept of the individual presented in *The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* is not only referred to the subject in Feuerbach’s materialism sense, but also referred to the individual asking for individual rights in political sense and private ownership in economic sense. Secondly, in the “First Manuscript” of *Paris Manuscripts* Marx defines the concept of individual as subjectivity
in philosophy by regarding private property as the objectification of “estranged labor”, based on which Marx then asserts the significance of “estranged communication” in Comments on James Mill. In brief, we could conclude that the principle of particularity or individuality consists of three concepts of the individual — the individual asking for political rights, pursuing private ownership in economics, and expressing subjectivity in philosophy — in terms of its positive sense. This essay then has its enough reason to state that the communication and unity of individuals, namely the principle of universality or sociality is possible only when the three concepts of the individual come into being. And this is the very positive sense of the principle of particularity or individuality of civil society for Marx. Therefore, the first point for this essay to distinguish itself from Japanese civil society scholars is its confirming of the particularity principle of civil society, i.e. the significance of the concept of the individual for Young Marx.

Secondly, due to their overlook of the importance of the principle of individuality to Young Marx, Japanese scholars have failed to notice the theory of three-stage social formations conceived by Young Marx according to three different types of relations between the individual and its society. Affected by the traditional understanding mode, Mochizuki Seiji and Yamanouchi Yasushi still assert that until Paris Manuscripts Marx is a humanist with no conception of social formation. On the contrary, this essay believes that though Marx has not clarified the theory of five-stage social formation theory clearly as in The German Ideology, influenced by Hegel’s divisions among “the family, civil society and the state” on the one hand, benefited from his unique understanding of civil society on the other, Young Marx has already set a tripartite developing mode for the social information of “traditional society — modern society — future society”. So the concept of “civil society” in this essay does not refer to an abstract social formation that runs consistently through the whole history development process, but a concrete social formation belonging to a “sandwich” structure, with the other two social formations of “traditional society” and “future society”. To be specific:

In the stage of (1) traditional society, individuals are completely immersed in social relations and constitutions (tribes, languages, blood relationship or classes) set by their community, and there is no form of private ownership independent of the community. The economic relations are not the leading social element but subordinate to other political, religious social relations. Under these operation regulations and external social relations, individuals have no chance or ability to question or break away from their community, let alone to control them. So in this stage, the individual belongs to its society. This is the traditional society at the bottom of the “sandwich” structure. On the contrast, at the top of the “sandwich” structure is (2) future society, in which individuals’ abilities and their mutual social relations have been greatly developed to a new stage when could be re-controlled by associated individuals. Because individuals and society have been completely integrated and civilized, there is no separation and conflicts among them. The middle layer of the “sandwich” structure is (3) civil society, in which individuals have broken away from traditional society with the help of the establishment of private ownership and created new economic and social relations through the division of labor and exchange. But on the other hand, these social relations among individuals cannot be presented as the direct communication among different personalities, but can only be
shown as the indirect exchange relation which for a long time cannot be controlled by associated individuals owing to their limited abilities and incomprehensive mutual relations. However, the social relations in this stage are no longer the external things totally irrelevant to individuals, but are the economic communication relations created by and among individuals through division of labor and exchange, with the premise of individual freedom and equality in politics and establishment of private ownership in economics. Since this kind of social relations is created by individuals, it is possible to be controlled by individuals again. In short, individuals are prior to social relations in the stage of civil society. To locate Marx’s civil society theory in his three formations society theory based on the distinguishing of “community” and “society” is the other difference between this essay and Japanese scholars.

In conclusion, if we define the main contributions of Japanese scholars as the creative renaissance of Marx’s civil society theory, then we could say, their advantage is to correct the previous over-stress on class antagonism in capitalist society, and highlight the cooperation and communication among individuals in civil society based on division of labor and private ownership, which have being neglected for a long time. Therefore, they especially emphasize the principle of universality or sociality of Marx’s civil society theory. However, in consideration of the real development process of Marx’s civil society theory and the relation between individuals and society, this essay attempts to lay its stress on the ignored positive significance of the principle of individuality or particularity, to be specific, the significance of the concept of the individual to Marx’ civil society theory, which is set in the background of the theory of three-stage social formation. In short, this essay tries to reverse the conclusion that the social relation is prior to the individual proposed in the “Article VI” of *Theses on Feuerbach*, and reveal the importance of the concept of the individual, then confirm Marx as the son of enlightenment, who inherits the principle of individuality and subjectivity advocated by Enlightenment Project.

Notes
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