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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Note	7
<i>Erdal Küçükyalçın</i>	
Foreword by JAD	13
<i>Selcuk Esenbel</i>	
Go-aisatsu by JAWS	17
<i>Brigitte Steger</i>	

ESSAYS BY SPECIAL GUESTS

Brief Remarks on Paradigm Shifts in Japanese Anthropology during the 20 th Century	23
<i>Josef Kreiner</i>	
Multiple Discourse on <i>Monozukuri</i> as a Keyhole to View Modern Japan	67
<i>Noriya Sumihara</i>	
From "Japanese Studies" to "International Japanese Studies" from Japan	79
<i>Masashi Oguchi</i>	

SELECTED ARTICLES

Employing the concept of techno-governance to analyse the field of biomedical engineering in Japan	95
<i>Susanne Brucksch</i>	

Mnemonic Monsters Redux: Traumatic Signatures
and the Afterlife of Image-Objects in
Japanese Popular Culture 127

Fabio R. Gygi

Sport and the artifice of nature and technology:
Bio-technological entities at the 2020 Tokyo
Olympic and Paralympic Games 155

William W. Kelly

Mediating Modernity through popular song:
The geography of visual images illustrating
enka in the context of karaoke and
thematic parallels with *Arabesk* 175

William H. Kelly

DISCUSSION

The Great Forest Wall: A plan to protect Japan
from future mega-tsunami 209

Michael Shackleton

Submission Guidelines 237

From “Japanese Studies” to “International Japanese Studies” from Japan

–A review centered around the activities of Hosei University
Research Center for International Japanese Studies–

Masashi Oguchi

*Director, Hosei University Research Center for International
Japanese Studies*

Hosei University Research Center for International Japanese Studies, which I am the current director of, has been established within the Hosei University in 2002 and thus, is a comparatively new institution. It originates from an official financial support program of the Japanese government for establishment of new centers for research, namely “The 21st Century Center Of Excellence Program (COE)”. The Center had received the initial capital for its establishment through that program and owes its name to one of its themes; “Development of International Japanese Studies – Construction of International Japanese Studies from Japan”. While the term “Japanese Studies” has become a word used ordinarily throughout the world, I think the term “International Japanese Studies” is a new wording created by the Hosei University. To prove this, the founders of the institution had applied to Japan Patent Office and registered the name “Research Center for International Japanese Studies” as a trademark. Therefore in Japan, the establishment of an

institution under the title of “Research Center for International Japanese Studies” had lawfully become the exclusive right of Hosei University. Hence, today, I will talk about the meaning of this new field “International Japanese Studies” and try to summarize our activities and their results.

Well, why did we choose the theme “Japanese Studies” under the “The 21st Century Center Of Excellence Program (COE)”? The answer to that question is that, we wanted to stress the need for reform in the field of Japanese Studies against the recent continuous expansion of globalization.

While doing that, whether it is meaningful to call what the Japanese do as “Japanese Studies”, rises as a problem. “Japanese Studies” as an academic field has traditionally been rather popular among foreign scholars who do research on Japan related topics. Prof. Dr. Josef Kreiner, who will speak after me, sets a perfect example for such scholars in this category.

It is only natural that human mobility is increasing in parallel with the ongoing globalization. Needless to say, the process of globalization has both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it is true that increasing human mobility brings different cultures in contact with each other but on the other, it also carries the potential to cause conflicts among them. While the age of globalization has helped the flourishing of the studies on different cultures, popularization of ‘Japanese Studies’ among foreign scholars was no exception to the rule. Therefore our primary goal was to set the study of Japanese Studies as exercised by foreign scholars as a new area of research for the Japanese scholars.

Secondly, though having said so, the Japanese Studies exercised by foreign scholars has a vast variety. Its content tends to differ depending on the country, period, the stance of the researcher or the methods used. Hence, the task the Research Center for International Japanese Studies assumes can as well be described as to help build a chronological, historical axis for

this wide range of studies on Japan, or at least to try to catch the extent of such scholarship. I am aware that it is easier to say than to realize this ambitious goal. For the time being, as a start we decided to limit ourselves to encouraging prominent scholars of each country (including the Japanese) to share and evaluate each other's research results. Then again, a new but important problem of methodology is destined to emerge: How will the success or failure of this new field of International Japanese Studies be evaluated? Thus, debates on the methodology to be used inevitably became a major issue.

Thirdly, I would like to refer to the results of such evaluation. At present, we have further limited our work to the evaluation of the findings of the scholars from non-English speaking countries. One reason for this is the fact that the works of the scholars from English speaking countries were to a large extent already organized. Therefore, we have set our focus on the non-English speaking scholars' works.

The evaluation naturally contains international comparison. Consequently, whenever the subject of evaluation involves the works of scholars from English speaking countries, they also are invited to join in the process. Furthermore, for instance, if a Chinese scholar's work is taken as the subject of study, it is regarded appropriate to include Japanese as well as other prominent scholars from English or non-English speaking countries.

Like any other scholarly work, the Japanese Studies exercised by foreigners contain periodization or objectivity constraints as well as unique problematizations and methodologies. Hence, an in-depth comprehension of how they problematize their topics, their methodologies and their standpoints, is necessary for a better evaluation of their works.

The point that deserves attention is to realize the fact that even the Japanese have differences in their understanding of Japan. These differences among the Japanese scholars tend to surface once they start evaluating the works of foreigners

together. I believe the views of Tadao Kiyonari, the then president of the Hosei University, and one who had closely supervised the establishment of the Center, which he expressed during a speech at the first symposium deserve further attention:

Lester C. Thurow, the professor of Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had written “Zero-sum Society”, was once in Japan and had expressed his wish to meet me. When we met, he had many questions to ask, but when I heard the content of talks with the Japanese visiting the MIT, I realized many inconsistencies. For instance, there were numerous inconsistent bits of information he had learned about the nature of the modern Japanese industry. It was weird. He was saying that he wanted to meet me because he knew that I had different views in a book I had written. You see, what had happened was that the “standard theories” about Japan were taken for granted without doing any further thinking, and those mistaken views had become a part of the on-the-edge scholarly views in foreign lands.

When we look at such examples, we come to realize that the conception of “Japan” among the Japanese may also very well be problematic and if the differences depend on misconceptions they obviously need to be corrected. On the other hand, different people tend to problematize different things. Even when an objective truth is examined, results attained by different people may differ from each other. But then to define “difference” becomes a major problem in itself. Once those differences are transferred to foreign countries, they await to be corrected by people who themselves have differing standpoints.

Fourthly, I believe once we start evaluating differences we become aware of our habitual stances as well as new facts, which in turn, may help us to discover new problems that await solution. This is exactly what we mean when we say “International Japanese Studies” instead of “Japanese Studies” bound by national borders. That’s why, what we want to achieve

with the COE Program is to share research results with the global academic community.

Of course by "Japanese Studies" we limit ourselves to the humanities. Although it might be meaningful to expand to include social or natural sciences, in order to keep our focus we continued our work within the limits of the humanities. Until now, while putting historical research at the center, we have been trying to broaden our scope towards modern times, but for the future our hope is to be able to include the social sciences if possible.

So our research center started its activities with such methodological concerns. In order to create a concrete platform for the Japanese and foreign scholars to share and compare their research, we are organizing an annual international symposium at the European Centre for Japanese Studies in Alsace (CEEJA) in Colmar village, Alsace, France¹ The following list containing the main topics of discussion during the recent symposiums may give you an idea on the content of this yearly activity of our Center.

- 2007 "On the impossibility of written translation"²
- 2008 "The Emperor within Japanese culture – The meaning of Tennō"³
- 2009 "The human body and embodiment"
- 2010 "The formation of the identity of Japan and its echoes"⁴
- 2011 "Symbols of Japanese identity"⁵
- 2012 "National identity and religion"⁶

¹ <http://www.ceeja-japon.com/index.php?lang=ja>

² <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/Default.aspx?tabid=151>

³ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/Default.aspx?tabid=251>

⁴ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/Default.aspx?tabid=788>

⁵ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/Default.aspx?tabid=929>

⁶ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/tabid/1113/Default.aspx>

2013 “The Identity of Japan and Asia”⁷

2014 “The future of Japan-consciousness: Globalization and Japan-consciousness”⁸

The reason why a number of identity related topics were chosen after 2010 was that the Research Center for International Japanese Studies had received financial support from the Monbusho (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) until the year 2014. The theme that the government had decided to support was “Reconsidering Japan-consciousness under the light of international Japanese studies’ methodology” and the Alsace meetings provided us with international comparative perspectives.

The reason I chose this topic is that I believe Japan is having a difficult time in troubled waters stirred by globalization. Enormous budget deficits, a decreasing birth-rate, an aging society, and an economy under continuous stress do not seem likely to come to an end in the near future. Under these circumstances, not only the economic position but also the political as well as cultural stances of Japan are at stake. As if these were not enough, sentiments of nationalism are on the rise for some, which in turn may cause additional international protests and friction. Therefore I believe, in these conditions, how should Japan as a framework be understood, or rather how it has to be understood within historical and international contexts are topics that deserve further scrutiny. Our studies thus focused on the problematique of “Japan-consciousness” by utilizing the International Japanese Studies methodology which by nature is both international and academic. We have been searching our way blindly in cooperation with our European and East Asian (especially Chinese) colleagues. In other words, by bringing the Japanese, European and Asian scholars together, we have been

⁷ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/tabid/1260/Default.aspx>

⁸ <http://hijas.hosei.ac.jp/tabid/1360/Default.aspx>

experimenting to employ "triangulation survey" method of ethnography.

I must confess that the biggest trouble we had was the fact that the terms "Japan-consciousness" and "Identity of Japan" in English do not match each other. In practice, the moment we started any joint research with international participation, the theme "Japan-consciousness" met with prompt resistance and was problematized by our foreign colleagues. The wording "Japan-consciousness" itself seems to resist translation to Western languages, and there are views that regard it peculiar to Japan and the Japanese. In the final analysis, these views put forward that although the term may be correlated with "the identity of Japan" when a social or cultural comparison is considered between the Japanese and say, the French, but then it still would be a problem about external convenience and it may be a mistake to assume the problem to be related to internal values. On the other hand, although I acknowledge that the term "Japan-consciousness", in reality may evolve from an external and coincidental wording to an internal and inevitable process of perversion dictating that "If you do not have it you can not be Japanese", I believe that we still should make that process itself the subject of our objective studies.

When compared with other countries, Japanese society is generally considered to be homogenous and in daily life, the identity of the Japanese people is not the subject of social debates. The problem of identity is not only unobservable in daily life, but on the contrary "Japan-consciousness" is assumed to be a "unique" characteristic of the Japanese society. I can understand that "Japan-consciousness" problem, (just like the earlier "Japanese uniqueness theories") is met with resistance from the Europeans since it is considered to carry a potential to be linked with sacredness of Japan and the Japanese.

Under the light of these debates, we can say that at the "natural", "original" roots of "Japan-consciousness" in fact, lies a much later

man-made invention of “ideology” (as Maruyama Masao points out in his ‘Historical layers of Japanese culture’) and this view has found general acceptance in the West. Hence, it is also accepted that an objective study of “Japan-consciousness”, its formation process, mechanisms, or the phenomenon and objects as well as the reasons that lie behind it, is both possible and critical.

Although it maybe a difficult philosophical conclusion, I believe the very fact that the notions “Japan-consciousness” and “the identity of Japan” do not match each other, shows how International Japanese Studies as a field, is both difficult and interesting.

Studies on “Japan-consciousness” will contribute to our understanding of the presence of different cultures within Japan. In fact, historically and culturally Japanese society was not as homogeneous as the Japanese would like to think. Obviously throughout history, there were many different cultures existing on the Japanese archipelago. In this long and narrow archipelago, at the farthest corners in South and North, various cultures distinctly differing from the Center found space to flourish. In other words, we can talk about “another Japan” or “two other Japans” which differ from “Japan” as we know it. This also is a perfect research topic for “International Japanese Studies” which deserves analysis from multi-directions.

In the north, it was thought that in olden times, a non-Japanese people called “Emishi” (later Ezo) were living until the 12th century. In fact these Ainu people, at least racially were the same as the Japanese and were nothing more than Japanese with a slightly different culture and a dialect. But the central government of Japan, in order to resist the Chinese Empire, the ancient great power of East Asia, asserted that just like China, she also was an “Empire” which has the power to subjugate other nations nearby. That’s why, they intentionally preferred to call the northern frontiers peoples as “Emishi” or “Ezo” as if they were a different nation, though they were not.

On the other hand, as the actual situation in the north gradually became apparent, it is understood that a separate world in which the standard food of the Japanese, rice and its cultivation was totally absent, was extending towards the north. Only then did they begin to accept (both in nominal and absolute terms) the existence of a different ethnic group in the north. This view, namely the world of "Ainu Culture" seems to have formed in the course of the 13th century. Rice cultivation was not applicable in the freezing cold environment of the north, and though they knew about it they did not produce it but purchased it from Central Japan.

Rice surely had a great meaning for the development of Japanese culture. Thanks to rice cultivation, it was possible to leave hunter-gatherer society and Jomon culture behind and evolve into a civilized agricultural society and Yayoi culture. From then on, rice cultivation remained at the core of Japanese society. The fact that the ranks of feudal lords were determined according to the amount of rice harvested from their land, and not its size, is a distinct characteristic of Japanese society.

The case was not so in the north and south of the archipelago. Both locations were not suitable for rice cultivation due to climatic conditions. The reasons for the cold north is obvious. In the south, rice cultivation is supposed to have entered into Kyushu through Korean peninsula which comparatively has lower temperatures, and instead of diffusing towards Okinawa down south, it expanded rather quickly towards colder regions in northern Honshu and reached Aomori. On the other hand, it was only in the Meiji period that rice cultivation could cross the Tsugaru Straits and reach Hokkaido. By the way, thanks to innovative breeding techniques Hokkaido is now able to produce high quality rice.

Hence, as rice cultivation could not penetrate into the northern and southern regions, cultures centered around trade flourished. In other words, there developed worlds with different cultures

and values, apart from “normal” Japan. In addition to rice, goods like pottery, ceramics or salt were flowing from south to north. Not to mention the various luxury goods that did not exist in the north. In the opposite direction, goods like skins of sea creatures, bird feathers, kelp, placer gold or horses were on the move. These were goods which the aristocrats in Kyoto wanted to buy no matter what the prices were. For instance the skin of sea creatures were in high demand since they were used as clothing or tapestry during the exceptionally cold winters of Kyoto while the bird feathers were used in the making of ceremonial arrows. Horses too were demanded because unlike the traditional Japanese horses used in agriculture, for some unknown reason, the north was the source of beautiful horses suitable for riding. As I said, we still do not know the reason for their existence. One theory states that they could have been brought on rafts from the Maritime Province (of Russia) on the continent, to Hokkaido via Mamiya Strait, La Pérouse Strait and the Tsugaru Strait. Just as many goods were carried over the Strait of Dover.

The people living in Central Japan in those days, thought that the other people living in the outer world around Japan, were not human beings but demons. Such places were terrifying for ordinary Japanese and nobody dared to approach. But the north was shining with wealth the south did not have. It is now known to us that there were frontier lords who played a bridging role between the two worlds. They were different from the ordinary bushi. They were trade lords. These facts were understood better within the last 10 years thanks to the results born by International Japanese Studies.

Likewise, the southern world, Okinawa region -just like the north- had no rice cultivation and thus was also out of Japan's territories. But its outlook was different from the north, too. Though I can not go into details due to time limitation here, I can say that while trading was the core of economic activity, the south had a separate entity, the grand China nearby. In addition

to Japan, the region was under the heavy influence of China. This factor helped increase the gap between the north and the south. Unlike the north, the south experienced a temporary establishment of an independent state, the Ryukyu Kingdom.

By the way, we have been describing Central Japan as a rice cultivating culture, but we should not forget that this classification was largely valid for the upper classes and the framework of the state authority, but the ordinary people did not necessarily benefit from the system and eat as much rice as they liked. The Japanese scholars were aware of this fact for a while but no one had felt the need to emphasize it until a friend of mine, Prof. Charlotte von Verschuer from the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE), recently published an article on this topic in the Tokyo University's "Shigaku Zasshi", one of the most authoritative academic journals on history. Ancient society had "millet culture". This standpoint unique to foreigners is of utmost importance for the development of International Japanese Studies. Ms. Charlotte von Verschuer is continuing to clarify new subjects which no Japanese researcher had until now thought were important.

Finally, I would like to mention yet another new research stance. Ancient Japan was part of a world order centered around China. The academic term used for it is "tributary system". Japan used to dispatch embassy missions to the Tang court and received on the edge cultural novelties in return. These missions are said to have a special place in the long history of Japanese-Chinese relations.

To begin with, we can say that many people empowered with state support had crossed over to Tang and learned a vast amount of cultural knowledge. On the other hand, there were very few Chinese who had visited Japan, a fact which is especially true wheremen of knowledge or technicians are concerned. Yet aside from the Tang embassy missions, the number visits of Japanese men of knowledge and technicians is also few. In that sense, when

compared with other countries in East Asia, it is a bit strange to find out that the officials and nobles of these two neighbouring countries had almost no contact throughout the whole history of Japanese-Chinese relations. The only exception to the rule is the Tang period where some nobles from the Fujiwara clan are known to have traveled to China. But then again, any traces of the officials of central government who had travelled abroad simply vanish.

On the other hand, there indeed were attempts to do a direct comparison between historical similarities of Japan and Europe until now. One such field is the study of feudal systems in Japan and Europe. The problem was why it was only Japan in Asia which experienced the development of a feudal system identical to Europe's. The pioneer for these studies was pre-war German liberal historian Otto Hintze. His book "Wesen und Verbreitung des Feudalismus" (1929, Berlin) and Asakawa Kanichi's review "The Documents of Iriki (1929)" has drawn attention to the fact that although the two had no historical contact whatsoever, the European feudal system showed significant similarities to Japan's.

However this approach was abandoned later. The reason was that such similarities were attributed to mere coincidence. Apparently, the possibility that Japan and Europe could have any direct exchange in those times is zero. Even so, our research group started an in-depth study of the policy statements of the Holy Roman emperors together with the statements of the Japanese emperors during the early middle ages, in an attempt to shed light to the similarities in social formations. We are trying to clarify the cultural factors behind the processes that led to identical social formations by comparing the writing styles of policy statements. Last year we organized a symposium in Tübingen University and the results are planned to be published next year in both countries.

In this paper, I have tried to introduce a part of the activities

and results attained of our Research Center as well as the methodology of "International Japanese Studies". I believe this academic field promises vast opportunities for the researchers. I would like to invite all of you to actively contribute to our efforts.