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journal or publication title	KYOTO CONFERENCE ON JAPANESE STUDIES 1994 I
volume	.non01-01
page range	138-144
year	1996-03-25
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15055/00003455">http://doi.org/10.15055/00003455</a>

# PUBLICS, POPULATIONS OR PARADIGMS? A second opinion on programs in the United States

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FORTY YEARS HAVE PASSED since I entered into the academic field that examines Japanese society and its human properties. But I see more change in that field, at least in the United States, in the last ten years than in all of the preceding thirty. The decade has been anything but dull.

It is customary to write the history of an academic field in terms of shifting concepts and paradigms. But that does too much honor to people who sit back and theorize. And paradigm shifts do not, in my retrospect, explain very much about the transformations in how we practice Japan Studies in the United States — though for sure the Feminists and Foucaultists will disagree with me.

I see our modes of practice shifting externally in response to new publics: serving a whole galaxy of groups concerned about Japan as a mirror for American society or as an ally for saving the environment, not merely as an economic machine whose chief product is un-level playing fields. And practice is shifting internally in response to radical changes in the population joining the community of scholars and students.

I will add — though it may not be necessary — that like our colleagues all around the world we also are, of course, adapting to the ferment that has been so evident in Japanese society itself. For example, the next time I attempt to describe life on the Shima Peninsula, where I have been doing fieldwork for more than a decade, I will have to deal with a new variable. The landscape has been invaded by an enormous resort complex that was not there a year ago. And this is not more of the Mikimoto Corporation and Japan's unique cultured pearls it is a theme park called Spanish Village.

Ten years ago could any of us have dreamed up the idea that a small town in Japan would pay an American anthropologist to come study it? If the idea had occurred to me I would have tried to sell it as the concept for a television sit-com. And yet: in August, 1994, one of my students went to the Tōhoku to begin an appointment as *yakuba kōmuin* in the employ of a town of ten thousand souls. He is a paid civil servant, not just an observer. Which puts him in a position to influence the making of town policy even as he investigates how it is being made. That puts a new spin on the old concept of the *oyatoigaikokujin*. And that in turn suggests that maybe we should write new words for the old tune we sing in the classroom, the song of Japan and its society made up of closed and exclusivistic vertical organizations.

I was asked to comment on trends in Japan scholarship across the whole North American

continent. As a proper academic I had better explain ahead of time who I will be speaking to and what I will be speaking about.

I will be addressing colleagues from outside the U.S. Those of you from the States are welcome to stay and voice dissent, or use the time for phone calls and pit stops.

In today's climate of political correctness it's a good idea to practice defensive driving. So let me declare that I do not represent any organization, movement or category of persons, not even the category of much-maligned white males of advancing years. I will not be speaking *for* anybody but myself.

I will be speaking *about* the United States, not the whole vast area included in the North American Free Trade Agreement. Ideas, books and videotapes circulate freely among NAFTA countries but there are non-tariff barriers to employment and very high barrier of language. Since I do not read Spanish and read French only under duress I have no business talking about Mexico or Francophone Canada. I have some sense of what our Anglophone colleagues in Canada are up to but no sense for the social and political climate in which they work. And it is that wider environment of multiple publics that I want to start with this afternoon because it circumscribes the niches in which scholarship is able to deploy survival skills.

You will have to search for quite a while before you will turn up anybody in the United States of the 1990s who is *not* curious about what is happening in Japan. The topics of that curiosity are stunningly diverse. And the motives for it can be personal, professional, or matters of public policy, or some combination of all three. One of my memorable phone conversations in recent years was with the superintendent of schools in a small town in the Midwest. He offered to pay me well if I would just come out for a few days to advise him and his board of education on what they should do to transform theirs into a Japanese school system.

Memorable in a different way was a visit to a regional city to take part in a one-day workshop on health problems in old age, for an audience of doctors and medical technicians. They were genuinely interested in what I said about national health insurance and social programs for old people in Japan. They were just as genuinely disappointed that I knew nothing about what they most wanted to hear, which is how Japanese physicians deal with the day to day challenge of practicing geriatric medicine.

The mass media have not bothered to follow the story of this groundswell of curiosity and concern for Japan. The reason is pretty clear. Media editors are unable to think of international relations on any model other than war or football. A video clip of an unknown American physician wondering what he might learn from his Japanese counterparts just would not slap the viewer's eyes and ears as will a split-screen frame with Iacocca and Ishihara shouting no and yes at each other in virtual reality.

Patricia Steinhoff hails the 1990s as a time when Japanese Studies "lost its irrelevance" as if irrelevance were a form of virginity. But relevance can mean many things. One old definition of a scholar is that a scholar is a person whose duty is to think otherwise. Or to put it another way, to not be trapped in immediate and urgent issues. However, those of us in state

universities have always had a duty to be relevant — to provide public service — as well as to study and teach. What's different from ten years ago is that we now have a vast new array of opportunities to be relevant.

With regard to U.S. Pacific policy and trade issues I don't see any great loss in our irrelevance since the Nixon years. Some of us would say of Washington what that candidate down in Kōchi three years ago said about Tokyo in his campaign speeches: "It's farther away from us than foreign countries." Five years ago when U.S. corporate self-interest fanned that media fuss over Revisionism several Japan scholars were asked for sound-bite-sized statements. But the discourse was dominated by *oyatoi interi* who are not academicians but employees of special interest think-tanks.

Japan Studies did have a brief moment of national attention at that time as candidate for scapegoating. Anyone who disagreed with the Revisionists was accused of committing "economic treason". And the Keidanren, not a truly disinterested party in the case, announced that McCarthysim had returned to America. But alas none of us academics received a penny in *tarento-dai*. Colleagues report that life was unpleasant for a little while on some campuses. On my campus we heard a few snide comments about "professors who take Jap money". But you have to consider the source. The complainers were from humanities departments not from the College of Engineering. Some of our engineering laboratories take in more money from Sony or Nissan in a single year than all of us in Japan Studies receive from all Japanese sources in a decade.

As it turned out, the Keidaren misread American Society, possibly not for the first time. Or did they misread the political visibility of Japan scholars? The United States has a great tradition of anti-intellectual witch-hunting. If Japan scholars did not become its victims this time, it may well be because on the national level we are perceived as politically feeble even if potentially relevant.

All through my years in Japan Studies there have been clientele wanting to know more about Japan simply because they are curious about other ways of life. The new clientele are wanting very specific types of information — 500 little japans instead of a single big one — as with that superintendent of schools or those physicians with geriatric patients. Perhaps you can go make a presentation to one of these new publics and still open your talk with Amaterasu and the brine-dripping sword. But if the group is, say, Greenpeace, you had better turn quickly to technical data on ocean pollution.

In American consciousness Japan is number one reference-other: where we look to know who we are and how well we are doing. Europe still has a place with regard to particular topics, for example Sweden for its social welfare system or Germany for its apprenticeship programs. But the European mirror has gone cloudy over the past decade. Japan is referred to in U.S. domestic discourse now almost as frequently as America has been mentioned in Japanese public discourse since World War Two.

I am suggesting that domestic policy, not foreign policy, is where Japan Study has a new opportunity to lose its irrelevance. The response on campus, however, is ad hoc and erratic. I

hesitate to forecast what Japan Studies programs will look like a generation from now. A thinkable scenario for the next decade might be drawn from trends over the past decade with regard to second-language instruction. Quite a number of professional and technical schools now employ their own Nihongo teachers — instead of sending students over to the Japan Studies department. These teachers tailor their instruction to the vocabularies and modes of discourse that future engineers or attorneys (for example) need to master. Next to join these business and engineering programs may be the “applied social scientist” who currently has to sustain himself off campus as a free-lance consultant. Ironically the old-line social science departments are moving in an opposite direction. A generation ago many of them welcomed country and area specialists into their faculties. As that generation retires it is not being replaced; disciplines are re-asserting the universal validity of their theories and methods.

Extrapolating from these trends we might see the Japan Studies program of the early 21st century shrunken to a battery of courses on language, literature, and “culture” as the debris of an ethnic heritage badly eroded by modernism. Campus bureaucrats will be delighted because they can slot Japan Studies onto their spreadsheets as just another foreign language operation. What will have been lost is that special quality of scholarship that is nurtured when students of society interact daily with other Japan specialists — an appetite for producing lively empirical reports that are informed by general theory without being intimidated by it.

That zest for empirical work has been the centerpiece of American research on Japanese society over the past decade. The results can be measured both by shelf-length needed to store the many books and articles and expected shelf-life for a number of superior pieces of work. We now have documentation and thoughtful discussion of an array of human arenas we knew only casually before — elite households, bakeries, nursing homes, fishmarkets, and so on. We are far beyond treating Japan in terms of cliché rice farmers, salarymen, death-defying *jukensei* and their self-denying mothers.

I'll only offer a brief comment or two on trends in research so many state-of-the-art reviews have covered that topic in recent years that we are at risk of becoming obsessed with taking our intellectual body-temperature. For those of you who want a homework assignment I have prepared a list of such re-appraisals; I particularly recommend looking at the masterful survey authored by William Kelly.

Attempts to paint general portraits of Japanese society — what used to be called holism — have been unimpressive when compared with the results of research on particular social settings, events or institutions. *Nihonjinron* has been attacked from so many sides that it has been flattened, though probably not forever. Its place has been taken by a new fascination with an entity called Self. When not incorporated in specific modes of action the entity appears to be as static and reified as old notions about Personality. The chief difference may be that Self is inscrutably labile, a feather on the breath of Foucault, whereas Personality was inscrutably stabile, fixated forever on the Freudian traumas of infancy. As Kelly remarks of these portraits of Self, “Where they remain cast in broad and ahistorical terms, they are dangerously essentialist and suspiciously Orientalist.” (1991 : 403)

Marxism went away quietly, feminism and postmodernism came in noisily. These approaches/paradigms have gained a number of adherents. But they have not transformed the scholarly corps or even general scholarly discourse the way that thirty years ago — overnight it seemed at the time — the portraits of Freud and Parsons were ripped from the pantheon and replaced by Levi-Strauss. Paradigm partisans have not shredded the field, as has happened in other parts of the academy, but the level of peevishness has risen a notch and some outbursts of it are not easy to distinguish from bigotry. If researchers come, through empathy, to resemble the people they study (a thesis proposed by Ronald Dore) then the mood these days among American scholars of Japan may reflect the mood drift said to be taking place in Japanese society, from *amae* and *omoiyari* to *urami*.

If we turn and look to the future, the field may of course be transformed by new paradigms; I think it is almost sure to be transformed by new people. I base this forecast on population trends in my classroom over the past decade.

Almost every year since 1966 I have offered a course on modern Japanese society and human relations. (Almost always in the same room, which remains unblemished by new paint or new furniture). For the first two decades some fifteen to twenty students enrolled, now the number is around forty. While the total number doubled, the percentage of graduate students went up fourfold. My audience now is *han-han* undergraduate and graduate students.

So the general level of sophistication in the room is much higher. Years ago only about one student in four had even visited Japan, now three out of four lived in Japan, many for extended periods, some for more years than I have. Now, too, the class includes a few *ryu-gakusei* from Japan. Before the mid-1980s very few students had any *Nihongo* competence, now there are native speakers in the room who are not shy about correcting the *kanji* I scrawl on the blackboard. And about half of the class has advanced language competence. For several years I have distributed a bilingual course outline.

Most students in the old days enrolled because of general curiosity, or because they were Asian Americans interested in *ru-tsu*, or because the class filled an otherwise blank hour in their time schedules. On further questioning I found that in many instances a “Japan experience” was memorable in the life of someone close to them — maybe a father who had served in the Allied Occupation or an aunt who made business trips to Tokyo. Now they are in the class because they are convinced that Japan experience in one form or another will be important in their own lives.

Visually the scene no longer looks like a gathering of young whites from the Chicago suburbs, it resembles a mini-conference of Asia-Pacific nations. In any particular semester at least four or five nationalities will be represented. The mixture will include some students from Japan itself, from Korea, China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaya, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. (Some years there also are students from Europe or Africa or Latin America).

When I compare it with my cohort in the 1950s the young cohort next in line has begun graduate studies with *Nihongo* skills and Japan experience almost at the level my age-peers

and I had reached at the time we left graduate school. The JET Program may not be improving the quality of spoken English in Japan but it already has improved the quality of preparation in applicants to Japan Studies departments in the U.S. These students already have seen Japan from inside and from normal eye-level. They have had time to temper their fascination with Japan by enduring the discipline of daily duties in Japanese organizations. Surely they should be able to do much better than my generation has in this effort to break the Gaimusho sound barrier — to document the galaxies of other Japans not included in the Official Explanations.

These students already are combining Japan expertise with other skills and types of knowledge in novel ways. They will address new publics much more effectively than my generation can. For example, another of my students also is in Japan at present doing dissertation research. He has taken triple training in anthropology and medicine as well as Japan Studies. Eventually he will hold both a PhD and an MD. He has completed his medical training, and as a doctor he can relate to Japanese physicians with a collegiality none of us can approximate. And the next time I am invited to speak to doctors in the Midwest I know just the right man for the job.

Not least, the students of today will come of age professionally as an international cadre of *sen'yu*: veterans of the classroom and E-mail battles of the nineties. They should have on a global level what the first postwar generation of U.S. scholars in our field had on a national level, a shared sense of origins and mission. That was what brought that postwar generation together, as I watched them — not some kind of shared enslavement to Modernization Theory, as is now being retrofitted on them. To anyone who tagged along after them and knew many of them over many years the charge is bizarre. Scholars in that postwar generation were as diverse in their thinking as any collection of humans; there probably are more paradigm puppets in the field today. Modernization gave them a label and an umbrella story-concept that each could draw on while writing his own narrative. Our umbrella today seems torn and tattered by comparison.

What should be done by way of *jinzai ikusei* for the new cohort? I suggest a policy slogan of More of the Same — and I do not mean that flippantly. Provide more opportunities for language training and direct involvement in Japanese life before and during their years in graduate school. Provide more support for combining Japan Studies with all sorts of other fields, not just commerce or law or journalism. Provide, after they move into scholarly practice, easy access to fax and E-mail and other media so that they can continue to network globally as they did personally on campus. And not least, provide them with invitations to future symposia like this one. Some of them ought to have been included today: we are talking about their future.

The globalization of Japan Studies is not something that will happen in the twenty-first century. I already have to deal with it every time I walk into that classroom and wonder how I should explain some feature of Japanese society in a way that will most readily be understood by people from at least half a dozen different countries.

I was invited here to speak, I agreed to speak so that I could come to listen. I need all the help you can give me. that multinational class has made teaching vastly more of a challenge than it was ten years ago. It also is vastly more rewarding.

### **A Note of Thanks**

For their efforts in preparing a Japanese-language version of this report, which I read at the Kyoto Conference session, I am deeply indebted to two former students: Professor Yamamoto Yu-ji, now Director of the International Exchange Center, Osaka International University; and Professor Kay Ikeda-Thorne, now of Barnard College.

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