Asian Studies beyond Borders: A Comment

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I have been a member of Japan Association for Asian Studies (JAAS) for forty-six years, since 1967. For quite a number of years, while the Association was still nascent, I was a de facto assistant editor of the Association’s quarterly journal, Aziya Kenkyu. Later, I officially served as its editor. I now realize that by proofreading many articles during those times, I managed to familiarize myself with the Asian studies discipline while learning about myriad countries and societies, which I had not researched in the field. Later I served on the JAAS Board of Directors and the Board of Executive Directors before I was appointed President from 1989 to 1991.

In the year of 1967, I returned from the United States where I had studied as a graduate student for four years. It was when I started studying as a foreign student in the United States in 1963 that I encountered what was known as area studies and I became a student of Asian area studies. For half a century since then, I have continued as a student, as a researcher, and as a member of JAAS. I would like to extend my personal congratulations for the Association’s commemoration of its sixtieth anniversary with this international symposium and I am grateful to the Association for inviting me as a participant in it.

The theme of this international symposium, “Asian Studies beyond Borders: Where do we come from? Where are we going?” is quite fascinating. I am particularly drawn to the latter part of the main title, “beyond borders.” The borders referred to here are not exactly the same as the borders being debated in talks of regional security issues within Asia. Telescopically speaking, however, I believe Asian studies beyond borders will contribute to resolving the regional security issues of Asian borders.

Needless to tell you, Asian area studies was born as an academic discipline in the United States and was in its heyday when I got there. Asian studies was one of the United States’ cold war strategies, thriving as a way to learn about enemy countries and it was carried out on individual nations. China area studies represented the typical case; China, which no one could enter beyond borders, was studied as a single, unknown entity from the outside. On the whole, U.S. scholars led attempts to read the riddle that was China by mobilizing all sorts of means, except for doing field research; scholars from other countries joined in U.S. attempts to better understand China. Southeast Asian studies were similar, although Southeast Asia was, and is, of course a region, not a country; the fields were researched indeed, but the region was viewed virtually as a single entity, as a target area competed for by external powers in the cold war, and studied from the outside.

However, when I started studying at Harvard, the graduate program for Asian studies I entered was named “Regional studies: East Asia,” not “Area studies: East Asia.” Chinese studies, Japanese studies, Korean studies and Vietnamese studies were each carried out as distinct area studies, particularly within the discipline of history. Yet, it was required that each nation also be studied within the broader regional framework of East Asia. Every graduate student therefore needed to simultaneously study two or three East Asian languages intensively. Japanese was required in the Chinese studies, for example, as the language was considered indispensable to tap off from Japanese studies on China.

I started studying modern Asian history in order to answer my question why, to speak figuratively, my father and grandfather were sent to the battlefield and fought in a war Japan waged
against other Asian countries. I suppose I have kept pursuing this question since then. Why did Japan start the Manchurian Incident that led to the Asia-Pacific War? For my Ph.D. thesis, I proposed to write about the preceding history of Sino-Japanese relations in Northeast China over the twenty-five years from the Russo-Japanese war to the Manchurian Incident. Harvard’s East Asian regional studies accepted my proposal, which was considered a study of international relations beyond borders and therefore a project of regional studies.

Upon returning to Japan in 1967, I read a paper at the JAAS conference in the spring of 1968. I revised the paper into an article which was printed in the fall 1968 issue of *Aziya Kenkyu*. I was lucky to make my academic debut this way, all thanks to the JAAS and *Aziya Kenkyu*. I wrote the article based on research for my dissertation and focused on the results of the Japanese colonial authorities’ attempts at education of native residents in Manchuria. When I selected this topic in the United States, studies on the modernization of developing countries was a thriving field of research and one of the target areas was education and its effects upon modernization. I must admit I was influenced by the trend.

In 1980, JAAS held a symposium to discuss “New Trends of ‘Area Studies’,” with quotation marks on area studies in the title. As a side note, it seems commonplace for Asian studies to periodically call attention to the problem of area studies. In any case, I was on the panel at the symposium to discuss area studies, although no one regarded me as a specialist in the field. I was bold enough to propose that what I called an oblique look should be applied in studying an area. By oblique look, or to view diagonally through an area, I intended to argue that area studies experts working from outside of a particular locale could contribute to understanding it by analyzing it through different levels of communities. By this time area specialists had been able to carry out intricate research, living in villages. I wanted to say that to understand the village, it was also necessary to look at space as situated in a multi-level structure of societies on the village level, local level, national level, regional level and so on. I went as far as to suggest that area studies from the outside might have an advantage of seeing the multi-level structures surrounding the village or the country in question. In response to my ideas, I was criticized as an armchair student of area studies. The criticism against me was warranted, as a true area specialist was now able to enter the field, crossing borders.

Twenty years ago, to commemorate its fortieth anniversary, JAAS published the four-volume series *Koza Gendai Ajiya* (Contemporary Asia), which was a collection of selected articles written by members. I participated in its planning as well as its publication negotiations and I edited one of the four volumes. The volumes were entitled: “Nationalism and Nation-States,” “Modernization and Structural Changes,” “Democratization and Economic Development,” and “Regional System and International Relations.” Key words included nationalism, nation-states, modernization, democratization, economic development, and regional system. The language well reflects what we were interested in during those years. In short, the nation-state was the center of our concern. We all presumed that the national border or territorial border was of the highest significance, almost exclusive of other types of borders.

Just before entering the twenty-first century, JAAS held a number of international symposia where the almost inevitable theme was “economic development and democratization in Asia.” We hotly discussed how economic development and democratization were interconnected and whether they were *sine qua non* conditions for each other. Conscious or unconscious, our framework was based on the one-country study method. But it now seems that that era was the final period of one-country Asian studies. People, goods, money and information were already moving across borders in Asia as well. Now we know, for instance, that democratization is not indispensable to economic development. Yet, economic development vastly increased the trans-border movements of people, goods, money and information. These interrelations beyond national lines in turn made it clear that we were surrounded by all sorts of other borders to contend with on many different societal levels.
Finally, ten years ago, to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary, JAAS published a three-volume series of article collections written by members. One of the volumes is simply titled "trans-border movements." The articles analyze various phenomena of trans-border movements in Asia, indicating that trans-border movements are recently one of the most serious concerns of Asian studies. To put it in another way, "trans" or transcending is considered as significant as the borders themselves. I would, therefore, like to ask each panelist how we shall construct trans-border institutions for Asian studies, because I am afraid we Asian studies specialists are somewhat lagging behind the general public’s trans-border movements. In this respect, I was glad to hear yesterday from Professor Takenaka, our new President, that we are going to have more chances for international exchange in Asian studies.

Only in a very cursory manner, I presented to you my personal recollections of JAAS’s sixty year history and corresponding shifts in academic interest toward Asia. I would like to stress that Asian specialists of Japan have studied the region with almost the same paradigms as Asian specialists of the other countries, almost synchronically. And now it seems that the new paradigm of Asian studies for all of us is "Asian studies beyond borders,” as declared here, today.

People live in villages, towns and cities, as they live in countries at the same time. And now people live in Asia more than they did before. People live in Asia, clashing with one another, yet with increasingly similar lifestyles and ideals. I sincerely hope that Asian specialists together, beyond borders, will carry on Asian studies as to correspond to this dynamic reality.

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