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Bridging over Troubled Water?
A Native Feminist Anthropologist’s Thoughts on “Bridging” Inside and Outside of Anthropological Studies of Japan in Japan

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It is my honor to be in this historic symposium with Professor Joy Hendry, a distinguished anthropologist of Japan from the U.K., as well as with these excellent Japan-based colleagues who specialize in the anthropology of Japan. Still, honestly speaking, I have complicated feelings about “bridging anthropological studies of Japan inside and outside of Japan”, because my various research interests require of me different, contested mindsets towards the anthropology of Japan outside of Japan.

As a self-identified “native anthropologist”, or an anthropologist who studies one’s own culture with clear awareness of (post-)colonial power relationships (see below), I would first like to present my three research interests and accompanying three different kinds of experiences and position(ality)es in global academia. I believe that these cases epitomize three possible attitudes that any Japan-based anthropologist of Japan might take. Following this, I would like to discuss how it is possible to bridge anthropological studies of Japan inside and outside of Japan, while critiquing the very concept of “inside/outside” or “bridging”.

A Feminist Anthropologist Welcomed Outside, Ostracized Inside

First of all, I am not only an anthropologist of Japan, but also a feminist. My first research interest lies in gendered cultural nationalism in Japan. The interest dates back to my Ph.D. studies at the University of Toronto, when I first encountered anthropology itself. I conducted my first anthropological fieldwork on women tea ceremony practitioners in the metropolitan Tokyo area for nine months from 1998 to 1999.

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I became an anthropologist of Japan rather unexpectedly and unwillingly. As a Japan-born Japanese, studying my own culture, after coming all the way to Canada, did not make sense to me initially. But I was persuaded by my supervisor, who said that the most important thing was not whether you write about a remote culture or your own culture, but that you write a dissertation that no one else could write. He also found my prior research experience investigating the Japanese tea ceremony (as a master’s student in semiotics-linguistics in Japan) an advantage.

Based on my experience and knowledge of the tea ceremony, I, now as an anthropology student, decided to explore why the tea ceremony in contemporary Japan was practiced predominantly by women, unlike in pre-modern times when it was practiced predominantly by men. In order to answer this question, I fully exerted my anthropological attitudes, feminist stance, and outsider’s critical eye on the cultural nationalism of my own country, all of which I had nurtured in Canada.

Three years later I came back to Japan and published my dissertation as two books. One book was in English, published by RoutledgeCurzon and targeted to an academic readership; the other was in Japanese, published by Kinokuniya Shoten and targeted at both academic and general readerships. English (academic) readers were small in number, but reviewed my work positively. Japanese readers’ reaction, however, split into two. While academics wrote positive reviews, some readers and nearly half of my participants in the field showed displeasure. They claimed that my work did not reflect the truth or reality. In fact, the first Japanese publisher that I contacted had refused to publish my work, saying that the work would induce “unnecessary opposition” (無用の反発) from readers; it also said that “a tea ceremony specialist” who reviewed my manuscript found my understanding of the tea ceremony “inaccurate” (正しくない). Even the publisher that accepted my manuscript advised me to rewrite some parts in more moderate language, which advice I followed.

Hearing these unwelcoming comments, I realized that my anthropological and feminist views were “too North American”, “alien”, “militant” or “off the mark” to popular Japanese readers’ eyes, although they seemed accurate when I was writing the work as my dissertation in Canada. As I further settled down in Japan, I increasingly had a feeling of alienation towards my own argument. Still, overall, I believe that my books presented an innovative way of looking at my own culture-society, even if it may appear “different” or “foreign” to general readers. Also, the work would not have been possible without my “looking from outside” of Japan.

In this first case, I feel that I fit better in North America than in Japan. I believe that North American anthropology and feminism provided me with significant theoretical frameworks and discourses that opened up a new perspective on Japanese culture-society. I also believe that I was able to acquire these theoretical stances because I lived in Canada. In other words, not solely reading but also living in the environment that nurtured certain intellectual positions and perspectives allows you more thorough understandings of them.
A “Native’s” Protest towards Outside

My second research interest lies in representations of the Japanese, especially women, in English-language ethnography. Although this theme somewhat contests my stance as stated above, it is deeply connected to my identity (or identification) as a “native” feminist anthropologist.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Kato 2006), “native anthropologists” are not merely anthropologists who study their own cultures. “Native anthropologists” by definition must study and write about their own cultures with full awareness of postcolonial power relationships, that is the power imbalance between the centre (English-speaking world, with the U.S. at its core) and the periphery; they must also be fully aware of their own positionality in the latter.

My consciousness as a “native anthropologist” emerged slowly after obtaining my degree, when I gradually came to think that I must say something about the derogatory depictions of Japanese women in ethnographies that I had read during my Ph.D. studies.

Although I learned a lot from North American anthropology and feminism, as I stated above, I am at the same time critical that too many works eroticize and Orientalize Japanese women (and men), especially those written by anthropologists and other “Japan specialists” (in cultural studies, media studies, and the even more ambiguous discipline called “Japanese studies”) based in the U.S. Needless to say, such a colonizing gaze derives from the colonial and neo-colonial relationship that has existed between the U.S. and Japan since early modern times, particularly since the end of World War II.

Even more disturbing is the fact that it is almost always women anthropologists and other “Japan specialists” in the U.S. who eroticize Japanese women, through sensationalizing locution and/or presentation of violent visual images from Japanese subculture (or rather, underground culture). I would argue that for them Japanese women are a convenient “Other” (with capital O) whom they can safely eroticize without being criticized as colonialists, because Japan does not belong to the so-called “Third World” but to the industrialized world. Through depictions of Japanese women as submissive, desirable objects for men, they can simultaneously draw audiences' attention to such “sexy” topics, claim an advantage as women researchers in tackling with such “sensitive” topics, and emphasize their supposed feminist advancement in contrast to such “Other” women.

When I submitted a paper manuscript on the above discussion to a mainstream U.S. academic journal, it rejected my work outright, saying that my understanding of American anthropology was insufficient. Meanwhile, when I sent the same paper to the journal Asian Anthropology, published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, it accepted my work immediately. The editors said that the paper was so important that it should be published in a more mainstream journal to be read by broader readership.

In this second case, I am more inclined to contest or protest against the anthropology of Japan as practiced outside of Japan, especially against American anthropology and the
U.S.-centric world system of anthropology. Considering the obvious power inequalities in politics (both in international relations and academia) as well as in language (English-speakers can publish and circulate their work among a global readership in their own language, while Japanese-speakers cannot), a pastoral image of “bridging” inside and outside of Japan seems to be simplistic. Rather, I am inclined to first require of U.S.(centric) anthropologists thorough self-critique of their persisting Orientalisation and eroticization of “Others”, the same self-critique that they conducted in regards to the Third World in the 1980s.

**Collaboration with Outside Researchers**

My third research interest focuses on young Japanese peoples’ global mobility and self-views, and falls in-between the two strands presented above. I do not entirely owe the theoretical frameworks I employ regarding this topic to academia outside of Japan, nor does my personal or political mindset contest against it.

Since my postdoctoral days I have been interested in the views of self, work and the world held by young Japanese temporary residents in Canada (more recently, in Australia as well) who are in search of a “real me” (本当の自分) or “what I really want to do” (やりたいこと). I call my participants “self-searching migrants” or jibun-sagashi imin (自分探し移民). I coined this term based on a Japanese phrase jibun-sagashi (self-searching), which has become clichéd in the mass media since the early 1990s.

In this research I am attempting to find common self-views and behaviors shared among young people in any post-industrial society in the post-modern era, and at the same time I am attempting to find the “Japanese” characteristics, if any, of migrants born and raised in Japan. In this attempt I have a special focus on “self-searching”, both as an act and as locution. In my view, the act of cross-national travel in search of “what I really want to do” is ubiquitous around the world today; yet, whether the phrase “self-searching” makes sense or not in a certain language is another question.

I have presented the English phrase “self-searching” in many anthropology and Japan studies conferences overseas and have asked English-speaking audiences if this phrase makes sense. Most of the time the audience shows a great interest in this unexpected phrasing, saying that they know exactly what I mean, or that they have seen this kind of people (both as emigrants and immigrants) in their own countries. Some give a similar English concept, self-help, for a comparative discussion. Meanwhile, almost all of the English-speakers find the phrase “self-searching” somewhat unnatural, suggesting that “self-exploration” sounds more natural. Based on their comments, I then probed into these questions: Why does the Japanese language make the phrase jibun-sagashi possible or natural? What is the difference between “searching” and “exploring”? Is the Japanese language, which naturalizes “self-searching”, related to the/a Japanese self-view?

In this third case, English-speaking audiences are my research collaborators, and I can say
comfortably that I am "bridging" the two linguistic and academic worlds to stimulate each other. I would have never been aware of the idiosyncrasy of my own language-culture without translating this term into another language and asking native speakers how it sounds. In turn, my audiences would have never known this concept, which does not exist in their own language but is possible in another language, unless they had heard it from an outside researcher.

Blurring, rather than Bridging: Towards a More Insider-sensitive Anthropology of Japan

Having these three mutually contested mindsets within myself, I do not know yet how to respond to the call from Professor Kuwayama and the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology (JASCA) for "bridging" anthropological studies of Japan inside and outside of Japan. One or two, or all three, of the attitudes presented above may win the empathy of other Japan-based, overseas-trained anthropologists of Japan.

Still, I am certain of a couple of things. First, "bridging" does not, or should not, merely mean translating Japanese-language anthropological works about Japan into English. Nor should it merely mean Japanese anthropologists’ attending overseas conferences and presenting their work in English. Second, “bridging” may not always mean a peaceful act; it may require debates. It may require of the overseas-based anthropologists thorough self-critique on their colonizing gaze, and more insider-sensitive approaches to Japan. The questions are: Why do these overseas-based anthropologists of Japan need to be attentive or sensitive to Japan now, especially when Japan’s presence in global political and economic scenes is said to be declining? What can Japanese anthropology do to persuade them?

I do not know the answers, yet I can think of at least two possible ways not actually to “bridge” inside and outside of Japan, but to blur the very boundaries between “inside” and “outside”, and thereby to critique the very concept of “bridging”. I am suggesting blurring not because I am a cosmopolitan who believes in the ultimate sisterhood/brotherhood among all people. Contrarily, I am skeptical about such a belief because people do not (have a reason to) understand each other as far as power relationships exist between nation-states or culture-societies—and power relationships will never cease to exist. Therefore, my suggestion for blurring aims to minimize the unavoidable insensitivity of people in “more powerful” areas toward “less powerful” areas and peoples.

First, anthropologists in Japan should be more inclusive and collaborative with Japan-based international anthropologists of Japan like Professor Roberson here, or with the members of Anthropology of Japan in Japan (AJJ), for which Professor Horiguchi and I are serving as executive committee members. As I experienced after coming back from Canada myself, living in and having a base in Japan usually enhances the sensitivity to Japanese points of view. At the same time, because of their original understanding of the outside culture (including that of academia), international colleagues are “outsiders”. Enhancing the visibility of these
anthropologists of Japan in Japan would be a first step for “Japanese” anthropology (of Japan or elsewhere) itself to be outbound.

Second, as an organization, JASCA should encourage and financially support graduate students and younger scholars to study and present papers overseas. Here “study” does not mean fieldwork or visiting overseas universities; rather it means enrollment in degree programs overseas. Also, presenting papers overseas should not solely mean adding a line in one’s curriculum vitae: it should instead also mean participant observation of other “cultures of academia”. By attending overseas conferences, younger scholars will learn the “cultures of academia” of various parts of the world, most typically of, but not limited to, “powerful” areas, where they can be both a collaborator and a protester. These areas may be not only the U.S. but also other English-speaking countries such as the U.K., Canada, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, as well as non-English-speaking countries in Europe, or neighboring non-English speaking countries such as Korea or China. By participating in academic fora abroad, younger scholars would be able to help decentralize and relativize U.S.-centric anthropology and its idiosyncratic “culture of academia”.

In short, any anthropologist must be insider-sensitive, and anthropologists of Japan are no exception. The question is how to retrieve and enhance the sensitivity in the anthropology of Japan (or any kind of “Japanese studies”) outside of Japan, where Japan-based and Japan-born anthropologists of Japan are often absent; and Japan-based and Japan-born anthropologists should have a significant role to play there.

**Postscript: Further Thoughts on “ Cultures of Academia”**

I had an opportunity to further think about “cultures of academia” in the discussion time after the panel. First, at a very concrete level, different regions on the globe have different “conference cultures”, as Professor Hendry put it: in the U.K., for example, half-an-hour tea breaks are inserted between sessions, as pointed out by Professor Horiguchi, for participants’ communication, while in the U.S. conferences are designed with much tighter schedules in which presenters must “market” themselves in haste. Therefore Japan-based anthropologists must adjust to respective “culture” to make themselves best understood.

Second, “cultures of academia” contain, again, power relationships. When I apply for overseas conferences as an individual, that is, not as a part of a panel, I am sometimes allocated into such obscure sessions as “Critical Issues and Methods in Anthropology” (read “Miscellaneous” or “Leftover”) with junior scholars, including graduate students. The conference organizers may have made a decision based on my gender and country of origin, without much interest in my title (Dr. or Professor). Although I want to find myself in such thematic sessions as “Global Mobility in Postmodern Era” or “Gendered Representations”, to meet new people who have similar academic interests, this does not always happen.

Although I am a Canada-trained native feminist anthropologist in a fulltime position at a
respectable Japanese university for more than ten years, I sometimes feel myself nothing more than an Orientalized woman in academia outside of Japan. Future generations of anthropologists in Japan must be aware that “Japan(ese)” is not unmarked either as a field or as one’s own ethnicity. It is marked, and one needs to manage several different modes, from collaborative to protesting, according to what topic s/he talks about and where conferences take place, if s/he wants to be recognized or accepted as a respectable anthropologist of Japan outside of Japan.

REFERENCES

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