The 2nd JASCA International Symposium

Whither “Japanese Anthropology”?:
A Summary of the Post-roundtable Discussion

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Reaching a Wider Audience

One of the key areas touched upon in the post-roundtable discussion was the issue of the audience of anthropological works. One audience member agreed with Gordon Mathews that anthropological works in Japan have reached a wider domestic general readership than in the U.S. Another deplored the fact that Japanese anthropologists are also drifting away from comprehensive Japanese, much like the American counterparts, and argued that with the fragmentation of anthropology today at a global scale, many anthropologists across the globe are struggling to make anthropology more engaging or more attractive. The former commenter raised a question about how anthropological research in Japan could reach a wider audience beyond Japan. Mathews responded that there is no simple answer to exactly how, but pointed out that there is indeed a global hunger for “good ethnographies.” While Mathews agreed with Yuriko Yamanouchi that translation is not simply a matter of language but also of style and the varying systems of knowledge production, he also suggested that ethnographies are translatable and can potentially have a global impact, much like Japanese works in literature, such as Haruki Murakami’s novels, that have gained global popularity through their translations.

With regard to the latter comment about the need for anthropology to become more engaging, Mathews agreed that with the neoliberalization of universities worldwide, there is more and more pressure on anthropologists to publish in specialized ways; this is because very broadly the humanities and the social sciences are called upon to mimic the hard sciences. He explained that the hard sciences have a high affinity with neoliberalism because of the visibility of citation counts, which makes it a much simpler “game.” Mathews provided the example of “Google Scholar” being used for citation counts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This structure is pushing scholars in the humanities and “soft” social sciences toward greater and greater specialization, and towards more and more
writing that is not comprehensible to a lay public. As an audience member mentioned, Japan may be less affected by the neoliberal audit culture, with little emphasis being placed on the Social Science Citation Index as a yardstick for assessing scholarly achievement. However, Mathews suggested that this might change in the not too distant future as, with the heightened level of globalization of anthropology, the  

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(isolation) and independence of Japanese anthropology that Yamanouchi discussed is becoming less and less sustainable.

Dilemmas with publishing for a general audience were also expressed from the floor along with Mathews. One early career anthropologist in the audience noted that in publishing her doctoral thesis from a commercial publisher in Japan, she was faced with the frustration of cutting out some detail and theoretical discussion at the request of the publisher. Mathews agreed that in reaching a wide audience, there are sacrifices to be made. He noted his own dilemmas in the publication of his work  

Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong  

(2011), an award-winning ethnography, which was often reviewed as “not academic enough” and was largely ignored by academics and yet was seen as “too academic” in the eyes of the general public. He suggested that he often imagines his favorite secondary school teacher as the primary audience and advocated a simple, straightforward ethnography written in clear language. As a general piece of advice to anthropologists with job security, Mathews suggested that anthropologists should simply try to be independent and to write what they want to, never because it is a trend. He hopes that more anthropologists will write for a lay audience, so that anthropology may have a broader public presence than it has now in the U.S. or Japan.

Tom Gill responded by suggesting that one way of maintaining a comprehensible style is by letting your subjects speak and listening to their voices. Gill’s own work  

Everyday Affordance: The World of Nishikawa Kimitsu, the Day Laboring Philosopher of Kotobuki-chō  

(2013) is based on the voice of his subject, with Gill writing down what he said and translating it into English. Gill argued that this is how a researcher can fill in the gaps between the researcher and the researched, between different languages or language communities. He mentioned that the Japanese version, published by a small publishing house in Kyoto with the price of about 1,500 yen (approximately 12.5 U.S. dollars), sold about 1,000 copies, whereas the English version,  

Yokohama Street Life: The Precarious Career of a Japanese Day Laborer  

(2015) published from Lexington Books with the price of about 9,000 yen (approximately 75 U.S. dollars), has sold only 100 copies or so. He noted a similar gap with his co-edited works on the Tohoku disaster (Gill et al. 2013a, 2013b), and gave a positive appraisal of the existence in Japan of publishing houses in-between general and academic publishing, selling books ordinary people read. He challenged simply dividing the anthropological communities into two – a Euro-American core and a periphery of which Japan is part –, suggesting that the fact that anthropological works are

\[1\] According to Mathews, this book sold very well despite having been published by a prestigious university press in the U.S. that specializes in scholarly books. Its Chinese translation won the Hong Kong Book Award in June 2014.
more accessible and read by more people in Japan shows that Japan is another core, situated more closely to the society to which anthropology belongs. Gill also suggested that scholars have a number of constellations of disciplines working with each other, in points, lines, and intersections, rather than working in an academic world system comprised of a single core and a periphery.

Mathews mentioned further that rather than having their ethnographies translated, anthropologists whose first language is not English should consider writing in English from the outset. While he acknowledged that writing in a foreign language is challenging, he pointed out that non-native writers can have an advantage in communicating to a larger audience, in direct and straightforward language, compared with native-speakers who tend to write in complicated English. He encouraged Japanese anthropologists to publish in English, suggesting that many academic publishers in the English-speaking world are dying for books that reach large readerships and sell well. These publishers often have copyeditors who can assist with language.

There were also discussions about the challenges of communicating the importance of anthropological knowledge in interdisciplinary research projects. In response to an audience member’s comments about the difficulty of working in applied interdisciplinary projects, Mathews noted in particular the challenges of working with quantitative-minded scholars in other disciplines. Junji Koizumi suggested that there is potential for anthropologists to contribute more to applied anthropology.

**Theory, Data, and “Japanese Anthropology”**

The global presence, or lack thereof, of “Japanese anthropology” was heavily debated among panelists and audience members. In response to Gill’s paper which emphasized the global presence of “Japanese anthropology,” Mathews pointed out that the examples given by Gill – the studies of African hunter-gatherers and Nepal – are small areas where Japanese scholars have contributed globally. He noted that if one were to ask the average attendees of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) or the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings to name Japanese anthropologists, their faces would probably draw blanks. He contended that “Japanese anthropology” does not have the global influence that it deserves, which he sees as a reflection of the ethnocentric attitude found among many Americans.

There followed debates about the extent to which the Kyoto University research on African hunter-gatherer societies, which Gill held in high regard, is representative of “Japanese anthropology.” One audience member mentioned that the Kyoto scholars are exceptional within “Japanese anthropology.” For example, instead of attending the annual meetings of the Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology (JASCA) they frequently go to African studies meetings in Japan and publish their work in their own journals. Another audience member agreed that the Kyoto School cannot be regarded as representative of
“Japanese anthropology,” and that their research should rather be viewed as individual contributions.

Still another audience member argued that lack of a theoretical paradigm is the other side of the coin of the richness of data that the Kyoto School thrives in. Mathews responded by pointing out that the word “paradigm” comes from Thomas Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). He explained that “paradigm” refers to how scientists as a whole believe in a common reality and work on the basis of that reality. Mathews noted that anthropology is a pre-paradigmatic field without a paradigm because it is not a “science” yet. He suggested that anthropologists may keep on studying and may invent a paradigm in the future, but it lacks a paradigm at the present moment, and he then questioned whether anthropological knowledge is improving or changing to fit a changing world.

There were debates among panelists and the floor surrounding the image of “Japanese anthropology” as data-driven. Gill agreed with Han and an audience member that in the case of “Japanese anthropology,” especially the Kyoto School, the intense, meticulous attention to ethnographic detail and prioritizing of empirical data ahead of grand theory seem to represent something that “Japanese anthropology” is noted for, that it is something that we can hang on to, without necessarily trying to claim that it is unique to Japan. Gill acknowledged that no one person or group represents “Japanese anthropology” and that “Japanese anthropology” should be seen as an amorphous body, comprised of a relatively diverse and a widely varied group of scholars. He nevertheless explained that in his presentation he had focused his attention on the contributions of “Japanese anthropology” in the studies of Africa and Nepal because when the peripheral nature of “Japanese anthropology” is discussed, associations are ordinarily made with the anthropologists who study Japan itself or other East Asian countries.

Min Han, in comparing “Japanese anthropology” to “Chinese anthropology,” suggested that a feature of “Japanese anthropology” is careful research, with its attention to history and the diversity among different groups within the same society, as well as the careful generation of theory from data. She mentioned that “Chinese anthropology” was similar to “Japanese anthropology” in its early years when anthropologists trained in the U.S. or the U.K. were teaching, but since the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949, the political environment has pushed scholars to conduct research that meet the expectations of the state. She herself has trained students who have come to Japan from China to learn from the good points of the Japanese style such as attention to detail and the process of fieldwork, the emphasis on the researcher’s autonomy, as well as the balance between data and theoretical framework.

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2 Editor’s note: in the 1920s and 30s, there were frequent academic exchanges between China and the West, including present-day Russia. Scholars who visited China at that time include Robert Park, Sergei M. Shirokogoroff, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. Among the Chinese students who studied in the West prior to the communist revolution is Xiataong Fei, the author of *Peasant Life in China* (1939). This book is prefaced by Bronislaw Malinowski, with whom Fei studied in London. Before going to the U.K., Fei studied under Wenzao Wu, who had attended lectures by Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Alexander Goldenweiser while studying at Columbia in the late 1920s.
Yamanouchi, on the other hand, pointed out that in *Bunka Jinruigaku (Japanese Journal of Cultural Anthropology)*, many anthropologists discuss theories, and argued that the varying ways in which theories are constructed or crafted in different anthropological communities have not been sufficiently grappled with. She drew attention to the importance of being aware of the presumptions of knowledge production, which lie deeper than in meticulous data or attention to detail. She suggested that one reason why “Japanese anthropology” has an image as being data-driven is that when Japanese anthropologists present overseas, their audiences often pay most attention to data. Thus, according to Yamanouchi, responsibility for this image lies with both Japanese anthropologists and their global audiences. Some audience members also noted the danger of generalizing “Japanese anthropology” as being data-oriented, pointing to the differences in doctoral training at different institutions in Japan. One provided the example of Masaji Chiba, noted in the international community of legal anthropology more for his theoretical work than his data, and suggested that Chiba’s oral history approach and papers on his personal experiences provide anthropologists with a learning resource.

With regard to the long-standing, fundamental question of balancing theory and data, one attendee offered the example of the heated debate around the 1960s among Japanese anthropologists about the place of fieldwork in their discipline. Eiichiro Ishida, a leading figure in postwar Japanese anthropology who taught at the University of Tokyo, argued for the importance of thorough documentary analysis before setting out to do fieldwork, whereas Jiro Kawakita from Kyoto maintained that fieldwork should precede studying theories, since theories will limit anthropologists’ scope when they conduct fieldwork, and that theories should therefore be developed post-fieldwork.

In relation to the issue of how anthropologists should handle data, one audience member underscored the importance of the “triangulation” discussed in Yamanouchi’s commentary, noting its similarity to Junzo Kawada’s “triangular methods.” Following Kawada, the audience member asserted that Japanese anthropological works should be based on comparisons among three points of view: the Japanese point of view, the Western point of view, and the culture of the research object. The speaker further noted that anthropologists are increasingly becoming aware of the subjectivity of their perspectives, and that anthropologists from the peripheries may effectively challenge Western hegemonic thinking by presenting their works in global centers.

**Issues with the Boundaries of “Japanese Anthropology” at the Individual Level**

There were debates surrounding how individual anthropologists engage with “Japanese anthropology” and whether “Japanese anthropology” is a meaningful category to employ, taking into account the existence of border-crossing anthropologists. Koizumi suggested that as individual anthropologists, we should be allowed to research as we see fit. An audience
member refuted this, asserting the need to consider the advantages that “Japanese anthropology” can have for academics based in Japan. Koizumi responded that the uniqueness of “Japanese anthropology” as a collective, such as meticulous data gathering, should become apparent when works are collectively examined in retrospect. Gill agreed with Koizumi that there is no need to look for a uniquely Japanese style of anthropology, but noted that there are general trends and characteristics that one notices when different national academic communities are compared.

Mathews suggested that with “national anthropology,” much like the concept of “culture,” questions arise as to “who belongs to what.” As a senior audience member pointed out, all the roundtable panelists have actually crossed borders between Japan and the U.S., Australia, the U.K., China, or Hong Kong, which complicates the definition of “a Japanese anthropologist.” Mathews and Yamanouchi expressed their own dilemmas surrounding their positionality. Mathews used the institutional affiliation and language(s) used for publications to classify scholars, but agreed with Koizumi that in the end we are individuals and we do not need to fit into national paradigms. He also suggested that there is a more typical or more stereotypical “Japanese anthropology” or “American anthropology,” and the identities of anyone in the fringes of these communities are always confusing. He imagined that as time goes on, the national boundaries of anthropology will become less important and that we will simply have a more global discipline, which, in his view, would be for the better.

In relation to the issue of border-crossing anthropologists, a question was raised about the relative advantages and difficulties experienced by foreign-trained Japanese anthropologists when teaching anthropology in Japan. Yuki Imoto, who received her doctorate at the University of Oxford and is now teaching in Japan, pointed to the difficulty of generalizing due to a diverse range of individual experiences, but recalled that entering “Japanese anthropology” after coming back from the U.K. was difficult, as she was faced with the differences in styles of presentation and scholars’ commentaries at conferences. She stated, however, that she has gradually begun to integrate, and that in terms of job prospects, foreign Ph.D.’s do have an advantage because their applications are seriously considered when they apply for positions in English language education, global/international programs, and interdisciplinary programs, as well as in anthropology programs. Koizumi (Ph.D., Stanford, 1981), humorously noting that the fact that he had done his postgraduate training in the U.S. had escaped his memory, suggested that the important thing about anthropological training is not the locations of the institutions but rather who the individual teachers are. Koizumi’s remarks were elaborated on by an audience member who drew on his experience teaching in China as well as in Japan, and pointed to the importance of “customizing” his ideas for his students and of controlling the classroom well when discussing sensitive political issues. The classes, he argued, should be customized to the audience, the quality of their knowledge, and the social constraints surrounding them.
Concluding Remarks

To conclude, Mathews’ keynote lecture and the following roundtable brought about discussions and debates around issues pertinent to anthropologists based in Japan as well as elsewhere, including issues of audience, theory and data, and the boundaries of “national” anthropologies. Where “Japanese anthropology” will head in the increasingly globalized age is difficult to foresee. What is certain, however, is that approximately fifty anthropologists, both Japanese and non-Japanese, gathered at the 2nd JASCA International Symposium and that they engaged in heated debates of these complex issues, in English at that, which will likely form a basis for a more globally engaging anthropology.

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