Let me ask why, at the outset, I consented to give this talk on the anthropology of Japan in a global context. I am not a Japanese anthropologist; how the hell would I know about where and how Japanese anthropology should proceed?

I am an anthropologist of American background who has lived in Hong Kong for the past 20 years. Much of my early research was on Japan, but not much over the past 10 years, when most of my research has been on Africans and South Asians in Hong Kong and in China. When I read research in Japanese, I tend to read not Japanese anthropologists but sociologists: scholars such as Yuji Genda and Masahiro Yamada, who discuss issues I directly deal with in my own work, as Japanese anthropologists do not, since the work of Japanese anthropologists most often deals not with Japan but with societies beyond Japan. For this reason I do not read much Japanese anthropology if it is not in English. I have written several papers on Japanese anthropology over the years: a paper comparing Japanese and American depictions of Japanese society (2004) and, at Takami Kuwayama’s request, a paper on why Japanese anthropology is ignored outside Japan (2008). But I am not Japanese, I do not write in Japanese, and I am only minimally aware of the major contemporary issues in Japanese anthropology.

If there are problems in Japanese anthropology, then these problems are certainly not for me to diagnose and comment upon—they are for you in the audience to deal with, not me. I do not want to be one more imperialistic foreigner telling Japanese what to do—you know far more than I do about what you may or may not need to do as anthropologists in Japan.
In this sense I have nothing to tell you, and I apologize for even being here, standing before you, paid for with your money. I do not even know why you are here, willing to listen. The problems in contemporary Japanese anthropology are for Japanese to deal with and solve, not me.

However, since I am indeed standing here before you, I should probably say something. The one area in which I may be useful to you is in terms of the globalization of anthropology. I am a member of the organizing committee of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA), and am one of two co-editors of Deja Lu, an anthropological journal of reprints from anthropological journals around the world; through these roles, I have been able to listen to some of the central arguments concerning the globalization of anthropology today. Allow me to discuss what I have learned, and bring in what little I know of Japanese anthropology. Perhaps, in this context, I may be able to be of some small use to you.

The Globalization of Anthropology

It seems absolutely clear that anthropology is becoming increasingly globalized. It used to be that anthropology consisted of Americans and Western Europeans, and Japanese as well, studying tribal peoples and ethnic groups within their colonies. More recently, anthropology has consisted, most basically, of people from rich countries studying people from poor countries. Today, however, anthropology is an increasingly global discipline. The WCAA, founded in 2004, now has 52 member associations, consisting of anthropological societies ranging from the U.S. to Japan to China to India to Chile to Mexico to Tunisia to the Philippines. It holds regular yearly meetings and fosters numerous research initiatives to explore how anthropology may exert a greater global influence. Deja Lu, a journal of anthropological reprints that it republishes, features free access to anthropology from journals across the globe—its last edition (Deja Lu 2015) contained articles from anthropological journals based in 15 different countries. The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES)—whose secretary-general is Junji Koizumi, a man who has had a highly important influence on global anthropology—had at its most recent full meeting in Manchester in 2013, anthropologists from 69 different countries. The American Anthropologist now published a regular article every issue on world anthropology; editorial boards of major journals published in the U.S. and Western Europe increasingly consist of anthropologists from around the world. All of this testifies to a recent explosion of interest in world anthropologies, and more than this, the globalization of anthropology as a discipline. Ulf Hannerz (1996) has conceived of “the global ecumene” as a world in which we are increasingly interlinked not by our likenesses but through our disagreements and debates within a common global forum. Increasingly this is the situation of anthropology throughout the world.

There are problems within this anthropological global ecumene. One problem is that anthropology reflects the global economy, with wealthy countries continuing to dominate
world anthropology. At the meetings described above, even though great efforts are often made to provide funding for those from poorer countries, this is extremely difficult to do, since anthropology itself is poor: Americans, Europeans, and to a lesser extent East Asians still play dominant roles. The WCAA for a number of years managed to fund the plane fares and accommodations of all developing-world presidents of its member anthropological associations in order to attend its meetings, but this now appears to be coming to an end—there simply isn’t the money.

Linked to money are the areas studied by anthropologists for their fieldwork—for anthropologists from poorer countries, it is typically one’s own society that is the area of one’s anthropological fieldwork, whereas anthropologists in wealthy societies can afford to travel elsewhere. The tens of thousands of dollars or millions of yen required for an anthropologist to do fieldwork at some locale distant from one’s own country is obtainable for an anthropologist from the U.S. or the U.K. or Japan, whether that money comes from a research grant or from one’s own pocket, but is probably impossible to obtain for an anthropologist from Pakistan or Uganda or Colombia or Indonesia. American, Western European, and Japanese anthropologists tend to do fieldwork in societies across the globe because they live in societies with the money to do so. Chinese, Indian, Eastern European, Latin American, and African anthropologists typically study their own societies, largely because their societies lack the wealth for them to do otherwise. This is of course reflected in Japan’s anthropological history: before the Second World War, Japan as a colonial power sent its anthropologists to study ethnic groups in its colonies from Taiwan to Manchuria. After the Second World War, for three decades Japanese anthropologists largely studied only Japan, since there was no money to go elsewhere. From the 1970s on, a newly wealthy Japan again became in effect an anthropological colonizer once more, like the U.S. and the U.K., sending its anthropologists all over the world.

If anthropologists study societies around the world, they are more likely to have global anthropological influence, at least potentially; if anthropologists study their own societies, then they seem more likely to play internationally the role of learned informants to anthropologists from elsewhere. This is one reason why my audience today is likely to know the names of many anthropologists from the U.S. or the U.K., as well as Japan, of course, but will be probably not be able to name any anthropologist from the developing world, at least beyond one’s own fieldwork society.

This is true throughout developed-world anthropologies—the anthropology of the developing world is largely ignored. Of course this is true not just here—it would be the same if I were to present this paper in Washington D.C. or London instead of Tokyo. If a developing-world anthropologist comes to the developed world to practice their profession, then the situation changes, and they may indeed become globally known, as numerous examples from the U.S. and the U.K. attest. This is not a racial prejudice but a regional prejudice. However, as long as they remain in their own society, they are likely to be unknown. The implicit assumption is that “if an anthropologist is any good, he/she will come
to the rich anthropological core. If they remain in the poor anthropological periphery, they must be not much good.” This prevailing attitude is never explicitly stated, but it is widely assumed.

If one problem of world anthropology is that of ongoing political economic inequities, another problem is that of language. In a world of multiple languages, English has become the de facto language for global anthropological communication, disadvantaging those for whom English is not a native language, and completely shutting out some anthropological traditions—such as, at least until recently, that of Japan. Yoshinobu Ota has criticized me for proclaiming the importance of English, since I am a native speaker of English (Ota 2015). In fact, however, native speakers of English are a distinct minority of those who present and publish anthropological findings in English today. The U.S. may contain more anthropologists than anywhere else in the world, with Japan as second, but if an anthropologist attends a meeting of the Indian Anthropological Society, the East Asian Anthropological Association, the European Association of Social Anthropologists, or the IUAES, then English will be the lingua franca.

I do not think that this is a good thing—Esperanto or some other more neutral artificial language would have been far preferable as a global language, since such languages would largely (although not entirely) lack the freight of global inequalities. However, given socioeconomic reality, the facts of England as the dominant global colonizing power of the 17th - 19th centuries, and of the U.S. global economic and political domination of the 20th century, this is unavoidable. If Japan had continued to grow economically in subsequent decades as it did in the 1980s—if Japan were now the world’s major economic power—then Japanese would now be increasingly offered as a global language, although it would no doubt have taken many decades before it was fully adopted. If China continues to expand economically for the next several decades as it has done over the past two decades, then Chinese might become the global anthropological language: in 50 years, my successor in presenting to you this lecture might be speaking in Mandarin Chinese, and your successors might understand him fully. Perhaps not, however, because language change is more gradual than economic change: Latin, and later French, remained intellectual lingua franca long after the political dominance of their societies had been eclipsed. In any case, the language of global communication, for better or for worse, is now English. At some point in future decades, machine translation will become sufficiently well-developed to make mastery of English no longer necessary: one’s Google glasses or their technological equivalent will provide instantaneous simultaneous translation, and one’s article written in one language will be well and instantly translated with a mouse click or two into any and all other languages. Translation will be immensely difficult because it necessarily involves not only vocabulary and grammar, but also the underlying logic of argument and its variation from language to language. But with sufficient artificial intelligence at work, perhaps this too can somehow be dealt with. In any case, we are far from being able to do this at present, and so we have only English.
Beyond economics and language, there is the problem of publication, the third problem of globalizing anthropology. In an increasingly globalized world, universities have become ever more concerned about global rankings. In anthropology, this has meant, in many societies across the globe, pressure to publish in journals that are ranked highly in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) (2015). Some universities in China, Korea and some other parts of the world, if not yet in Japan, are requiring anthropologists and other social scientists to publish in journals listed in the SSCI. If they do so, they may be rewarded with promotions and cash bonuses; if they fail to do so, they may lose their jobs. The SSCI is largely Western in the journals it lists. As I have written elsewhere,

Of 81 journals listed by SSCI under the category of anthropology in 2013, 36 have publishers based in the U.S. and 19 have publishers based in the U.K.: 55 out of 81, a bit over 2/3 of the total. Another 10 are based in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and 3 are from Australia, all countries heavily influenced by Anglo-American anthropology. 76 of 81 total publications, 94% of the total come from the U.S., the U.K., Western or Central Europe, or Australia/New Zealand. Of the remainder, there are two Indian anthropological journals on the list, two journals from Latin America, one from Africa (South Africa), and none from China, Japan, or Korea. If an anthropologist from East Asia seeks to publish in a recognized journal, as designated by citation indexes such as SSCI, she cannot publish at home (Mathews 2015: 5).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with publishing in a foreign journal, of course. But in order to satisfy the referees and editors of such journals, an anthropologist from outside the Anglo-American anthropological core must adopt the norms of that core or else their writings will remain unpublished. As Takami Kuwayama has written,

Influential scholars in the core countries are in a position to decide what kinds of knowledge should be given authority and merit attention. The peer-review system at prestigious journals reinforces this structure. Thus, knowledge produced on the periphery, however significant and valuable, is destined to be buried locally unless it meets the standards and expectations of the core (Kuwayama 2004: 9-10).

Foreign scholars who seek to be heard in the Anglo-American core are forced to adopt the discursive norms of the core, Kuwayama is saying. Most simply put, if an African or Latin American or Indian, Chinese or Japanese anthropologist seeks to be heard in the U.S., she must “sound American” in her theoretical concerns and style of argumentation. Referees of a given journal require that submissions meet the particular standards and concerns of that journal, which may typically mean unwittingly forcing them to fit a certain national style of doing anthropology (see Mathews 2010, 2012 for more detailed explications of this point).
This represents, in effect, the institutional return of Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor. In anthropology, the idea that “West is best” as trumpeted by Morgan and Tylor in their evolutionary schemes has long since been transcended intellectually. But institutionally, because of the SSCI and other such citation indexes, and the refereeing and editorial systems that such journals employ, we do indeed in effect see the return of this evolutionary scheme. As universities become globalized and global rankings become increasingly influential, this is a game that we will all be increasingly forced to play. The SSCI and other citation indexes are changeable, and do not have to be Western in orientation: if journals from beyond the Western orbit become cited and influential, then these citation indexes will change to reflect that. But as of now, this has not happened.

To sum up my argument thus far, we do indeed see the globalization of anthropology, but with a number of ongoing problems, those of economics, language, and publication, all of which make this a very top-heavy and distorted globalization indeed. There is a parallel between dependency theory and anthropological globalization. Just as dependency theory argues that core economies keep peripheral economies peripheral, in anthropological globalization core anthropologies keep peripheral anthropologies peripheral. This is not their aim, but this may be their effect. Anthropologists have overwhelmingly lamented colonization in all its effects, and yet anthropology today continues to practice intellectual colonization. This is certainly no one’s fault—I have yet to meet an anthropologist from anywhere who defends this situation—but this is what we see.

Japanese Anthropology/American Anthropology

Where is Japan in all of this? Japan is a global power in anthropology in terms of numbers—Japan has the second largest number of anthropologists of any country in the world today, second only to the U.S.—but in terms of the global influence of its anthropology, Japan seems to remain more or less marginalized. Most anthropologists outside of Japan, or in any case, outside of East Asia and outside the anthropologists’ fieldwork area, can name, at most, only one or two anthropologists based in Japan—perhaps Chie Nakane; perhaps Tadao Umesao; perhaps Shinji Yamashita, perhaps one or two younger anthropologists—for their intellectual contribution to the discipline.

Tom Gill has argued, in his paper presented at this symposium (Gill 2015), that Japanese anthropology is not marginalized, and that, for example, Japanese hunter-gatherer studies have had a global impact, as have had Japanese anthropological works on South Asia; Min Han has argued in her paper for this symposium that Japanese anthropology is beginning to have some impact in China (Han 2015). This may indeed be the case. Nonetheless, if one were to go to an American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting, or European Association of Social Anthropologists meeting, or IUAES meeting, and ask 50 anthropologists at random to name an anthropologist based in Japan, the large majority of anthropologists will not be able to come up with anyone. If one were to ask instead for the
name of an anthropologist based in the U.S. (substituting JASCA for AAA in the meeting one attends), virtually everyone will be able to provide a name (I have done this test, albeit on a considerably smaller scale, at these different meetings). Why? Why should the second largest anthropological power in the world have so few anthropologists whose names are recognized beyond Japan?

This is largely because of language—the great hurdle of English in Japan. Japanese anthropology is acutely changing, and there is now more and more English used in presentations and publications. But the fact remains that this is more of a duty created by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in its awards of money than a desire of most Japanese anthropologists themselves to be heard beyond Japan. And this reflects the ongoing taken-for-granted attitude among many anthropologists in Japan that what happens outside of Japan does not really matter. I wrote an article for the Japanese Review of Cultural Anthropology (2008) in which I stated the following, which I repeat at length because it seems largely apt today as well:

In December 2006, I attended a remarkably insightful anthropological conference in Tokyo. The conference was held entirely in English and included many notable Japanese anthropologists as well as a few foreign anthropologists. Many of the papers in this conference were extraordinarily interesting, and the basic theoretical structures upon which this conference’s papers were based—involving the reshaping of the conventional anthropological meanings of culture—could have had a major impact on world anthropology.

I assumed, naively, that because the conference papers had been in English, the conference organizers would seek to have those papers published in English, since they could thereby be read by people beyond Japan. I enthused at the conference’s closing session that foreign publishers would certainly be interested in the volume that could result from this conference. But upon expressing this view, I was met only with blank stares by many participants. Finally, I was told, “Why would we want to publish this overseas? We held this conference in English only so that we could get funding from the Japanese government.”

I found this answer difficult to comprehend…. I had long assumed, on the basis of my interactions with Japanese anthropologists, that the biggest barrier to the promulgation of Japanese anthropology overseas was language. Since almost all Japanese anthropologists write in Japanese, and many are uncomfortable writing in English, Japanese anthropology could not reach an audience outside Japan, I had thought. But with the answer I received at this conference, I saw that language, although still an important barrier, was perhaps not the primary barrier. These Japanese anthropologists, even though they could write perfectly well in English, were not concerned about attempting to affect the world of anthropology beyond Japan. Helping to create a world anthropology
with a distinct Japanese voice contributing to that anthropology was something that had apparently never occurred to them (Mathews 2008: 53-54).

Since I wrote those words eight years ago, there has undoubtedly been a significant increase in Japanese writing in English and presentation in English. But it remains unclear how much attitudes have changed among most Japanese anthropologists. A Japanese anthropologist who writes in English wrote to me several months ago complaining that when she publishes in English—as she indeed has in a number of thought-provoking articles—she is ignored by the Japanese anthropological world, for whom Japanese is the only language that counts, in the sakoku (national isolation) of contemporary Japanese anthropology. Others have related similar stories to me, as if to say, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Is there anything wrong with this? After all, Japanese is the language of Japan. Why should Japanese anthropologists not primarily work in their own language, and read their own language? This is common sense. But the fact remains that if Japanese anthropologists write only in Japanese, then the world outside Japan—not just Americans and British but also Koreans, Chinese, Taiwanese, Hongkongers, Singaporeans, Indians, Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans, anthropologists and students and laypeople alike the world over—will ignore them. (Translation of a Japanese book into foreign languages is possible, but is comparatively unlikely: in anthropology, as in the publishing world at large, many more books are translated from foreign languages into Japanese than vice versa). It is certainly possible for Japanese anthropologists to write in their fieldwork languages, and this may be an important contribution to knowledge in the society in which they work. However, the global lingua franca is English, and to communicate globally, writing in English is the most direct way to do it. Writing in English certainly does not guarantee that one’s work will be paid attention to (I myself write in English and much of my own work has been more or less ignored), but it is a necessary minimum in order to have even the possibility of communication. I am well aware of how arrogant and imperialistic it may seem for me, a native speaker of English, to proclaim the importance of English to those who are not native speakers of English, and for whom English may be a vast practical and existential barrier. But this, for better or for worse, is the global reality.

Is it a problem if Japanese anthropology is ignored beyond Japan? Perhaps not, in the sense that Japanese anthropology is primarily for Japanese. Japanese anthropology seems remarkably vital in Japan, from at least one key bit of evidence. Whenever I visit Japan, I make an effort to go to Japanese bookstores to marvel at their anthropology sections, which in good-size stores, number in the several hundred or more of volumes. Almost all American bookstores—except for those serving university campuses—do not have anthropology sections anymore, because almost no one is interested in reading books by anthropology professors. I must go to Japan, and to a foreign language, to see a public audience for anthropology—I delight in spying the occasional salaryman or office lady on their lunch
break looking over anthropology books. The fact that anthropology has a public audience in Japan, and the fact that ethnographies win cultural and literary awards—to provide only one example, Sayaka Ogawa (2011), whose wonderful book on Tanzanian street vendors won the Suntory Gakugeishō Award—indicates that anthropology has a voice and audience beyond the small professional world of the discipline.

By contrast, anthropological publications in the U.S. have in large part become professionalized and specialized, with anthropologists writing only for one another. A tragedy of much contemporary American anthropology is its drift away from comprehensible English, English written for a lay audience rather than only for specialists. American anthropology once was widely read by a larger public: consider the writings of Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead, which sold millions of copies, or, more recently, Marvin Harris. Today, however, except for David Graeber, whose book Debt (2015) has had a huge popular impact, anthropologists tend to write only for one another in the U.S..

There are several reasons for this. First there is the tenure system in the U.S.: in this system, generating new professional knowledge becomes the key to a junior professor’s academic survival, knowledge emphasizing, in the case of anthropology, not particular ethnography but universalizing theory—this professionalization in effect makes anthropology irrelevant to those who are not professional anthropologists. Anthropologists, once they have attained tenure, can break free of this if they choose, but this is often extremely difficult for those who have been trained and socialized in this way. Second, there is the publication system in the U.S., whereby there are numerous university presses and academic journals, making publication of highly specialized academic writing relatively easy: anthropologists in the U.S. need not worry about finding anyone beyond a professional coterie to read their work, given this situation. This is in part a function of the number of anthropologists and anthropology graduate students in the U.S., creating enough income for journal and book publishers to make it unnecessary to reach beyond the profession of anthropology for readers. Third, there is the intellectual drift of anthropology itself in the U.S.: American anthropology, in the decades following the heyday of Clifford Geertz and then postmodernism in the 1980s, took a decisive turn away from the scientific and towards the literary. This meant a turn away from writing in order to be easily understood, towards writing in a more complex and mannered way. This, in effect, has made American anthropology less international and more provincial—less global and more particularly American.

In Japan, these conditions have not developed. There is in most Japanese universities no system whereby junior faculty must earn tenure, and so the need to write in a certain way in order to gain tenure is not a motivation for most junior anthropologists. There are relatively few academic presses and anthropology journals, and so anthropologists who seek to be read must often publish for a larger audience, in commercial presses—many anthropologists do not do this, but a surprising number do, far more than in the U.S.. Of course many anthropologists publish primarily in their university journals or in other formats, but
publishing for a larger public is done far more by Japanese anthropologists than by American anthropologists. The postmodern turn has had an impact on some Japanese anthropologists, causing their writings to become more complex and involuted, but partly because there is not as well-developed a publishing infrastructure to publish works with a potentially small audience, there are comparatively fewer such writings. What all of these factors mean is that Japanese anthropology is in a position to relate to the Japanese public in a way that American anthropology is not. Anthropologists in Japan may take this situation for granted. Nonetheless, anthropology in Japan seems to have a public vitality that foreigners—Americans, anyway—can only envy. I write as someone more or less ignorant of the finer points of Japanese anthropology today, as earlier noted, but this evidence of bookstores does seem clear: one would not see this in the U.S.

But can this and should this reach beyond Japan? Again, is it a problem if Japanese anthropology is ignored beyond Japan? I believe that it may be a problem, if anthropologists around the world have some responsibility to contribute to the global development of the discipline. If, as some anthropologists around the world maintain, there is no such thing as a global anthropology, but only global anthropologies, with each society’s anthropology having its own aims, purposes and pursuits, then each society’s anthropology may have no obligation beyond itself. But if anthropology is indeed singular rather than plural, or singular as well as plural—if there is a global discipline of anthropology, encompassing different national, societal, and regional traditions—then anthropologists worldwide should presumably contribute to its global growth to the extent that they are able to. And to the extent that English is global anthropology’s lingua franca, then this needs to be done in English. We do have, in my own view, a single global anthropology, within which communication between different anthropologies is essential in order for the discipline to grow and flourish. This communication can most effectively be accomplished using the language of the global hegemon, English. This is deeply regrettable, as I have discussed, but this, again, is the world that we are in.

Anthropologies in a number of other societies—such as Norway and Sweden and Israel—are able to publish influential books and articles in both their own native language and also in English. The English writing of someone like Thomas Hylland Eriksen, to take just one example, is remarkably clear and straightforward, perhaps exactly because he is a Norwegian, not a native speaker of English. At least in part because of this, his writings are influential. Could Japanese anthropology do the same? Could a Japanese anthropology emerge that might make anthropology relevant to a larger public not just in Japan but in the world at large? This is enormously difficult—Takami Kuwayama years ago commented to me on how painful it has been for him to witness brilliant Japanese anthropologists stumble in English, looking childish simply because it is a foreign language. This continues today—Japanese anthropologists presenting in English often appear far different from how they appear in Japanese: far more stiff, and far less self-assured, in my experience. To ask that Japanese anthropological writers do what is so difficult for non-native speakers of
English to do may seem insurmountably difficult. And yet there is an enormous need. People not just in Japan but around the world are interested in reading gripping anthropological ethnographies, of the kind that some Japanese anthropological writers seem well able to produce, in a way that almost all of their American counterparts apparently cannot. If, through some means, these could be written in English, or translated into English, there might be a very significant world anthropological audience.

I have argued recently that anthropology in East Asia might yet emerge as the world’s anthropological core, replacing the Anglo-American core, due in large part to the growing economies of China, Korea, and Japan, as opposed to those of the Euro-American world. The GDP of East Asia will shortly be greater than that of Western Europe and the U.S. (Mathews 2015: 2); as goes economics, so too follow intellectual pursuits such as anthropology. If East Asia becomes the economic center of the world in the decades to come, then its anthropological ascent may follow in the decades thereafter. Can East Asia ever become the world’s anthropological core, supplanting the West?

At present, it would appear not. East Asian anthropology may never be able to do this, because Japanese, Korean, and Chinese anthropologists can agree on so little (Mathews 2015: 4), including even the language of their communication. I have been involved for a number of years in the East Asian Anthropological Association, a society made up of anthropologists based in East Asia, and have seen the difficulties inherent in attempting to create a common basis for an East Asian anthropology. English has emerged, begrudgingly, as the lingua franca of the organization, only because Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Taiwanese, and Hongkongers cannot communicate with one another in any other language; but aside from that, historical and political shadows remain. Japanese and Chinese anthropologists can hardly trust each other on a national basis, given the lingering shadows of the Second World War—the Nanking Massacre and so much else, endlessly trumpeted by the Chinese government and downplayed by the Japanese government. Taiwanese and Hongkongers typically have fundamentally different political views than mainland Chinese; Koreans tend to mistrust both Chinese and Japanese—these different political views of history cannot help but shape and shadow anthropological relations.

But if an East Asian anthropology perhaps cannot emerge, what of a Japanese anthropology itself, in all its vitality? My own view is that American anthropology, in its increasingly arcane specialization cutting itself off from comprehension by a larger public, is following a narrowing path, one that may lead to its future irrelevance. If neurosurgeons or engineers write in a specialized form of writing to one another, this hardly matters, in that their writings will contribute to the general public, in terms of better brain surgery or civic infrastructure. If anthropologists write in a specialized form of writing to one another, however, this may provide no benefit to a larger public; and this is what anthropology is doing today in the U.S. Japan, with the second largest anthropological society in the world, has followed this path to a much lesser extent than the U.S. Japan is no longer in a period of sustained economic growth, as we all know: but could Japan succeed the U.S. as the
world’s anthropological center? I do not know—and I have already far passed my competence in this paper in my commentary on Japanese anthropology. But I nonetheless believe that world anthropology would benefit if Japanese anthropology took the place of American anthropology as anthropology’s world leader, and I wonder if this might not be a possibility in the future?

It has been often noted that Japanese anthropologists have been excessively reliant on Western theorists in their writings, typically using Anglo-American theoreticians to bolster their own ethnographic claims. One could argue that Japanese anthropologists need to come up with their own theories, a quite reasonable argument. But it could also be argued that Japanese anthropology might leave aside the very emphasis on theory that has so plagued Anglo-American anthropology in recent decades, to promulgate a more reader-friendly, ethnographically thick anthropology that can re-excite the world as to what anthropology, at its best, really is. This is my own vision of anthropology, anyway. It may be arrogant for me to try to project my own vision of anthropology onto a Japanese anthropological world that has its own, different concerns at present. If so, please forgive me. Above all, I love the discipline of anthropology, and believe that it offers something of extraordinary benefit for those who seek to understand the world in all its complexities. The society of my origin seems to be unwittingly destroying anthropology in all its communicative potential. The society to which I now speak may have the potential to revive anthropology in all this potential. But perhaps this is no more than my own latter-day imperialistic hallucination—this is entirely for you to decide.

The Future of Anthropology

My ideal for a global anthropology may be apparent from what I have described thus far—I can envision a day when, rather than the core studying the periphery, anthropologists from rich countries studying people from poor countries, we have a world in which anthropologists from all over the world are studying societies all over the world: everyone is studying everyone else. I also can envision a world in which anthropologists are not just specialists but are reaching out to a larger public. Japan may lead this in the future, but whether the future leader is Japan or some other society, I hope for a day in which the findings of anthropologists are truly useful to ordinary people throughout the world, from secondary school teachers to taxi drivers, rather than to a tiny number of professional specialists and their students. However, at present, I see little chance of this dream being achieved, in that anthropology throughout the world is, arguably, not expanding but diminishing. I think that we must face very honestly a troubling question: Is anthropology necessary in the world today? I fear that, given what anthropology has become, the answer may be no.

What do anthropologists do? If the provost at my university, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, were to ask me, “What is anthropology, anyway?” I would not know how to answer in a way that would make the identity of anthropology clear. “Anthropologists study
culture,” I could say. But then, scholars who engage in cultural studies as well as sociology also study culture, so this does not distinguish anthropology as its own distinctive discipline: we are one of several disciplines studying the same broad phenomenon from different angles. Beyond this, anthropologists themselves over the past few decades have increasingly abandoned the study of culture (see Brightman 1995 for just one example of this): today if I attend an anthropological meeting and speak of “American culture” or “Japanese culture” or “Chinese culture,” I might not even be argued with but only laughed at, such is the disrepute into which the concept of culture, uncritically used, has fallen.

If I thus abandon culture as anthropology’s core in attempting to explain what the discipline is, I might say instead, “Anthropologists do ethnography.” However, scholars of other disciplines, such as sociology, as well as investigative journalists, also do ethnography. This does not mean that we anthropologists cannot claim ethnography as our core: but this argument seems weak: is ethnography, as a method of investigation, of itself enough to define the identity of a discipline? Perhaps not.

In both Japan and the U.S., sociologists are stereotypically those who study their own society, while anthropologists study other societies—this is a primary basis upon which the two disciplines are distinguished. But with sociologists increasingly studying societies worldwide, and anthropologists studying their own societies, this distinction increasingly loses its meaning. As sociology becomes globalized, the dictum that “sociologists study us and anthropologists study others” is less and less viable, since “us” and “other” are increasingly intermixed: “studying others” as opposed to “studying ourselves” can no longer be the basis for disciplinary distinction. The idea that “anthropologists study traditional society” has also evaporated, as has, in large part, tradition itself.

Added to these conceptual difficulties are the problems inherent in the four-field approach: my department in Hong Kong, like many American departments of anthropology, has both cultural anthropologists and archeologists, as well as smatterings of linguistic anthropology and biological anthropology: but why on earth should these be in the same academic field? Archeology is closer to history than it is to cultural anthropology, and biological anthropology and cultural anthropology are together largely because of historical accident alone: the 19th-century assumption of culture’s physiological origins. The fact that these four disparate fields are stuck together in a common department makes the potential question of a provost or president all the more unanswerable. If asked, “What is anthropology, anyway?” I fear that I could give no convincing answer at all, but only change the subject to talk about the weather. The lack of an answer may be due in part to my own lack of comprehension of my discipline, but I also think that it is due to the incomprehensibility of the discipline.

Indeed, our discipline is in trouble if we cannot adequately define what it is that we study. In an era of the shrinking of academic departments in the social sciences and humanities, higher-ups will say, “Why should we bother to keep anthropology if anthropologists can’t even explain comprehensibly and succinctly what it is that they do?” Japan in a sense epitomizes this trouble, in the multiplicity of different academic departments, often with
exotic labels, to which anthropologists belong to. There are many more anthropologists in Japan than those who belong to anthropology departments, indicating this problem: there are anthropologists, but what exactly anthropology is remains murky. This problem is conspicuous in Japan, but exists throughout the developed world. It is less the case in the developing world, where anthropologists are more likely to study their own societies, more likely to study indigenous minority groups, and are more likely to emphasize tradition rather than modernity in their research. In the developed world, on the other hand, anthropology’s boundaries and subject matter have become murky. Bronislaw Malinowski wrote in 1922,

Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants—these die away under our very eyes (Malinowski 2002 [1922]: xv)

This did not happen, because anthropologists in ensuing decades turned to contemporary societies as the basis of their studies. But in the long term, this is exactly what has happened: what we study and how we study it is no longer our own, and so what we are also becomes unclear.

Given these difficulties, let me offer this proposal as a solution: let us abolish anthropology as a separate discipline, along with sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and economics, to establish instead two large disciplines: quantitative social science, and qualitative social science. The latter would consist of anthropology and also the sociology of knowledge, as well as history: it would be devoted to the understanding of human beings in all forms that transcend numbers and statistical measurement. This discipline could enable us to transcend the artificial boundaries of disciplines today, created largely through historical artifact, to instead think of social science in its two essential domains, the universal and the particular, the measurable and the immeasurable.

I believe that instead of being the abolition of anthropology, this might represent the true birth of anthropology, on a far broader basis than it has thus far existed. In one sense, cultural anthropology has already been doing this: it is no coincidence that the most influential thinkers in anthropology over the past four decades, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, have not even been anthropologists, except in the large sense that I have just discussed. We have long been qualitative social scientists but let us now embrace this role. Let us leave this little contemporary anthropology, to embrace a larger whole, which we can call big anthropology: the qualitative examination of all aspects of human thought and behavior in different times and places, underlain methodologically by diachronic ethnography, the study of texts, as well as artefacts, of the historical past, and synchronic...
ethnography, the study of those whom we talk with and live with at present. This can have an extraordinary impact on the world, if only we were to fully embrace it. Anthropology in its small sense, the anthropology created by historical tradition and happenstance, is the past, and is dying. Anthropology in its large sense, that which I have proposed here, is the future, and is soon to be born. Rather than resist this, as reactionaries clinging to arbitrary disciplinary boundaries, let us instead embrace it as our discipline’s future. Institutionally this new larger anthropology will no doubt struggle for many decades to be born. Intellectually, in a world increasingly globalized, this new larger anthropology is contemporary anthropology’s best hope for a flourishing future. And—who knows? With its flourishing array of different kinds of academic departments, possibly it will be Japan that leads anthropology into this future.

**Conclusion**

I began this paper by discussing the globalization of anthropology, and its three large problems, those of economics, language, and publication, serving to maintain and even exacerbate the top-heavy nature of anthropology today, the dominance of the Anglo-American core over other anthropologies. I then considered Japanese anthropology in comparison to American anthropology, focusing on how the former has a larger public audience than the latter, which has become mired in specialization. I wondered if Japanese anthropology might possibly manage to convey the fascination of anthropology not just to a public in Japan, but also to the world, however unlikely this may seem to many in my audience. Finally, I considered the future of anthropology, arguing that the discipline itself, now undefinable, might have a flourishing future within a new and expanded discipline of qualitative social science.

I have a personal vision of an anthropology in which anthropologists throughout the world work on a truly equal basis, apart from the inequalities of economics and language, in which anthropologists throughout the world convey their findings to a larger global public in a democratization of knowledge, and in which anthropology is the vibrant intellectual center of a new discipline. I am neither a starry-eyed idealist nor a fool, and doubt that any of these things will be attained in my lifetime, if ever. But I conclude this paper only with this hope: that we can think beyond our own individual research, and also beyond our research within its national context. In today’s world, we are not yet global citizens, but let us at least do all we can to be global anthropologists.

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