

## Area Studies and Japanese International Relations

Keiko SAKAI

Chiba University

### Introduction

The field of Japanese international relations (IR) is unique compared with IR studies in other countries in that it includes Area Studies. Hatsuse (2017) describes the positioning of academic fields of IR in Japan as follows: “Japanese IR is bifurcated into the study of ‘relation’ among the nation/states in the world and the ‘Area Studies’ of countries and territories as the ‘basic unit’ of international relations. The latter includes humanities and economics such as modern history and studies on developing countries” (p. 29).

Thus, Area Studies is one of the four subcategories recognized by the Japan Association of International Relations (JAIR). Former presidents of JAIR appreciated the role of Area Studies in Japanese IR saying, “Japanese Area Studies possesses its *raison d’être* in order to emphasise the incompleteness of Western-origin imported theories of IR” (Kokubun 2009: 9–10). Further, Tanaka (2009) expected that “Area Studies as an application of theory of International politics will be no more than merely mechanical applications of a priori or Western-origin hypotheses, and it is only locally based area studies that can lead to a more ‘hermeneutically’ appropriate understanding beyond such simple theories” (p. 15–16).

However, this does not mean that there has been rich communication and constructive discussions among the subcategories in JAIR. In the panel titled “‘Warping’ in the Global Diffusion of IR Theories: Comparison of the Japanese and German IR Communities” at JAIR’s annual conference in 2019, the following question was received from the audience: “Is Japanese IR, which tends to focus on diplomatic history and area studies, really a different approach from mainstream IR [in the US and Europe], or is it simply underdeveloped?” (JAIR Newsletter No. 162). In the same year, Sakai published an article sounding an alarm about the reality that Area Studies had become a servant of international politics and other social sciences (Sakai 2018).

In this presentation, I will describe how Japanese Area Studies have followed paths different from that in the U.S. and Europe, especially after WWII, and highlight how this difference contributes to the uniqueness of Japanese IR.

1.

When did Area Studies start in Japan? Were there any studies or academic orientation in Japan similar to the Area Studies that emerged in post-WWII U.S.? As Inoguchi (2007) describes, “both international relations and area studies inseparably developed as studies of ‘foreign countries outside Japan/events occurring outside Japan.’” Throughout Japan’s history, studies on regions “abroad” have been a way to learn from developed countries, i.e., China until the end of Edo era and Europe after the Meiji revolution.

The first ‘field studies’ that modern Japanese intellectuals conducted were the official missions to Europe at the end of the Edo era and beginning of the Meiji era to understand the mechanism of modern developed European political and economic systems. Their admiration for Europe shows a striking contrast with their disdain for Asia and Africa, which the missions visited shortly on the way. In his memoir, Yukichi Fukuzawa [1835-1901], who joined the missions and later became a leading educator and enlightenment thinker in the Meiji era, shows contempt for the poverty and underdevelopment of Egyptian society<sup>1</sup>.

Since Japan’s victory over China at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the target of the field research shifted from the developed West to Asia, which gradually came within the range of the expansion of Japanese Imperial territory. Especially during the period from the second Sino-Japan war to the end of WWII [1937-45], Area Studies research projects with a policy orientation were promoted in the Research Division of South Manchuria Railway (an intelligence organization for Japanese colonial policy on Manchuria and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Fukuzawa says in his “Seikouki”: “Land of Egypt is impoverished, and people there are dirty; they are really disgusting. ... Its population is half a million, most of them are poor, and urban life is not prosperous. Nature of the people is stubborn, lazy and least diligent. Legal system there is extremely harsh.” (Fukuzawa 1962)

East Asian region), East Asian Institute (established under the Cabinet Planning Board), Tokyo Imperial University, and Kyoto Imperial University.

Here, Japanese studies on regions “abroad” were divided into two types: IR on Europe and the U.S., which were leading powers in world politics, and Area Studies on Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, which were the target of colonial expansion. We should note that the latter was parallel to Oriental Studies in Europe in its imperial purpose.

Although it was called “Asian” Studies, research on Muslims and Islam was also encouraged for imperial purposes, as Muslims from Tatar in central Asia started fleeing to Japan as political exiles from Russia or missionaries at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tanada 2012). The Japanese Imperial Army considered using the Muslim network in Japan to establish the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere by strengthening networks with Muslims against the Soviet Union, mobilizing Uyghur Muslims as spies against Chinese authority, and subjugating Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia under Japanese occupation. When a Tokyo Jami’i (mosque) was established by Tatars in Tokyo in 1938<sup>2</sup>, Mitsuru Touyama, a leader of pan-Asianism and rightwing nationalist, attended its opening ceremony.

Parallel to these activities, several research institutions on Islam were established with support from the Japanese government and Imperial Army. In 1937–38, the Association of Islamic Culture was established, and it published an analytical report on the political and social situation of Muslims in China, India, and North Africa. Islamic Studies Departments were created both in the East-Asiatic Commercial Intelligence Institute headed by Shumei Okawa and in the Research Office attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Shumei Okawa, a class war criminal convicted by the Tokyo Tribunal Court, expressed strong sympathy with Western colonized Asia and Africa and translated

---

<sup>2</sup> First Mosque was established in Kobe by Indian Muslim In 1935. Prior to these activities by Muslims in Japan, religious, cultural and academic institutions on Muslims and Islam were established since 1920s, such as Muslim group in Tokyo (Mahalle-i Islamiye), which was established by Tatar exile in 1924.

the Quran after WWII<sup>3</sup>. In 1938, the Institute of Islamic Area<sup>4</sup>, and Greater Japanese Muslim League were established. The former was soon controlled by Zenrin Kyoukai, a spy agency, for maneuvering in Mongol<sup>5</sup>, and the latter was under the supervision of the Army ministry, ministry of the Navy, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was led by Senjuro Hayashi, the former prime minister and rightwing army general.

2.

After WWII, we can find continuity and discontinuity in the development of Area Studies. Except for some cases of continuity, such as the Institute of Developing Economies, established after the WWII as a sub-governmental research institute and succeeded a number of archives and academic works from Manchuria Railways, discontinuity was grave to the extent that most of the scholars on Area Studies abandoned their research after the war, or the Institute itself was burned down by wartime bombardment<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the discontinuity can be clearly seen in the shift in scholars' perception on Asia as well as in research methodologies and discipline. They strongly criticized the pre-war studies based on Japanese colonialism, saying that “it was selfish research on the outside

---

<sup>3</sup> His firm anti-Western stance made him interested in Islam, as he considered that the Muslim societies in South Asia and North Africa suffered a lot under British and French colonialism. In 1922, he published an article of “Political Future of Muslim”, then in 1942, he published *Kaikyo Gairon* (General Remarks on Islam). After WWII, he translated Quran while he was in the hospital in 1950. He admitted that he could not read Arabic, so his translation was not from Arabic but from English, French, German and Chinese. See Usuki (2010), Misawa (2002).

<sup>4</sup> On Institute of Islamic Area, see Tamura (1987). Although the Institute of Islamic Area was involved deeply in imperial politics and used as a tool for colonial strategy of Imperial Japan, there were numbers of excellent scholars on Islam and Asia in this Institute. Most prominent scholar was Toshihiko Izutsu, a scholar on philosophy of Islam, who translated of Qur'an into Japanese from Arabic for the first time in 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Islamic Area was established by Koji Okubo, a prominent scholar on Turkey, and Hajime Kobayashi, professor at Army Academy. Akira Usuki describes that “Kobayashi committed to the war and politics, even collaborated with the military establishment during the war” (Usuki 2007). On Okubo, see Osawa (2004).

<sup>6</sup> After the Institute of Islamic Area was burnt down, Hajime Kobayashi, its founding member, established Middle East Institute of Japan in 1960 as a research institute attached to ministry of Foreign Affairs.

worlds which lacked proper understanding on their political, economic and social context” (Suehiro 2006). Hirano, one of the leading figures and founder of Japanese IR, notes that “Japanese area studies are ‘Japanese-style’ which have developed in reflection of the failures of the pre-war and wartime period, and with the area studies of the US as a bad example” (Hirano 2007: 283).

In the 80s, discussion on what Area Studies in Japan should look like became active. Here I pick up three leading scholars who represent the Area Studies schools during that period. The first is Toru Yano, a political scientist who represented the Kyoto School of Area Studies on Southeast Asia (Yano 1987). He refused to engage with existing disciplines, saying that they were imported from the “West”, and insisted on the necessity of developing a distinct discipline and methodology for Area Studies in Japan (Yano 1993-4). Rejecting his involvement in policymaking, he considered Area Studies a methodology to introduce a new perception framework for understanding “the others.”

The second scholar is Naofumi Tachimoto (Tachimoto 1999)(Takaya and Tachimoto 2001), who proposed the notion of “global area studies,” which pursues a reconsideration of the modern Western frameworks of sciences and looks to introduce a new knowledge framework. He also insisted that an area/region should be understood within the wider, global context.

Tachimoto’s idea is shared by the other scholar, Itagaki (1992), a historian on the modern Middle East. He pointed out that research on the Middle East is impossible without taking its relation with Europe, Africa, and Asia into consideration, and collaboration with European Studies is essential since the notion of the Middle East itself is the product of European politics. He emphasized the necessity of understanding the whole globe as one area/region.

The scholars’ arguments can be summarized as follows. First, they refused to focus only on the role of global powers that subordinate the non-U.S./European regions, instead claiming the importance of focusing on the Global South in global politics. Second, they criticized the U.S./Europe-oriented view of the world and established their own direct research networks, bypassing the Western knowledge production system. Third, they underlined the role of non-state actors and sought to relativize the central role

of the State in IR. Fourth, they rejected the stereotypical perceptions on “local communities,” such as tribes, sects, and communal groups, as being primordial, ahistorical, and everlasting. Finally, they insisted that the territories of the areas/regions were not fixed from the beginning but were the results of the transformation of IR and products of the changes of global structure, especially under the processes of centralization and decentralization of global power. The Middle East and Slavic countries are good examples.

3.

Contrary to these discussions among Area Studies researchers in the humanities, and although a few IR scholars responded seriously, most did not try to develop Areas Studies research in their field of IR. This reaction is epitomized by the following statement by Inoguchi (2007), former president of JAIR [2000-02]: “Most area studies conducted in the academic world are excessively humanistic rather than socially scientific or useful for government policy.”

Then, did IR and Area Studies grow apart after WWII, despite sharing similar roots of studying areas abroad? They indeed share a commonality, that is, Peace Studies, reflecting the failure of pre-war academism that served the colonial policy of the State. As Hatsuse (2017) describes, there was a “post-war academic climate in Japan that reflected on pre-war militarism and aimed for a peaceful Japan.” In this context, post-war international politics reflected the experience of wartime cruelty and took up subjects such as Peace Studies, Asian solidarity, socialism, and anti-colonialism (Hatsuse 2017). Peace studies of IR and anti-colonial studies of Area Studies after WWII are undoubtedly derived from the lessons from the war, which Maruyama called “communities of contrition.”

If Japanese IR is based on self-reflection, since M. Maruyama claimed that “Japanese social scientists in particular are responsible for the failure to prevent the war of aggression,” and if Japanese Area Studies is based on self-criticism of pre-war colonial studies, we can call Japanese IR with post-colonial Area Studies the “losers’ IR,” i.e., “IR from the losers’ point of view,” different from winners’ IR or winners’ Area Studies that

focuses on a Western-oriented/state-centric world view. Ishida, former President of JAIR [2016-18], stated in his statement of purpose in soliciting applications for a special issue of the 200th Annals of JAIR as follows: “Since studies of IR at the international level is basically that of the victorious nation, the key to solving the difficult problem of restoring relations, which is essential for the security of the defeated nation, cannot be found in a ready-made global standard of IR. Thus, the issues that cannot be adequately clarified within the global standard system of international politics are the ‘unique challenges’ of JAIR”, which can be the nodes “that connect and link our members” in the JAIR (Ishida 2018).

In this sense, Japanese IR with Area Studies can offer an alternative to the West-centric winners’ IR that has been developed in the past.

The collaboration between Area Studies and IR goes beyond the fact that they share a common starting point. Area Studies is appropriately part of the study of IR in the sense that “areas” are constructed as a consequence of international dynamics. Area Studies would be liberated from its past position as a servant to social sciences and/or tool for state-led strategic studies if it ceased to study only fixed, unchangeable eternal culture, society, or communal features of certain areas. The boundaries of “areas” have been subject to international power relations. Ieda (2008) described that “areas of the world are ‘open spaces’ that are constantly being challenged by new challenges from within and from neighbouring regions, not to mention the pressures of globalization” (p. 37).

In this sense, Area Studies indivisibly overlaps with IR. The Japanese type of IR that includes Area Studies can contribute to general IR theoretical development. Although Inoguchi laments that “area studies have been incorporated into comparative politics” rather than into IR, and recent academic attempts tend to pursue “comparative area studies,” Area Studies can play a role in searching for alternative IR. As Kang (2003) concludes, a “vigorous dialogue between theory and evidence holds the promise of enriching all the major international relations paradigms” and “scholars in the fields of international relations and Asian security appear poised to make major strides.”

References:

- Ahram, Koellner and Sil eds. (2018) *Comparative Area Studies: : Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications*, Oxford University Press
- Fukuzawa, Y (1962) *Seikouki*, in *Fukuzawa Yukichi Zenshu* (西航記、福沢諭吉全集第 19 巻), 19 6-65, Iwanami.
- Hatsuse, R. ed. (2017) *Non-Western International Relations: a dialogue with Japanese IR predecessors* (国際関係論の生成と展開: 日本の先達との対話), Nakanishiya.
- Hirano, K. (2007) “Area Studies in Global Age (グローバル化時代の地域研究 : 特権性の喪失)” in Nishimura N. and J. Tanaka eds. *New Perspective of Contemporary Chinese Studies* (『現代中国地域研究の新たな視圏』), Sekai Shisousha.
- Ieda, O. (2008) *Searching for Open Area Studies* (Lecture series Slav-Eurasia Studies I 講座 スラブ・ユーラシア学 第 1 巻 開かれた地域研究へ 中域圏と地球化), Koudansha
- Inoguchi, T. (2007) *Genealogy of Japanese IR* (『国際関係論の系譜』), University Press, University of Tokyo.
- Ishida, A (2018) “Kokusai Seiji No. 200; The Search for Alternatives: International Politics Revisited” (『国際政治』第 200 号「オルタナティブの模索——問い直す国際政治学」) JAIR website. “<https://jair.or.jp/committee/henshu/2953.html>
- Itagaki, Y. (1992) *History Today and Area Studies - Perspectives on the Contemporary Middle East* (歴史の現在と地域学), Iwanami.
- Kang, D. (2003) “Getting Asia Wrong: the need for new analytical frameworks,” *International Security*, vol. 27. no. 4
- Kokubun, R. (2009) “Introduction: in between Area Studies and International Politics”, *Japanese International Politics vol.3. 'IR seen from Area'* (日本の国際政治学 第三巻「地域からみた国際政治」), Yuhikaku.
- Misawa, N (2002) “Okawa Shumei and Japanese Islamic Studies” (大川周明と日本のイスラーム研究), *Annual journal of the Asia-Africa Cultural Research Institute*, no. 37, pp. 73-83
- Osawa, K (2004) “Islamic Studies in the Early Showa Period : Kaikyoken-Kenkyujo (Institute of Islamic Area) and Okubo Koji” (昭和前期におけるイスラーム研究 : 回教圏研究所と大久保幸次), *Journal of Religious Studies*, 78 (2), 493-516, 2004

- Sakai, K (2018) "Searching for the Never-ending IR and for the Area Studies not as a servant for Social Sciences" Kuzuya, A. and A. Shibasaki, ed. *The End of International Relation?* (「国際政治学は終わったのか」)、Nakanishiya.
- Suehiro, A. ed. (2006) *Asia as an Area Study: Iwanami Lectures on 'Imperial' Japan*, vol. 6(岩波講座「帝国」日本の学知〈第6巻〉地域研究としてのアジア)
- Tachimoto, N. (1996) *Issues and Methods of Area Studies: attempts of Socio-Cultural-Ecological Dynamics* (地域研究の問題と方法--社会文化生態力学の試み)、Kyoto University Press
- Takaya, K and Yano, K (2001) *Introduction to Global Area Studies* (<Reading crustal deformation of the Contemporary Area Studies> Series) (地球地域学序説 (シリーズ「現代の地殻変動」を読む))、Koubundo.
- Tamura, A. (1987) "The Research Institute of Islamic World: its staffs and time of activity" (「回教圏研究所をめぐって その人と時代」)、*Gakushuin Historical Review* no.25. pp.16-35
- Tanada, H. (2012) "Islamic Research Institutes in Wartime Japan Introductory Investigation of the "Deposited Materials by the Dai-Nippon Kaikyo Kyokai (Greater Japan Muslim League)", *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies (AJAMES)*, no.28-2, pp.85-106
- Tanaka, A. (2009) "Introduction: Japanese International Politics", *Japanese International Politics vol. 1. 'International Politics as Academic field'* (日本の国際政治学 第一巻「学としての国際政治」)、Yuhikaku.
- Usuki, A. (2007) "An Aspect of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Wartime Japan: a case of Hajime Kobayashi (1904-1963)", *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies (AJAMES)*, no. 23-2, pp. 195-214
- Usuki, A. (2010) *Okawa Shumei, between the Emperor and Islam* (大川周明 天皇とイスラームのはざままで)、Seidosha
- Yano, T. (1987) *Area Studies* (Lecture series Political Science IV) (IV 地域研究 (講座政治学)), Senrei Shobou
- Yano, T (1993-4) *Modern Area Studies Series* (講座現代の地域研究), Koubundo