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03 Peripherality and Provinciality in Japanese Studies: The Case of the English-Using World

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War the conditions for producing knowledge in the scholarly fields called “area” or “regional” studies have been the focus of intense self-reflection. Those of us belonging to Japanese or Japan Studies (henceforth JS) have also participated in this reflexive exercise. Indeed, during this period, we have heard critiques of the Euro-American model of scholarship sounded by scholars based inside and outside of Japan who have systematically questioned the epistemological foundations of JS and sought to offer alternatives (Hamaguchi 1985; Kent 1999; or Ryang 2004a, 2004b). Other works like that of Morris-Suzuki’s (2000) calls for an anti-area studies approach that takes as its starting point a much more global view of developments. And yet another strand raises questions about the degree to which North American-based scholars can be said to dominate our field — in access to funding, setting research agendas, and determining career patterns or access to journals (Asquith 2000a; Kuwayama 2004; Sugimoto 2013).

Alongside these developments, in the English-using world the same period has ever increasing theoretical citation in articles published in JS (as in other regional journals and books) in both the social sciences and the humanities. These quotations may take the form of analytical constructs that are deployed in regard to Japanese data or “ornamental” quotes (witness the ritual invocation of French academic “saints” as Foucault, Derrida, or Deleuze). In the social sciences, it seems, what is worthy of study in JS is governed by the disciplines and their emphasis on the theoretical contribution of a given study and less and less by multi-disciplinarity or holistic understandings of areas. In the humanities, the concepts, theories, and frameworks of cultural studies have become almost a precondition for publication and career advancement.

Against this background, in this article I raise questions about the inputs Japanese scholarship have contributed to the dominant English-using academic system. Specifically, I will argue that from the point of view of the core of this academic system, these contributions have typically taken two ideal-typical forms of peripherality: what I call *marginality* and *provinciality*. In this sense, my essay contributes to what Ludden (1997) calls a theorization or theory of area studies or of area-specific knowledge(s). My argument follows Sugimoto’s

(2013) plea that we need to extend the comparative angle used in regard to Japan inwardly towards academic institutions and to area studies like JS. To be clear then, my aim is *not* to add another deconstruction of area studies but rather to suggest that it may be fruitful to use the case of JS to think comparatively about the ways in which knowledge about areas is socially produced, reproduced, and integrated into systems of knowledge.

Area Studies: Centers and Peripheries in Systems

Analytically, the character of JS is dependent first of all on their place in the broad scheme of the academic systems comprising the world of higher education. Many scholars — including those in JS — usually identify two levels of this system: the globally dominant one where English is used and a variety of local systems interacting to a greater or lesser degree with it. This system is often thought of as having a center, semi-centers and peripheries (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982).

A more complex picture reveals that the world is actually divided into three tiers of various overlapping linguistic academic systems each of which is characterized by its own metropolitan centers, semi-centers and peripheries (Hamel 2007). Below the dominant top tier of the English-using system lies the second tier each of which is characterized by its own language of research and mode of academic production and using the languages of former colonial or regional empires (Eades 2000): the prime examples are the Spanish, French, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese or Hindi academic communities. Finally at the bottom is the third tier comprised of other countries with languages that have little international diffusion.

Each community, with variants, is characterized by its own academic mode of production. A prime and relevant example for our purposes is the slowly changing *kenkyushitsu* model in Japan that long assured tenure without “publish or perish” pressures, made available and legitimized in-house publications, provided more publishing opportunities earlier in careers, and (still) has large readerships in the Japanese language (McVeigh 2002; Poole 2010). For the Japanese-using academic system — as for other of the larger linguistic academic communities — the governing issue is the presence of a critical mass of scholars and resources that can assure full-fledge careering structures and practices, and allow them to be relatively disconnected or loosely coupled to the English-using system. Thus while mastery of (academic) English is a prerequisite for participating in “international scholarship,” its use may be limited if there is a very large internal academic market as in China or Japan (Barshay 1996; Eades 2000). Such academic markets, unlike those characterizing “small” societies like Malaysia or Israel, often allow professional advancement without publication or participation in English language fora.

The indicators of how English has become the dominant language of the academic world are clear. For instance, more than 75 percent of the articles in the social sciences and well over 90 percent of the articles in the natural sciences are written in English (Hamel 2007). In addition scientists in the semi-peripheries are users of Western science rather than contributors to its collective store of knowledge (Schott 1998). The governing pattern is for the filtering of external ideas into second and third tier communities through translations of works written in the centers (almost exclusively composed in English or rarely French or German) or the holding of international conferences and seminars.

Against this background it is important to understand that while before World War II area studies was a Eurocentric story it has now become a US based one. Indeed, following Appadurai (Burgess 2004: 124) area studies can be seen as the largest institutional epistemology through which the academy in the United States has apprehended much of the world since that war. The shift between Europe and the United States represented a shift in the metropolitan centers or cores of the world system of academic knowledge. Hence, area studies such as JS have travelled across the Atlantic and their contemporary core is concentrated in the top 50-60 or so universities in the United States.

Moreover, what is important in the shift to the United States is that it is groups in the dominant American academic metropolis that create criteria for professional recognition, standards for research, vocabularies for appraising career moves, and identifying relevant audiences. In addition, publishers or journal editors serve to reinforce relations between centers and peripheries that are further reproduced by cultural and academic exchanges, policies of scientific foundations, or processes of training (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982: 10; Miller 2005).

The main mechanisms by which the power and location of this core are produced and reproduced have been charted out before and include problem setting and conceptualization, maintaining the hierarchy of scholarly publications, defining excellence through citation patterns, holding scientific conferences, and lastly, staffing funding schemes for research (Blagojevic and Yair 2010). Within these cores, metropolitan scholars largely confine their attention to what goes on at home, or possibly in one or more other metropolises while scholars at the periphery are concerned with what happens in the discipline in their own country and in one or more metropolitan anthropologies. And in the peripheries researchers on the whole take little note of each other's work, at least unless it is brought to their attention through metropolitan scholarship.

In these circumstances academic authority of knowledge produced in the centers is grounded in patterns of social authority; it is primarily scholars at the metropolitan hubs that

settle disputes and establish truth. For instance, when I have looked at the patterns of citations in English-language books about Japan, I have repeatedly found the theories cited to have been produced and disseminated from a few tens of institutions in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Britain. Or, to provide another example, the arrangement by which departments in Singapore or Hong Kong (where English is the medium of teaching) consistently obtain the majority of their external academic examiners from the prestigious universities of Britain and America is both an indicator, and a practice that actualizes center-periphery relations. Whatever interest scholars may have in problems defined as important in their societies, in order to achieve recognition from the “centers”, they must formulate their findings in terms of relevant theoretical models developed in the metropolises. For example, many Asian scholars find that they often have to “de-Asianize” their findings for external audiences from the centers (Burgess 2004; Jayasuriya 2012; Tachimoto 1995).

Two Kinds of Peripherality: Marginality and Provinciality

The model that I have been sketching out allows us to understand two kinds of peripheral knowledge that have sometimes been conflated in writings about area studies (each having its own expression in JS): *marginal* knowledge and *provincial* knowledge. Marginal knowledge is produced within the main US-British dominated system (or any academic system) by groups who are located at its fringes and who talk back to the centers in the world academic language of English. While they do so in a manner that is less fluent than scholars positioned in the centers, they are nevertheless understood and the legitimacy of their participation in the system is accepted by those at the center (Gerholm and Hannerz 1982: 9).

From the perspective of the Euro-American center, knowledge produced within other (loosely coupled but independent) linguistic academic systems however, is frequently seen as *provincial* knowledge: one often labeled as parochial or insular. Because these other linguistic systems have their own research agenda, use locally produced analytical frameworks, and write for local audiences the knowledge they produce is “unfashionable,” “unsophisticated,” or “outmoded.” For all of the celebration of peripherality and diversity in the English-using center, the grounds for celebration are defined by this very center. Sociologically, for peripheral scholarship, the center provides the crucial reference group.

This is certainly the case for how much of Japanese folklore is seen by English-using folklorists and anthropologists because it focuses on questions of origin and authenticity, questions that are viewed as old-fashioned and no longer as important. Similarly, Western anthropologists conflate anthropology and folklore in Japan despite their distinct pedigrees and agendas for research (Shimizu 2000). To use an image suggested by Mathews (2004), scholars

within and outside the English-using system seem to live in parallel universes. Asquith (2000b) sees a lack of willingness to dig deep into alternative paradigms as the problem with scholars at the center.

My model allows us to understand that the root of this problem is that scholars within the English-using system and outside of it are situated in very different systems of incentives and disincentives. It is, I think, for these reasons that Kuwayama (2000) cites examples of the arrogance of and lack of respect among American anthropologist for the knowledge produced in Japan, they see it at best as data (if at all) and at worst as little more than parochial opinions. Conversely, to follow him (Kuwayama 2000), scholars at the center have their own kind of provinciality because they can ignore foreign scholarship without damaging their own career, which I sometimes refer to as the “provinciality of the center.”

Steinhoff (2012) rightly remarks that in the study of East Asia, whether focused on Japan, China, or Korea, one has to be able to utilize the scholarship written in the appropriate language in order to be taken seriously within the area studies community. Yet as the secondary literature in English on those areas has grown exponentially, scholars are expected to place their contributions within that scholarly context; that is, English-language writing about Japanese society is seen by scholars pursuing their career as being more important for them. Hence, to get published they have to refer to other academics who have published about Japan within their English-using system rather than to researchers who have developed frames for understanding this society but written in Japanese (or Chinese or Korean).

Moreover, in almost all cases, the theory used is one developed outside writings about the area. The governing variable in the relations between linguistic communities is the looseness or tightness of their coupling. By this I mean the degree to which each system is sealed off or is tied to the other. It is my impression that there is a particularly loose-coupling between the various linguistic systems within which JS are carried out. Such a view lets us understand the truly global nature of the academic systems for producing knowledge that is divided between linguistic communities (each characterized by center-periphery relations) and organized hierarchically.

In the marginal communities both within the English-using and other communities, scholars writing about local cases and tend to “import” theories developed at the center and write for both local consumption *and* consumption at the center. For scholars in Japan, to put this point by way of example, the choice of going from being provincial to peripheral (and hopefully more central) involves career choices such as whether to pursue graduate studies, where and what to publish, the languages of publication and the paradigmatic boundaries one works within.

We can now understand — to put this point by way of examples — that the study of Japan in Israel, Singapore, or Norway (all parts of the English-using system) is marked not so much by parochialism as by marginalization or peripheralization in terms of the world system of scholarship. The very exposure of local scholars there to work outside these countries prevents them from becoming parochial but is mediated by works published in the centers of the English-using system. On the other hand, the orientation to the center comes at the price of being disconnected from local, “parochial” knowledge.

Conclusion: Towards Change?

Various solutions have been offered to remedy this situation. For example, Van Bremen (2000) looked to a solution in bicultural scholars. Others have established various institutional solutions such as the Graduate Program in Global Studies at Sophia University and belongs to the English using system and is loosely coupled to the Japanese one. Another potential solution to the links between parallel — if hierarchically organized — systems is scholars who become transmigrants travelling between different linguistic academic communities characterized by their own ways of producing, disseminating, and consuming knowledge (Yuki Imoto personal communication).

Faure (2001), commenting about academics in Hong Kong, explains that they lead a schizophrenic existence since they are caught between the “international” (read English-using) system and the system of the Chinese-using world. Within the contours of this world, mediators are important since they translate — literally or figuratively — texts published in one system into the language of another. For the foreseeable future, however, younger scholars seen to achieve global acknowledgement have to play by the rules of the dominant English-using academic system.

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