INTERVIEW

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Cultural Exchange at the Crossroads

Since its founding in 1952, the International House of Japan has been active as a pillar of face-to-face international cultural exchange, and especially as a research base for foreign specialists on Japan. However, this role has changed with the times, and the environment surrounding Japanese studies is also changing. We spoke with Professor Inoki Takenori, director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, about the changing state of Japanese studies and the prospects for the future of international cultural exchange.

The changing state of Japanese studies

IHJ: *The International Research Center for Japanese Studies was established in 1987. Could you tell us something about the circumstances leading to its founding, and why it was created at that time?*

Inoki: The Center was established as a result of the devoted work of a number of scholars from the Kansai region active in the humanities and social sciences, led by Kuwabara Takeo, Umehara Takeshi, and Umesao Tadao. We are now entering our twenty-third year, which seems a good time to take stock, to reconsider where we have been and where we should be going; and so we are in the process of compiling a twenty-five year history. In the process I've had the opportunity to read a variety of source materials from that time and to talk with a number of the key figures. On that basis—though this is merely my own interpretation—I would say there were probably two principal factors in establishing the center.

The first was that by the 1980s Japan had successfully ridden out the two oil shocks and become a major global presence, especially in the realm of international trade. It was also a decade that saw the outbreak of a kind of "economic warfare" between Japan and the United States such as the U.S.-Japan Structural Impediments Initiative Talks. I believe that the scholars I mentioned a moment ago felt that it was necessary to create a mechanism in Japan to provide support to foreign specialists doing academic research on historical or contemporary Japan. So the Center's role was to be a comprehensive service institution to researchers in Japanese studies, and the stance of providing support for their work was quite strong. They were trying to create meaningful overseas friends for Japan whose understanding of the country was more than just superficial. Their intent was to nurture a deep layer of Japanese specialists.

The second, I think, was that at that time Japan had finally developed the psychological and economic wherewithal to think about doing something of this nature.

Over the past twenty years or so, have the research methods and types of foreign scholars coming to Japan also changed?

For more than twenty years we have welcomed some 330 scholars for one-year periods of residence at the Center. During that time the nations and regions from which they have come have expanded considerably. In the beginning most came from the United States and Western Europe, but beginning in the 1990s, with the institutional changes taking place in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, we began to have more scholars from places like Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland. And if we look at the past ten years or so, what is striking is the number of researchers from Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and the other countries of Asia. Right now, the largest number of scholars are from China, the United States, and Korea, in that order. These three countries together account for about half of our overseas researchers, followed by Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, Canada, and India.

The research methods have changed as well. We are no longer simply getting Japan specialists—now we are seeing collaborative research between, for example, American and Japanese researchers who are specialists in other fields. Even if the American researchers cannot read Japanese and the Japanese are not specialists in American studies, because they share a specialization in a particular field, they can collaborate with one another and engage in more accurate comparative research. We are seeing a lot more of this style of research, which promises to yield results at a high level of academic quality.

Thus, with outstanding Japanese collaborators, there are ways in which these research teams

can engage in a research that achieves greater depth than that of American Japan specialists, so we've seen a relative decline in what you might call Japanese studies per se.

Are we seeing changes in foreign institutions devoted to Japanese studies as well?

It depends on what sort of time span we are talking about, but I think it is clear that independent Japanese studies institutions are declining in number. For example, it appears that in Germany the Japanese studies center at the Philipps-Universität Marburg has been absorbed into Frankfurt University, and its former facilities and endowment are to be used for a newly established center for research on the Middle East.

In the United States, Japanese studies have commonly been integrated into departments of East Asian studies or East Asian languages. If this ensures their survival, all is well and good, but the primary reason for this is cost-cutting. And sometimes Japan loses out in such cost-cutting—for example, when a Japan specialist does not receive tenure and resigns, only to be replaced by a China specialist. In any case, it is clearly the case that there has been a decline, at least in number, among institutions specifically devoted to Japanese studies as a result of such reorganizations. And I think there are a number of issues related to quality as well.

What sort of policy initiatives are needed to foster future Japan specialists?

I think we need to become more conscious of approaching this issue from a strategic, policy-making orientation. China, for example, has provided state funding for the expansion of branches of the Confucius Institute[1] to universities (and in some cases, high schools) in the United States, Japan, and elsewhere in the world. The Confucius Institute is noteworthy not simply because it is increasing the number of people who can speak Chinese; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, exposing talented and capable individuals at an early stage of their development to China. People

who study Chinese in their first or second year at university in one of the Confucius Institute projects are probably going to choose China if their interest in Asian studies continues into their second and third year. I think such an experience is extremely effective in influencing their choice of direction. And in that sense, I think the Chinese government has been successful.

In contrast, it would seem Japan has been standing idly by, starved for ideas. Politicians and bureaucrats have a limited consciousness with regard to cultural policy, and what little they have is domestically oriented. There's no need to be aggressive about it, but if we want to keep up with the rest of the world, we can't be quite so passive and disinterested.

The problem is that both academics and government officials are already quite busy with a variety of projects. For example, we've got both the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs thinking about how to bring foreign students to Japan, what they will study, how to assist their future careers. Perhaps because of the territorial divisions between ministries, there appears to be little consciousness of the need to differentiate among these programs and give them unique characteristics and goals. As a result, we have a number of programs that seem to be doing more or less the same thing. In a sense, there's kind of a cutthroat competition going on [*laughs*]. I think what is crucial is for each organization to have a much clearer sense of where they are putting their weight and what perspective they are choosing to emphasize.

Nurturing the "core" of Japanese studies

In recent years manga, anime, and other aspects of Japanese pop culture have become quite popular abroad. What are your thoughts on this?

I have no desire to offer a critique of manga or anime in general, but it seems to me there are a couple of things that can be said against this present enthusiasm for pop culture. One is that genres such as manga and anime have an extraordinarily strong visual appeal, but I believe they rob people of the basic human activity

of heightening their imaginative powers through an understanding of the written word. They are representative examples of a culture that does not honor the written word, what you might call bastard children of democracy, and I feel a certain resistance to their current and almost exclusive prominence.

I also think that people engaged in academic research ought to be asking themselves why they are so popular, and debating it. In other words, I can't agree to the way this is being marketed in the public realm, absent of any critical perspective, just because young people happen to like it or it happens to be popular abroad.

When Japan was riding high economically in the 1980s, there was a lot of research on Japan aimed at trying to unravel the mystery of the Japanese economic miracle. In the United States the number of people studying Japanese grew dramatically at that time. A teacher of Japanese in America often used to joke that if you did a long-term graph of the Nikkei stock index and the number of students of Japanese, they would be following essentially the same curve [*laughs*].

The current enthusiasm for pop culture, like the enthusiasm for studying Japan when the Japanese economy was booming, is a volatile and what we might call a peripheral phenomenon. When people get tired of anime and manga, I think it is likely that the number of Japanese students will also decline. The real issue is whether or not we are nurturing the sort of scholars who will make a long-term investment in the core of Japanese studies—the humanities and social sciences.

International House of Japan, through the I-House Press,[2] is engaged in publishing aimed at transmitting Japanese culture to the world. Translation is an indispensable tool for cultural understanding. What do you think is the most important thing to pay attention to in this regard?

The importance of translation certainly should not be underestimated. If you look at the place of translation in Japanese culture from the Meiji period (1868–1912) onward, Japanese scholars of, say, French literature have studied their subject, selected the works

they thought should be translated, and translated them. In other words, the French government wasn't choosing the titles and asking Japanese who could read French to translate them.

I am a member of the committee of a certain foundation that is charged with selecting fifty works of Japanese nonfiction for translation into English. The committee members are all Japanese. Of course it is important for us to suggest our ideas about "must-read" works in the field of Japanese studies, but the perspective of overseas specialists is important, too. And I think it would be valuable to have a selection process that reflected their motivation—books that they read in the course of their studies that impressed them, books that would help their compatriots better understand Japan, books that they would like to translate themselves if the funding were available. If we don't have such a two- or even three-stage selection process, then the whole thing runs the risk of forcing something on people that they don't really want.

The key to the future of cross-cultural exchange

What about English-language ability among the Japanese? Beginning in 2011, English will become a required subject for fifth and sixth grade elementary school students.

I think in order to foster the psychology that encourages people to be able to converse with foreigners without mental blocks and to say what they want to say without reservation, even if their command of the language is imperfect, starting off in elementary school is a good thing. But the real power in learning another language lies in reading ability, and I don't think this is something children can acquire in elementary school, at a stage when they still don't have a complete command of the Japanese language. So I think more important at this point is the kind of training that will allow them to communicate what they are thinking in a foreign context. And if they don't have a clear idea of what they want to say, even in Japanese, they certainly aren't suddenly going to be able to say it in English.

English education at the elementary school level is part of an effort to foster more internationally oriented human resources—but the question is, what is the best way to do this?

Our ability to train people has declined across the board, in all fields and institutions. In the academic world it used to be that students learned a great deal from observation: seeing what their mentors were doing and quietly making it their own. They used to look to seniors for what they might learn from them; seniors had a sense that they should nurture young people. Now everybody's an equal, but along with freedom has come a disinclination to take on the burden of looking after the young people. Of course it is also true that one of the most important parts of education is in what you don't teach. There can be an element in teaching which is nothing more than passing on your own fixed ideas and prejudices, and that is not good.

I think we need to give young people more opportunities to work. In fact, there are certain things that can be learned only through working. Doing a job is in itself a form of training, and one learns from one's mistakes. In this respect, Japan is a bit too

much of a gerontocracy. The retirement age at the universities is sixty-three, but a lot of professors stay on with special appointments. This makes more administrative busywork for younger faculty, and even has an impact on their research interests.

Why is Japan such a gerontocracy?

Well, it's not so much the fault of the old people, but that we've created an educational system that can't be entrusted to younger people. Japanese universities provide no strong foundation in the liberal arts. By the liberal arts I mean the sort of intellectual and spiritual training that comes from mastering foreign languages, studying Eastern and Western civilizations, and reading the classics of Western, Chinese, and Japanese literature. There's something Fukuzawa Yukichi called "civic wisdom" (*kōchi*)—the ability, gained through the study of the classics, to skillfully discriminate among matters of greater and lesser importance and to set priorities. Our educational system does not foster this capacity, and has instead relied on the wisdom and experience of the elderly. But the leadership training available through study of the classics is of vital importance to both the life of the individual and that of the nation at a time of great crisis.

Through programs such as ALFP and the I-House Ushiba Fellowships,[3] International House of Japan has played a role in supporting intellectual exchange. Do you have any advice for the future activities of a small private-sector foundation such as I-House?

Cooperation is extremely important. The capacities of a single organization are limited, even in terms of who they might invite to give programs. So I think it is important to pool resources and energy in the form of collaborative projects with research institutes, universities, the Japan Foundation, and other organizations. But in doing so an administrative structure that allows each organization its independence and the ability to emphasize what it feels to be important is desirable. I think this kind of cooperation is very important.

I also think there is no need to limit yourself to Japan specialists. For example, in 1977 the Japan Foundation invited Claude Lévi-Strauss[4] to Japan. It was especially significant because structuralism was popular at the time, but this was a major event for scholars in the humanities, something of immense significance even from today's perspective. He was not intimidated by scholarship [on Japan], and the various remarks and comments he made while he was here—precisely because he was not a Japan specialist—were quite impressive. Some of them made even Japanese people reflect on their understanding of this country. I think it would be good to create a venue where public intellectuals from a number of different countries could be invited to come and give informal seminar presentations and engage in dialogue.

Interview conducted by Furuhata Takashirō, IHJ Executive Director

Notes

[1] The Confucius Institute is the umbrella organization for a network of language education centers established beginning in 2004 by the Chinese government with cooperation from universities and other academic institutions; it is intended to promote knowledge of Chinese language and culture and international understanding. As of May 2008 there were 245 branches in seventy-two countries.

[2] I-House Press is a publishing program intended to give wider distribution mainly in English translation to major works by Japanese scholars and to the fruits of program activities at the I-House, for the purpose of promoting greater overseas understanding of Japan.

[3] The Asian Leadership Fellow Program has been implemented as a joint program between I-House and the Japan Foundation since 1996. Each year six or seven public intellectuals from Asian nations who have demonstrated leadership in a variety of fields are invited to Japan on two-month fellowships.

The I-House Ushiba Fellowships is a program aimed at fostering dialogue among Japanese and foreign experts by inviting to Japan overseas intellectuals who are attempting, from a humanistic perspective, to propose ways of overcoming the various divisions that still plague our 21st-century world.

[4] Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908– 2009). French social anthropologist and philosopher. The lectures and dialogues from his visit to Japan in 1977 have been published in Japanese by Misuzu Shobō as *Kōzō · shinwa · rōdō—Claude Lévi-Strauss Nihon kōen shū* [Structure, Myth, Labor: The Japan Lectures of Claude Lévi-Strauss] (Misuzu Shobō, 2008 [new edition]).

My personal motto is:
Steady efforts, certain gains (literally, "continuation and accumulation")

Inoki Takenori Born in 1945. Specialist in labor economics and economic thought. After graduating from the Faculty of Economics at Kyoto University, he completed a doctorate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He served as a professor in the Faculty of Economics at Osaka University and at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, and then became director of the Center in April 2008. His major publications include *Keizai shisō* [Economic Thought] (Iwanami Shoten, 1987; winner of the Suntory Academic Prize and the Nikkei Prize for Economics Books); *Jiyū to chitsujo—Kyōsō shakai no futatsu no kao* [Freedom and Order: The Two Faces of a Competitive Society] (Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2001; winner of the Yomiuri–Yoshino Sakuzō Prize); *Bungei ni arawareta Nihon no kindai—Shakai kagaku to bungaku no aida* [Japanese Modernity as Revealed in Literature: Between Social Science and Literature] (Yūhikaku, 2004; winner of the Kuwabara Takeo Academic Award); *Daigaku no hansei* [The University Searches Its Soul] (NTT Shuppan, 2009); and *Sengo sekai keizai shi—Jiyū to byōdō no shiten kara* [An Economic History of the Postwar World: From the Perspective of Freedom and Equality] (Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2009). In 2002 he was honored with the Japanese Medal with Purple Ribbon for his academic achievements.