

Toshiba International Foundation 30th Anniversary Essay Contest

**Knowledge without Supremacy:
Japanese Studies in the Face of Global Ecological Crisis¹**

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Shifting Human-Nature Relations, Shifting Ways of Knowing

“I know that you are fond of Japanese things. Do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence?” An Irish writer, a graduate of the University of Oxford, once wrote in 1889. He carried on: “The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people. ... In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people.”² This is what Oscar Wilde argued in his “Decay of Lying: A Protest,” a work of dialogue on nature and aesthetics written during the height of cultural and political Orientalism of Japan in Europe.³ What Wilde meant by this statement is that one should stay in the UK if one wants to know Japan; because “Japan” one imagines doesn’t exist as it is. The ordinary people’s ordinary lives are quite like those of people in the UK. The provocation made by Wilde in the late 19th century still resonates with us – the humanities and social sciences scholars who study Japan from Anglophone worlds and those who discuss Japan from Japan, to the Anglophone world in the

¹ The manuscript developed as part of interdisciplinary research dialogues through which the author collaborated with other scholars and practitioners whose work concerns knowledge making in Japanese Studies and/or ecological studies.

The author presented the first version of the reflective paper as the opening remark for *Ecologies of Knowledge and Practice: Japanese Studies and the Environmental Humanities*, a Graduates and Early Career Researchers workshop she co-organised with her colleague Alice Freeman at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford in October 2017. The event was made possible through the generous support from from St Antony’s College’s Antonian fund, the Nissan Institute of Japanese Studies, the Japan Foundation London, TORCH (the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), and our friends, colleagues, and mentors. It was run in partnership with the Oxford Centre for Global History and TORCH and in association with Japanese History Workshop and the Oxford Environmental History Network.

The author, then, presented the second version of the paper at the research colloquium *Rethinking Environmental Praxis, Disciplinarity, and Subjectivity: New Perspectives on the Anthropocene in East Asia* at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature, Japan’s National Institutes for Humanities in Kyoto, in February 2018. The event was organised by the geographer Daniel Niles and the historian Terada Masahiro. Our dialogue began through *the Anthropocene Curriculum*, the ten-days experimental workshop on interdisciplinary knowledge making in the face of the ecological change, run by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Max Planck Institute for History of Science in Berlin, 2016.

² Oscar Wilde *Decay of Lying: A Protest* 1889

³ The art curator Jonathan Watkins narrated the Wilde’s account on Japan to the author as they discussed the very same topic in the spring of 2017.

21st century. We may not be as prone as the 19th-century artists to naïve exoticism and Japanese exceptionalism. Yet, Wilde's remark reminds us of the fact that we tend to forget that whether if one is Japanese or English, we belong to the same world as the same human beings. Today, whether if one is a scholar of Asia, Africa, Eurasia, or Europe, we are inescapably confronted by the fact that the history of human beings has now collided with the history of the earth. Human-made artifice – such as plastics and excessive nuclear radiation – have entered the ecosystem of the earth and are now part of “the environmental nature.”⁴ The presupposed separation of humans and the external nature that grounded the modern intellectual disciplinary foundation more than hundred years ago is no longer viable.

The disciplinary and regional divides that intersect with Area Studies and disciplinary divides originate in an intellectual and practical paradigm that operates in antithesis to our present condition. They are rooted to the late 19th-century academia Oscar Wilde lived through that allowed the Orientalism to emerge. As much as these modes of learning continue to adopt to our present needs and provide us with a wealth of knowledge, there are at least two predicaments that hinder broader intellectual imaginations required for the common challenges in the ecological crisis of our shared planet – shared, not only among humans but also with non-human majorities. The first is to do with the limit of nation-state centred framework of conventional “Japanese Studies” in facing a problem beyond the state management of compartmentalised land and human politics. The second is the Eurocentric character of modern academic discipline whose paradigm still operates in the West and the East binary, or indeed, the West and the rest. The problems of “the nation-state ... as the [presupposed] fundamental unit of investigation” and “European developments [as the] foreground and the central driving force” have also been addressed by the historian of Japan and the forerunner of the field of “global history” Sebastian Conrad as the “two “birth defects” of modern social sciences and humanities” that emerged in the late 19th century.⁵ The history of the globe is, I argue, inherently environmental. These late 19th century methods of knowing are simply inadequate, or possibly even outdated when one confronts with the history of humanities in entanglement with the history of the earth.

Relocating the root of “Japanese Studies”

The discipline of Japanese Studies in the Anglophone academia formally emerged out of Japan's international relation to Euro-American colonialism in the late 19th century, Japan's Meiji era widely known as the modern period when Japan widened its restricted boarder to so-called Western modernity. A representative example is the Asiatic Society of Japan established by British and American diplomats, businessmen, and missionaries in 1872, five years after the Meiji Ishin, the start of the Meiji era, at the port city of Yokohama where America's black ship arrived. As one can imagine from the name of the society, Japanese Studies was established in the context of the study of Asia. Fast forward to the post-war 1940: another turning point for the research of culture-from-distance emerged. The American anthropologist Ruth Benedict got commissioned by the US Office of War Information to write

⁴ This historical moment of the epoch has been characterised variously by scholars today. One predominant conception is the Anthropocene whose existence is defined by the presence of human-made artifice in the strata of the “nature” earth.

⁵ Conrad, Sebastian. *What is Global History?* (Princeton: 2016) pp. 3-4

the canonical book of Japanese Studies “The Chrysanthemum and Sword” in 1945.⁶ The book on Japanese behaviourism was written without her visit to Japan based on her wartime research on the country from a distance. Then, as recounted by the historian of Japan Harry Harootunian in the recent issue of the journal *Japan Forum*, the period of Cold War gave rise to Japanese Studies in America that “transmute[s] the study of Japan into a world-class social science paradigm of peaceful ... development of former Third World countries that could be put as a textbook example for other new nations to emulate and follow without resorting to revolutionary theories of change.”⁷ While Harootunian resents still never-ending alley of conferences that claim the importance of Japanese Studies based on Japanese exceptionalism and their turn to so-called “native theory” in the recent years, in this essay, he calls for an intellectual framework of “Japan is not interesting,” somewhat reminiscent of Oscar Wilde, a paper once delivered by the late literary scholar Masao Miyoshi in the 1990s. Miyoshi employed such provocative title indeed with the aim to invite critical debates to the field of Japanese Studies that continues to rely on identity politics and the “nationalism”.⁸ He argued the urgent need for “broadening the world in which Japan had been resituated and the necessity of redefining its relationship to it.”⁹

It is broadening of Japanese Studies in the context of global ecological challenges that I wish to advocate: a move towards an Area Studies with planetary nature at the heart of our way of knowing, instead of the sole nation-state on its own. Miyoshi, in fact, had already begun to catalyse in his work such as his 2005 paper *The University, the Universe, the World, and “Globalization”*, arguing that how the Humanities and Social Sciences departments should teach their students the history of the planet before the emergence of human race.¹⁰ Then, while we build on the legacy of scholars like Miyoshi, how do we bring this forward beyond the framework of identity politics? What is noticeable in Miyoshi’s methodological approach is that he seems to have perceived the planetary nature in the sense of Environmentalism. Indeed, in his interview with the Japanese media studies scholar Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro published in 2007, Miyoshi argued that where we may be able to arrive at when we successfully bring together the history of the earth with the Humanities and the Social Sciences is environmentalism.¹¹ The logic of environmentalism back then still operated within the dichotomy of nature-culture where non-human nature is considered as the natural environment external to “cultural” humans; passive and exploitable nature needs to be protected from and by cultural humans. The environmentalist thoughts emerged in the lineage of the modernist science that brought the birth to the disciplinary divides. Today, the modernist paradigm is no longer feasible neither in the face of global ecological challenges. The ecological condition and its epistemological lens of the present day has surpassed the environmentalism.

⁶ Ruth Benedict *The Chrysanthemum and Sword* 1945

⁷ Harootunian, Harry. “Other people’s history: some reflections on the historian’s vocation” *Japan Forum*, 03 April 2017, Vol.29(2), p.139-153.

⁸ Miyoshi, Masao and Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro *Teikounobahe/Site of Resistance* (2007)

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.150; Miyoshi, Masao “Japan is Not Interesting” In., *Re-Mapping Japanese Culture: Papers of the 10th Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia*. Monash Asia Institute (2000), pp. 11-25

¹⁰ Miyoshi, Masao and Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro *Teikounobahe/Site of Resistance* (2007) pp.246-247 and pp.316-317

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.317

The logic of the environmentalism has a curious resemblance to that of the identity politics. The emergence of identity politics was based on the belief in liberation – a yearning for freedom – of the oppressed. This belief of freedom, as pointed out by the historian of medieval Japanese literature Rajyashree Pandey, presupposes human as the sole bearer of agency and a free will. It is based on the “modern liberal thought [that assumes] behind every act there is the presence of an autonomous individual, who has the innate desire to strike out against the norms of her society.”¹² What if, then, humans were not the only bearer of agency; and what if, non-human majorities were no longer regarded as merely passive and exploitable being? The Japanese Studies in the face of the global planetary crisis poses the possibility for Japanese Studies to move beyond the dilemma that Miyoshi posed in the age of the environmentalism.

Japanese Studies in the East and the West Dichotomy

The second predicament is the historical place of Japanese Studies in the Eurocentric nature of humanities and social sciences disciplines whose paradigm still operates in the West and the East binary. Japanese Studies initially emerged from the realm of “Asia” in the East in the intellectual history of the planet. The historian of East Asian political relation Urs Matthias Zachmann clarified that no equivalent to such concept as “Asia” existed in Japan and the wider East Asia until Jesuits introduced the ideography to Japan in the 17th century. The imposed naming of geography was received by “Asian” intellectuals with disapprovals as such naming gesture signified an imbalance of power dynamic.¹³ The stigma of the “East Asia” in relative to the “Western Europe” that stems in this historical lineage never left our consciousness. The term has long been internalised in writing of both humanities and social sciences as a geographical location and intellectual conception. In other words, to practice “Japanese Studies” as part of the branch of Area Studies of Asia is, in a sense, to be inherently affected by the difficulty of the politics of cultural and intellectual supremacy of the West.

It is concurrently important to be reminded that the notion of the West can be more of a conception of intellectual space than an all-encompassing representation of the Euro-American or Anglophone world. The habitual traits of so-called “the West” and the “Western” modernity are the bifurcation of nature-culture. This is represented by the colonialism of land, of environmental nature, and of people who were perceived by the colonialists as part of the ‘nature’ i.e. so-called primitive savages that could be exploited in the name of so-called civilisation. This notion of modernity measures human progress based on technological development distinguishing itself from pliant nature in the hands of autonomous humans. As much as it is useful, such conception as the West mystifies what we know as the East to be an opposite counterpart culture that essentially lived harmoniously with nature. The reality is that objectification, manipulation, and exploitation of nature by humans as well as the use of a notion of nature as a political ideology to justify inequalities are evident in the history of both Japan and so-called the East. Works of established historians of Japan such as Conrad Totman, Julia Adeney Thomas, Brett L. Walker, Ian J. Miller, and Federico Marcon are good

¹² Rajyashree Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Women, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (Honolulu, 2016) p.26-27.

¹³ Zachmann, Urs Matthias. *The Meaning of Asia in Japanese-Chinese Relations* A Lecture delivered on 28 January 2014 at the Old College, University of Edinburgh, UK.

examples.¹⁴ The epistemology of the Western modernity is not essential to, if not simply transferrable from, Euro-America. The notion of the East is, in other words, a modernist project as much as is the notion of the West.

The demystification of the East goes hands in hands with the demystification of what typically constituted the notion of the West. The influential “Western” thinkers such as the philosophers and anthropologists of science Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour have already done so. The demystification – or the demise – of the monolithic West in the face of the ecological crisis has been taken further most notably by works of scholars such as by Anna Tsing and Philippe Descola.¹⁵ Such ways of thinking are still rarely employed in the discipline of Japanese Studies.

The Role and Form of Japanese Studies in 2020 and Beyond

Bearing in mind the discussion thus far, what is required in Japanese studies in 2020 and beyond is knowledge-making of Japan in the global ecological crisis that illuminates accounts of the world through perspectives away from the Euro-centrism, human-centrism, and nationalism. Such narratives embrace other kinds of modernity that existed in the history of the present and the past – a progress that does not base itself on the power competition of East-West, nature-culture, male-female, civilised-primitive, developed-developing, sciences-humanities, and, institutionalised or non-institutionalised knowledge and practice. Japanese Studies, having emerged at the intersection of the East and the West bifurcation, holds the almost untapped possibilities in unravelling these narratives that consciously decolonises the current predicaments of knowledge making. Historians whose work deals with modern Japan – Japan’s determining period of modernity – have laid the foundational ground. Sho Konishi, for example, reopened the “opening” of Japan in articulating the Russo-Japanese transnational history of anarchism that contributed to people’s vision of modernity based on cooperation beyond borders instead of competitions among nations.¹⁶ Nile Green, at the same time, clarified the existence of non-colonial and non-European origin of Japanese Studies in his work on the early 20th century Islamic Japanology.¹⁷ The form of Japanese Studies without a supremacy of one discipline, culture, or identity over another holds the role to shape both academic and life practices in the present and the future of global ecological crisis.

¹⁴ Thomas, Julia Adeney. *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Miller, Ian Jared. *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013); Miller, I. J., Thomas, J. A., and Walker, B. L. (ed.,) *Japan at Nature’s Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press); Walker, Brett L. *A Concise History of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); and Marcon, Federico. *The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Tsing, Anna. *Mushroom at the end of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: 2015); Philippe Descola trans., Janet Lloyd *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: 2005)

¹⁶ Sho Konishi *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* (Harvard: 2013).

¹⁷ Nile Green “Anti-Colonial Japanophilia and the constraints of an Islamic Japanology: information and affect in the Indian encounter with Japan” In., *South Asian History and Culture*, 01 July 2013, Vol.4(3), p.291-313.

Japanese Studies without a supremacy may concurrently be a discipline of trans-disciplinarity. In speaking of disciplinarity and how we may be able to move forward from interdisciplinary to transdisciplinary, Masao Miyoshi reflected on the meaning of this terminology.¹⁸ Discipline means a branch of knowledge studied in higher education. And it also means “the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour, using punishment to correct disobedience.”¹⁹ And it is connected to, he pointed out, the word “disciple” i.e. a follower or pupil of a teacher, leader, or philosopher.²⁰ What then would happen to one’s method of knowing if one was to refuse to be a disciple, to be trained to obey rules with potential punishment? And what if, one was to seek knowledge based on observations of non-human subjectivities that could not be easily defined by conventional epistemological categories or lexicon we have?

One of the significant case studies that echoes these questions is the intellectual history on the life and work of the Japanese naturalist and polymath Minakata Kumagusu (1867-1941) I research.²¹ While living and working as an independent scholar who specialised in the micro-organism of slime mould in Japan, the US, and the UK, Kumagusu made an immense contribution to the transdisciplinary knowledge making of the time. He published 51 articles he published in the Science journal *nature* and approximately 400 English essays and 600 Japanese works in the field of Humanities. He conversed with key historical actors of Japan and China – such as the ‘founding father’ of Japanese folklore studies Yanagita Kunio and the political revolutionary Sun Yat-sen – as well as scholars at the British Museum in the UK. In so doing, they influenced each other’s thoughts and imaginations. Even the Shōwa emperor of Japan, also a microbiologist, requested Kumagusu to deliver him a lecture (1929). The naturalist was a prolific scholar who, both independently and collaboratively, pushed the boundaries of intellectual imagination in the globalising modern period. No substantial account of his life and work, however, existed in English – until now. Kumagusu, in addition to the academic contributions, ferociously run a nation-wide campaign against state-led mass destruction of the deep forest and its numerous sacred sites, immediately after the Japanese victory of the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War in the name of modern progress. One of the most affected regions was the ancient forest of Kumano in his local Kii Mountain Range; the UNESCO acknowledged the sacred sites and pilgrimage routes as the World Heritage Site in 2004.

Kumagusu’s activism and its legacy protected the biodiversity and cultural ties embedded in the forest in redefining modern science. He perceived nature that grounds the science as queer: “a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to ... heterosexual norms.”²² He found the epistemic truth of the world in the micro-organism of slime mould that possesses more than 900 biological sex, both qualities of plants and animals, and transient ability to float between life and death. What I define as the history of queer nature changes the way

¹⁸ Miyoshi, Masao and Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro *Teikounobahe/Site of Resistance* (2007) pp.318-319

¹⁹ “discipline” In., *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005-2014) Version 2.2.1 (171.1) Apple Inc.

²⁰ Miyoshi Ibid.,

²¹ The thesis has been generously supported by the Toshiba International Foundation Fellowship, Oxford Sasakawa Scholarship, Japan Foundation Endowment Committee Research Fund, Sasakawa Japanese Studies Postgraduate Studentship, and Storry Memorial Bursary. Without their support, neither my research at the university nor in Japan would have been possible.

²² “queer” In., *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005-2014) Version 2.2.1 (171.1) Apple Inc.

we understand the history of modern science. Queer nature in modern science believed that “ecology” was not only about mutual supporting system among non-human species; existing human cultures, societies, and psychology in the Kii Mountain Range was part of the ecology that sustained the earth-bound human history. Such an understanding of ecology emerged from nature where humans were microbial beings that, in the microbial scale of a molecule, shared the same life and death ontology to slime mould. Gender and sexualities embraced androgyny and transient possibilities of multiple biological sexes as in the biology of slime mould and mythologies and cultures of sexualities in Shingon Buddhism and *Kumano Shinkō*. In this paradigm, all cultures and belief systems – including different kinds of sciences and religions – had something to learn from one another in finding the epistemic truth that grounded the modernity. It was these qualities of queer nature in modern science that led to the present-day international acknowledgement of the region as the World Heritage Site.

In redefining the history of the modern science, I contribute to the collective effort to redefine the knowledge of modernity – thereby changing the historical trajectories to the present moment in which Japanese Studies can be redefined in placing nature at the core of our studies of human activities. To achieve this collaboratively among the new generation of scholars, I initiated *Ecologies of Knowledge and Practice: Japanese Studies and the Environmental Humanities* with my colleague Alice Freeman in 2017.²³ The two days and a half Graduates and Early Career Researchers Workshop at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford developed a new foundational ground to the works and wisdom of established scholars. The next step is to develop the common ground among various area studies in expanding human imaginations on cultures of nature across the globe through shared critical concerns in the face of global ecological crisis. The global ecological crisis is a failure of human imagination.²⁴ In embracing the barely untapped methods of knowing, and therefore the grounds for human imaginations, Japanese Studies of 2020 and beyond holds the possibility to move away from the past predicaments towards the process of knowledge making without supremacy.

²³ On the programme details, please visit: <https://ecologiesknowledgeandpractice.wordpress.com/>

²⁴ The account was inspired by the aim of *Humanities on the Ground: Confronting the Anthropocene in Asia*, the Research Institute of Humanity and Nature’s 13th International Symposium in which the author took part in 2018.