Crossing Academic Fields and National Borders : The Study of History, Politics, and Japan in Three Countries

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Crossing Academic Fields and National Borders: The Study of History, Politics, and Japan in Three Countries

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Abstract

In this Research Memo, I survey the state of the field in my area of specialization, postwar Japanese political history, comparing the academic landscape in the three countries where I have experience: the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of historiography, but to explore how the study of history and politics, and specifically the context of modern/contemporary Japan, has been approached in three countries and how their different trends and conventions have affected my experience as a researcher.

As a point of departure for the discussion, I will first briefly outline my academic background and research focus. Second, I will consider trends in particular subfields which relate to my area of research in political history and modern/contemporary Japanese history. After examining the scholarly landscape in American academia, I will turn to the Japanese context, and briefly, to the United Kingdom and Anglophone world. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on how this comparative discussion relates to my particular research experience and by speculating on some challenges and opportunities entailed in the "new normal" of today's uncertain world and global academic marketplace.

Keywords: political history, historiography, Japanese history, academic disciplines

Introduction

A central aspect of conducting academic research on any subject is understanding the trends, conventions, and trajectories within the field in which this research is situated. Scholarship as a whole is a cumulative process and it progresses or expands understanding of the world most clearly and systematically when one piece of research is aware of, and in dialogue with, others that have come before it. Given the importance of understanding the landscape in which one's research expedition is moving, in the academic profession there are surprisingly few opportunities to carefully reflect on the state of the field. This

kind of analysis is usually restricted to a few introductory paragraphs of a volume or article or a brief literature review. However, it is the kind of discussion that can best inform those outside one's specialty about the broader discourse in which it fits and its broader significance, and thus it has a particular value beyond narrow exchanges between experts.

In this essay I will examine the state of the field in my own area of specialization, the political history of postwar (post-1945) Japan. Because this is a quite narrow, specific field, I will consider separate but intersecting fields of political history and modern Japanese history. I will focus on comparing research trends in the Japanese academic community, where much of the existing research is naturally centered, with developments in the American and Anglophone scholarly world, where I have spent most of my formative years being educated as a historian. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive historiographical overview —that is, an analysis of how history has been written or understood over time— but to briefly explore how the study of history, and specifically the history of contemporary Japanese politics, has been approached in Japan and the West and how these variations have affected my experience as a researcher.

The structure of this essay is as follows. As a point of departure for the discussion, I will first briefly outline my academic background and research focus. Second, I will consider trends in particular subfields which relate to my area of research in political history and modern/contemporary Japanese history. After examining the scholarly landscape in American academia, I will turn to the Japanese context, and briefly, to the United Kingdom. Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on how this comparative discussion relates to my particular research experience and by speculating on some challenges and opportunities entailed in the "new normal" of today's uncertain world and global academic marketplace.

My Background and Research Focus

The overarching theme of my research is the political development of modern Japan since the end of the Second World War. In this area of specialization, I combine longstanding interests in social sciences, humanities, and Japan, arriving at it as the result of a long path of advanced multidisciplinary study at several institutions in three different countries. As an undergraduate I majored in political science (mostly international relations and political thought), and immediately after graduation I received an opportunity to study at Kyoto University as a research student. There I became acquainted with the Graduate School

of Law's leading program in modern Japanese political and diplomatic history and my experience studying in this environment inspired me to pursue Japanese studies. When I subsequently enrolled to earn an M.Phil. in Political Thought and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge, I decided to switch my focus from a Western topic to the subject of Meiji-period Japan. This foray into Japan research led me to pursue study of Japanese politics in University of California Berkeley's political science Ph.D. program. However, I came to realize that the humanistic, historical approach I wanted to take suited me better to a history program. As a result, I moved to a doctorate in History and East Asian Languages at Harvard University's Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, where I earned my Ph.D. in November 2019.

In the History and East Asian Languages program, I focused on the postwar political history of Japan, doing projects that in various ways addressed a puzzle that has particularly fascinated me: the trajectory of party politics and the political dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). In several papers I have written I have tended to use biographical study of key political figures to shed light on Japan's political development. This research has fed into my Ph.D. dissertation, titled "Satō Eisaku and the Establishment of Single-Party Rule in Postwar Japan," which I am now revising and expanding to publish as a monograph.[1] The project examines the life and political career of Satō Eisaku (1901-1975), who until recently (when Abe Shinzō barely broke his record) was the Japanese prime minister with the longest continuous tenure, serving seven years and eight months from 1964 to 1972. Besides using Satō's biography to frame a crucial period of Japanese history, I also argue that at different stages of his career—from his time as an elite bureaucrat, to his consequential stint as prime minister, to his final years as an elder statesman—Satō contributed to what would become the long-term preeminence of the LDP in postwar Japan—one that in many ways continues to this day. In helping consolidate LDP rule, he bequeathed an important legacy to his successors, including Abe, who happens to be his great-nephew and hails from an electoral district in the same vicinity in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

While working on my dissertation I returned to Kyoto University's Graduate School of Law for a two-year research stay. I then returned to Harvard to complete and defend the dissertation, and a few months after completing the degree I began my current position at Kansai Gaidai University. Thus, my academic development has been divided among three different countries—the United States, Japan, and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. Furthermore, my journey as a researcher thus far has been characterized not only by

exchange among these academic communities but mobility between the disciplines of political science, history, and area studies. It is from this perspective that I would like to reflect on these fields as they exist in these contexts and the implications of these comparisons on my own emerging project.

Political History and Japanese History in the United States

Within humanities and social sciences, I have always been particularly interested in political questions, which led me to an early focus on political science. The big turning point was when I moved from a political science Ph.D. program to one focused on history and area studies. I decided that my intention to study politics from an exclusively humanistic and historical angle, and to focus on Japan, made my envisioned project more at home in the discipline of history.

Much of this has to do with the particularities of American academia, where my graduate education has been concentrated. Once upon a time, in the mid-twentieth century, political science included works by scholars like Barrington Moore or Samuel Huntington about political processes over broad sweeps of time and space.[2] But as all familiar with the discipline are aware, in the past few decades political science in the United States (with the exception of the political theory subfield) has diverged from history and humanistic areas of study in substance and style, placing increasing emphasis on formal models, quantitative methods, and the specialized terminology associated with these. To be sure, some have resisted this trend. For example, a subfield of American politics known as "American political development" focuses on historical questions, and enterprising political scientists like Daniel Ziblatt, an expert on European politics, carry on Moore and Huntington's legacy.[3] But these are exceptions remarkably able to swim against an overwhelming tide.

When I began studying political science as a graduate student, I was not fully aware of these constraints. One reason is that undergraduate education tends to emphasize the more accessible qualitative side and does not dwell on methodological debates pertinent to practicing academics. Furthermore, my years before the Ph.D. program were spent outside the United States, where the trends are quite different (as I will soon explain.) In any case, since my aim was to study Japanese politics taking a largely historical perspective and I found that this approach was increasingly marginalized in American political science, I decided to change to a history-oriented program. This was despite the fact that Berkeley's

political science department has a more qualitative reputation than others and that I greatly respected my advisors and enjoyed working with them.

I was happy to find that the discipline of history was more methodologically to my taste. It also addresses large issues like modernization and imperialism that have largely fallen off the radar of political science or at least have been framed much more narrowly. However, history has its own trends and conventions to contend with. Most who have studied the subject are familiar with the various "schools" and "turns" that have defined historiography, or the practice of studying and writing history, in the West: Whig history, the Annales School, the Cultural Turn, for example. However, it is my impression that the shifts have especially potent and quick in the American academia due to the rapid social and cultural transformation the young nation has experienced since its founding. This is evidenced by the multitude of currents or movements in the study of American history, which naturally sets trends for other subfields of the discipline in the United States.[4] As a result, in American universities history faculty are not only classified by country or region, but also by themes such as "environment," "gender and sexuality," "borderlands," "transnational or global," "empire," and "science and technology."

While intellectual diversity and differentiation is commendable, categories and trends can be constraining. Some types of history are considered fresher and more innovative than others, and the succession of new tendencies has often come at the extent of political history, one of the oldest and most traditional subfields. As anecdotes as well as surveys suggest, just as political science distances itself from history, the number of political historians in the United States has also declined since the late 20th century.[5] Increasingly, political subjects must intertwine with other more favored topics to be viable in the academic market. One case in which political history has suffered relatively little is when it is subsumed within the context of transnational or global history or the history of empire. For example, in recent years U.S. diplomatic history has been reframed first as "history of American foreign relations" and then as "the United States in the world." This implies the focus has transcended state-to-state ties between the United States and other countries to include a wider range of international interactions often involving non-state actors.[6] Despite these modifications, or sometimes because of them, this area of study has produced excellent, politically-relevant works such as Erez Manela's scholarship on "the Wilsonian moment" or Jeremy Suri's research on the "global 1960s."[7] Political history involving strictly national narratives or individuals biographies has less traction in academia, though general audiences

still tend to appreciate it .

The study of Japanese history in the United States generally echoes these patterns, perhaps with a slight lag. Compared to others, this is quite new field pioneered by a small, closely-knit group of specialists. Only truly emerging in American academia after World War II, it was first dominated by proponents of modernization theory such as Edwin O. Reischauer and John W. Hall. Largely in this vein, in the 1960s George Akita, Peter Duus, and others wrote important studies featuring the statesmen of the Meiji and Taisho periods.[8] The Vietnam War era coincided with a critical reaction against modernization theory as a framework supporting US hegemony around the world. Historians' interests gradually shifted from high politics to intersections between state and society or culture, and by the 1990s political history had been nearly eclipsed by social and cultural history.[9] Since the start of the 21st century, a new generation of scholars has increasingly focused on urban culture, war, imperialism, transnationalism, ethnicity, gender, and the environment.[10] Besides imperial and wartime Japan, the era of the US Occupation seems increasingly the new period of interest (beyond, of course, John Dower's authoritative work on the subject).[11]

This brings us to my own area of focus, postwar Japanese political history, where scholarship remains sparse for two reasons. First is the decline of political history across the history discipline as a whole. Second is the fact that given the newness of the Japan field, postwar history remains especially understudied.[12] To be sure, there have been important contributions in recent years, especially when politics is combined with other concerns. Similar to the case of American history, Japanese political history has thrived most when put into an international framework, as suggested by several recent works examining Japan's place in the Cold War.[13]

One reason Japan historians increasingly situate their research into larger global, transnational, or thematic contexts rather than simply shedding light on their country of interest is that the field of Japanese studies has contracted in the past few decades. This is due not only to pressures in the humanities and higher education in general (exacerbated by the economic fallout of the current pandemic) but also to the relative decline of the Japan's economic power in the world since the early 1990s and subsequent slumps in student enrollment in Japan-related courses and in funding for Japan studies programs.[14] As a result, there are fewer and fewer exclusively Japan-focused positions and specialists often must broaden their geographic or thematic scope in order to promote their research or survive in the academic profession. For example, a historian of Japan increasingly feels pressure

to identify as an "Asianist," "world historian," or "environmental historian" rather than simply a student of Japan. As one young researcher, who is conducting a project analyzing the job market observed, "No tenure-track faculty jobs in exclusively Japanese history were offered in North America for the 2019-2020 season." Scholars of literature and culture have fared somewhat better than others, partially due to the enduring "soft power" of Japanese anime, manga, video games, and cuisine.[15] These sobering trends have affected junior Japan researchers across the disciplines, and while they can force academics to be resourceful and persuasive, they also narrow the possibilities of pursuing knowledge for its own sake.

Political History and Japanese History in Japan

During my research stays in Japan, I have found a very different landscape than what I have encountered in my graduate work in the United States. The most obvious difference is that Japanese studies or Japanese history is naturally not a peripheral niche area of study within the humanities but instead the dominant one, analogous to the position of American studies or American history in the United States. The fact that the number of specialists and volume of research on any given subject in the field is far greater poses both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, this creates more competition, but on the other hand, it means more exchanges of ideas. This is not to mention the basic fact that for Japanese history more sources of various kinds are available in Japan than outside it (with the exception of non-Japanese scholarship which may be somewhat more difficult to access.)

Another important reality I have found is that in Japanese universities the discipline of history is organized in ways that are very different from their counterparts in the United States. First is the geographical categorization of historical fields. In Japan, the study of history (and understandings of culture and the humanities in general) exhibits the civilizational trichotomy of "Japan," "the West" (Europe and North America) and "the East" (East, Southeast, and South Asia) that first took root in the early modern period. To be sure, this worldview is far less overt than before. However, while there are Japanese specialists of regions such as Latin America or Africa that fall outside the trichotomy, they remain somewhat marginalized in comparison to the Japanologists, Occidentalists, and Orientalists.

Second, Japanese historiography has been influenced by the West but nevertheless trod a distinct path. While history-writing traditionally followed the model of the imperial Chinese court chronicles, the modern academic study emerged in the Meiji period. The practice

promoted by the state combined heavy influences from the German positivist tradition of Leopold von Ranke with adherence to national myths about the origins of the Japanese imperial line and Japanese people.[16] Eventually this establishment school was challenged by an ascendant Marxist tradition, which remained pervasive on campuses well into the 20th century. After the Second World War, modernization theory gained traction and by the 1970s was questioned by a new current known as "people's history" (*minshū-shi*) which promoted a shift away from elite politics toward study of the grassroots—somewhat analogous to the rise of social history.[17] While Marxist history has declined in recent decades, its influence can be felt in research examining labor, social movements, and minorities, fields represented by institutions such as Hōsei University's Ōhara Institute for Social Research (*Ōhara shakai mondai kenkyūjo*).[18]

Third, while history in Japan has been affected by trends in academia overseas, these shifts are less drastic compared with those in the United States. Fields like gender history, environmental history, and cultural history have not edged out more traditional areas of study. One important reason for this is that in Japanese academia, history is regarded as less of a stand-alone discipline than one of several methodological approaches used in distinct subject areas. At Kyoto University, where I spent several years as a researcher, historians are distributed across several academic departments depending on their specialty. Cultural and social historians and premodernists tend to be found in the Faculty of Letters, and the Faculty of Economics houses not only economists but also economic and business historians. The Graduate School of Law, which with I was affiliated, contains specialists in a variety of subjects relating to politics, foreign policy, law, and administration. These include political scientists, political/diplomatic historians, and legal scholars, who in an American research university would likely find themselves in entirely separate departments or even separate schools. While categorizations vary according to the university, other Japanese institutions often follow this arrangement of subsuming the history field within other faculties. Universities with separate "history departments" are rare in Japan.

This fragmentation of the historian community means that multiple fields can thrive at the same time but also that fruitful cross-pollination between them is more limited. Unlike its American counterpart, political history in Japan continues to be a robust area of study with a large and active community of scholars. Political and diplomatic historians represent a sizable contingent in leading academic societies such as the Japanese Political Science Association (*Nihon seiji gakkai*) and the Japanese Association for International Relations (*Nihon kokusai*

seiji gakkai). Yet while the field is less vulnerable to new fashions in historiography it is characterized by some strong and enduring conventions. It remains overwhelmingly positivist and is most concerned with formal institutions, roles, and procedures in politics. One indication of political history's fealty to official frameworks is that it has generally adhered to a periodization of modern Japanese history according to imperial reigns or prime ministerial cabinets though these often do not neatly encapsulate important historical developments. The field also tends to focus on the role of formal state actors in particular policy areas or processes which sometimes are premised on a forced dichotomy between "foreign policy" (*gaikō*) and "domestic politics" (*naisei*).[19] The inclusion of non-state actors and informal interactions that have transformed "American diplomatic history" into "the United States in the world" have affected political and diplomatic history in Japan to a far lesser extent.

However, despite these limitations, political historians in Japan have done innovative work that pushes the bounds of their field. One example is tying Japanese history to transnational or international history by collaborating with colleagues overseas on projects focusing on "the Russo-Japanese War as World War Zero" or Japan's role in World War I.[20] Another original strand of research pioneered by scholars like Mikuriya Takashi and Naraoka Sōchi examines "political spaces" (*seiji kūkan*)— sites where politically-relevant activities occur like government buildings, political meeting-places, and politicians' residences. This scholarship links political history and political biography to material culture, constructions of status, and social class. It also expands the scope of the field to bridge the divide between public and private life and formal and informal politics.[21]

Naturally the scholarship on postwar Japanese political history in Japan is far more plentiful than it is in the United States. However, it is still relatively sparse compared to voluminous literature on the wartime or prewar periods. Japanese political historians remain somewhat reticent to explore recent history due to its proximity and the fact that their positivist inclinations take pause at the relative lack of available sources. Much of the research on postwar politics is still conducted by trained political scientists using qualitative or quantitative methods familiar to their counterparts in the United States.[22] Only a small number of political historians focus primarily on the period after 1945. Yet postwar political history, especially diplomatic history, is gradually rising as a field. This includes research relating to the administration of Satō Eisaku, the political figure on whom my research concentrates.[23] Historians are beginning to write biographies of contemporary

leaders, which until recently had been the purview of political journalists. Another promising and relatively understudied area of research is historical analysis of contemporary political parties, which have been the bailiwick of political scientists. These are the emerging fields in postwar history to which I hope to contribute.

Political History and Japanese History in the United Kingdom

Having spent less time in the United Kingdom I have less insight into trends there than I do about those in the United States or Japan, but as another important center of Japanese studies it also merits comment. My overall impression has been that when comparing the conditions in the American and Japanese academia described above, the United Kingdom falls in between. While the field of history in the United Kingdom has more of the status of an autonomous discipline than it does in Japan, it is somewhat less faddish than its counterpart in the United States. In other words, history-centered departments and programs exist in Britain, but within them there is less of a zero-sum competition between different persuasions. While new trends and movements certainly have an influence, older approaches like political and diplomatic history (which have a long tradition in the United Kingdom) have not been eclipsed. Furthermore, the relationship between the disciplines of history and political science is somewhat closer than in the United States. As a result, British and European scholars have produced some important recent contributions in contemporary Japanese political history.[24]

Another distinction I found studying in the United Kingdom is area specialization. While there has been a shift away from area specialization in American academia, especially in social sciences, area studies remain more robust in the United Kingdom. While at the University of Cambridge, I was particularly intrigued by the geographical categorization of the study of history there. While Asian history is the responsibility of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, all other regions and genres are under the umbrella of the Faculty of History.[25] This and names such as "the School of Oriental and African Studies" suggests the residual influence in British humanities of an Orientalist and West-centric imperialist worldview. While this may have few practical implications for the substance of scholarship, the institutional divisions caused some challenges for me when I sought to study Japanese intellectual history as an M.Phil. student at Cambridge. Yet I also found that the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies is a great global hub for Asian studies, bringing

together scholars from North America, Europe, and Asia in various events and projects.[26] Perhaps this is precisely because British academia is methodologically and geographically a bridge between its counterparts in the United States and Japan.

Conclusion

Navigating the academic terrain of political science, history, and Japan studies in the three different countries has profoundly shaped my outlook and approach as a researcher. My experience as an undergraduate and then studying in the distinct academic cultures of Japan and the United Kingdom led me to believe that a thoroughly historical approach to examining politics was highly feasible in a political science graduate program. However, I found this was not so much the case in the American context, even in a hospitable department such as the one I was situated. This caused me to move to the discipline of history, which is far more amenable to the type of project I envisioned. However, this field also has its peculiarities and constraints which also vary by country.

Even within a single area of study, working as an academic in different national environments involves understanding and adapting to different conventions, some of which directly contradict one another. Especially when these experiences are combined, what first seem like obstacles may also be viewed as stimuli that challenge one to interrogate one's tendencies and to reach out to multiple critical audiences.

The Balkanization of academic communities around the world can be mitigated by a greater number and frequency of international exchanges and collaborative projects in which scholars are forced to confront and negotiate their various biases and blind spots. Interdisciplinary interactions, though often not incentivized, would also prevent areas of study from becoming increasingly parochial and detached from other parts of academia and from the general public. For all the real upheaval wreaked by the current COVID-19 pandemic, it has presented some surprising opportunities in this regard. Virtual talks, conferences, and other fora have removed many financial and logistical obstacles to participation, thereby promoting academic exchange and also greatly democratizing it. It remains to be seen how lasting these adjustments will be and whether they will permanently break down certain institutional fiefdoms and hierarchies that have characterized academic marketplaces across the world up to this point.

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