

Special Contribution

A Transnational Moment

IRIYE Akira

I am honored to be present at this wonderfully transnational moment. You have brought together scholars, students, and interested citizens from many countries to commemorate the inauguration of an innovative program for the study of the history of cultural contact and communication in East Asia and beyond. Cross-cultural encountering and networking are the essence of transnational history. As someone who recently co-edited a dictionary of transnational history (*The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*), I cannot be happier to have been invited to participate in the events that you have organized. To receive an honorary degree in such a setting is a rare privilege, the pleasure of which I shall share with my coworkers across the globe who dedicate themselves to transnational communication and understanding.

Transnational history, an approach to studying the past through a focus on cross-national encounters and exchanges, is a rather recent development. Traditionally, history, especially of the modern era, has privileged nations. Historians have accepted the nation as the key conceptual framework within which to explore political, economic, and cultural affairs. History, in other words, has tended to consist of national histories, and most historians have focused their study on just one country's past. Even when they have dealt with a plurality of nations, their primary interest has been in international affairs, which by definition concern relations among nations. That is the sub-field of history known as international history, which has developed in parallel to national history. Transnational history, in contrast, chronicles interconnections across boundaries that go beyond national identities or international relations. When individuals, their associations, or their products (material or spiritual) cross national borders – as tourists, artists, missionaries, business people, exchange scholars and students, migrant workers, refugees, and in numerous other ways --, they may not necessarily shed their respective nationalities, but their cross-national encounters do constitute transnational moments and contribute to defining a global landscape that is independent of a map of the world whose units are nations (including empires).

Thus characterized, transnational history has existed side by side with

national histories and with international history for a long time, even longer these other kinds of history, for cross-border encounters in various parts of the world preceded the birth of modern nation states. And even in the modern era, states and nations by no means exhaust human groupings. People have organized themselves into many types of associations, some of which have been local, while others have been transnational, be they regional or global. Nations, too, have entered into various associations in which they pursue shared objectives. Thus modern history needs to be conceptualized as consisting of local, national, regional, international, and transnational histories, all of which make up world or global history.

Nevertheless, historians have been rather slow to recognize this simple fact. It is only during the last fifteen or twenty years that the traditional privileging of national and international history has given way, albeit slowly, to such new conceptualizations as world history, global history, and transnational history. Historical perception tended to lag behind historical reality. Speaking of transnational history, it may be said that while it always existed, transnational historiography did not emerge till the end of the twentieth century. A good example of transnational consciousness may be seen in the transcripts of a conference held in Bellagio, Italy, in 1972, where participants from around the world spoke of “a growing network of individuals concerned with the improvement of long-term cultural relations among people and countries who wish to transcend the barriers – political, military or ideological – which often distort or handicap the fulfillment of human relationships.” Such language reflected the growth of transnational connections separate from individual national identities or political and strategic considerations. It took such awareness nearly twenty years before historians began to refer to those cultural developments as transnational, a development that led to the development of transnational history as a distinctive category. Although the term “transnational history” was at first used by a tiny group of historians during the 1990s, it is only in the last ten years that it has spread worldwide, thus becoming a transnationally recognized conception of the past. Historians throughout the world now not only find the conception of transnational history useful, but they have also forged transnational networks to further this way of studying the past, transcending their respective national boundaries, geographically and cognitively.

We might put the founding of Kansai University’s program in East Asian cultural interactions in such a historiographic context. This program reflects awareness of the importance of transcending a purely nation-centric approach to history, and it stresses the cultural aspect of cross-border relations. Such awareness fits well into the framework of transnational history. It is part of the global, transnational effort at charting a new course in understanding our past.

The past should be shared by all people regardless of national division, but the part of the past that can be shared most meaningfully consists of cultural productions, their infusion, and their transmission. Your project's emphasis on cultural interaction and interconnection throughout East Asia is, therefore, most appropriate.

Transnational history is above all a study of these cultural phenomena. First of all, in contrast to international affairs, which studies interstate relations with a focus on military and economic power, transnational history studies cultural interactions apart from such a focus. Power assumes a relationship of domination and subordination, a hierarchical system to order states and nations. Culture, on the other hand, is less a hierarchical than a shared pursuit among equals. Individuals and private associations engage in their undertakings and define their identities quite often independently of power considerations or national policies. Second, culture speaks to memory; individual and group memories may be personal, private, and even moral, quite separate from official memories that prioritize national interests. As against national memories, there exist communities of shared memory across national borders among people who have met and interacted across national boundaries or have lived in each other's communities. Third, not just memory but culture in general is transnationalizable. Cultural productions such as works of art and literature easily cross national boundaries and contribute to creating a transnational space. Fourth, various regions of the world often constitute such transnational spaces. East Asia is a good example. Your project assumes that cultural pursuits in the region contribute to defining its identity. Of course, East Asia can be seen as a space where cultural pursuits have coexisted side by side with violent confrontations as well as with more peaceful commercial engagements. But the underlying assumption of the Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia seems to be that through all such contradictory and overlapping developments, there grew a common regional consciousness, a shared awareness of its cultural legacies that can be appreciated by all people.

Here we may explore some questions that arise in connection with the bold new initiative undertaken by the Society. How is a regional identity forged? What if excessive nationalism should emerge – as it has emerged from time to time – to question the validity of anything transnational? Can we count on the existence of an epistemic community of scholars and educators who are ready to overcome excessive nationalism and commit themselves to a shared task of transnational communication? Even more critically, can there develop a community of memory and meaning across national boundaries not just in East Asia but also in the rest of Asia and, for that matter, throughout the world?

In seeking to explore such questions, which I am sure have also preoc-

cupied the members of this Society, we may be inspired by and learn from the scholarly work being carried out by European historians. Many of them have been interested in tracing the meaning of “Europe” and “Europeanization” through history. They agree that these are not uniform conceptions and that the dual legacies of Europe – imperialism, war, and genocide on the one hand, and the pursuit of human rights and international cooperation on the other – have all contributed to creating a self-conscious European memory and identity. Scholars studying the history of East Asia may draw some inspiration from such work to examine the region’s past in terms of the evolution of the conception of East Asia and the possibility of East Asianization as a counterpart to Europeanization. The East Asian region, too, has had its empires, wars, and excessive nationalism, along with intra-regional trade and flourishing cultural productions. To the extent that through such diverse modes of interaction shared memories may emerge, they would be an important counterpart to the European community of memory and culture. We could then ask if the histories of Europeanization and East Asianization have something in common. Have the two regions developed internally consistent regional identities? Are these regional identities universalizable, or are they more exclusionary? If universalizable, the two regions will be able to contribute to further cultural transnationalization, but if not, the world may remain divided. In this connection, I am impressed that one of the objectives of the Society for Cultural Interaction in East Asia is to explore cultural interactions between East Asia and the rest of Asia, an endeavor that will surely lead to a perspective that would embrace even regions beyond Asia. Scholars and interested citizens outside of East Asia could then engage themselves in discussions about the region’s cultural pursuits, just as non-Europeans are invited to join Europeans to explore the meaning of Europe.

Ultimately, then, your project, and, I may add, all scholarly endeavors everywhere in the world, will contribute to defining the meaning and direction of human civilization. For, whether we speak of Europeanization or East Asianization, in the end we come back to the meaning of humanity. Together, Europe, East Asia, and other regions of the world may, through their histories, contribute to transnationalizing the idea of humankind and its civilization. There can be no more meaningful task in today’s world, no more significant “transnational moment.”