

Introducing Research Institute of World History (NPO-IF) in Japan

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The institution called Research Institute for World History (RIWH) was founded in July 2004 in Tokyo. It is an independent institution, and does not belong to any universities, governmental organizations, or companies. It belongs to NPO–International Forum for Culture and History, a non-profit organization founded in 2000. Its financial base is made up of contributions from individuals and organizations. The concrete purposes of the Institute are

- 1) To promote interest in research and education on world history in Japan
- 2) To collect and provide information on research and education in world history
- 3) To popularize the necessity for study of world history in Japan
- 4) To maintain contact with other institutions and groups concerned with world history.

We have only limited resources and manpower. We have no permanent researchers but have several irregular researchers.

1. The background of RIWH

In order to explain the reasons for the initiation for the RIWH, I must briefly look back over the Japanese experience in world-historical writing.

Japanese historiography has produced considerable achievements in the writing of world history. The results of these achievements have been divided into two spheres. One is the history textbook for the junior high and high schools, while the other is the compilation of book series in world history. Most of these achievements

were directed to overcoming traditional problems of the Japanese historical thinking. Since the Meiji Era, the Japanese historical thinking was dominated by the Euro-centrism and this came to be closely connected with Japan-centrism since the beginning of the 20-th century when the trilaminar structure of Japanese history studies was established: Western(European) history, Asian history and Japanese history. European history was the history that Japan should learn from, the Japanese history was the history of the nation who learned from Europe and civilized itself, while the Asian history was the history of the people whom Japan was to lead. This kind of world history, of course, encouraged the Japanese invasion into Asia since the 1930s.

After the World War II, the interest in the world history was thought to be important because the Japanese should live in peace with neighboring Asian countries and should overcome its Euro-centrism and Japan-centrism. As I mentioned before, there were considerable achievements since then.

But actually there are lots of problems to be solved.

- 1) Japanese vs World history -- World history including Japanese history
- 2) Euro-centrism
- 3) Mere citation of one history after another
- 4) Cultures with the same value and without center?
- 5) Lack of grand perspective
- 6)

2. Why is the RIWH necessary?

Is it a world history if a series covers the whole of the national or regional histories on the earth? Our Institute tries to pursue the missing link. The purpose of the Institute is thus to find the possibilities for searching out viewpoints or methods for building world history beyond the terms of collections of national (or regional) histories on the earth.

We have developed many detailed and specialized histories in these several decades, but we have lost

long-term and comprehensive perspective of the world where we live. Every historian believes that, if he/she produces a high-standard achievement in his/her special field, it will contribute to enriching world history or someone will make use of it to produce world history. The separated, subdivided situation of historical sciences that has advanced since the 1980s has proved not only to be weak in the face of “globalization” but to be an obstacle to forming a grand-scale perspective, by reducing historical studies to detailed and specialized or even “hobby-like” works.

Although there were quite a lot of series on world history published in Japan, and though some of them seriously tried to conceptualize world history, it cannot be denied that the series were mainly collections of individual works; the effort to form world history was only sporadic.

Our guiding figure for considering world history is the late Professor Bokuro Eguchi (Tokyo University). As a specialist on the age of imperialism, he left many suggestions for world history. According to him, “comparison” must lead to “relation.” If a certain part of the world was “backward,” it was so because there was an “advanced” part at its side. The “advanced” part stands in the way of the “backward.” And the “advanced” part makes use of the “backward” factors within its own region too. We have to think of a world where every part of the globe is connected to each other in one sense or another. Thus if there is a relaxation of conflict between powers in one part of the world, there must be an increase of tension in another part of the world.

As a historian of the age of imperialism, Eguchi did not consider the world as a world made of nation states but as a holistic imperial power confronting the whole people in Asia and Africa, though there were mutual conflicts among the Powers. He also emphasized the limitation of our recognition of the facts. Looking at things from the “North”—that is, developed countries—it is easy to make mistakes even though it may seem highly sophisticated, while the viewpoint of the “South”—that is underdeveloped countries—does not easily lead to mistakes, however unsophisticated and instinctive it may seem. It is like the saying in the Bible that it is

more difficult for the rich to get to the Promised Land than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Thus he taught us to see the world always from the “South.”

3. Activities of RIWH

Following the purposes of our Institute listed above, we are organizing discussion meetings on the method of world history, introducing global achievements of world history including translation and review of important works, examining the achievements of world history in Japan, including the works of the late Professor Bokuro Eguchi, and organizing our “world history caravans.”

(1) Introduction to Foreign Achievements in World History.

We have organized several discussion meeting on the possibilities of world history, with Professor Patrick Manning (U.S.), Professor Ivan T. Berend (U.S.), Professor Steven Topik(U.S.) , Dr. Erzsebet Szalai (Hungary), Dr. Francisco Zapata (Mexico), and Dr. Tha Thi Thuy (Vietnam) as our guests. Through these discussions we have learned that our project for world history is not an isolated movement, that we had better present the Japanese achievements to the world more explicitly. World historians elsewhere are pondering the same possibilities of constituting world history, and we have to pay attention to their point of view when we try to formulate world history.

We are also trying to introduce recent major works on world history. We are now undertaking the translation of P. Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) into Japanese.

(2) Examination of the Japanese achievements in world history.

We have found it important to examine the Japanese achievements in world history after World War II in order to communicate with world historians abroad.

First, we started to examine the works by Professor Eguchi, as already mentioned, and we are

planning to translate his main works into English and to put them on our web site.

Secondly, we have reviewed the series of world history published in Japan since the end of the war, some part of which is introduced above. The complete presentation is to be found in our website.

Thirdly, we are dealing with the problems of the textbook of world history. We discussed the problems of the *New History Textbook* for the junior high schools, published by the ultra-nationalists, from the viewpoint of world history. Critique of the *New History Textbook* is written by myself and can be seen on our website.

At the same time, we are trying to translate into English a typical history textbook for junior high school to show how world history has traditionally been intertwined into the context of Japanese history.

The fourth and most recent work of the RIWH in this filed was the publication of a booklet “Is World History Unnecessary?” (Iwanami, 2007).

4. Constructing World history

RIHW is ambitiously trying to construct world history in a positive way.

(1) First, we are engaged in constructing world history from the viewpoint of the inter-regional(international) relations. We are trying to do this concerning two periods.

1890–1905. We are trying to construct cross-regional world history covering the period of from 1890 to 1905—that is, the period of the Sino-Japanese war and the Russo-Japanese war. Our method is double. On the one hand we make much of the economic, social and cultural history of imperialism; on the other hand we use the history of cross-regional international relations with local history in mind. In this case we see the history not from the viewpoint of the powers but from the viewpoint of Asia and Africa, trying to place the native resistance ideas and movements into a broad perspective.

The “long 1980s.” We are trying to construct cross-regional world history of the “long 1980s” from

the same point of view. It will show the close relationships in the history of the regions of the world and shows how the events in 1989–91 were the result of the global development of the “long 1980s.” We are trying in our analysis to construct world history of the long 1980s from double approaches. On the one hand we make much of the economic, social and cultural history of the “long 1980s,” the age of globalization. On the other hand we use the history of cross-regional international relations with local history in mind.

(2) Secondly, we have started to plan a series of World History of our own conception. Some examples of the topics will be as follows.

- a) World history seen from the movement of materials such as raw products (coffee, tea, potato, sugar, silver, oil, uranium etc.) and manufactured goods (cotton, silk, wool, steam engine, gun, atomic weapon etc.).
- b) World history seen from the movement of people such as prominent individuals (Sadayakko, Gordon, Magellan etc.) as well as group of people (emigration, refugee, traders etc.).
- c) World history seen from communication such as means of transportation (camel, carriage, railway, ship, airplane and rocket) and means of communication (mail, telephone, radar etc.). We can add world history of images too.
- d) World history seen from Mega-era such as Eurasia, Indian Ocean and others.
- e) World history seen from cross-regional or inter-regional relations.

The discrimination, disease, gender, ecology and war are also the candidates of the topic but the last topic should be World history of World history.

This is a primitive effort to describe the world in a borderless way, or to describe the world history beyond nations states.

5. Popularizing World History: “World history caravan”

For popularizing the understanding of world history we are organizing “world history caravans,” which are intended to organize talks with local people in the countryside on world history and the relationship of local history to large-scale world history. We have been to Yamato City in Niigata Prefecture, and to Matsumoto City, Iida City, Nagiso Town, all in Nagano Prefecture and Honjo City in Tochigi Prefecture. Participants are teachers of history in the local junior high schools and high schools, as well as students, housewives, pensioners, businessmen, local publishers, and newspaper writers.

Topics so far have included the cross-regional history of the world in the period of the Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War and the cross-regional history of the world before the First World War. The RIWH presented an image of the grand history of the given period and the local historians did the detailed history of the local society in the given period. Sadayakko, a world traveling Geisha, was also a topic. The migration and immigration of the people from and into a small city gave us a grand perspective that connected the local history with the grand world history. And silk was a very good topic to connect local history with the grand history.

Happily, we found unexpected relations of local history with grand history. These surprises made the people who participated feel the importance of thinking about history at a world scale.