

Editors' Preface

In April of 2020 we experienced the beginning of what was to be a paradigm shift in research institutions' operation strategies in Japan, as elsewhere in the world. The new coronavirus COVID-19 epidemic brought nationwide lockdowns, shut down campuses and invoked travel restrictions that severely limited researchers' academic activities, especially if these involved cross-border air travel. Confined to working at home, locked out of the university library, and unable to physically attend international conferences, our researchers have faced challenging obstacles and barriers on an unanticipated and unprecedented scale.

In the search for solutions Prof. Yasushi Kosugi, Director of the Asia-Japan Research Institute, opened an online forum entitled "Asia-Japan Today: Researcher's Essays", inviting researchers of Asia-Japan Research within and outside Ritsumeikan to share their personal experiences and strategies for coping with the ongoing crisis.

We were delighted to receive contributions from young researchers in a wide range of specialties living in a variety of circumstances, some alone, others in crowded rooms, yet others co-parenting small children, all of them trying to carry on with life while sharing the extra burden of protecting themselves and those around them from the ubiquitous virus.

Needless to say, as time passes we are all to varying degrees adjusting to what is called the "new normal", but we may be far from satisfied with the results. Teaching online has its limitations, our students are suffering, and designing effective online teaching strategies is time-consuming. And how can we complete our research projects? The toll on our physical and mental reserves is incremental as the weeks draw into months and the end seems very far away.

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By reading these researchers' essays, we can learn how others are coping with living and working under such conditions, how they are communicating with counterparts in their fields as well as colleagues in other countries, and how they are overcoming their fieldwork limitations. Importantly, we see how the opportunity to share with our fellows relieves us of this stress. We have learned that there are positives too. Chatting with friends around the globe has become as simple as chatting with our parents and siblings; we can fit a variety of activities into our more flexible daily routine; and getting dressed for work and hurrying to catch the train is definitely not something that we miss.

To preserve this unique moment in time we decided to make a booklet of these personal narratives, both to provide something tangible that others can access and benefit from, and to serve as a reminder of the early part of an era opened by the COVID-19, though we are not sure of what follows. Many of the essays were written nearer to the beginning of the COVID era, and the decision to publish came several months later, so we requested the authors to provide updates in the form of postscripts to relate their recent experiences and the latest news from their counterparts overseas. Their postscripts provide this small booklet with a more comprehensive picture of the ongoing global attempt to keep academic research alive and well in the COVID era.

Our hope is that we can convey real voices from the field of research on Asia and Japan and connect with our fellow researchers around the world, while sharing strategies for coping with the ongoing circumstances, with the intention of offering encouragement and support to those forced to share similarly challenging working conditions.

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