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## **Asia-Japan Research at this Juncture of History: Facing the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Crisis in a Research Institution**



**Yasushi KOSUGI**

Director  
Asia-Japan Research Institute  
Ritsumeikan University  
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The health and social issues caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) have grown into a world pandemic, and a great number of countries are struggling to maintain their societies while facing this unprecedented crisis. The mass media, the

internet, and SNS are overflowing with so much information and so many opinions.

In Japan, the government declared a national emergency on April 7, 2020, followed by various measures to curb the spread of the virus, resulting in the temporary closure of educational institutions, from kindergartens and elementary schools up to universities and graduate schools for an indefinite period. We in academia are also facing something we have never experienced before, staying in the dark. The crisis which started at the end of 2019 in China, spread to immediately neighboring countries, including Japan, and to other parts of the world in a very short time. While the prevention of further transmission and the curing of patients are the first priorities, I would like to talk about the dilemma which the crisis has brought to research institutions. The first problem appeared to us as the cancellation of trips by overseas guests to our international symposiums in February. Soon after, universities and schools in Japan decided to cancel graduation and entrance ceremonies in March and April, in order to prevent massive transmission of the disease. In this country where these ceremonies under cherry blossoms are much celebrated, this decision was taken only after serious hesitation.

In our institute, Asia-Japan Research Institute at Ritsumeikan University, many of us are engaged in research about various regions of Asia. We are accustomed to visit the countries which are the subject of our research every year. We are actively inviting and being invited to conferences by academics and specialists from these regions, as well as researchers studying these regions in Europe and America. However, in February, we started to receive emails apologizing for cancelling their trips, based on instructions by their

employers or governments. The same conditions soon applied to us in Japan. We were told not to go abroad. Then, the countries around the world started to close their airports and ports to foreign visitors, reducing passenger flights to a minimum. We had to either postpone or cancel all overseas trips and international conferences.

Although I have been engaged with Arab and Islamic Studies for nearly a half century, I have never encountered an experience of this gravity. In the Middle East, certainly wars (both international and civil wars) have prevented us from going into some countries from time to time. I have first-hand or almost first-hand experiences of the fourth Middle East War in 1973 with the subsequent First World Oil Crisis, the Islamic Revolution in Iran with the subsequent Second World Oil Crisis, and the Gulf Crisis and Gulf War in 1990-91. However, never have I met a situation where human traffic has almost ceased as we are witnessing at this time.

Historians and the media inform us that this crisis has a precedent as a world pandemic, like the so-called “Spanish Flue” in 1918-20, and as an economic crisis like the Great Depression from 1929. However, the present calamity has proved to be more serious than the global financial crisis triggered by the failure of Lehman Brothers in 2008, and is said to be similar or more serious than the Great Depression. Even if they are comparable however, those among us who had lived through these crises are extremely few, and therefore, this crisis is something unknown to all of us. For specialists of Area Studies, which developed after the middle of the 20th century, it is a crisis we have never encountered.

After listening to the explanations and analyses of experts and specialists in various fields of sciences, it seems that the

expectation of containing the infection by short-term decisive acts is overly optimistic. Moreover, if such a pandemic is one of the consequences of modernization, urbanization and globalization worldwide, it is likely that similar problems will recur even if the present virus ceases to be a major threat. As long as there is such a possibility, we must change our lifestyle to one that can adapt to and cope with these conditions.

I think that the way research should be conducted will have to change greatly, both for the “Corona era” and the subsequent “Post-Corona era”. Or, at least, we should be prepared for it. I would like to begin this essay series with the aim of continuing to write about how researchers in Asia and Japan have been responding to the challenges of today. It may be considered as a primary record of contemporary Asia-Japan research.

### Author's Profile

Yasushi KOSUGI: Professor and Director at Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University. Doctor of Laws (Kyoto University). Specialties: Islamic Studies, Middle East Area Studies, History of Political Thought, International Relations, and Comparative Civilization. Among his recent works: *The Sayings of Muhammad: Hadith* (Japanese translation with his own selection and notes), Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2019; *An Introduction to Islam for Students and Working Adults* (co-editor), Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2018; *Jihad of the Islamic Empires*, Tokyo: Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2018. Among his research articles, “An Inquiry into the Legal Concept of Halal under Islamic Law: With Special Reference to the Correlation between the Halal/Haram Dichotomy and the Five Categories of Judicial Rules”, *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, Vol.12, 2019: <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/240734>.