

BOOK REVIEW

Historical Literacy in the Age of Post-Globalization

Ed. by Norihisa YAMASHITA, Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Inc., 2019*

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This is the most interesting book on world history that I have read in recent times. It is written in Japanese, and I have heard there are no plans to translate it into English. Therefore, it may be unfair to criticize it in detail in an English journal. Instead, I introduce the main points of the book and share its importance and the intellectual curiosity it arouses.

In a nutshell, the book's message involves how we, from Japanese high school students to businesspersons, can benefit from learning world history.

In the contemporary world, prevalent values are changing rapidly, and the economic system, politics, and communication styles are undergoing major changes. It is a globalization era. In such a globalized society with an unknown future, people want to be accurately aware of the realities of the world and be prepared to deal with any adversities. No matter what the world may look like in the future, people want to live happy lives.

To those of us living today with such thoughts, this book gives a clear message that learning history is useful. In Japan, history education has long been criticized as a subject that involves only memorizing personal names, events, and ages. The subject has been called 'boring'. The authors of this book, who are cutting-edge researchers, say that 'learning history is useful and fun'. It is no wonder that such books attract a large readership, although this is a full-fledged textbook with many terms and explanations that, to be honest, seem difficult for beginners.

So what is the purpose of introducing such a full-scale Japanese academic book in an English journal? At the very least, I thought it would introduce English speakers to advancements in current studies on world history in Japan. This is one of the best books in that sense. Below, I introduce the contents of the book and note humanities and social science issues concerning world history in Japan, with some personal impressions and opinions.

First and foremost, this is a Japanese book with no English translations. To the best of my knowledge, there is no official English translation for the title or chapters. I have hence provided the title of each chapter in the original Japanese text, followed by an English translation that I attempted,

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rather than a literal translation:

Part I. 私たちにとっての「世界史」はいかに書かれてきたか (How the ‘World History’ has been written?)

Chapter 1. 近代的営みとしての歴史学 (‘History as a Modern Project,’ Norihisa Yamashita)

Chapter 2. 近代的歴史記述をいかに開くか (‘How Can We Unthink Modern Historical Narratives?’), Norihisa Yamashita)

Part II. 世界史と空間的想像力の問題 (World History and the Issues of Spatial Imagination)

Chapter 3 「ヨーロッパ中心主義」が描いてきた世界地図 (‘Cartographic Grammar of “Eurocentrism”’, Norihisa Yamashita)

Chapter 4: アジアから見る世界史 (‘World History from the Asian Perspective’, Takashi Okamoto)

Chapter 5: 日本は「東南アジア」をどう捉えてきたか (‘How has Japan seen the concept of “Southeast Asia”?’), Masato Karashima)

Chapter 6: 大西洋のアメリカと太平洋のアメリカ (‘America in the Atlantic and America in the Pacific’, Takafumi Ishikawa)

Addendum: イスラーム世界という歴的空間 (‘The Islamic World as a Historical Subject’, Hiroyuki Ogasawara)

Part III. 社会科学の基本概念を歴史化する (Historizing the Basic Concepts of Social Sciences)

Chapter 7. 「市場」という概念 (‘The Idea of “Market”’, Hirokazu Takizawa & Kai Kajitani)

Chapter 8. 「市民社会」概念の歴史性と普遍性 (‘Historicity and Universality of the Concept of “Civil Society”’, Hirokazu Takizawa & Kai Kajitani)

Chapter 9. 歴史の中の「国家」 (‘“State” in the Histories’, Mie Ōba)

Chapter 10. 戦争と外交 (‘“War” and “Diplomacy”’, Miwa Hirono)

Chapter 11. 概念としての家族の流動化 (‘Liquidation of the Concept of Family’, Rajkai Zsombor)

Chapter 12. 漢字で書き、用いている「文字」 (‘“Letter” in the Historical Conjunctures of Modern East Asia’, Satoru Hashimoto)

Column 1) 科学をグローバル・ヒストリーで捉えなおす (‘“Science” in the Global History Contexts’, Yoko Matsubara)

Column 2) 混合趣味あるいは忘却されたマルチリンガリズム (‘Gemischter Geschmack, or Multilingualism Fallen into Oblivion’, Hiroshi Yoshida)

Chapter 13. 宗教的交通の豊かさ (‘Fertility of Inter-civilizational Exchange of Religion’, Takahiro Nakajima)

As shown above, there are 13 chapters which are divided into three parts. The book also has one addendum and two columns.

Part I contains two chapters from the editor. He discusses the issue of world history study and education today, as well as the issue of ‘Modern Historical Narratives’ [近代的歴史叙述]. This is a key concept. Criticizing this is the main purpose of this book.

According to the editor, history as academic knowledge was established in modern Europe. Therefore, the characteristics of that era are engraved in historical narratives, which are biased by Modern, State, and West centrism, says the editor. In other words, historical studies in modern times

have so far appreciated the modernization of European society as a universal model of world history. The historical experience of Europe as a universal model has been deemed a criterion for evaluating the historical experience of the non-European world. Of course, people may find some universality in achieving modernization in Europe, but people may overlook the existence of values and institutions that have remained in the world.

Thus, Part I is a standard overview of the criticisms of the Eurocentric cognitive framework of world history. However, this book goes further and attempts to take a theoretical perspective by addressing the question of how to rectify the narrowness and biases of such Modern Historical Narratives. To briefly rephrase and summarize this attempt in my words, it first reconsiders the view of history aimed at modern times from the perspective of globalization. Second, it re-examines the conceptual devices that have underpinned Modern Historical Narratives.

Rethinking Modern Historical Narratives has been a very complex and elaborate theme in the humanities and social sciences so far. Therefore, I am impressed that this book addresses this issue head-on and clearly proposes two workable approaches that invite readers to Part II that reconsiders geographical imagination in world history, and Part III that re-examines important social science concepts, which are the historical products of modern times.

Part II provides a perspective to understand the worlds of Europe, Eurasia, Southeast Asia, America, and Islam.

Every historical narrative is a product of people's imagination of 'what the world is'. The natural environment of the world consists of diverse areas such as land and sea, warm and cold regions, and wet and dry areas. If the ecological conditions are different, the lifestyles of the people are naturally different. Different lifestyles harbor different social organizations, economic activities, families, and politics. Naturally, people have different norms about their values and concerns. Religious views differ too. Culture is different. Civilization differs. The reality we call the 'world' is an inhomogeneous and multidimensional space. The idea behind Modern Historical Narratives was to define such a space with the imagination that Europeans have become accustomed to.

Part II reconsiders this spatial imagination of people, which is the premise of Modern Historical Narratives, from all angles. The point is the dismantling of a simple dichotomy that people have consciously and unconsciously accepted and is taken for granted in Modern Historical Narratives - the East and the West, the Christian World and the Islamic World, and so on. Or the view that divides the West and the Rest. For example, while Japan is called the Far East, why is the West not called the Far West? There are many mysterious assumptions in world history. Part II is an attempt to fundamentally re-examine such unspoken assumptions based on the West, State, and Modern-centric cognitive framework of world history.

Every chapter is fascinating. Readers can learn a lot. Personally, I found Chapter 4 quite convincing. This is the latest update to the so-called 'Ecological View of History' [生態史観]. The famous 'Civilization Map' presented by Tadao Umesao more than half a century ago, which was later sophisticated by Heita Kawakatsu's 'Maritime View of History of Civilization', is re-examined in a more appropriate manner as a 'Global History'.

I will not go into details here, but as far as I know, there has been little discussion until recently that the ecological conditions of the globe and human activities are comprehensively linked to world history, though there is a global academic trend of so-called environmental history. In that sense, I think it is significant that Umesao's Ecological View of History has been cultivated in Japan. Chapter 4 integrates this rich academic legacy from Asian perspectives, dismantles the East-West dichotomy,

and sends a strong message that an Ecological View of History is still valid today and has many possibilities as a historical interpretation.

I also totally agree with Chapter 4 when it clearly questions Kenneth Pomerantz's theory of the 'Great Divergence' - one of the biggest controversial issues in recent years for Global Economic History - from the perspective of an Ecological View of History.

I must admit that Pomerantz depicts a world history image that is far closer to reality than Immanuel Wallerstein's imagination of the so-called 'Modern World-System'. Until the 19th century, the Modern World-System did not have a reality that could be called a 'World-System' literally. European domination of the world was embodied economically after the 19th century, as evidenced by Pomerantz and other literature on recent Global Economic History. Few scholars have accepted the idea that the World-System centered on Europe has developed in a single track of development to unite the world. Nowadays, the idea that the world remained multipolar at least until the beginning of the 19th century, in terms of not just cultural and social norms but also in terms of economic power and political influence, is held among historians and social scientists in the modern world history. From the standpoint of economic history, Pomerantz has developed a convincing argument for such an interpretation of world history.

However, the argument that a Great Divergence occurred around 1800, as Pomerantz says, is valid at best. From the perspective of international law, for example, European domination over the world can be seen from the end of the 19th century. The peace treaty of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895 declared that Korea was removed from Chinese suzerainty. It was the end of the so-called Sinocentric Tribute System and Korea's independence was ensured under the world ordering of European-made international law. From the perspective of the global expansion of the sovereign state system, one must wait for the independence of Asia and Africa in the latter half of the 20th century.

Considering the above, where to find 'Divergence' as a concept that covers the entire world history requires a difficult debate. What is clear is the different historical paths divided by ecological conditions, says the author of Chapter 4. Speaking of the Great Divergence, Asia (Eurasia) continuously traced a unique development path of history different from Europe from the pre-modern period. There is little basis for seeing the world from the perspective of European-led globalization. The author's claim seems very convincing to me, though more discussion is needed.

In contrast, Part III re-examines concepts that help us understand a 'world' that has been deemed as the 'world' imagined by Europeans in modern times. Re-examining the concepts involves verifying the social sciences, which have been very historical products of modern times.

I am a historian, and I am not qualified to make any academic criticisms of the concepts of the social sciences. However, it is common knowledge that the social sciences have created the concept of understanding, criticizing, or justifying the European world in modern times. It is also known that the social sciences have expressed concepts as general and universal when conceptualizing the world in this way. Here, this book reminds us of an important point: such conceptualization and individual cases accessible to scholars who led the social sciences for centuries were, in fact, only very historical products based on local historical experiences in modern Europe. Nonetheless, the scholars of the social sciences and those who have accepted them have believed that such limited historical experiences have had a certain generality and universality that can be applied across the world. Part III reiterates that this is a problem.

In fact, there are two columns that most explicitly discuss this fundamental awareness of the issue. From this perspective, each chapter in Part III re-examines the main concepts and issues of the

social sciences: markets, civil society, nations, war, diplomacy, families, letters, and religions. These are, so to speak, the basic social science concepts that arise when social sciences meet reality. The modern era has made people accept that this is applicable across times and places. But, again, these were just products of a universal concept of modern European history. The main theme of social sciences in recent years has been nothing but the deconstruction of such modern concepts, and Part III and columns present the latest findings.

What I have provided above is a brief introduction to the book's contents. After reading, readers will receive the message that learning from history will help us better understand the realities of our time and look into the future. The book will certainly help all strata of readers to develop 'the ability to refer to world history as a framework for understanding today' (p.1). The editor calls this method 'Historical Literacy'. It is a practical book to academically convince that learning history is useful to solve today's practical issues. It is a pity that readers would be limited to those who can read Japanese. Hopefully, an English translation will be published soon.

Lastly, I would like to touch on the significance of this book. The editor calls the present day 'the era of disruptive change' - an era wherein the 'existing social design' is to change, an era in which prevailing values themselves change. People are under great pressure to transform the social design and structure created by the West-centric world in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, what exactly does this mean? What has been the fundamental change in the international society, say, for the three decades after the Cold War?

Obviously, we are now living in the multi-polar world of the 21st century. The center of change in today's global society is undoubtedly the diminishing influence of the Western world on international politics and economics, substantive to non-Western worlds such as China and India, or to say the least, the Indo-Pacific world. It can be found that the center of gravity of 'hard power' has moved. However, the issue to be noted is that the 'West' continues to hold the ideational and informational power that defines the code of conduct of the international community - regarding what is 'right'. The sources of 'Hard Power' and 'Soft Power' are in different places. This can be presumed to be the cause of various conflicts in international society today.¹

However, the sources of substantive power and ideational power were the same throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, when the Modern Historical Narratives covered by this book were cultivated. It was an era when the 'modern world' centered on the 'West' continued to exist in the most balanced manner. It may have been a very short and exceptional era in the long history of human society. Therefore, the change in the international community today may be a change in which such a short period of human history returns to a multi-polar world that can be said to have been rather 'normal' throughout human history. At least, what is 'disruptive', whether good or not, is today the mechanism of the international community in the 20th century.

That is why, as this book points out, in order to interpret such times, we must thoroughly rethink the West-centric cognitive framework that has supported such a 20th-century world. This is a cliché claim. However, this 'rethink' cannot be overemphasized, because how to actually do it remains a real challenge.

Personally, I think that there is no choice but to empirically clarify the existence of the pluralistic world in the globe. Instead of collecting the historical experience of a historical subject from a historical narrative of that subject, we actively present a perspective that has always existed as the

1 For example, see Onuma Yasuaki, *A Transcivilizational Perspective on International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff, 2010.

history of ‘inter-subjectivity’. In other words, the question is what kind of historical narrative can you tell, when you look at it from Europe or Asia, not from the history of Europe or the history of Asia?² As the English title of this book (not the official English title, but the expression decoratively written on the cover - ‘Historical Literacy in the Age of Post-Globalization’) suggests, I assume that the authors of the book aim to describe such a global history.

Now, is such a historical narrative possible? This cannot be currently answered by me or by the book. It entails a long journey. At the very least, this book provides a solid foothold to start such a journey.

2 I relate to the idea that ‘everyone can think “this is our history” - that’s a Global History’. Retrieved March 4, 2021 from <https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/focus/ja/features/voices084.html>