

## Value Interpersonal Connections and Probe Your Own Research Questions



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Do you find it hard to start writing an essay or dissertation? Do you think you need a block of time to write? In this volume, we asked Professor Hirono of the College of Global Liberal Arts for advice on specific methods for gathering information and writing essays and dissertations, and how to approach “facts” as a researcher.

Research Themes	Chinese peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, development assistance, and conflict mediation
Specialization	International Relations, China Studies
Publications	<i>China's Evolving Approach to Peacekeeping</i> , London: Routledge 2012

## On My Research

### Studying China from the Perspective of Countries in Conflict-Affected Areas

My expertise is in China's international relations. I am currently focusing on what roles China plays in conflict-affected areas such as South Sudan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan.

Today, discussions about China tend to be ideological. Some may have the impression that China unilaterally controls many countries in conflict-affected areas. However, when you actually go to those countries, people there always consider how they can take advantage of the approaching superpowers. I am examining how people in such countries perceive China and attempt to utilize it for their own interest. Based on my examination I aim to analyze China's roles in conflict-affected areas.

### Seeing International Relations as “Interpersonal Relationships Between Leaders and Followers

My current research focuses on “followership” in international relations. For a great power to demonstrate leadership in international relations, it must receive the support of its “followers” (defined here as foreign countries in which it invests and to which it provides aid). In other words, without followers, leadership cannot exist. So, how do followers view China in the leadership role? They can see China as either a problem or an opportunity for economic development. The reputation of a leader greatly depends on how the followers view the leader. In other words, international relations can be understood as interpersonal relationships. This understanding is actually quite simple – something that even a child can understand – but it is easy to forget. Since most of the countries in the world are developing countries, how they perceive China, and view the world, is very important to understand when thinking about international relations.

### Do Not Speculate; Obtain the Facts

In my new edited book, *Ittai Ichiro wa Nani wo Motarashita no ka: Chūgoku Mondai to Tōshi no Jirenma (一带一路は何をもたらしたのか: 中国問題と投資のジレンマ (What the Belt and Road Initiative Has Brought Us: The Issue of China and Investment Dilemmas))*, the various authors and I attempted to examine China's Belt and Road Initiative without ideology or speculation. Usually, large national proj-

ects have a clear budget and a clearly specified project duration. However, the Belt and Road Initiative does not come with either piece of information. So, the literature on the Initiative is often based on speculation. Professor Akio Takahara of the University of Tokyo explains this state of the literature by analogy with a constellation of stars. Stars exist, which is scientifically proven. However, the constellations that we speculate connect the stars with lines do not exist in reality. Rather, they are merely a way of thinking about the stars. The constellations are meaningful in themselves, but it is wrong to assume that the constellations themselves exist in reality. Same with the Belt and Road. If you think there exist certain connections, where such connections do not exist, you will end up with a faulty analysis. This is what I am worried about in my own research.

Look at the stars, not the lines in the constellation. Observe the dams and roads that have actually been built, and listen to the stories that residents tell. These are the “facts” (i.e., raw data, called primary sources), which we can see, touch, and listen to. It is fundamentally important to the core of any research to check your “facts”.



Interviewing victims in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake about China's humanitarian assistance (at a village near the Nepal-Tibet border)

## What I Always Tell My Seminar Students

### Don't Make Assumptions

I often say to my seminar students, “Don't make assumptions.” It is dangerous to make assumptions about how other people think based on their names, looks, or nationality, or based on any number of other preconceived notions.



## Advice for Writing Essays and Dissertations

### Frequently Used Databases

“[ProQuest Central](#)” is a very useful database. I use it and recommend it to my students. For China-related matters, I often look at journals published in China through the [CNKI \(China National Knowledge Infrastructure\) database](#). “[Beida Fabao](#)” ([pkulaw.cn](#)) is also very useful. Although China is known for not publishing data, this database offers all official laws and judicial precedents issued by the central and local governments, as well as treaties and declarations signed with foreign countries. I also use “[RUNNERS Discovery](#)” a lot.

### A Paper Is Not Something You Write; It Is Something You Build

It may come as a surprise to you that a paper is not something you write. The process of writing is a process of building. A paper is something to be assembled. Each element of the paper is like a little building block. You can consider how to assemble building blocks in a coherent way. This way, you can create an object while thinking about which blocks lead to the most important question, and in what way. Also, instead of being scared of the size of the “mountain” called a “dissertation,” why not approach the dissertation by making small building blocks (e.g., single paragraphs), and assembling them while thinking about the overall objective? This way of thinking helps time management. You can think, “today I’ll write this paragraph in the next 30 minutes,” or “I have 15 minutes now, so I’ll just write these three sentences.”

### For Those Struggling to Write Papers

I recommend you read [Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write](#). This is a book that asks 100 scholars from around the world about their various writing styles. The book discusses a wide range of experiences and ideas on when and where to write, and expresses the idea that “we are all different and are all wonderful” (a verse from a poem by Kaneko Misuzu), when it comes to academic writing. When you read it, you’ll think, “It’s okay to write like this!” and come to enjoy the writing process. After reading this book, I also now try to write for 30 minutes right after I wake up in the morning, when my brain

is still fresh and sharp (although I must admit that I often fail and sleep in a bit). Doing this helps me start my day with a great feeling of accomplishment.

## How to Use the Library

### The Joy of Unexpected Encounters with Great Books

In my research and teaching, the majority of resources I use come from the electronic databases to which the Ritsumeikan University library subscribes. Nevertheless, I still get excited when I physically visit the library stacks, because I unexpectedly find great books near the books I look for. The excitement of such moments is one of the best parts of searching for books at the library.

#### Advice from the Library!

Ritsumeikan University has seven libraries across Kinugasa Campus, Suzaku Campus, Biwako-Kusatsu Campus, and Osaka Ibaraki Campus. Professor Hirono uses the OIC library for her class preparation and the Shugakukan Research Library for her research.

#### A day in the life of Professor Hirono

6:00	Wake up and write
7:00	“The chaos” time – prepare breakfast with my husband and take care of my 8-year-old son and two dogs
8:00	Do some housework
8:30	Engage in Associate Dean’s work
	Attend meetings and write emails. On Thursdays, teach and supervise students.
19:30	Prepare dinner and do some housework with my husband
	“Do your homework” time
20:30	“Can you take a bath?” time
21:00	“Not in the bath yet? Hurry up!” time
21:30	“C’mon, GET IN THE BATH RIGHT NOW!” time
22:00	Accompany my son to bed
22:30	Write emails and prepare for the next day (or fall asleep with my son)
24:00	Sleep

For example, when I have attended academic conferences in China, panelists have said, “Now, let’s ask Prof. Hirono for her Japanese way of thinking.” I feel very uncomfortable being defined in such a way. I happen to have a Japanese name and Japanese nationality, but the way I think and perceive things should not be defined by someone else. “The Japanese way of thinking” or “the Chinese way of thinking” is a bias, which is a hindrance in research. Not all Japanese or Chinese think the same way, so is there really a Japanese way of thinking, or a Chinese way? Always avoid generalisation, and always challenge your assumptions. The same can be said of the process of reading papers. While it is important to analyze the relationship between the author’s background and the content of the discussion, reading with preconceived notions based on superficial information like the author’s affiliation or title does not amount to a desirable attitude as a researcher. The same can be said of interpersonal relationships. Assumptions can lead to misunderstandings, which, in turn, can lead to discrimination.

I also tell my seminar students to let the primary sources speak for themselves, so that they (the students) can highlight the facts, rather than perceive things and events through their own stereotypical lenses. Research should be always established with empirical evidence. It should not be interpretation or speculation. It is essential to ask yourself whether there is enough evidence to make a specific claim.

#### Advice from the Library!

Databases can be accessed on campus or from home. If you want to access databases from your home, please go to the RITSUMEIKAN IT SUPPORT SITE and click on “VPN”.



## Message to All New Students

### “What You Seek” Matters More than “Where You Are”

Some new students might think that the COVID-19 pandemic may have prevented them from living the student life they had expected. I also experienced a complete change in my life when I had to return to Japan from abroad, against my will. From that experience, however,

I learnt that what I like to do, what I can do, and what I can learn from interacting with others, do not change irrespective of the physical environment I am in. What you seek is more important than where you are. This way of thinking, I believe, opens up the world to you. And now I cherish my life in Japan, to which I returned suddenly, under duress, and completely without a plan. I am grateful for the wonderful encounters I have had at Ritsumeikan.



Presentation on “China and the World Order in Transition?” at the Ash Center at Harvard Kennedy School