

# **Overcoming the Limits of English-Language Asian Studies Knowledge: Doing Ainu Studies in Japan**

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My question for this short paper is simple: as scholars involved in Asian Studies should it not be an imperative that we value work produced in Asian languages on an equal footing with that being written in English? Should it not furthermore be a prerequisite for Asian Studies scholars working in English language institutions that they actively produce work in the Asian languages they have studied?<sup>1</sup>

I believe that such a requirement would not only make it easier on the part of Asian Studies scholars in English language institutions to engage with the often context-specific work being carried out in Asian languages, but also surely provide a concrete, practical and material solution to the twin problems of universalism and particularism in Asian Studies that show no signs of disappearing today, especially as Asian/Area Studies enter a phase that some have labeled as their “afterlives” as disciplines under globalization<sup>2</sup>. I would also, no doubt, ensure that the academic work of people writing in Asian languages and who are looking for careers in English language institutions is properly valued, and work some way towards bridging the oft mentioned gap between the priorities of language learning and research that are said to plague Asian Studies departments throughout the English speaking world.

Let us make no mistake. English is the global academic norm and the task of translating knowledge from non-English speaking areas of the world into English for the monolingual English speaking public is still going to be a task at the center of Asian Studies for many years to come. Writing in Asian languages is not going to achieve the kind of circulation or audience that writing in English will. Under current managerial constraints and economic conditions, writing in Asian languages might appear a counter-productive, counter-intuitive, or

OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ASIAN STUDIES  
KNOWLEDGE: DOING AINU STUDIES IN JAPAN

even simply meaningless as an exercise. There are probably few financial benefits involved.

However, as Asian Studies scholars should be all too well aware, it is through direct and creative conflict with universalizing norms that so much knowledge, humanitarian, scientific, literary, philosophical and practical, has been produced in languages other than English<sup>3</sup>. In many ways, this has been what “Asia”, however putative, has been all about<sup>4</sup>. In this precise sense, perhaps it is time for Asian Studies to *join* Asia instead of forever observing. Writing in Asian languages might provide a practical way to provincialise English as the language through which knowledge about Asia is “maximized”, “promoted” and “transmitted”; to sublimate English language Asian Studies from their “afterlives” into something new. Or even as a method through which we can begin to treat our areas, peoples and languages of study not as mere “fields”, but as things that demand from one a different kind of fluency aside from the only social scientific<sup>5</sup>.

My reasons for raising the question of language are twofold. Firstly, there is a personal dimension which involves my own experiences as an English speaking bilingual researcher doing Ainu Studies in Japan for the last six years. Second, however, is a more general and perhaps (romantically?) ironic sense of un-comfort that I have towards English language studies of Asia and the Ainu of becoming the global norm. For I see the problem of the language of Asian Studies and the financial restraints that may reinforce limitations in this area, as two examples of how academic practice can induce and transmit certain values which would perhaps be best unlearned. I am going to use the personal dimension as a means to getting at this more general problem.

Over the last four years or so I have been involved with a young group of researchers, as well as non-academics, concerned about Ainu history and affairs, and who have been working together to produce a book on issues we see as important with regards to the contemporary Ainu situation. As a group we are also highly critical of the current atmosphere of multicultural coexistence surrounding recent government policy initiatives towards the Ainu<sup>6</sup>. The topics we have been working on range from critical reassessments of Ainu writers

OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ASIAN STUDIES  
KNOWLEDGE: DOING AINU STUDIES IN JAPAN

such as novelist, Hatozawa Samio, linguist, Chiri Mashiho, poet, Batchelor Yaeko, and thinker, Masao Sasaki. This has been carried out with a specific focus on how they came to terms with modernity in Japan and the Ainu position within it. We have also begun to explore the possibilities and implications behind a re-writing (particularly with reference to Ainu oral narratives) of the master narrative of “assimilation” vs. “resistance” that has deeply shaped postwar Ainu historiography. We have evaluated issues of ambivalence and the regional tensions caused by and in the activism of people like Kaizawa Tadashi, one of the original plaintiffs for the 1997 Nibutani Dam ruling in which the Ainu were recognized as an indigenous people for the first time in a national Japanese legal context. We have also looked at issues such as changes to the visual representation of the Ainu in postwar Japan Broadcasting Association (NHK) documentaries.

All of these issues are fairly context-specific. Many of them also brush against the grain of established Ainu Studies in Japan that is often characterized, on the one hand, by a parochial academic protectionism of sources and other important historical materials, and, on the other, with the rapid adoption of English language models of Indigenous Studies. Most importantly, however, is that all of this work is being done in Japanese.

Over the last few years during my involvement with this group I have also maintained contact with a number of researchers engaged in English language Japanese or Indigenous Studies elsewhere around the world. Every now and again, however, in my dealings with these disciplines I have experienced something that I can only really describe as the trial of the “forever never native informant”. Despite being a native English speaking bilingual researcher in Japan and writing in Japanese, I am often considered to be engaged in the same activity as those in the field of English language Japanese or Indigenous Studies when researchers come to Japan to collect their source materials. It is rare that I am considered to be engaged as thoroughly as say a Japanese researcher is with Ainu affairs in Japan.

In this sense it is often the case that I am asked by researchers who predominantly write in English as to whether or not I can introduce them to people doing Ainu-related research in Japan as a kind of point

OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ASIAN STUDIES  
KNOWLEDGE: DOING AINU STUDIES IN JAPAN

man, or source of contacts. It would seem that I am never considered to be part of that group myself and Japanese language Ainu Studies remain as source material for people interested in those issues in English language Area Studies. Whether this is just the paranoia of an inexperienced young academic on my part, or simple coincidence, I cannot be sure. However, I do find that mentioning the fact is *almost* akin to the kind of “treason to whiteness” described by people like historian, Noel Ignatiev, of the infamous Race Traitor collective. For Ignatiev, “whiteness” functions like a private club that grants privileges to certain people in return for obedience to its rules; it is “based on one huge assumption: that all those who look white are, whatever their complaints and reservations, fundamentally loyal to it”<sup>7</sup>. With this in mind, whenever someone asks me if I can introduce them to someone in Japanese Ainu Studies out of the blue, I almost always feel like giving them Ignatiev’s reprimand: “Oh, you probably said that because you think I’m white (or in English language Asian Studies!)”.

There are no doubt clear institutional restraints on academics within English language Asian Studies that force them to adopt a pattern of short term visits to their country or area of study from which they proceed to return to their institutions, publishing in English with little room for direct reciprocity for the subjects of those papers. These financial restraints have been supportive, however, of those Cold War imperatives that demanded Asian Studies scholars to produce universal declarations about Asia for national governments, and today continue to support a similar pattern of academic behavior.

Over the last 20 years or so the critique of colonial and Cold War legacies intrinsic to Asian/Area Studies has been profound. It has exposed the structure through which specific nations, areas and regions are perceived solely as sites for gathering information in order to make universal judgments about what are often only putatively integral geographical units. It has also revealed the subsequent incorporation of these judgments by the target areas involved into their own particular disciplinary fashions in a strict relationship of complicity. The universal is stated, either accepted or rebelled against in the particular, only to be outsourced once more into new universal statements about that acceptance or rebellion, and the process goes on. This is, in turn, related to a problem that Naoki Sakai has called

OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ASIAN STUDIES  
KNOWLEDGE: DOING AINU STUDIES IN JAPAN

“co-figuration”; a process in which what is often incommensurable is rendered as a fixed and unchanging difference according to an overarching logic of symmetry and temporal equivalence<sup>8</sup>. This logic has worked to erase the very particular history of universalizing academic methods and mask any real possibility of thinking about any true sense of universality. It is why Edward Said, in his now thirty year old thesis, considered “Orientalism’s [read Asian Studies] failure to have been a human one as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience”<sup>9</sup>.

Would it make any difference to this kind of ingrained structural supremacy supported by English language use in Asian Studies today if it were say a compulsory institutional requirement to publish in target area languages? It certainly would not be financially rewarding, but if Asian Studies is to finally break free from the complicity between modern universalizing methods and their national particularizing cousins, then perhaps a degree of creative nihilism is demanded here and researchers publish more bilingually. After all, it seems bizarre that a growing majority of Asian Studies departments in English language universities are refusing to recognize academic work being produced in Asian languages, even by their own faculty. These issues were perhaps highlighted best at the Transmission of Academic Values in Asian Studies workshop when a number of speakers raised the question as to whether it was really possible to have South East Asians in English language South East Asian Studies? Some models are already there<sup>10</sup>, but we need to address the issue of the language of Asian Studies more thoroughly if it is to change the imbedded structures of superiority that English supports – and, of course, if I am finally to be considered proper native informant material!

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, within reason, this does not mean that I wish to advocate that people who study ancient Mayan write academic theses on poetry or syntax etc. *in* ancient Mayan.

<sup>2</sup> See Harry Harootunian & Masao Miyoshi, “Introduction: The ‘Afterlife’ of Area Studies”, in *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Mizumura Minae’s comments on what she sees as the

OVERCOMING THE LIMITS OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ASIAN STUDIES  
KNOWLEDGE: DOING AINU STUDIES IN JAPAN

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“miracle” formation of modern Japanese literature through its creative tension with the Western novel in her *Nihongo ga horobiru toki* (“When the Japanese Language Dies”), Chikuma Shobo, 2008, pp. 196-232.

<sup>4</sup> See Sun Ge’s “How does Asia mean?” in Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat eds., *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 9-65.

<sup>5</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s comments on what she calls the ethics of “deep language learning” and the future role of Area Studies in her *Death of a Discipline*, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 9-23.

<sup>6</sup> See my “On the Dawn of a New National Ainu Policy: The ‘Ainu’ as a Situation Today”, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, under review.

<sup>7</sup> Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor*, Routledge, 1996, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> See, Sakai Naoki *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism*, Minnesota University Press, 1997, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1978, p. 328.

<sup>10</sup> The impetus behind Naoki Sakai’s own multilingual Traces project has been particularly exemplary in this regard. See <http://www.arts.cornell.edu/traces/> (accessed 07/09/2009).