

## New Japanese Scholarship in Cambodian Studies

### Introduction

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The environment of mainland Southeast Asia for foreign researchers has drastically changed since early the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War and the introduction of open-market economic policies between the regions, foreign researchers have gradually been permitted to conduct academic research in socialist countries such as Vietnam, Lao P.D.R. and Cambodia. They now have access to regions where conjectural interpretations rather than analysis had long been made. Such opportunities offer the promise of new research findings, since the regions have been “under-studied” for several decades. Collaboration with native scholars also opens new horizons for inter-regional study from a comparative perspective.

Paradoxically, it should also be noted that the significance of microscopic studies focused on particular regions or villages tends to be disregarded, partly due to their obvious transformation, which is affected by the larger reformation of the regions in terms of economic and inter-regional relation between nations. More frequently, microscopic study of the people in a particular region today is officially encouraged by the states of the region from the stand point of promotion of national cultural heritage policy and the tourist industry of the region. Thus, stereotyped images of regional culture and society have disseminated more widely than ever before in parallel with the spread of information technology, whereas what really happens is that the more the regional world looks homogenized, the more local complexity appears.

It was in this context that the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University organized a three-year joint-research project from 1995 to 1998 to promote ethnographic studies of the region. Entitled “Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Making of Mainland Southeast Asia,” the project aimed to present and exchange first-hand data gathered by Japanese researchers who had finished long-term and intensive fieldwork somewhere in mainland southeast Asia [TAK 1998]. This initial and domestic seminar-meeting rapidly developed into a series of international workshops, the first of which was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1998, which was sponsored by the COE program from 1999 to 2003. For the same purpose, four meetings with short-term excursions to rural villages of ethnic groups were held in Kunming (P.R. of China), Chiang Rai (Thailand), and Luang Phrabang (Lao P.D.R.), to which

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native and outside scholars of the region were invited [Hayashi 1998; Hayashi and Yang 2000; Hayashi and Aroonrut 2002; Hayashi and Thongsa 2003]. In the same period, another series of gatherings concerned with “Inter-Ethnic Relations, Migration and Cultural Reconfiguration” were held as joint-research seminars at CSEAS, expanding the region surveyed as well as the issues addressed. In the six years from 1998 until the end of fiscal 2003, this joint-research seminar met 19 times and invited 53 presenters.

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Most of the papers on Cambodia included here are revised English versions of presentations originally read in Japanese at a special seminar of “Inter-Ethnic Relations, Migration and Cultural Reconfiguration” held at CSEAS on 6th and 7th December, 2002. Each study is based on long-term fieldwork that was conducted by researchers under different research grants in the 1990s. The main purpose of this compilation is to introduce their new research findings in this under-studied region as well as to present one phase of the activities of the series of joint-research seminars mentioned above.

Except for some senior professors, there are very few Cambodian specialists among Southeast Asianists in Japan, compared with scholars of Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This is mainly because the civil war and the subsequent Pol Pot regime made it nearly impossible for foreign researchers to conduct empirical study in Cambodia. Accordingly, Cambodian study in Japan has been seriously muted. It was only after the “Paris Agreements,” the Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict concluded in Paris on 23 October 1991, that Japanese researchers began to conduct field work on issues concerning Cambodian society and culture [cf. Ohashi 1998; Amakawa 2001]. Most of the papers here are results of long-term fieldwork conducted since the mid-1990s at the earliest. With their skills in native language and their perceptions of life gained through several years of stay in contemporary Cambodia, most of the authors have become specialists of sorts on various issues in Cambodia. Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to introduce their works as those of new “pioneers” who are cultivating a regional study of Cambodia, at least in the sense that they do not share an Orientalist perspective on the research.

Except for the works of earlier scholars who began to study from the 1960s [Bizot 1992; Bizot et Von Hinüber 1994; Ebihara *et al* 1994; Vickery 1984; 1986; Nepote and Khing 1981], many of the academic works on Cambodian society and culture accumulated in the past two decades have been made by journalists or NGO workers rather than academic specialists. Other works are by specialists who have expanded their field of study for the purpose of (risky) comparison with their “home research sites” [Thion 1993; Keyes 1994; Hayashi 1995; 2002]. Under the UNTAC regime, foreign journalists, intellectuals and NGO workers often remarked: “Now nobody can meet any Cambodians whose ancestors built the great Angkor Vat in ancient times.” In 1993, I first joined a two-year research project to conduct a survey on Buddhist organization in Phnom Penh and its suburbs. In the chaotic environment that still prevailed, I

began to realize that Angkor Vat was a symbol to divert foreigners' attention from the ongoing social unrest and chaotic reality that people were struggling with their daily lives. In other words, the more foreign researchers consider themselves as crusaders fighting to help Cambodian society, the more they take an essentialist view of the common people and begin to think how to develop the disintegrated Cambodia, rather than to see what people are constructing with what kind of intentions in different settings. This positioning in the field seems to coincide with Orientalist ways of sketching of non-Western societies and cultures. Physically, Angkor Vat has been located far from the people living in various communities.

Regional study of Cambodia in the field of Southeast Asian studies seems to have long been dominated by the colonialist point of view as found overtly in the study of glorious Angkor Vat. The tendency to focus on elitist culture, which has a distance from living cultures of common people, can be observed even in the present condition of the research. The outstanding political movements and the related issues replaced obvious Orientalist studies. Recent studies on Cambodian society, however, have always been located in the aftermath of the turmoil of Pol Pot regime, which gave rise to the exodus and holocaust. In an Orientalist manner, most researchers have not focused on specific town/village residents, but on "survivors," "refugees" or diaspora together with the dystopia of the Khmer Rouge [Stuart-Fox and Bunhaeng 1986; Supang and Reynolds 1988; Gunn and Lee 1991; Mysliwiec 1988; Martin 1994; Wagner 2002]. On one hand, there is an abundance of works on political struggles as well as current reports of "formidable" socio-economic conditions. On the other, there is a paucity of substantial data on bureaucracy, provincial administration, cultural practices, family structure, kinship system in rural areas and the like, while it is true that some studies have shed light on hidden facets of the socio-political changing of Cambodian society [Chandler 1991; 1992; 1996; Kiernan 1985; 1996; Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Heder and Ledgerwood 1996]. It seems that such circumstances also reflect the foreigners' intention to reconstruct the socio-political environment, which is also sustained by the global development-aid and social welfare to "underdeveloped countries." In other words, what is concealed in problem-solving study are facts and realities rooted in everyday lives, which are easily overlooked or taken for granted. This is one reason why the classic descriptive work of Delvert [1958], who believed that to understand Cambodian people is to study rural peasants, is still highly valuable and beneficial. After his work we have only Ebihara's thesis focused on a specific village community [1968].

It is imperative to observe that Cambodia is not a "museum" filled with glory, as found in the past colonialist view, nor a mere field filled with tragedy and poverty, as depicted by observers living in the consumer society of "developed nations." Cambodia as a region is much more than that. It has local communities, to varying degrees, constituted by displacement. They are sustained in hybrid historical conjunctures. We should notice that, surrounded by images configured through an unchanging colonialist view, we know little about how people live there and react to the social realities of poverty, the political environment, and the outside world that foreign researchers come from. Under the wave of globalization, which promptly

classifies and reifies regional reality because of print capitalism, more fundamental research involving interaction between researcher and researched is urgently needed, rather than reproduction of stereotyped image based on macroscopic views, which accords with most Southeast Asianists' current academic propensity for area studies in terms of pandemic "global standard." In short, contemporary Cambodian studies have few substantial data or ethnography in many facets with which to capture the social reality.

What does the shortage of substantial data mean in Cambodian studies? To my knowledge, microscopic survey in a particular region is certainly lacking. What is needed urgently is to accumulate empirical data through long-term fieldwork, a process of interaction with locals, which requires not only literal knowledge but also a perception of the socio-cultural environment. Scattered knowledge obtained from successive interactive processes needs to be integrated, redefining the reality of each field of research, and providing a foundation for further investigation. It is true that such ethnographical knowledge from a specific field is always incomplete because it is constantly reconfigured in each process. However, such knowledge could also be constitutive as far as the process by which it was generated is reciprocal. Without having this reciprocal process, we could not meet any locals but anonymous actors.

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It goes without saying that the authors represented here did not necessarily intend to perform such anthropology oriented fieldwork. But each of them had seriously conceived what was their field of research and how new findings could be made in the difficult and chaotic conditions of contemporary Cambodia at the time. Meanwhile, as in other socio-cultural studies, up-to-date knowledge on Cambodia is promptly placed in leading to the "market" of academic knowledge in the name of a particular research association affected by government policies and media industry. Having been at a crossroad under such circumstances, the present authors do not intend to reproduce the stereotyped images that non-specialists tacitly expect in their enduring view of Cambodia as a country in turmoil, but aim to accumulate substantial data to be further studied, recognizing that their aim of study is to develop regional study of Cambodia as it is.

The papers address various subjects; the historical (Kitagawa and Sasagawa), the social (Takahashi and Sakanashi), and the cultural (Kobayashi).

Based on her careful examination of French archival documents and field research of the site, Kitagawa, who maintains the significance of focusing on regional factors in studying Cambodian history, attempts to reconstruct a regional history of Kampot, a marginal town that functioned as an outlet from Cambodia to a colonial resort, paying attention to its relations with outside world. Sasagawa's work explores the post-colonial discourses on the court dance, focusing on its historical process of cultural representation, by scrutinizing a huge repository of documents recorded in French and Khmer. Through the analysis of the court dance, the paper elucidates in detail how Cambodian "tradition" has been configured and transformed. Takahashi, an anthropologist who studied Thai culture in the late 1980s and recently conducted

fieldwork in rural villages in Cambodia, describes the present state of female-headed households in a rice-growing village of Takaev province. She reveals the continuity of function of the kinship system despite the drastic change of the outside world. Sakanashi, the youngest of the authors, analyzes opinions collected in a sociological quantitative survey of both urban and suburban secondary school students and finds salient patterns of orientation to their future social positions including jobs associated with the current unstable socio-economic conditions. In the last paper, Kobayashi describes the historical process of transformation of Buddhist practice in rural villages of Kampong Thum, showing valuable data obtained from his intensive fieldwork for more than two years. His observations in villages are precious, compared to the latest studies on social change and religion, which remain schematic and impressionistic, with no first-hand data from specific fields [cf. Marston and Guthrie 2004].

It should be noted that the papers in this volume are a minimal introduction of many important works by a new generation of Japanese specialists in Cambodian study. In recent years, many other valuable works on various issues have appeared, including works on archaeology, land tenure, government organization, legislation, economic development, classic/modern literature, and language. Although there is no space to mention them here, these academic contributions to regional study of Cambodia should not be dismissed [cf. Amakawa 2001].

Reconsidering previous analytical schemes as well as positioning in the field, both new specialists and specialists-to-be attempt to depict a reality underneath institutional pronouncements. Because their fresh material is still being processed, readers might find insufficient analytical consideration or clarification in their arguments. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that their research findings on specific regions provide a good introduction to new Japanese scholarship in Cambodian studies. They should be further and fully developed to expand the new horizon of Cambodian studies in Japan. By their future contributions, contemporary Cambodian studies could also provide an arena to reconfigure of generic scheme of “Southeast Asian studies” which have long been dominated by Western perspectives and policies. As an organizer and a representative of the joint-research seminar, I therefore hope that all the papers will elicit fruitful comments and suggestions for future studies from both readers who are interested and engaged in the study of Cambodia and Southeast Asianists who are studying society and culture from an inter-regional perspective.

**Keywords:** inter-ethnic relations, mainland Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Angkor Vat, local history, Orientalist view, regional study, globalization

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