

Unthinking the nation state as area: Interrogating Japan and Japanese studies

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Chris McMorran

National University of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract

Geographers and others have recently addressed the problematic of area studies by suggesting alternate ways to recognize the connectedness of peoples and places. However, some areas seem so self-evident as to resist their undoing. One such area is the nation state. In this paper, I examine the resilience of the nation state as area through the example of Japanese studies. I discuss the emergence in the United States of Japanese studies as a field, and thus Japan as an area worthy of study, due to its enemy status in World War II, which highlights a troubling disciplinary origin in interrogation that still haunts the academy. I continue by explaining how Japan's postwar amnesia of its pre-1945 empire and the influence of one research monograph in particular helped produce the enduring notion of a homogeneous and spatially isolated Japan. Subsequent decades of research have tried to undermine this notion, albeit without questioning the ontology of Japan itself. In this paper, I outline challenges to unthinking the nation state as area, including existing institutional barriers and the role of Japanese studies as a source of professional identity, both in general and for me personally.

Keywords

Area studies, Japan, nation state, interrogation, Japanese studies

Introduction

Thinking through the relationship between area studies and geography involves reflecting on who I am as a scholar and teacher, amid ever-shifting institutional and disciplinary expectations. As the editors of this special issue acknowledge, geographers have often remained silent on the problematic of area studies, not to mention its crises of identity and legitimacy that caused some to predict its “dissolution” (Silberman, 2002: 303). I was insulated from these concerns among area studies specialists during my graduate training in the U.S. in geography, which began in the year 2000. As a newcomer to geography, I was more concerned about the constant policing of its internal and external boundaries than the problematic geopolitical and discursive boundaries of my research area, Japan.

Corresponding author:

Chris McMorran, Department of Japanese Studies, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260, Singapore.

Email: mcmorran@nus.edu.sg

That changed when my need for a job overrode my desire to remain in a geography department. Upon entering a department of Japanese studies, I reflected on what constitutes Japan and Japanese studies in ways previously unnecessary. Since my arrival, I have continued to conduct research on the Japanese archipelago, while maintaining a conceptual foundation in geography. This leads to an almost daily performance of different disciplinary identities for students, colleagues, and administrators in my institution, as well as in professional and personal circles beyond the university and Singapore. Depending on who is listening, I may emphasize my extended residence and language training in Japan or how my research speaks to ongoing debates in geography. Such is the everyday reality facing all scholars who not only think through, but live through, the relationship between area studies and geography.

In this paper, I examine area studies and geography through the lens of my institutional home of Japanese studies. I begin with a brief history of the emergence of Japanese studies as a field, and thus Japan as an area, particularly as a postwar example of a state tool used to interrogate a threatening other. I then discuss the resilience of the nation state as area, especially within Japanese studies, despite efforts to rethink area studies by geographers and Japan scholars alike. I conclude by discussing the challenges and possibilities of unthinking Japan as an area of analysis in Japanese studies, as well as in my teaching and research.

Interrogating area studies

In the US, area studies began in the 1940s as a tool of the state to learn about potential threats and to produce citizens knowledgeable about distant locations. In particular, area studies programs emerged from service language schools, which trained young American soldiers to interrogate enemies and potential enemies, first in Japanese, and later in Korean, Mandarin, and Vietnamese (Harootunian, 2002).¹ This explicit link between area studies and interrogation of the enemy is especially obvious in the work of Ruth Benedict, whose scholarship continues to impact Japanese studies today, and who helped produce an “area” deemed worthy of study in the US: Japan.

In June 1944, the US Office of War Information commissioned Benedict, already a respected cultural anthropologist, to study “the Japanese”. As Benedict (1946: 1) explains, “The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle... We had to understand their behavior in order to cope with it”. War prevented Benedict from conducting research in Japan. Instead, she relied on film, literature, travelers’ depictions, and interviews with Japanese-Americans held in internment camps in the western US to reach her conclusions. The result was *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a book ostensibly about “the Japanese” and “Japan”, in which a modern population of over one hundred million people living in a complex empire spread across Asia became neatly packaged as a handful of cultural patterns geographically limited to the Japanese archipelago.

Published after Japan’s defeat, the book sold well in both the US and Japan. It arrived in Japan at a time of purposeful distancing from its recent past. Japan experienced no postcolonial moment, no national reflection about the horrors that had been committed in Asia under the auspices of the Japanese empire. Instead, the nation looked inward and focused on recovery. As Ching (2007: 413) eloquently notes:

Instead of an outstretched and vast imperial landscape, Japan, as both a geographical and a cultural signifier, was now enclosed and delimited within the borders of an

“island country”... The multi-ethnic composition of the “Japanese”, as necessitated by the incorporating logic of the empire, was readily discarded and disavowed in the immediate postwar years. Instead, a singular national/racial identity [...] was inaugurated and consolidated in conjunction with Japan’s refusal to confront its war crimes and colonial past. The new understanding was that Japan had been a natural community integral to the Japanese archipelago since antiquity.

Within this fog of self-induced amnesia, Benedict provided a clear portrait of an ethnically and culturally homogenous society with a seemingly timeless set of shared values and practices geographically limited to the Japanese archipelago. She singled out aspects of Japanese culture that appeared as the mirror image of the West (the US), thus providing a framework for understanding the Japanese, who were humanized for American readers as a quirky, but ultimately knowable Other. The timing of the book’s publication, following the dismantling of the Japanese empire, spared it from needing to acknowledge the messy geographical, ethnic, and imaginative realities of pre-1945 Japan. As Ching (2007: 413) suggests, “It was by effacing and denying the traces of coloniality that the postwar cultural identity of the Japanese as a homogeneous people was established as Japan’s self-image”. Benedict’s research was instrumental in producing and justifying this “self-image”, which also largely became the world’s perspective on Japan.

Within the academy, Benedict’s portrayal legitimized continued scrutiny of Japan as both a threat (from wartime enemy to economic contender) and a model (a shining example of modernization via democracy and capitalism, without forfeiting cultural identity) by both developed and developing nations for decades to follow. My own Department of Japanese Studies was founded in 1981 in response to the Singaporean government’s aggressive “Learn from Japan” campaign. As Avenell (2013: 29) explains, in this campaign, “‘Japan’, freely imagined and sometimes shamelessly orientalized, served as a useful ideological device for governmental elites as they attempted to manage and shape the social and economic transformations accompanying the shift to advanced industrialization in their country”. In the decades since, members of the department have continued to occupy a niche in the university by teaching about Japan and researching its economy, society, literature, politics, and more.

Benedict’s work also helped inspire the voluminous pseudo-scholarship written for the Japanese public in the genre called *Nihonjinron*, or “theories of Japaneseness”, which reached its zenith during the economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s when scholars and non-scholars alike were trying to uncover Japan’s “secrets” of success.² Given that one of the hallmarks of area studies is language study and extended time spent in the area in question, it is ironic that Benedict did not speak Japanese or visit Japan, yet produced a volume that continues to reverberate throughout Japanese studies (Robertson, 1998). In fact, some claim Benedict directly or indirectly inspired much of the past seven decades’ social scientific scholarship on Japan, as scholars either built upon her conclusions or aggressively challenged them within the interdisciplinary field of Japanese studies.

I dwell on this history of Japanese studies for two reasons. First, Benedict’s work provides an explicit example of area studies’ troubling foundations in interrogation of the putative Other (as enemy or potential enemy). As Davis (2015: 52) argues, area studies has held this adversarial stance of “learning about” others for too long. He instead suggests area studies’ potential for “learning from” others. The former reifies difference and operates via interrogation. The latter begins with caring and proceeds by opening oneself to potential transformation. It requires language training and extended time spent among people who may change one’s perspective on the world. Unfortunately, scholarship in geography often continues in the “learning-about” vein, with geographers

simply searching for area-based case studies to flesh out theory. Cumings (2002) neatly describes the “implicit Faustian bargain” in the postwar era between area studies experts and social scientists, which largely continues today. While the former often considered social scientists “unlettered barbarians” who lack linguistic, literary, and cultural expertise, social scientists considered area studies specialists “spelunkers in the cave of exotic information, chipping away at the wall of ore until a vein could be tapped and brought to the surface, to be shaped into useful knowledge by the carriers of theory” (Cumings, 2002: 265). Indeed, some geographers ride a fine line between using area studies to “learn about” and “learn from” others. For instance, Gibson-Graham (2004: 416) call area studies a “resource” (Cumings’ *ore*) for finding cases of non-capitalist economic practices and relations, while simultaneously acknowledging that fieldwork, a hallmark of area studies, can be a “transformative experience” that generates completely new ways of thinking. Such a perspective links the strengths of geography and area studies, but it must also actively exorcise the ghosts of interrogation that continue to haunt academic practices and shape how geographers engage with the area.

Second, the emergence of Japanese studies in the US signals the emergence of a largely unproblematized geographical category of analysis: the nation state. Japanese studies emerged in the postwar era as a way of both seeing Japan and organizing research about it. As Sidaway (2013: 989) notes, “The recognition of some regions at the expense of others reflects power, rather than the ontological status of regions per se”. The case of Japan makes clear that the nation state is no exception. Japan has held a privileged position in the short lifetime of area studies in the US. Unlike other “areas” like Southeast Asia, South Asia, or the Middle East, Japan—much like Korea—became and remained a legitimate container of analysis through area studies, namely Japanese studies. This was due in part to Benedict’s seductive portrait of Japan as an ethnically and linguistically homogenous country. Moreover, Japan’s strategic importance as a buffer against Communism in the early decades of the Cold War and its economic strength that continues today all contributed to making it an accepted area of study. Whether looking at the postwar economic “miracle” or the present “lost decades”, Japan has been a convenient, logical, and largely unquestioned geographical unit for investigation, despite, as one prominent historian puts it “the artificial nature of Japan’s frontiers” (Morris-Suzuki, 2004: 107). Indeed, while social scientists have long worked to undermine Benedict’s homogeneous, timeless, and thoroughly ungeographic portrait of Japanese society and reveal its social, economic, and ethnic diversity, the container holding this complexity has remained sound.

Despite the solidity of Japan as object of study, however, Japanese studies never became a common disciplinary home in US institutions. Echoing the scalar acrobatics inherent in the thoroughly “undisciplined” realm of area studies, Japan experts employed outside Japan today may be found in departments of Japanese studies, East Asian studies, Asian studies, Asia-Pacific studies, international studies, global studies, or more traditional departments like history, sociology, geography, political science, media/film studies, anthropology, and more. For this reason, Japan specialists like me must negotiate multiple identities to colleagues, administrators, journals, and friends based on area (Japan, East Asia, Asia-Pacific, and Asia), discipline (geography, comparative literature, history, political science, etc.), and method (ethnography, translation and literary criticism, archival research, social surveys and statistical analysis, etc.). This is not unique to Japanese studies, of course, but it speaks to both the potential and difficulty of unthinking the nation state as area.

Unthinking the nation state as area

Geographers and others have long critiqued the spatial and imaginative configurations of neighborhoods, cities, and other areas. For instance, Lewis and Wigen (1997) challenged what they call the “myth of continents”, while Gillen (2016) has more recently and adroitly disputed the underlying assumptions of the “Asia” portrayed in the “Asian Century”. Indeed, the questions of what constitutes Southeast Asia, the Middle East, or Sub-Saharan Africa, and whether such areas are useful (and to whom), have not only fed into crises of identity and legitimacy among those who identify as area studies experts, but also created opportunities for geographers and others to weigh in on such struggles (Appadurai et al., 2013; Miyoshi and Harootunian, 2002).

One outcome of this soul-searching has been the proposal of new ways to redistrict the planet, such as the Black Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Silk Road, and Zomia (see Sidaway, 2013). It is unlikely that any of these areas will ever attract the same level of concentrated scholarly attention as Asia or Japan. But that does not seem to be the point. Instead, critical scholarship on areas and the proposal of new areas has revealed their arbitrariness as containers of connectedness, as well as their role in directing, and thus limiting, how we understand the world.

Several scholars working on Japan have challenged its solidity as an object of research. For instance, Silberman (2002: 317) notes that the impact of poststructuralism has led many to claim that “Japan is not a fixed entity of any sort. There is no essential personality nor is there an essential Japaneseness”. Indeed, “there are now several Japans, each masking a political stance that makes any unity of understanding impossible and improbable” (Silberman, 2002: 317). Morris-Suzuki (2004: 101, original emphasis) has gone further by questioning the usefulness of Japan as an organizing principle and advocating what she calls “Anti-Area Studies”, which “seeks to examine a specific social, political or historical *problem* from *widely differing* geographical vantage points”. Instead of organizing research around a geographically arbitrary area like Japan, Morris-Suzuki envisions research-based around themes like frontier studies or indigeneity, which affect people in non-contiguous spaces. Such efforts to unthink the nation state (and area studies more broadly) remind one of the many interdisciplinary fields that emerged from the 1980s onward, like gender studies, migration studies, development studies, Science and Technology Studies (STS), postcolonial studies, and global studies. And although such fields provide exciting ways to rearrange scholarship and institutions, there remain barriers to disrupting or unthinking the nation state as area when it comes to Japan.

First, there are institutional barriers, like the availability of funding by the government of Japan and private foundations for Japan-specific research; numerous established outlets for scholarship on Japan, including international peer-reviewed journals devoted exclusively to Japan; and a wide audience of non-academics who remain curious about Japanese society, arts, economy, politics, and popular culture.³ This institutional architecture, coupled with the commitment of years of training required for area expertise, threatens to restrict people’s ability to think beyond Japan or question the ontology of the nation state.

In part, this is because Japan provides professional identification. Scholars of Japan may work in disciplinary or broader area studies departments surrounded by non-Japan specialists. Expertise on Japan sets them apart, distinguishing their research and teaching in a neoliberal educational era when such distinction is more important than ever. As a geographer in a Japanese Studies department, I am surrounded by colleagues with PhDs in history, anthropology, linguistics, international relations, and more. Geography sets me

apart from my colleagues, while Japan binds us together in the eyes of the institution and our students, particularly with respect to other area studies departments like Chinese Studies and Malay Studies.

I understand the call for an “anti-area studies”, and I believe geographers like me can play a role not only in unthinking the nation state as area, but also fostering new ways of organizing and disorganizing area knowledge. At the same time, I feel stuck perpetuating the idea of Japan-as-area. The future of my position and my department depend on me emphasizing the continued relevance of the study of Japan and teaching eager students something about it.

At this point, the best I can do is introduce the controversy. Thus, when I look out across 450 blank faces in my Introduction to Japanese Studies class each year, I begin by asking, “What is Japan, and who says so”? This question indicates not only that identifying Japan may not be as easy as pointing to the map, but also that there exists a lively debate about the origins, borders, population, identity, etc. of Japan, and that we as a department based in multiple disciplines may answer the question in vastly different ways. The same can, and should, be said about all areas.

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Notes

1. This link between interrogation and knowledge production continues to haunt the academy, as evidenced by the American Psychological Association’s recent prohibition against members assisting the US military with prisoner interrogations (American Psychological Association, 2015).
2. For critiques of what Benu termed the “hegemony of homogeneity” at the core of *Nihonjinron* works and their relationship to Benedict’s research, see Benu H (2001) *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of “Nihonjinron”*. Melbourne; Portland, OR: Trans Pacific Press. Also see Robertson JE (2008) Introduction: putting and keeping Japan in anthropology. In Robertson JE (ed.) *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., pp.3–16; Ryang S (2004) *Japan and National Anthropology: A Critique*. New York: Routledge. Incidentally, although I speak of Japanese studies as a single field, some scholars note distinct forms and factions of Japanese studies. See Silberman BS (2002) The disappearance of modern Japan: Japan and social science. In Miyoshi M and Harootunian HD (eds) *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.303–320.
3. For instance, journals devoted to Japan (in English) include *Journal of Japanese Studies*, *Japan Forum*, *Social Science Japan Journal*, *Japanese Studies*, *Contemporary Japan*, *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies*, *Monumenta Nipponica*, and *Mechademia*. This list is not exhaustive, nor does it include Asian studies journals that publish work on Japan like the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Asian Survey*, and *positions*, or the many disciplinary journals published in Japanese.

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Chris McMorran is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a cultural geographer with broad research interests in the geographies of home and the geographies of teaching and learning. His latest publication is *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* (2016, AAS Press), co-edited with Deborah Shamoon.