

Slavic Area Studies in Japan: Features and Tasks

Hiroshi Kimura

A Contrasting Picture

Japan appears to rank second place in the world in the number of specialists who are interested and engaged in Slavic area studies.¹ According to a survey done by the Slavic Research Center of Hokkaido University,² the number of such specialists in Japan is 800–1,000. The number of such experts in the United States, on the other hand, is approximately 8,000, about ten times more than the number in Japan. Still, the number in Japan is more than the numbers in other countries, including the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, not to mention Sweden and Finland.

Regrettably, however, Japanese specialists appear to have had little impact on the international academic community of specialists in Slavic area studies. For instance, very few article by Japanese authors can be found in leading periodicals in the field such as *Slavic Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies* and *Post-Soviet Affairs*. Although a few excellent non-Japanese language journals in the field of Slavic area studies, including *Acta Slavica Iaponica* and the *Japanese Slavic and East European Studies*, are available in Japan, I have seldom found back numbers of the these journals in libraries of foreign institutions. I have also rarely heard comments about articles that have appeared in these Japanese publications. As for book-size publication, there are certainly a great number of volumes edited by Japanese authors, but there are few volumes written by a single Japanese author in Russian, English or any other foreign language.

The numbers of Japanese participants in international symposia held outside Japan are not very large. For instance, the ICCEES has held a world congress once every five years, but only 21 Japanese, about one percent of the total number of participants, participated in the VII ICCEES World Congress held in Tampere, Finland. The AAASS (American Association for Advancement for Slavic Studies) has held national conventions annually. These convention are not only for American specialists; they are international conferences open to all foreign specialists. However, only three Japanese participated in the 34th Convention in Pittsburgh in 2002, and only eight Japanese participated in the 35th Convention in Toronto.

1 Slavic studies in this essay means studies on such areas as the former Soviet Union/Russia, the CIS, and the Baltic, Central and East European countries.

2 For example, *Surabu Yurashiya Kenkyu-sha Meibo (The Directory of Slavic and Eurasian Reseachers) (7th edition)* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2003) lists 1,499 specialists, but this number has to be slightly reduced since the list includes not only those who are interested in Slavic studies but also those who are interested in international affairs in general.

Suggestions on Ways to Narrow the Gap

Despite the large number of specialists in Slavic affairs in Japan, there has not been a significant contribution by Japanese specialists to the international academic community in the field of Slavic affairs. Regarding this contrasting picture of the current situation of Japanese Slavic studies, the following two questions arise:

(1) What are the background reasons that account for such a picture? and (2) What are the ways and means to narrow this gap?

More Attention to Ways of Presentation

Generally speaking, it seems to me that most Japanese academics consider the concept of solidness to be more important than the concept of originality. To put it simply, most Japanese academics are interested in demonstrating what kind of primary source materials they are employing in their works. Nobody can criticize such an attitude. Such an attitude is a necessary condition for claiming to be an academic writer but does not satisfy sufficient conditions. An academic work also requires, for example, original findings and unique conclusions as well as presentation of unprecedented discoveries in a communicatable fashion.

Writing a good article or book is like good cooking: both need excellent materials and skill in presenting them in an acceptable way to digest the contents. Some Japanese are enthusiastic about collecting research materials but tend to neglect the significance of presenting them in an easily readable fashion. This is particularly applicable to oral presentations by Japanese experts. Many Japanese read their written manuscripts in English or other foreign languages word for word, making the audience bored, and they neglect the importance of free discussion in a question-and-answer period, which is often considered to be a more interesting part of an oral discussion than presentation of the paper itself.

Fields of Studies: More Need for Division of Labor

It appears that many Japanese specialists have unique tendencies in choosing their subject of study: they prefer a small subject or countries or areas that they can easily manage. For instance, there is a relatively large number of academics in Japan who specialize in Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, former Czechoslovakia and former Yugoslavia, whereas there is only a small number of academics who are studying Russian domestic and foreign policies. There are very few academics in Japan who have been studying Russia's relations with the United States, Western Europe, China, and the two Koreas.

Recently, however, the number of academics in Japan who specialize in areas geographically closer to Japan has been increasing, an encouraging and welcome development. Japanese specialists could make a significant contribution to the international academic community in areas such as Siberia, the Russian Far East, Sakhalin, and Russia's relations with neighboring countries in North East Asia (Japan, China, the two Koreas).

Internationalization in the True Sense of the Word

Almost all South Korean specialists in Slavic area studies have a Ph.D. from American, British, German or other foreign universities, mainly due to the fact that there are no excellent graduate schools in South Korea. Few Japanese specialists, on the other hand, have studied for a long period abroad, since there is a large number of relatively good graduate schools in Japan. Similarly, Japanese specialists in Slavic affairs do not need to establish themselves internationally because there are relatively large numbers of students and readers in Japan. If these trends continue, however, the contribution of Japanese specialists will remain limited to the domestic market.

In order to promote the internationalization or globalization of Japanese Slavic studies, I propose the creation of a national association of Slavic studies, equivalent to the AAASS. Of course, this goal cannot be achieved overnight. In this sense, the formation of the JCREES (Japanese Council of Russian and East European Studies) as an umbrella organization for several independent associations related to Slavic Studies in Japan is indeed a step forward. Yet, JCREES should be regarded only as an organization of an intermediary nature. In other words, we should aim at the creation of a unified Japanese national association that will help Japanese specialists in Slavic area studies not only to promote their research in Japan but also to enhance their work to an international level.