Modern Japan History Association Roundtable: "The State of Our Field"

Sabine Frühstück, Carol Gluck, Andrew Gordon, and Laura Hein, with Eiko Maruko Siniawer†

Eiko Maruko Siniawer

Welcome to the Modern Japan History Association's roundtable on "The State of Our Field." One reason I'm excited about the establishment of this Association is the creation of opportunities to reflect on the current state and future of our field, and in fact the very definition and contours of the field. Accordingly, I hope that this roundtable will be the first of many such fruitful conversations. Today, we will focus on where our field of modern Japanese history has been, and where it is and should be headed, in conversation with four eminent scholars in the field.

Introductions of our panelists are really unnecessary and anything I say will be woefully inadequate in capturing their contributions to the field, so I will be brief. Sabine Frühstück is Professor and the Koichi Takashima chair in Japanese Cultural Studies in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her work transcends and transgresses national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries by employing both historical and ethnographic methodologies. Her recent publications include *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), and the Japanese translation of her book *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism* (University of California Press, 2017), titled *"Sensō-gokko" no kingendaishi: jidō bunka to gunji shisō* (Jimbo Shoin, 2023).

Carol Gluck is George Sansom Professor Emerita of History at Columbia University. Her research focuses on social and cultural history from the mid-19th century to the present, with particular emphases on the construction of ideology, international relations, history writing, and public memory. Her recent publications include the book *Sensō no kioku* [Memories of War] (Kōdansha, 2019) and an expanded paperback version of *Rekishi de kangaeru* [Thinking through History] (Iwanami Shoten, forthcoming).

Andrew Gordon is the Lee and Juliet Folger Fund Professor of History at Harvard University. His work has been on labor, class, and social and political history more broadly. Recently he has been delving into topics such as Japan's "Lost Decades" and so-called dark tourism. One of his more recent publications is the book *Fabricating Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 2011).

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Laura Hein is Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Professor of History at Northwestern University. Her research takes up diverse topics and themes from economic policy and theory to remembrance and public memory. She recently edited Volume 3 of the *New Cambridge History of Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), and her most recent solo-authored book is *Post-Fascist Japan: Political Culture in Kamakura after World War II* (Bloomsbury, 2018), just published in Japanese translation under the title *Posutofashizumu no Nihon: sengo Kamakura no seiji bunka* (Jimbo Shoin, 2023).

In this roundtable, each of the panelists will speak in turn to answer two prepared prompts, proceeding in alphabetical order and then reversing. The first prompt is:

> *What do you see as promising new directions in the field? What are the trends about which you have reservations, if any, and why?*

Sabine Frühstück

I want to begin by stating the obvious, namely that my responses to these questions are limited by how I operate in the field, what interests me, and of course also by what I teach and what my students tell me they care about and want to learn more about. I should also apologize to all of the eminent colleagues in this group and beyond, and the emerging scholars in this group and beyond, for the fact that I will have time to mention very few of their works by name or title, when in fact there are so many more works out there that need to be highlighted and discussed more broadly.

Let me begin by inviting you to think with me about three aspects of innovation. Obviously there are many ways to be innovative, as long as we continue to rethink and reconceptualize what constitutes "modern," what constitutes "Japan," and what matters. That being said, the three aspects I would like to use as an organizing device for my remarks are: 1) protagonists, 2) authors, and 3) skills.

One new direction of great interest concerns the expanding of the population of protagonists in our historiography, and is pursued by historians who center modern histories on the experience of minoritized and marginalized communities. Here I highlight two scholars who have pointed us in this direction in a more reflective way. One is Vera Mackie, who has highlighted the potential of such histories to challenge conventional periodization and thus have impact on the field far beyond the immediate questions and communities such historiographies describe. [1] Mackie's work has underscored the importance of thinking about and rethinking periodization, asking the question, what does it mean when we think about modern history as the history of women and the history of gender? The answer is, it looks very different. The peaks and valleys are in very different places. What it means to be modern looks different.

From a different angle, Julia Adeney Thomas has urged us to reconsider the historical geography we've created, not to pay tribute to the best of everything that was, but to debate and evaluate what matters.[2] She calls our attention to how unevenly distributed our attention is, as a community of historians around the world but also as historians of Japan in particular, in terms of which places, which topics, and which populations are at the center of our narratives. Let me exemplify this with an example from my own milieu. Consider women's, gender, and now queer history. Once innovation lay in writing about women, period, and later, in discovering women as victims of war. Then, in the '80s and '90s, radical historians introduced women also as collaborators and perpetrators. At the very moment at which such perspectives became mainstream, yet another generation of innovative historians refocused their attention on outcasts of empire and rewrote once lost histories of people at the margins.[3] There is still a lot more to come from this well—the expansion of the protagonists of our histories—since we have essentially ignored large portions of the population in question, including people with disabilities/different abilities and children, just to name two.

Another new direction concerns the authors of historiography. In spite of the now commonplace proclamation that, "the author is dead," many of us continue to operate with the tacit understanding that good historiography will make it into the classroom and eventually trickle into the public sphere, possibly shaping public consciousness.[4] Courageous doubters of this perspective are not only sometimes motivated by problems of our present, but also aspire to new ways of *making* scholarship in the broadest terms. Some of you will think of digital humanities projects, and rightly so, but I am thinking more generally of collaborative work. Collaborative work can bring together different methodologies and skillsets from different fields to, for example, "deep map" modern East Asian history, or reconfigure global, transnational, transregional, and translingual encounters in other critical ways, including, for instance, by considering the connections between the Japanese Empire and Latin America.[5] Letting ourselves be inspired by the sensibilities of sociology and anthropology to think again and again, not only about who should be the protagonists of the historiographies we write, but also who should be granted authorship, continues to have innovative potential we've only just begun to tap. I see great promise for innovation and collaborations beyond the confines of disciplines and methodologies, in efforts against tribalism, where historians employ their concern for marginalized persons not to reduce them to the prism of their marginalization, for example by demarcating ever more miniature new subfields, but to fuel the vigor of history as a whole.[6]

As for which trends I have reservations about, the short answer to that is there aren't any, really. But it is important for us to remain vigilant that new topical and geographic interests don't eliminate old analytical sharpness. For instance, just during my lifetime we have seen several waves of the historiography of war, or the historiography of empire, or the historiography of militarism. We also have developed an increasingly sophisticated gender analysis over the last 20, 30, or 50 years. So it is important to not forget that whatever new directions we take need to remain cognizant of all the analytical tools we already have and that we have developed with respect to other problems in the past. This is important, both to historians exploring new problems, and to a new generation of historians revisiting old problems.

In terms of skills, I don't think that any of the skills I have in mind are inherently new, but it has become clear from current work, and from the new directions of modern history I have described, that we will need more than one language—more than one Asian language—to do it well. We also need to tap more than we have done in the past into translation and into translingual collaboration. That remains very difficult, I think, although many of you already do it very well.

Carol Gluck

Every several years, I taught a seminar called "New Directions in Japanese History Writing." I spent the summer before gathering and reading, or at least looking at, the new books on modern Japanese history from 1600 to the present. I then compiled a list of works published in the past two or three years from which the students could choose titles for us to read in class. I realize that if I were to give that course now, my summer would have to last a year. There are so many books—so many good books: the field is flourishing and it's flourishing globally.

I think we will be concentrating today on English-language work, but if we had the time to travel the continents (including Africa), we could sample scholarly trends in the field of modern Japanese history around the world. For this year's ICAS—the International Convention of Asia Scholars—there are separate prizes for English, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese books. [7] And if you look at the winners you will see that there are as many commonalities as there are differences in the way the various historiographies are evolving. So I'd like to keep in mind that ours is now a truly global field.

I have been saying for a long while that this is a particularly good time to be writing

history—not only Japanese history, but history in general. This is because of the specific conjunctural moment we live in: a historical conjuncture that began toward the end of the 20th century and continues today. I'll mention two characteristics that I think are relevant for our conversation here. First, we live in the land of *paradigms lost*. As long-dominant theoretical models—whether Marxist, liberal, developmental (or modernization)—lost their hold, the glaciers of orthodoxy began to break up. And this fluidity has required historians—but has also *enabled* historians—to ask their own questions and figure out how to answer them, without a ready parachute to deploy in the form of received theoretical categories.

The second aspect, which Sabine mentioned, is the access historians now have to the *multiple methodologies* that enriched history-writing across the 20th century. They often began as innovative or oppositional approaches—feminism, history from below, ethnography, sociology, the linguistic turn, postcolonialism, material history, environmental history—you name it—but they gradually became absorbed into the historiographical woodwork, particularly that of younger scholars. Sabine's discussion of gender is a good example. It used to be a separate topic, a focus in itself and also an exhortation, as in Joan Scott's important intervention of the 1980s.[8] But by the turn of this century, gender and sexuality had become a part of how historians approach their subject, whatever it may be—in short, part of how they view the world. This kind of methodological capaciousness makes history-writing today different from what it was in earlier times.

These characteristics pertain to the situation I describe as "after the shipwreck." Fernand Braudel once compared social science models to boats: make them, set them afloat, and see what happens. "The shipwreck," he added, "is always the most significant moment."[9] I think we are after the shipwreck: we are in the most significant moment, by which I mean that ours is a time between scholarly orthodoxies. It is also a time of historical transition, one already proving to be a long one. And although it is a time, both historical and historiographical, which won't last forever, it is in my view producing some extremely good and significant history in many fields, including ours.

Let me mention four good and significant aspects of modern Japanese history-writing in English. First, *thickening depiction*. Historians have deepened the narrative which, looking back now, seems to have been very thin indeed. When I studied for Ph.D. orals in the 1970s, I used the mnemonic device of envisioning a clothesline that stretched from 1550 to 1970, on which I hung events to enable me to answer whatever questions came my way. Like the clothesline, the storyline, too, was linear, punctuated by the canonical periodization—basically the Diet Library card catalog: *kinsei*, *kindai*, *gendai*. Or reign names like Bunka-Bunsei. Or nicknames like "Taisho democracy." But if we think about almost any period now, we see how the chronological punctuation is moving around. Think, for example, of our understanding of shogunal rule, or "early modern" (a term I don't like, since I prefer to de-center modernity by calling it Tokugawa, but nonetheless…). If you look at the second volume of the *New Cambridge History of Japan*, you'll find what might be called a "long early modern" that runs from 1580 to 1877.[10] The Meiji Restoration has similarly stretched out and thickened, as also happened with transwar history and now is changing accounts of the Occupation. Many aspects of modern Japanese history appear deeper, thicker, more complex, and more confusing—in a generative way. This doesn't imply that there aren't parts of the past that remain thin or missing, but the parts that are addressed have transformed my linear clothesline into something more like an Einsteinian four-dimensional past.

The second aspect has to do with *broadening the space of experience*, borrowing the phrase from Koselleck.[11] We all recognize this: beyond the nation to the transnational; beyond Japan to the regional—and not just Japan *and* Asia, but Japan *in* Asia, using the multiple Asian languages that Sabine recommended; the emphasis on empire and on intra-imperial spaces, on oceans and borderlands and diasporas; and of course the so-called global turn. This expansion

of the space of experience is also taking place within the archipelago, within Japan. The local has increasingly become a site in which to see "big history" happening. I won't name names now, but I could easily recite quite a list of such studies. This work employs a distinctive approach to space within Japan, and at the same time, often accompanies its expansion of experiential space with a more complex view of time: an acknowledgment of overlapping temporalities, for example. And it isn't only a question of scale either: we recognize that people in the same place can live in different experiential times at the same calendrical moment. Expanding the space (and time) of experience has changed our perspectives and with it, the work that we do.

The third aspect appears as *diversifying arguments*. In short, our analytics have changed as our questions have. Modernity is no longer the main story, or the only main story. Binaries are fading fast: whether East/West, traditional/modern, change/continuity, or state/society, this is not the way we approach narrative or interpretation. The fact that there is now a history of everything has helped those of us in Japanese history to write about new subjects, like Eiko's book on waste, for example.[12] But it is more than that: the arguments are more complex, more adventurous, and sometimes quite surprising, constituting a real analytic achievement.

The fourth aspect is the practice of *mixing methods* that Sabine spoke of and I've already mentioned. Historians use different approaches in the same project, in the same book, in the same chapter. They are free to roam. What used to be thought of as methodological brigandage in disciplines other than history is now considered open season. The resulting mix is very rich (including the tools of digital history), and it is changing the field. I would add just briefly that there is also an ongoing change in the poetics of history-writing that characterizes some of the recent books in our field. Such writing is imaginative and engaging, and it is breaking us out of the learned habits of academic prose.

And what about my reservations? I'm with Sabine, in that I don't really have reservations about the recent and current work. But I do have a question. I would like to know: what is the main story of our time? The main question? For a long time, modernity was a main question, but I don't think that's true today. Some people think the most pressing question now is the relation between equality and inequality, within and across societies; others think it is dealing with the Anthropocene. What both disturbs and tantalizes me is that it is hard to see the most pressing questions of the present in a time of historical transition of the sort that we are now at least thirty years into experiencing. But whatever the world and Japan are going to be in the future, the fact is that the history of that future is *happening now*. That's the way history works, not by events that change things between a night and a morning but by seemingly unconnected swirls and streams that *eventuate* into something different, which historians then name and explain. I would love for us to try to figure out history while it's happening and not have to wait to see how it all turns out. And the reason to do this, in my view, is that trying to get at the difficult-to-grasp main issues of any era is an essential part of the critical, political, and even moral enterprise that is the writing of history.

Andrew Gordon

I'm going to echo or elaborate on points that Sabine and Carol have made, which is a good thing because it means that we are—in a broad-strokes way—living in the same realm, or having similar perceptions. I also want to first of all thank all of you in the younger generation (or perhaps two generations younger) who have put the Modern Japan History Association together. Right now I see 198 participants—this is an extraordinary number, I think, and it shows that there was a need or a demand that wasn't being met. It's really valuable, and in a way this answers the big question about the state of the field: the state of the field is good. The fact that there are so many people here today is really heartening.

I will get to a few grumpy reservations in a few minutes, but let me first make four points.

I'll mention a couple of works specifically, because they just happened to cross my desk recently, but as Sabine said, our individual views are partial, we can't know everything that is going on, and it doesn't mean that there aren't other examples of what I'm speaking about.

My first point connects to Carol's point about broadening the space of experience, and in particular our field is becoming ever more global. I can think of one dissertation that's extremely promising—I won't mention the name, because it's still in progress—that is focused on a single region within Japan and (as Carol said) that is fine because that project, although it's confined within fairly narrow borders, is raising big questions and leaping out of that narrow frame. So maybe a problem—if I may jump ahead to problems—is actually that there isn't enough of that kind of work. But "ever more global" is the biggest ongoing trend that I see in our field, and with that one exception, I can't think of a dissertation I've advised or books I've looked at recently that are mostly contained as a story within the four main islands of Japan. The connections are wider and more octopus-like. The one work I'll name—shamelessly, because I'm proud to have been her advisor—is Jun Uchida's new book, which connects one very specific place in Ōmi—those merchants—globally, and not just into Asia, not just to Korea, but also to North America.[13] I must admit that when she first sketched to me that project a number of years ago, I was dubious. I said, "Really? That was all really going on?" But I've just seen the book, and it was all going on.

But this trend has also seen historians venture out into the oceans. Jun's work crosses oceans, but I'm talking about other works that look inside the oceans. So the broadening is not just global; it's also moving out of the Japanese islands and into the sea, but in new ways that take the ocean as a place of action and not just a place that gets traversed. Oceanic history, of course, is a trend much broader than the field of Japanese history, but Japan historians, or historians who look significantly at Japan, are part of that project and part of multi-authored books in that field.

A second really important trend that I see—and this connects to what Sabine said about skills, and what Carol said about the mixing of methods—is that not only is the work of many people in our field of modern Japanese history crossing borders more, it's also crossing disciplinary borders. It's mixing in and bringing in a variety of new methods. I see this most particularly in the case of environmental history, where people have to learn and write about science. So it's not only venturing into anthropological approaches, or crossing boundaries within the social sciences, or within the humanities, but also crossing into natural science. Just to give one other shoutout to somebody who I think is here, Andy Bernstein's forthcoming book on Mount Fuji starts out with a chapter on geology, and he's really digging into the science.[14] Anybody who does environmental history seriously—and there are many in our field—has to do that, and in my view that's a really valuable new trend.

Relatedly, and this is the third point I want to make: a material turn. Not in the Marxian sense of materialism, but literally. I just mentioned the geology of Mount Fuji, but also soil, water, fish, cement, roads, and bricks. There's lots and lots of work that's bringing the material into interaction with people, and with social structures, in a way that's really exciting. Somebody who pioneered some of that work, and who is so sadly no longer with us, was Aaron S. Moore. Hiromi Mizuno is another scholar who is connecting her research to science. And there are other, similar works in progress, by recent Ph.D.s who are still putting together their first books.

And finally, a point about the multiple skills and multilingualism that Sabine mentioned: I think that's already happening. For my generation, it was much less so. We weren't monolingual, of course—we at least knew English and Japanese, if we were in this field—but that was about it, and I took an easy route. I was supposed to learn Chinese to some modest extent—classical Chinese, because it was required of my field—but I didn't see why it would be valuable. This was really stupid, but it was before China had opened up. It was in the mid-1970s, and I just took a *kanbun* course that sort of counted as

Chinese. So I never learned a second East Asian language, but so many of the people on this Zoom who were a generation or two younger have, and so many of our students are doing that, which I see as a positive trend.

As for reservations, I'm old-fashioned, so I sometimes worry that some of the old frames are not brought in enough. Social class, for example. Sometimes I look at some new work and I think, wait a minute, let's not forget about the state, it's still important. It doesn't mean state/society is the only binary, but occasionally I get grumpy about that.

I was in Japan last winter from February to May, and this may just be of result of the randomness (or maybe the non-randomness) of the particular gatherings I went to of Japanese historians where I was the only anglophone scholar in the room, but I felt that they were not necessarily in sync with these trends that I've mentioned, and I wonder if there's a less rich connection between historians of Japan in Japan and those of us outside than there was in the past. I'm not sure about that, though, and I'm interested to hear what others think. Carol suggested that's not the case when she talked about a robust global field of Japan studies, so maybe I should just chalk it up to a couple of coincidental events.

Finally—and this is something for all of us to think about—the ever-expanding availability of digital materials for us to consult conceivably will make some of us lazy. Not everything that needs to be examined is available online. Especially with travel becoming more expensive, with graduate school budgets crimped, with graduate school administrators wanting to get students out the door more quickly, and also with the availability of so much material online, the actual need to go and spend significant time in Japan or in Asia may feel less, and that's a shame.

To be fair, I see this much more with undergraduates. I just had an experience in the course I'm teaching this semester, talking to the teaching fellows. Every single book and article on the syllabus is available online, except for John Dower's *Embracing Defeat*.[15] We made them buy that book because I'm assigning a lot of it and it's not online. But the teaching fellows told me this morning that very few of the students are actually reading it. The students said, "If it's not online, we're not going to read it, and we're not going to buy it." Those are undergraduates. Of course this is not a group of undergraduates, but my reservation or concern is that I hope we don't assume we can get to everything we need through the internet.

Laura Hein

I'm going to say some of the same things, but hopefully in a somewhat different way. One thing I will say is, language training has gotten *so* much better than it used to be, and I'm quite envious of those of you who have learned your Japanese more recently. But I will pick three topics, a little bit more focused on the actual subfields of history compared to what some of my colleagues have just said.

Environmental history—yes, it is transforming the way that we approach history, but I wanted to focus on specifically how it changes economic history. This is a point that I've made before, but I think it's really important because it shifts the valence of economic activity. When I wrote my dissertation in the 1980s, on Japanese energy industries and economic policy, everyone agreed that economic growth was a good thing, and the main discussion was about fair distribution. But economic growth, by definition, requires more energy expended from some source, which we now realize usually contributes to climate change by releasing captured carbon into the atmosphere, making economic growth intrinsically problematic in the new field of ecological economics. So the biggest problem is no longer that, say, pollution is a byproduct of sloppy uncaring forms of industrialization and urban development; rather, destructive planetary warming is intrinsic to economic activity itself. This is something that I've looked at most carefully through the work of Mark Metzler in his chapter in the *New Cambridge History of Japan*, which he is now expanding into a book.[16] It turns out that Japan is a very good place to think about these things, because its modern economic growth was both highly

energy intensive and very entangled with Asia. One of the ways it was both of these things was through agricultural inputs. Here, I've learned much from Hiromi Mizuno's and Toshihiro Higuchi's work on fertilizer—how much changing access to agricultural inputs transformed both the places where fertilizers came from, as well as the places where they were added to the soil.[17] Interestingly, both of those scholars established that transfer as central to empire, first in Hokkaido, and then on the Asian mainland. This is because agriculture depletes the soil unless you add compensatory inputs, so when Japan imported huge amounts of soybeans or rice or other food from Asia, they were also transferring stored energy to the archipelago. The Japanese Empire was unusually resource intensive, beginning in these ways early on, and massively moreso in the 20th century when it industrialized. Metzler argues that Japan's industrialization was also unusually geographically extensive very early on, which has huge implications for our field. This is not to say that Japan was alone in its growing reliance on oceanic herring or guano or fertilizer of other sorts—this was true of all of the places that boosted their agricultural output significantly in the 19th century, including the United States—but Japan went down this path unusually early, in an unusually big way. In thinking through the implications of environmental history in these ways, Japan scholars are really in a good space to say something of global significance.

Secondly—and I'm going to again echo my colleagues here—the spatial turn, that is thinking much more carefully about actual geographic places and the way that those places affected the lives of the creatures traveling through and living in them, is also enormously generative and again, not new—Kären Wigen has been doing this for a long time—but the implications of this kind of scholarship are still unfolding. Some of these implications are cultural and social, but spatial thinking challenges us to think about when it is useful to consider national boundaries or imperial geographies, and when it is not. Geography focuses our attention on activities conducted by Japanese people—and even by the Japanese state—that did not stop at the legal borders of the time, which of course are not the same as today's borders.

Often, the most interesting part of the story is when Japan's national or imperial borders failed to contain what was going on. Here I, too, was struck by Jun Uchida's work on the Ōmi merchants, but also by Hiroko Matsuda's work on Okinawans in Taiwan, which show that specific groups of people—in these two cases, people from one geographic area within Japan—go where they find opportunity and make use of the legal and social structures that advantage them; this is what economists call "arbitrage."[18] Notice that in this regard, it isn't particularly relevant to think of Okinawa as a colony in all but name, even though doing so is very useful for other questions. The Okinawans and the Ōmi merchants were acting in exactly the same way, as were Chinese nationals, and Koreans, and Mongolians, and refugee Russians, as much other new work shows. So these are various individuals, with specific skills or credentials, who took advantage of different geographic legal spaces, such as the international settlements in Shanghai or the Solomon Islands, to make new lives for themselves, and the locality and the localness of it is what we're holding constant here.

A third ongoing trend—again not new, but one that I think is well-established now—that makes scholarship much more fun for me, is the merging of history and art history. When I started my career most art historians saw their task as participating in debates in philosophy, about truth and beauty, and it was much less common for them to study, say, the patronage networks surrounding artwork, or the effect of new electric lighting on painting styles. Meanwhile, history graduate students had absolutely no training in how to think about visual materials, or architectural objects. As a discipline, we've since gotten much better at recognizing how something that isn't words on a printed page can be read as text, and integrating that with other kinds of data. I distinctly remember the first time I heard somebody do that work, and it was really electrifying. But that was a long time ago.

The biggest trend that I have reservations about is not related to topic. I find intensely boring any research that concludes by asserting something that should have been the underlying premise. There are a lot of topics where you see that, but I'm going to pick one that I have seen literally hundreds of times, not just in Japanese history, which concludes that some oppressed group did not passively and cheerfully accept their subordination, and the reason they didn't do so, of course, is because they were human beings, and we humans are all the foremost subjects of our own lives, even when we define our life's purpose as serving someone else—as fully 100 percent of the books I am referencing conclude.

Good scholarship tries to tell us something that we don't already know. That might mean looking at why individuals defined their life goals in the way they did, when and how that definition changed over time, whether it was unusual for their day, or many other related questions, but it has to move past the bald fact that they had subjectivity in order to seem exciting to me.

Eiko Maruko Siniawer

Laura's last comment dovetails nicely into our second prompt, which is:

> *What questions should we be addressing, and what approaches should we be adopting in our current and future work?*

This time we will go reverse alphabetical order, starting with Laura.

Laura Hein

I'm going to stick with the same three topics. First, one of the implications of environmental history that we haven't fully absorbed, is the extent to which it decenters intentionality. Coal smoke doesn't intend to pollute human lungs, and yet our human-centered history is all about making planned action and desire central, which is why there is this focus on the agency of subalterns, and these two fields or branches of history don't connect very elegantly right now. I think most people juxtapose the topics without clearly articulating how they connect to each other, or they point out that poor people with few social resources are less well equipped to handle large environmental changes, which again, seems kind of obvious, because that's what you use resources for—to, say, buy flood insurance—so to me that isn't a surprising finding. How to fit human stories with environmental stories—I don't think we're very good at that yet.

Secondly, the work on empire, and the spatial turn, frequently focuses on the coloniality of the colonial experience and, implicitly or explicitly, does this in order to create a backstory for contemporary nationalism. The presumption is that Okinawans, or Koreans, or others in the past, should have thought of themselves fundamentally as members of an unfairly subordinated natural nation. But actually, when we go and do the research, it turns out some of them did, and some of them didn't, and even the ones who did disagreed in profound ways about the content of that nationalism. I myself don't see why historians have to argue that our actors should have been nationalists, let alone that there was an obvious correct way to express that nationalism. I see that as an intellectual box of our own making, and I'd rather just not start with that assumption.

Third, visual images encode meaning in different ways than do texts, and they operate intertextually with other images in different ways. We need to become much more explicit about these modes of analysis, because my students find it hard to distinguish between causality and juxtaposition. Memes are funny because they scramble these two modes of analysis, but they're also dangerous because they teach people not to distinguish between them, and that, I think, is another one of our jobs.

Andrew Gordon

I'm just going to make one point as to what questions we should be addressing. It's a temporal question, which is to say, is it time to

bring the so-called Lost Decades into the realm of work that historians do? In fact, there was a very interesting and lively discussion among the members of the Modern Japan History Association about how one makes sense of the so-called Lost Decades, which many of you probably saw.

To step back a bit into my own time machine, the *Postwar Japan as History* book that I worked on with Carol and Laura was generated from an idea that came out of a discussion at the home of Sally Hastings in Chicago when the Association for Asian Studies meeting met in Chicago in the spring of 1986.[19] A bunch of us were lamenting that when we taught our history courses, there was nothing to assign by historians that talked about the period after the U.S. Occupation. The historians weren't doing postwar, although there were a bunch of snapshots by sociologists and political scientists. Okay, well, maybe we should do something about it, was a conclusion I reached, so I reached out to Carol and Laura and others, and that project evolved. I won't go into further detail, but the point is, 1986 was only 41 years after World War II ended, and even less if you concede that the Occupation had already been written about by historians to some extent; in that case, it was just 34 years since the end of the Allied occupation of Japan. It has now been 33 years since the Bubble burst, so maybe it's time for some other group of people to think about the Lost Decades as history.

Two points about how one might go about it. First, you can't just start with the Lost Decades. The '70s and '80s were a time when certain anxieties took hold. There was the excessive pride of the 1980s, but there was also an underside to that excess of pride, especially among many conservative intellectuals, that fed into the later perception of loss—a kind of "I told you so, things weren't right" perspective. The second point is that to do the history of the so-called Lost Decades, we need to figure out a way to go beyond saying it wasn't just loss, that there was creative stuff happening. That's true, but that's not enough. Those of us who try to dig in and do this work need to connect the dynamics of the sense of lostness with the dynamics of the sense of creative new departures and innovations.

I was discussing this with some colleagues at Harvard a few weeks ago and one of them—Alex Zahlten, a media studies colleague—made a fascinating point. He said that actually the 1990s were, in his view, the start of a renaissance, a new golden age of Japanese filmmaking, precisely because they could make films about this sense of lostness. In other words, the story of innovation and creativity, a seemingly upbeat story, connects directly to that sense of loss. That's just one small example, but a very suggestive one.

Carol Gluck

The way I see things, it's not a matter of *what* we should address, but *how*. I've never been in favor of deciding what people should work on. That's because we choose our topics—or our topics choose us—for at least three reasons. First, whatever our view is of the pressing needs of the present. Second, the scholarly context in the field. When I think of my own case, in the '70s it was ideology all the time; in the '80s, it was culture all the time; in the '90s it was memory all the time. You go with your context even as you think you are marching alone out in front of it. That's true of the work on empire, sexuality, diasporas, etc. The third reason I regard as the most crucial: you choose to study what you care about. My definition of good history is to ask *big questions*, address them with *deep empiricism*, and do it because you have *fire in the belly*. For me, the fire in the belly is key to choosing a topic and posing a question. Without that it's hard to write a really good book, so I'm not going to tell anyone what to study because I don't know what fire is in your belly.

That said, I do have two things to say about *how*. In terms of the globalizing trend that Andy spoke about, I am a fan of what I call the "comparative frame," which does not entail direct or frontal comparison (which is okay too, but that's not what I'm addressing here). It's more a habit of historiographical seeing—casting an eye on similar phenomena in other places, and looking first for the commonalities and the

connections rather than the differences. I contend that looking at a different place or context helps us to ask different questions of our own subjects, and that this is its value. You do not need to mention those comparisons in the text, and I usually don't, though they are there as artifacts in a phrase that you'll find often in my work: "as elsewhere." *Looking elsewhere* is a way of doing Japanese history without having to actually study what the nineteenth century was like in Newfoundland (one of my favorite comparative frames). Looking elsewhere is a great help, I think, in any historical inquiry and especially perhaps in a history as determinedly national as that of Japan (or France or the U.S. or…).

The second wish I have relating to the *how* has to do with the need for more communication. I echo Sabine here in thinking we would benefit from more communication and more collaboration with historians in Japan, in Europe, in Latin America, and everywhere, which is why I too am excited about the Modern Japan History Association. I was thrilled when it started, and it gets better with every event. As Andy rightly says, it is a great vehicle for communication. I am in favor, too, of more collaboration. Working with other people is a bit like the comparative frame. When we talk and work outside our own octopus pots (to mention octopus twice today, but this time just the pots), thinking and questioning together usually makes for better history, and it is also a lot of fun. I don't feel about Japanese historians quite the way Andy does. Maybe not all Japanese historians connect to these trends, but there are many of them who do.

The other aspect of expanded communication that I hope for—it's a *how* question too—is for us to write for broader audiences, for the so-called EGR—educated general reader—to bring the new work into the wider world. Not only trickling down, or trickling out through the classroom, but intentionally writing for people who might read our accounts, and that also means writing in the media and other popular fora. I see this as a matter of writing—of craft and poetics—and I think some of the work is already headed in this direction. To give students a head start, I now give them different advice about their dissertation and first book.

So those are the things I would like to see. It's the *how* that interests me: how in terms of the comparative frame and how in fostering greater communication and collaboration.

Sabine Frühstück

First, I want to go back to Laura's point about art history and history, because one of the things that I was so impressed with, is that Laura went from being an economic historian to art history. I find that superbly impressive, when somebody decides that their "fire in the belly" is now a different one. Without being prescriptive, I do wish that more historians would take visual culture seriously. I don't think we all need to become art historians, but I remember with horror that when I did my first book, I had these great images that I took with a terrible old camera, and I just thought, okay, here's the image that shows you what I'm writing in the text. That was my approach. Luckily, an art historian became one of my best friends. She looked at my images and she said, "oh, there's this here" and "oh, what did you think of that?", and I realized I didn't see any of that. I only saw what I already thought without the image. I hope I have made some progress since then, and I wish that at least some of you would take visual culture more seriously, not only as complementary or as illustrative, but as a competing source of information and knowledge and object of analysis.

I come down somewhere between Carol and Andy in terms of the *how* and what would be useful, but in terms of where to look, I think what we must do is rethink our most recent history, whether the '70s, or the '80s, or the post-1945 period as a whole, given the terrible moment we're in, right now, and what that means for history and historians. Just think about how the history of militarism and war and empire is one that ends, for most of us, in 1945, and for some a little bit later, depending on the problems we study. I have great fear that we have arrived at a moment that will change everything.

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