

Commemorative Lecture

Noboru Karashima

“The field of my academic focus is the history and culture of South Asia. To be more accurate, the history of South India. It was 35 years ago in 1961 when I first went to India to pursue the subject and enrolled at the graduate school of Madras University and Epigraphist Office, Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India. I spent three years in India that time. I have frequented the country ever since, and I estimate I have spent more than seven years in India altogether. Besides India, I have also visited Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian nations many times.

When I go to such countries, India in particular, people often ask me why I study Indian history. Having been asked the question so often, I have developed two ways to answer that question. I choose which answer to give, depending upon whether we have time or not and the way he or she asks that question. Let me introduce you to the shorter version of the answer first.

‘My family has pursued academic careers. My mother’s father majored in Chinese literature and taught at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Tokyo. My father was his student and taught at Keijo Imperial University until 1945. My father’s major was contemporary literature of China and he was good friends with Lu Xun. In such a home environment, I was naturally expected to succeed my father’s profession and pursue Chinese literature. It did not interest me, however, just to follow simply my father’s path, so I decided to change the course a little. I chose to study India instead of China, and history, instead of literature. This is how I came to study Indian history.’

Most people will be satisfied with this answer. This is not a false story and they can trust it. Yet, this does not fully explain why I chose the subject. So, when I see the person is serious to know the answer and has more time, I elaborate further as follows.

‘When I was at high school, I took an interest in Asian history. Naturally, I majored in Oriental history at college. As I studied the subject, however, I started wondering what Asia really is. We are not Westerners and often call ourselves Asians. But why is that? I could not help but feel the concept of Asia was created in a negative sense. It is only when Westerners came to this part of the world that the concept of Asia was born: Asia exists opposite to the West — I thought the concept of Asia did not come by itself from within ourselves, the Asians.

If this is true, what happened in our past? If we look back upon history, there seems to have been two major civilizations in ancient, so-called Asia. One is Chinese civilization which Japan has always belonged to in its history. If we are allowed to exclude Islamic civilization which had close relations with the West, then the other one is Indian civilization. Ancient Southeast Asians were under the

influence of either Indian or Chinese civilizations although they developed a culture unique to themselves later on.

As I said, the Japanese have lived under the influence of Chinese civilization for such a long time that we know China fairly well. Since my family profession was the study of Chinese literature, I personally feel that I understand China better than others and feel very close to it. On the other hand, I do not know anything about India except for Buddhism. I do not know about Indian society, the people's lives, let alone its history. To make it worse, Buddhism is now said to have perished in India.

I thought, therefore, if I study Indian history and compare the civilization of India with that of China, I might be able to find the answer to my question, 'What is Asia?' If I can find something common between the two civilizations that is different from what constitutes Western civilization, I thought, the elements can be nothing but Asian. I hoped this way I would be able to define the concept of Asia in a positive sense. That is how I started to pursue Indian history.'

As a matter of fact, I did not think logically of this way from the very beginning. However, it roughly explains how I came to major in the subject. Most people enjoy this explanation and very often ask what happened thereafter. They ask whether I could find any common elements between Chinese and Indian civilizations and subsequently define Asia in a positive way.

Then I will be in trouble because I don't think I could answer that question. I rather imagine that I will not be able to find the answer so soon, since I have been studying only a part of Indian history. However, I hope that someone will follow my path and eventually find the answer for me. That was the outline of my second way of answering the question, but it still misses the most important part of how I took an interest in Asian history. Today, I wish to take this occasion to talk about that part.

It has something to do with the formation of my self-identity and the story goes back to my childhood. When World War II ended in August 1945, I was in the sixth grade. My family was separated since our house in Tokyo had been burned down by an air raid and some of my family had evacuated from Tokyo. We finally rented a small apartment in Kamakura in the autumn, and four of us — my parents, elder sister and I — could live together once again.

As you know, the U.S. Occupation Forces entered Japan after the war and we saw a number of occupation soldiers in Kamakura too. Children at that time would run after the soldiers to receive chocolates and chewing gum from them. I also received sweets several times. Those American soldiers had a strong impact on me as a child for we had never seen them before.

In the following year, I entered a junior high school. As far as I remember, it was then that my elder sister and I had to go to Tokyo by ourselves. We have to take the Yokosuka Line to get to Tokyo, but there were very few train services at that time and the trains were always packed with passengers. It was not surprising at all to see people get on and off the trains through the windows. My

mother was so worried about letting her two children travel to Tokyo alone that she gave us enough money to buy tickets for second class seats (the second class seats are equivalent to the green-car seats of today's Japan Railways trains). My sister and I got on a second class carriage on the platform at Kamakura Station.

The second class carriage was also very crowded and full of occupation soldiers from Yokosuka Base who were bound for Tokyo or Yokohama on vacation. Being pushed against, I tried hard to hold on to my sister. It was then that a white hand stretched out of the crowd aboard and began to push me out of the train. It was a hand of an occupation soldier who did not like to be pushed in any further. He and the other soldiers were trying to hold my sister, while this hand tried not to let me in.

I could not see whose hand it was, yet I cannot forget the big white hand, its unpleasant touch and the fear I felt then. 'Who on earth are these soldiers who tried to push me out of the train?' 'If they are Westerners, who am I if I am not white?' I did not think logically at that time, but the intuitive question I felt led me to major in the history of Asia later on.

The powerful impact of the end of the war did not come only from the occupation army though. My family, who were leading a nice life in Seoul, had to face a totally different life and went through such hardship after coming back to Tokyo. It was a great shock to me. I suppose that I sensed the contradictions of society in the drastic change I saw in the destiny of my family. I believe that is why I took an interest in exploring the mechanism of society and history. I also met good teachers who aroused my interest in history at junior high and high school.

Of course, there were times I hesitated about pursuing Oriental history at university, but anyhow it explains roughly why I selected Oriental history as my subject and I have to say that I still have the question, 'What is Asia?' with me. By the way, when you pursue academic studies, you have to concentrate on a very narrow area. In my case, it was a medieval dynasty in South India. My graduation thesis was on the Chola Dynasty, one of the South Indian medieval dynasties. In scientific research, you have to proceed step by step. You cannot make quick progress as if you were flying in the sky.

In Japan, when you say Indian study, it often means the study of Indian philosophy, Sanskrit literature and Buddhism. Our predecessors have established high standards in these areas. That is because Japan, as a Buddhist country, has a long tradition of studying Buddhist literature translated in classical Chinese. On the other hand, study of Indian history and society in Japan started only after the war. That is when our senior scholars began to go to India in the 1950's.

I chose to write on a South Indian dynasty in my graduation thesis. No one was studying the history of South India in Japan at that time, although there were several senior researchers studying North Indian history. However, there lies a big difference between North and South India both linguistically and culturally. I thought it was important to study South India to understand Indian culture and history as a whole, and decided to pursue South Indian study since no one else

was doing it.

At that time, Professor Nilakanta Sastri at Madras University was an authority on South Indian history and had made great achievements in the field. Yet the history of South India has not been studied as much as that of North India, so there were still many unknown facts. As a result, studying South Indian history posed some difficulties. Not before long, I realized that there were no historical accounts on South India in ancient and medieval times comparable to the dynastic annals in China and the only available materials were inscriptions engraved on the walls of stone Hindu temples. I also learned that there are quite a number of inscriptions left and most of them are written in Tamil. That is why I studied Tamil and began to study the history of the Chola Dynasty, a medieval dynasty in Tamil.

After entering the doctor's course at the University of Tokyo graduate school, I went to Madras University as a research student. Professor Sastri had already retired then. I spent the first year at the graduate school of Madras University and the next two years at Epigraphist Office, Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India, located in the mountains of South India. As I said, the basic historical materials on ancient and medieval times were inscriptions, so it was impossible to conduct a historical study on South India without being trained for reading those inscriptions. The Epigraphist Office was the best institution to have that kind of training.

The Epigraphist Office sends its researchers to local posts. Those researchers' main assignment is to make rubbings of the inscriptions carved on the walls of the local stone temples, decipher them and create textbooks based on the research work. At that time, many young talented researchers worked there and the place was full of their spirit and energy. I liked the atmosphere there very much and stayed there for nearly two years, conducting surveys. In addition, the office was situated in the town of Ooty, 2,400 meters above sea level and it was cool there. The pleasant climate made it easier for me to live in South India where it is usually very hot.

The two years I spent at the institution were full of activities. Senior researchers instructed younger ones and young researchers exchanged a lot of ideas through discussions among themselves. In 1969, I had another opportunity to study in India. This time I took my family with me and spent the last two years of the three-year stay at the Epigraphist Office. The office was moved from Ooty to the base town of Mysore for some reasons, but it was still a highland and the temperature was cool enough for us to live pleasantly. Our second boy was born there and my then 70-year-old mother joined us for the last ten months of our stay. The office staff and our neighbors were all so kind to us that both my wife and my mother said they did not want to leave.

Later on, I came to be regarded as one of the epigraphists and treated by prominent epigraphists of India as their colleague. I owe this honor to my experience of having studied at the Epigraphist Office. In 1975, the Epigraphical Society of India was established and at its 11th Conference held in 1985, I served

as chairman. At the 21st Conference held in January this year, I was elected Honorary Fellow and awarded copper plates with an imitation of ancient writing, which noted my achievements, inscribed on the plates. I am deeply indebted to the 30 years' friendship with the Indian epigraphists for the honor, and at the same time, I respect the generosity and warmth they have shown to me by not discriminating against me as an alien. I consider this very precious.

I am essentially a historian, so I am more interested in how to use the inscriptions I deciphered as historical materials than in how to read them. I have examined issues of socioeconomic history by looking at how South Indian society has developed from Chola dynasty to Vijayanagar kingdom, or the 9th to 16th centuries. Going against the traditional method of epigraphical study, which tended to discuss certain topics by selecting an inscribed text or two, I have introduced a statistic method to see what the contemporary inscriptions are telling us about the times as a "whole." I conducted research with my Indian colleagues and the new method enabled us to discover many facts that had not drawn much attention before.

Upon studying the social development, I chose to explore social changes which took place primarily in the system of land holding. Then I gradually started to take an interest in the peoples' way of thinking and life style of that time, and studied strife fought between the castes, Chinese ceramics brought to India and also curry. I also take a standpoint that historical studies, even if they focus on the ancient times, have to look at the present time as the starting point. Therefore, I have repeatedly picked up issues such as caste and ethnic problems in contemporary India and Sri Lanka at my lectures and seminars at universities.

My wife and I have written a book about curry as an element of Indian culture and I have even appeared in a Japanese popular cartoon, entitled *Oishimbo* as 'Professor Karashima who is an expert on curry.' Indian curry is different from Japanese curry. In my view, Indian curry is made of a mixture of spices or a composite seasoning, that is equivalent to Japanese soy sauce. My scientific theme is to seek when and how curry was invented in India. I am afraid I do not have enough time to elaborate on this theme today, but I would like to mention that Tamil inscriptions are again very important materials to study this issue.

Speaking of ceramics, China started to produce porcelain for export in the 9th century. Pieces of the pottery have been discovered in Korea, Japan, Southeast Asian nations and even West Asian countries, including Egypt. Here in Fukuoka, *Korokan* or the State Guest House is well known for the discovery of pieces of high quality pottery. On the contrary, not many pieces of earthenware have been found in India. This has some relation to the Hindu idea of pollution in the eating and drinking and its custom not to construct a grave. After the 13th and 14th centuries, however, Islamic governments emerged in India and the Silk Road of the Sea was actively used, therefore, I thought pottery of this period could be discovered from the nation's port towns and remains of palaces. When I conducted research with Indian colleagues based upon this belief, we succeeded in

discovering massive Chinese earthenware pieces.

The series of studies conducted of Chinese pottery and the Silk Road of the Sea led me to 'reexamine' the relationship between South Asia and Southeast Asia in medieval and ancient times. It is a well-known fact that Indian culture, Hinduism and Buddhism in particular, had spread to ancient Southeast Asia and contributed to the social development of the region. In past studies, however, such a relationship was looked at in a one-sided manner and often made scholars of Southeast Asia uncomfortable, using such words as "Greater India" against Southeast Asia or calling Southeast Asian countries "Indian colonies."

In reality, though, propagation or exchange of culture is by no means one-sided and I am sure that Southeast Asian culture has exerted an influence upon India too. For example, Borobudur, a Buddhist temple constructed in the 8th century in Java, is magnificent and you cannot find any equivalent architecture in India in the same century. Angkor ruins in Cambodia also far exceeds 12th century Indian remains of the same scale. Based on these facts, I formed an international project, with the help of the Ministry of Education of Japan, to 'reexamine' the relations between South Asia and Southeast Asia in medieval and ancient times. For the last four years, my Indian colleagues and I have visited ruins in Southeast Asian nations forming an international team.

In prewar time, studies on Indian culture in Southeast Asia were conducted mainly by French and Dutch scholars. However, after the war scientific research of this kind was no longer conducted as India and Southeast Asian countries had obtained independence. As a result, scholars of Indian studies were no longer aware of Southeast Asia, and scholars of Southeast Asian studies were no longer aware of India. In particular, studies of inscriptions of ancient India written in Sanskrit or Tamil, that are still found in Southeast Asia, tend to be taken lightly. Such a situation led me to form an international team of scholars and take eminent Indian scholars to Southeast Asia with me. I expect these kind of activities will encourage a new wave of academic pursuits to occur.

As I have talked about my academic career, things have become more clear to me. I have tried to look at Indian culture as a whole by studying the history of South India where languages and cultures are different from those of North India. In taking an interest in Southeast Asia, Professor Tatsuro Yamamoto (Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo and Member of the Japan Academy), under whom I studied at university, had an extensive influence upon me. I assume, however, my interest in the influence of Indian culture seen in Southeast Asia came from my deep concern about the 'conflict' and integration between the two different cultures. I was attracted by the fact that a new culture emerges from cultural clash.

As I referred to the white hand of a U.S. Occupation soldier earlier, my question "What is Asia?" came from the 'conflict' between the two different cultures — the West and the East. I see that the question still exerts an influence upon me deep in my mind and urges me to compare Chinese culture with Indian culture to understand 'Asia' better. At the same time, I have been trying to

understand Asia by examining cultural contact 'within Asia'. As a means of doing so, I have taken up studying such cultural conflicts in history as the propagation of Indian culture to Southeast Asia in ancient times and ethnic disputes in the present time.

'There exist many different cultures within Asia, but some likeness shall emerge from interaction or conflicts between the cultures.' — What I am trying to explore is probably the fact that only through conflicts or interaction will 'Asia' come into existence. The conflicts may be cross-cultural contention within the Asian region, or they could spring from discord with the West. The conflicts may look negative at first sight, but something new may eventually come out of the negative conflicts. Cultural creation may therefore be an act to transform a negative event into a positive one.

What I have discussed so far is simply my midterm report or prospect. However, through talking to you today, I feel I have found an answer to my long-standing question, 'What is Asia?' I wish to express my deep gratitude for the bestowment of the prestigious Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize and the opportunity to speak at this occasion. I wish to further pursue my work and devote myself to drawing a more eloquent picture of Asia, based upon the insight I obtained today.

Thank you for your attention."