

Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia

The University of Tokyo

News Letter
Spring 2024



Feature article:
Interview with Professor Takahiro Nakajima,
Director of IASA



●As a Chinese Philosophy Researcher - New Enlightenment

—You specialize in Chinese philosophy. What has been the focus of your study?

Chinese philosophy was not, and still isn't, a trendy field of research. I thought it would be meaningful to raise universal questions from a minor field of philosophy. Indeed, China has grown into a global economic power today, and Chinese philosophy may no longer be a minority. However, if Western philosophy, especially that of modern Europe, remains mainstream, I think Chinese philosophy still has an aspect of minority. I thought I might be able to bring change to the Eurocentrism of philosophy by raising universal questions from a minority standpoint. That was what I felt when I was young.



The Philosophy of Zhuangzi
(『莊子の哲学』)
Edited by Takahiro Nakajima
Issued 2022
Kodansha gakujiyutsu bunko

—One of your books is *Sōshi no tetsugaku* [The philosophy of Zhuangzi].

You seem to have a particular interest in Zhuangzi among Chinese philosophers.

Early in my career, I had a shocking experience when I was working on my graduation research. When I read the original Chinese version of Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* based on the Mawangdui Silk Texts excavated from a tomb at the Mawangdui site, my idea of Laozi was destroyed, as I had gained from Japanese translations. Later, my research focus shifted to Xunzi. What I found difficult when reading his works was how I should understand or translate the term *xing* (human nature). Xunzi writes about transforming one's nature, but I did not really get it. Can human nature be altered so easily? ...and then I thought, "Where did this idea come from in the first place?" Perhaps Zhuangzi may be the source of the idea of transforming human nature, I thought. Not only in Japan, many philosophers say that Zhuangzi's thought can be characterized for denying distinction. In his views, everything under the sun would ultimately become one. However, I think the biggest influence Zhuangzi had on Xunzi was his idea of *wuhua* (transformation of things), that is, to transform into a different being. I have a feeling that this concept of transformation had a profound significance in the context of Zhuangzi's thinking.

Philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Emmanuel Lévinas, who emphasized the concept of "the Other," emerged in post-war France. Conscious of such trends in Western philosophy, researchers of Chinese philosophy once tried to dig deep into the issues of existence and possession, but I felt that there was no need to force ourselves to follow the footsteps of Western philosophers. Instead, we should stick to the unique ideas of Chinese philosophy and try to put them in a larger context. That was my intention when I wrote the book on Zhuangzi. The concept of transformation, becoming another being —this doesn't just mean that a person changes and turns into something different, but the world the person is part of also changes into something different—I thought it was quite an exciting idea.

— Could you tell us about your current research?

Together with some friends, I started what we call the World Philosophy project in 2018. *Sekai Tetsugaku Shi* (A History of World Philosophy, nine volumes) was published by Chikuma Shobo in 2020, gaining a wider readership than expected. I do have some regrets, however. We should have presented our ideas in a more universal context. We relied too much on the uniqueness of Chinese thinking, but we should have established a vast context of world philosophy and clarified that it was nonsense to be bound by conventional Eurocentric views. My current research focuses on how indigenous concepts, such as those from China or Japan, are universalized in world philosophy.

Through such research I came to realize that perhaps we need some enlightening. The Age of Enlightenment in Europe occurred in the 17th to 18th century, but Europe did not arrive at enlightenment on its own. In its history leading to that moment, Europe interacted with other parts of the world including China, India, and Egypt. Enlightenment was a consequence of a chain of interactions.

The Enlightenment, however, led to the ideology of anthropocentrism, a firm conviction that humans, especially those with rational minds, should reign at the center of the world. This resulted in human arrogance toward other animals and the natural environment and justification of slavery and exploitation of fellow human beings. I don't think we should go on with such a mindset and arrive at the idea that we need a new kind of enlightenment. Right now, I am attempting to bring new enlightenment with the cooperation of my colleagues at IASA.

I came to sympathize on this point with a German philosopher named Markus Gabriel. He founded The New Institute in Hamburg, where he was engaged in new enlightenment movements. In response to their moves, I would like to initiate our movements at IASA or UTokyo. I think this challenge involves not only philosophy, but we have already reached a phase requiring a fundamental transformation of scholarship. The previous enlightenment that occurred some centuries ago was a top-down process, whereas the new enlightenment must happen in a bottom-up way. I believe that we need to reconsider the value of indigenous wisdom and build a bridge that connects indigenous thinking with modern knowledge.



Overcoming Totalitarianism
(『全体主義の克服』)
Edited by Takahiro Nakajima and
Markus Gabriel
Issued 2020
Shueisha shinsho

●IASA's Vision for the Future – As the Director of IASA

—You were appointed Director of in April 2023. Do you have plans that you would like to implement?

Upon my assignment, I wrote about what I believe to be the mission of IASA. I think the approach itself to Asian studies is changing. Conventionally, Asian studies were conducted within the framework of area studies developed in the U.S. Although we often heard the call for “internationalization of research,” that was almost synonymous with writing and thinking in English. It had certain positive effects, but that is not enough. I feel that we need to Asianize Asian studies. What narrative, vocabulary, and syntax are we going to use in reconceptualizing and refining concepts specific to each region in Asia? I hope to see some change in those things.

—What does IASA need to do to Asianize Asian studies?

IASA has already launched a program called “Global Asian Studies (GAS)” as a platform centered on Asia. GAS is provided in English, but I think it is necessary to use and reconceptualize languages from other regions. We have also launched the East Asian Academy for New Liberal Arts (EAA) with donations from the private sector. There is also The Ushioda Initiative of Arts, a project launched as part of EAA and committed to developing a new approach to East Asian studies. It is an attempt to develop and deliver new studies from East Asia, making use of the rich and diverse concepts of East Asia. Those are some of the things we’re trying to do. I hope to further expand these projects. As the director of IASA, I am responsible for making budgetary requests. I want to build a place in IASA .

Where researchers of advanced science and technologies and those at the frontlines of humanities and social sciences can engage in dialogue, I think this is an initiative that only IASA can implement. This year, we are looking to provide a platform for dialogue between researchers of advanced science and technologies and humanities and social sciences with a particular focus on philosophy. I think it is important that we actively communicate our aims and seek external funding to make our plans come true.



●Society Supports Academia –New Fund for IASA

— We heard you have just established a new fund for IASA.

The situation is similar at any university or department, but national universities need more funding. If that’s the case, there is no other way than to look to outside sources. So, we decided to set up a fund as a new channel for financing. Unlike ordinary donations that are directly used up for whatever purpose, we decided to pool and manage the donation money in a fund and use the management gains to support new research projects, especially those by young researchers.

In February 2024, we established the IASA Fund ([please refer to the last page of this News Letter](#)). We have already received contributions from several donors. We appreciate it very much. I think there is a considerable number of people who are interested in IASA and its activities. I believe it is our mission to attract the support of such people and develop the kind of new Asian studies that I have been talking about.

—Does it mean this fund can support IASA’s activities more permanently than ordinary project donations?

That’s right. Donations restricted to a particular purpose must be used for that purpose. Of course, we are very grateful for those kinds of restricted donations, but the new fund is designed to be a flexible funding source to support new activities at IASA. I don’t know if we will be able to attract enough funding while I am the director of IASA, but we are looking into a future of 10 to 20 years from now. I hope we will be able to ensure the agility of research by building this kind of mechanism for collecting funding. Research in humanities and social sciences like ours cannot produce tangible outcomes in the short term.

●The Future of the Humanities and Social Sciences

—What roles do humanities and social sciences including studies at IASA play for society?

I’ve given quite a lot of thought about the roles of humanities and social sciences, and I think it is all about literacy in a wider sense. We are thoroughly trained to read texts, but that’s not all. It’s not just about reading books, but rather, we are expected to read and interpret the contexts of society, the world, and the future, in other words, literacy in the wider sense, which is not as easy as it seems on one hand, literacy is a passive ability to receive information, but on the other hand, there is more active literacy. This means you become part of the text and participate in and engage with the context. In many cases, the text or the context won’t open to let you read it unless you jump into it yourself. In that sense, we are being tested for active literacy or the ability to engage with the context.

—I see, literacy in terms of actively engaging with the text or context.

Yes, I wonder what it means to engage in dialogue with an individual or society living with diversity. Some people live in despair, and some societies have an entrenched way of thinking. People living in such societies never even try to change their minds and are very difficult to dialogue with. So, most people just give up, but I think that’s the starting point. I mentioned earlier about active literacy or the ability to engage with the context. It’s a bit like using your literacy skills to help change the mindset of a person or society with certain entrenched values. I think that’s important.

(next page).

All societies have diverse cultural layers. So do individuals. Multiple layers run within a person, constituting a complex structure, sometimes with a layer embedded in another. Sometimes, however, when you press a certain point, the whole structure suddenly changes, as if you had clicked a change button. Up to that moment, this person believed that there was a particular set of essential values on which society was built. Still, when a different key inherent to the culture or society is clicked, the axis of values changes. Then, the entire society starts to change. I believe this could happen to any person and society. You see, it is transformation, like Zhuangzi said. Active literacy is about engaging in that process to transform the other person and yourself; in other words, undergoing mutual transformation. We may assume that the other person or society is too stubborn and stupid to transform. That's an attitude we need to change ourselves. I feel that humanities and social sciences can help bring the moment when actual dialogue occurs.

—Transformation, Dialogue with the Other, and Literacy— It was an interesting interview that provided insight into many of the key concepts that appear in Professor Nakajima's works. Although there are more questions I would like to ask, it's time to end the interview. Thank you very much, Professor Nakajima. (Interviewer: Haruka Ueda)

News

At IASA, five divisions (Pan Asian, East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, and Pioneering Asian Studies) are advancing research in their respective fields. Various joint projects are carried out in collaboration with partners (inc. GAS and EAA).

【Tōbunken Seminar】

Before the Buddha: The Beginning of Buddhist Imagery in Early India—

On January 19, 2024, Dr. John Guy, Senior Curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA) visited Japan and gave a lecture under the moderation of Professor Norihisa Baba of Division of South Asian Studies.



【Tōbunken Seminar】

A Comparative Examination of Warriors in Japan and Ottoman Empire—

On February 16, 2024, Professor Gülay Yılmaz of Akdeniz University (Turkey) who was visiting Japan gave a lecture under the moderation of Professor Jun Akiba of the Division of West Asian Studies.



Source: : Rāḷamb Book of Costumes, World

【Opinion】 How Are We to Interpret Taiwan's Presidential Elections?—

Presidential elections were held in Taiwan on January 13, 2024 and the victory went to the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's candidate Lai Ching-te. How will it affect the cross-strait relations? What are its implications on Japan and the global political and economic landscape? Professor Yasuhiro Matsuda of Pan Asian Studies, IASA who specializes in Taiwan research, and his co-researcher and IASA Project Researcher Wei-hsiu Huang promptly shared their insightful interpretations on the elections that attracted wide interest, through interviews by Japan's national newspaper and Taiwan's local media, respectively.



【GAS Lecture Series】 Gendered Mobility of North Korean Women in the Post-Cold War Era—

Global Asian Studies, hosted by IASA as part of its initiative to Asianize Asian studies, provides a series of lectures by inviting experts from various fields of Asian studies.

GAS Lecture Series No. 6 was held on February 8, 2024, with Associate Professor Sung Kyung Kim from the University of North Korean Studies as the speaker under the moderation of Assistant Professor Jiyeon Kim of the Division of Pioneering Asian Studies.



【Tōbunken Seminar (cohosted by EAA and Tokyo College)】 The Reception of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* in Japan and China—

On April 18, 2024, IASA, Tokyo College, East Asian Academy for New Liberal Arts, and Ushioda Initiative of Arts will co-host a lecture by Professor Anne Cheng of Collège de France, a world-famous researcher of the history of Chinese philosophy. The theme she chose for the lecture on the reception of Montesquieu's thought in Japan and China.



Publication

Below are the latest books written by IASA faculty members.



Revisiting Modern Japanese Thought – Philosophy I (『日本の近代思想を読みなおす 哲学 I』)

Edited by Takahiro Nakajima and
Fumihiko Sueki
Issued December 2023
The University of Tokyo Press



Vernacular Art and Folkloristics (『バナキュラー・アートの民俗学』)

Edited by Yutaka Suga
Issued April 2024
The University of Tokyo Press

Call for Contribution to the IASA Fund

Today, the population of Asia accounts for more than 60% of the world's total population and majority of the global resource consumption. With a torrent of crises threatening the existence of the human race, it is a societal demand of the modern world to systematize and universalize the Asian wisdom rooted in Asian experience of responding to uncertainty and to share with the world such wisdom transcending beyond Western-centric concepts. IASA will further enhance its functions as an international research hub by developing the world's top-level environment for Asian studies and opening it to the world. We have established the IASA Fund to promote new knowledge creation through advanced Asian studies and contribute to the achievement of SDGs by fostering researchers of Asian studies with an international perspective. We deeply appreciate your warm support and cooperation.

How to donate to the IASA Fund

- * Benefits for both the IASA Fund and UTokyo Foundation will be applied to donations to the IASA Fund. Please refer to our website for further details
- * Please note that shipment of gifts of appreciation will be limited to locations within Japan.

If you would like to use a payment sheet, please use the attached sheet.

If you would like to give via the web, please use the UTokyo Foundation website.

[From here](#)→



Director of IASA

T. Nakajima



<https://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/>



[Editor's note] While editing this issue, a memory of a conversation with Director Nakajima occurred to me. When I was being interviewed for a faculty position, he asked me "What can you do to enhance IASA's international communication to the society at large?" I answered, "I've given it a thought, but I am still not sure. I have read both the *History of IASA* and the subsequent issues of the *IASA Catalogue*, but I could not accurately track the activities of IASA since the mid-2010's." My answer sounded so candid that I instantly regretted what I said. "Oh no! I'm going to fail..." The interviewers, however, laughed and said "yes, we know what you mean," showing sympathy. Luckily, I got the job and have been working as a member of IASA since last October. Director Nakajima assigned me to issue this News Letter as the first possible step to resume communication via printed media. This is the memorable inaugural issue. We can only introduce part of the activities of the faculty members at IASA, because they engage in a wide range of research as their interests lead them. I hope to contribute to Asianizing Asian studies by doing what little I can.

(Edited by Assistant Professor Haruka Ueda, Office of International Academic Affairs,
IASA)

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