Interview with Professor Shigeru Akita, August 2021

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To celebrate and commemorate Professor Akita’s work as the third president of the Asian Association of World Historians, I have asked some questions that I hope will be of interest to the readers of the Asian Review of World Histories and beyond.

I first met Professor Akita when he was a BA student at the Western History Division (西洋史専攻), the History Department, the Faculty of Arts, at Hiroshima University. He went on to earn an MA and a PhD at the same department, then accepted a post at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies. As an economic historian of the Raj, he won several prestigious prizes for his publications and came to lead his particular area of study in Japan and the world. He then went on to become one of the leading figures in the study of global (or world) history, in his case with a strong focus on Asia.

Professor Akita and I were students together at Hiroshima University. I’d never class my achievements with his, and the paths we’ve followed have diverged, but I’m happy to say that they’ve also crossed now and then. And I feel there was something we learned at Hiroshima that led us both to this field, global history, with a strong sense of the need for the perspectives, experiences, and materials of Asia (and other parts of the non-Euro-American world) in this still very Anglo-American-dominated field.

Professor Akita, you seem to have been interested in India ever since your undergraduate days. When did you become interested in India, what made you interested in India, and what does India mean for your career as a historian?

I was originally attracted to the history of British imperialism because of my interest in the historical origins of Indian “poverty” in the 1960s–70s, often referred to as the North-South Divide. In those days, India was presented as a symbol of poverty by Japanese mass media, although this was only one among many aspects of multifaceted Indian (South Asian) society. As a poor
undergraduate studying history, I felt a sympathy with poor people of India and the Global South.

*Economic history also drew you. Were there any reasons for this angle?*

No special reasons. But while I was an undergraduate, I took two courses on economic history: one was on early modern and modern Japanese economic history by Professor Masao Arimoto, and another was on contemporary Chinese history by Professor Ryo Yokoyama. Both scholars’ courses were Marxist analyses of Japanese and Chinese societies based on empirical data (statistics) and historical documents. I was impressed by such systematic and “scientific” approaches. In those days, general historians at the Faculty of Letters (humanities) and economic historians at the Faculty of Economics closely collaborated with each other and shared their common interests. I found it easier to work on such economic history, which was based on socio-economic analyses, in contrast to economic histories that were based on models and theories of New Classical Economics and which would require quantitative analyses.

*Did you always intend to become an academic?*

No. Originally I wished and intended to teach “world history” (世界史) at a senior high school. When I was at my senior high school in Fukuyama city in Hiroshima prefecture, I was inspired by the dynamic and admirable teaching of world history by Shirō Yamane, a teacher there. I liked history and geography as the subjects of “Shakai-ka” (social studies 社会科) and I was eager to become a history teacher. When I consulted with Mr. Yamane about a suitable university, he strongly recommended Hiroshima University, from which he had graduated and whose academics he knew well. In any case – it was when I was writing my BA thesis – I became interested in doing further research to pursue my interests. I then decided to do an MA after getting financial support from my family. This was the beginning of my so-called academic career.

*I remember that our BA period at Hiroshima was a time of change because of the passing away of Chair Professor Chiyoda; he specialized in German history and we had to learn German as the first foreign language. Although it was sad to lose the chair professor, the period turned out to be great, because we had the chance to take many intensive courses taught by leading scholars from Kyoto, Tokyo, and so forth, including Professor Takeomi Ochi (British history), Professor Keizaburō Maruyama (on Soussure), Professor Shōzaburō Kimura (French history), and...*
Professor Sakae Tsunoyama (British history). While I was not thinking of an academic career, I was still very inspired by all their ideas, frameworks, and works (including southern French cooking lectures by Professor Kimura!). The Marxist framework was still strong – although not as strong as in the field of Japanese history – but diverse new frameworks, including structuralism, post-structuralism, and the Annales school, were opening to us.

Do you share this view about what we were offered at Hiroshima in this specific period, and were you also quite excited and inspired by all these lectures? And who or which work would you say was most influential in the earlier period of your academic career, including your postgraduate days?

I completely agree with you. After the sudden death of Professor Chiyoda (nowadays, I highly appreciate his academic collaborations with prominent German scholars), we had only one associate professor at the Western History Division (西洋史学専攻). To alleviate this critical teaching situation, many well-known scholars came to Hiroshima University to provide intensive courses.

In my fourth year as an undergraduate, I had a chance to take a course by Professor Akihiko Yoshioka, the prominent economic historian. Professor Yoshioka was then at Tōhoku University, where he specialized in British history, publishing several books on British capitalism. One of these books was for Japanese general readers, entitled Indo to Igirisu (India and the United Kingdom) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975), and it dealt with the economic history of British colonial rule in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He analyzed the historical origins of Indian poverty as being rooted in colonial underdevelopment, focusing on the colonial mechanism of the “drain of wealth” from India to the United Kingdom. His study of British India seemed to me a pioneering work of so-called dependency theory, or metropolitan-peripheral analyses of the capitalist world economy. His intensive course on British imperialism in the early twentieth century at Hiroshima prompted me to do an MA to study the British Empire and the Raj on a bilateral Indo-British basis.

Fortunately, Professor Yoshioka was very kind to me. I think he had a great empathy for those who were from Hiroshima prefecture. He was born in Hiroshima city and was affected by the atomic bomb.

When I returned to a postgraduate degree at Hiroshima after a few years of working – not in the History Department, but in international studies at the Graduate School of Social Sciences – the postgraduate seminar in my new school was heavily focused on literature, and I started to attend a weekly seminar at the Western History Division of the History Department, where I think you were in a PhD program. Thinking back, I think that weekly seminar was the best training in
history discipline for me. It was social science – oriented, and we were encouraged to ask questions about the main argument, key concepts, frameworks, theories, and methodologies, and “so what” questions, as well as questions about empirical details across the diverse historical and geographical contexts.

When I attended some of your postgraduate seminars at Osaka, I felt that you maintained a similar approach. What would you say were the most important things that you learned at Hiroshima? And has the training system, especially for postgraduates in our discipline, changed significantly? If it has, what are the most notable changes?

The most important point I learnt at Hiroshima was intensive discussions and mutual criticism among seminar participants. During my days as an MA student, the new senior Professor Tetsushi Sumida was appointed as the chair of the Western History Division. He was a prominent scholar of British financial history in early modern times, and came to Hiroshima University after resigning the position of president at a big private university. At that weekly seminar, he always made critical comments on methodology and key concepts of analyses from social sciences. After his seminar, graduate students usually went for a drink and continued our informal discussions with our assistant professor (助手), Ichirō Nojima. Such formal and informal discussions and mutual criticism in a friendly atmosphere provided an excellent environment for reflecting on our own mistakes, learning from them, and broadening our perspectives.

At Osaka University, I tried to give our students the same kind of opportunity for discussion and dialogue. But unfortunately, at some point around twenty years ago, I recognized that graduate students were more individualistic, and often not eager to join such intimate casual talks after a seminar. I noted a gradual change in student mentality, which has been becoming more individualistic. There has been a growing general indifference to their peers’ research projects.

I do not know much of your days at Osaka University of Foreign Studies, and then you moved to Osaka University. I nonetheless could see that you are very committed to the history of Osaka, especially as the business and financial center of modern Japanese history. What impact would you say Osaka the city has had on your work as a historian?

Osaka was called a “Manchester in the Orient” at the turn of the twentieth century, and in 1933 it surpassed Manchester for cotton production and exports. This prosperity has been well studied by our colleagues in the Economic History Department of the Graduate School of Economics, and especially by
Professor Takeshi Abe, who published an excellent book, *Kindai Osaka keizaishi* (Modern economic history of Osaka; Osaka: Osaka University Press, 2006). Osaka had been famous as the commercial center of Japan since the Edo period (especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and had established the first forward market in the world, earlier than Amsterdam did. And I married an Osaka-born woman. This local situation and atmosphere impacted me somehow as an economic historian.

*It was in Osaka where you expanded your field of study from British imperial history to global history. What prompted this shift of focus? And, in your view, what’s the chief difference between the two?*

I shifted my focus from British imperial history to global history at the beginning of the twenty-first century in London, not in Osaka. I had a second opportunity to conduct overseas research in London, supported by a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2000–2001. Then I was affiliated with the Department of Economic History at the London School of Economics as a visiting professor. My host was Professor Patrick O’Brien, who had returned to the LSE as the centenary professor of global history after his official retirement from the Institute of Historical Research. Professor O’Brien initiated the creation of a global economic history degree at the LSE. I was inspired not only by the academic challenge he posed but also by the contemporary transformation of the world economy, notably the resurgence of East Asia since the late 1990s. I have sought to highlight the Asian impetus to globalization in the context of global history. In 2003–2006, Professor O’Brien received a huge fund from the Leverhulme Foundation, and organized an international collaborating network, GEHN (Global Economic History Network) project¹ for four years.

Thanks to him and my senior colleague, Professor Kaoru Sugihara (then at the Graduate School of Economics, Osaka University, and co-organizer of GEHN), I joined the team of global economic historians. That was the very crucial turning point of my research career.

British imperial history can be seen as a bridge to global history. ² The orthodox interpretations of the modern world system are now challenged by the emergence of new studies about the modern world economy that focus on

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¹ http://www.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/Research/GEHN/Home.aspx.
Asia, and by recent developments in Asian economic history in Japan as well as in the Anglo-American academic world. Especially after the publication of Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), the main focus of reassessment and the front line of global history are concerned with the early modern world, also known as the “long eighteenth century.”

*I am not sure whether the questions 6, 7, and 8 may need to be reordered chronologically, but you have translated Gentlemanly Capitalism by Cain and Hopkins. The latter also started in the field of British imperial history and expanded to the field of global history, and you have worked with him closely. How significant was this project of translation for your career development as a historian of global history?*

I was greatly influenced by the “gentlemanly capitalism” paradigm developed by two prominent imperial historians, A. G. Hopkins and Peter Cain. I first met Tony Hopkins in 1992, when he came to Osaka as a guest speaker to our seminar. In Japan, some of my colleagues and I had organized a research group, entitled the Japanese Society for the Study of British Imperial and Commonwealth History (JASBICH) in November 1989 for the purpose of enlarging our perspectives and establishing closer scholarly networks among British historians. With strong support from my friend, Professor Yukio Takeuchi of Nihon University, who had strong personal connections with Professor Peter Marshall and Tony, we had started to invite prominent British scholars to Japan for academic discussions. Tony was the second guest speaker at our 1992 seminar. As general secretary of our society then, I had arranged his seminar in Osaka and a short visit to Kyoto, the old capital of Japan. When I guided Tony to Kyoto for sightseeing, instead of seeing the sights we talked almost nonstop about my research into British India and the Japanese historiography of British imperial history. He strongly encouraged me to do comparative studies of modern empires and expressed appreciation for my research. That was the first time I had intensively discussed my studies with a prominent British scholar. It gave me a great confidence and motivation to engage in academic collaboration.

After our long talk in Kyoto, I made a proposal to translate Hopkins and Cain’s three major articles in *Economic History Review* into Japanese, just before publication of their *British Imperialism* in 1993. Professor Takeuchi and I did our first translation project on these three articles. In addition, we attended the roundtable on “gentlemanly capitalism” held by the American History Association in San Francisco in autumn 1993. Here we could meet and discuss with many prominent American, Canadian, and British scholars, and it led to
my contribution to an edited volume by Ray Dumett of Purdue University. The AHA roundtable led me to further widen my interests, and to compare formal empire in South Asia (British India) and informal empire in East Asia (Japan and China). This comparison would also demonstrate diverse impacts of "gentlemanly capitalism," discussed by Cain and Hopkins, and led to a new interpretation of their concept. In this context, I appreciate Ray's encouragement to contribute a short essay to his edited volume, because it gave me a strong incentive to shift to wider perspectives.

Related to the topic of translation, many prominent scholars in Japan take up the job of translating what they regard as the most significant foreign works in their respective fields. How do you evaluate this work of translation in Japanese academia, and what has been the significance of their works of translation in the development of the respective areas of scholarship in Japan? I ask this because, living in an English-media academic environment, I very much appreciate that major works in non-English languages, which I cannot read, have been made available in Japanese, and this has had a significant impact on me as a scholar.

Yes, I agree with you. Many Japanese historians who major in Western/American history translated major works (books and articles) by European/American scholars, into Japanese.

It usually takes a significant time to translate a substantial book into a good, readable Japanese book. It took almost four years to translate two volumes of British Imperialism, by four historians (including myself). While working on the translations, we must continue to write our own articles based on original research. Doing both was very stressful and burdensome for us. However, a successful translation-publication can broaden the readership of historical and social sciences’ works. One typical example is the translation of Wallerstein’s four-volume The Modern World-System by my predecessor, Professor Minoru Kawakita. He had translated volume one of Wallerstein’s books in 1981. Since then, the paradigm of modern world-system became very popular among the Japanese, not only scholars but also public intellectuals and even schoolteachers. The main reason for such popularity was the revision and inclusion of the notion of the modern world-system into the National Guideline for World History Education (学習指導要領・世界史) at the level of senior high schools by the Education Ministry, in 1981. The national guideline is legally binding.

and all school textbooks must follow its basic principles in Japanese secondary education. This is a good example of the big impact translations can have on the wider Japanese readership.

However, recently I feel unfairness about one-sided, unilateral ways of translation, because excellent works by Japanese historians, written in Japanese, are rarely translated into English and aren’t cited or quoted by European/ American scholars. I strongly hope that in the future we may have a more balanced reciprocal situation for translations.

Global history, stemming from British imperial history, seems to be a major trend. As a base of studies, it offers lots of great points from which to venture into a broader history, but there are also significant criticisms as well. While Eurocentricity, or more specifically, “Anglo-American or English language” – centricity, may be one significant criticism, there is also another one, which you are probably familiar with: postcolonial scholars’ criticism regarding the point that the British “intra-imperial” infrastructures – such as postal shipping routes, cable networks, credit transfer system, and other economic infrastructures – served as “international” public infrastructures. What is your position on this point?

While I recognize the significance of the critical postcolonial perspectives and their works, I also would like to emphasize greater interactive dynamics. Of course, it is easy to point out the centrality and hegemonic aspects of Anglo-American “public” infrastructure. However, as I clearly pointed and analyzed in my own book, the British Empire, as the hegemonic state, offered “international public goods” to Asian countries, and the peoples in Asia could actively utilize such public goods for their own purposes. We have to consider these mutual interactions or complementary relationships between Asian countries and the British Empire. Later, similar interactive dynamics occurred in the relations between Asia and the United States under Pax Americana.

It is still true in my field, the history of international organizations, that most works have been mainly concerned with Euro-American experiences and perspectives, and this may still be the case in the field of global history, despite the fact that its main point should have been “being global.” You have been one of the main forces to argue the significance to global history of Asia’s experiences.

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4 Dominic Sachsenmaier, “The Place of East Asia in the Contradictory Worlds of Historiography” (paper, HeKKsaGON Conference, 10 September 2021).
5 Shigeru Akita, Igirisu-Teikoku to Ajia kokusai chitujo (The British Empire and the international order of Asia) (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2003).
and perspectives, and hence the significance of the AAWH and this journal. In your view, where do you think progress has been made, where do you think good work remains to be done, and what would be a message for young and upcoming scholars in the field who are very conscious of this issue?

I think in the field of global economic history, some excellent results have appeared, such as the works of Professor Osamu Saitō and Professor Kaoru Sugihara.6 We should continue our efforts to produce our original and innovative works, by further exploring data sets as well as new analytical frameworks and/or concepts in economic history. And academic collaborations with Asian and non-English-native scholars, who may share the same problems and feelings with us, are very helpful and important to overcome Eurocentric views. However, as my experiences with Patrick O’Brien and Tony Hopkins show, it is also crucial to establish reliable, friendly and trustful relationship and friendship with European/American scholars, and to have mutual respect.

With your colleague, Professor Momoki Shiro at Osaka University, you have also been committed to world history education at a high school level. It has an urgent and significant political meaning not only in northeast Asia but also globally, especially in this Covid and post-Covid era, in which the world seems to be more divided by national boundaries than ever. As we also face another crisis of the globe, climate change, I feel we need somehow to contribute to nurturing and fostering global citizenship among the younger generations across nations and regions. Would you have some insights on this matter from your long-term experience of working with high school teachers and the community in Osaka?

For professional historians, as researchers and educators at universities or colleges, it is quite important to establish and keep close relationship with high school teachers and mass media, because they are direct “recipients” (consumers) of our academic works, including via school textbooks and general-interest books. And to produce talented schoolteachers for history education at high school levels is a raison d’être of history departments. Therefore, at Osaka University, under the strong leadership of Professor Momoki Shiro, we have held monthly joint-discussion meetings with senior high school teachers for almost twenty years now. Through such collaborations, some of us wrote senior

high school textbooks on world history 世界史 and Japanese history 日本史. For the last two years, I have also advised the Education Ministry on drafting the new National Guidelines for History Education at senior high school level. I think the new guidelines (taking effect in 2022) partly reflected our practices and suggestions regarding history education in Osaka.

In addition, we published our own original world history textbook for university students (for the first- and second-year students), entitled Shimin no tameno sekaishi (A world history for citizens) in 2014. Fortunately, it became a bestseller and attracted strong attention from wider circles, including major national newspapers. This book was based on the intensive discussions with schoolteachers at our above-mentioned regular meetings. We learn a lot from our collaborations with schoolteachers.

We thank you for your great works and initiatives in the field for many years at the helm of the AAWH and its journal, and we also look forward to many more great works from you!

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On Professor Akita’s reflections as a historian of South Asia, please see Shigeru Akita, “From South Asian Studies to Global History: Searching for Asian Perspective.” In How Empire Shaped Us, edited by A. Burton and Dane Kennedy (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).