

The Best of Worlds: *An Interview with Caroline Hau*

Interviewer: Takamichi Serizawa

— *On Japanese area studies*

Serizawa: You have been interviewed by people in the Philippines and the US, but this interview will be particularly addressed to the audience in Japan and I hope it will be read by many young scholars of area studies in Japan. Therefore, could you share your impressions, thoughts, and assessment of area studies conducted in Japan in comparison with area studies in other countries?

Hau: I like to tell young Japanese area-studies students and scholars—many of whom are at least trilingual—that they have the best of worlds, not just the proverbial “best of both worlds.” They read and write in Japanese, they know Southeast Asian languages (some know more than one), and they also have English and/or some other language(s). This gives them access to several intellectual traditions, circles of audiences and practitioners, arenas of debate and engagement, and repositories of knowledge. We live in an era in which the area-studies ecosystem runs the risk of being characterized (and criticized) as an “Anglocene,” given the prestige and dominance of, and increasing pressure to publish in, English.

The strength of area studies in Japan is that it has been able to draw from the wellspring of research and study on Southeast Asia by Japan-based scholars going back many decades. If I may be permitted to generalize, these are often detailed and fine-grained, grounded in long-term fieldwork and archival work, funded by universities that encourage curiosity-driven research and by a state with a strong geo-strategic interest and stake in Southeast Asia, and modest in ambition and scope. Southeast Asian studies from Japan may not have the same impact and influence that Chinese studies (in particular, Chinese historical studies) from Japan have had on Western scholarship on China/Eurasia. (For example, can we think of a Southeast Asian studies equivalent of Naito Konan’s hypothesis, which was instrumental in reshaping the understanding of China’s socioeconomic changes during the ninth to tenth centuries?) But Japanese and Japan-based scholars can use their comparative advantage to draw on multiple intellectual traditions and knowledges to address multiple audiences in multiple languages without having to cater to an Anglophone-only audience.



Caroline Hau

I'm of course aware of the Anglo-saxonization of disciplines like economics and political science, in which some area specialists are working, and the relative decline of Japanese-language publishing in area studies vis-à-vis English-language publishing. If it is possible to publish in as many languages as one can write in, one should do so, or at least have the option to be able to do so.

— *Scholar's life and work*

Serizawa: When I read a text, I always pay attention not simply to the work itself, but also to the scholar's life, because I believe that the text and the scholar's experience are more or less interconnected or intertwined. You have been based in Kyoto for more than twenty years and have worked on a variety of subjects, such as ethnicity and Chineseness in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, literary criticism, popular culture, and gender and migration studies. How do you describe the relationship between your life and work?

Hau: Actually, I wanted to be a writer. I became an academic out of necessity because Filipinos normally cannot earn a decent living by writing novels and short stories.

As a Chinese Filipino, I had long been interested in how issues of race and ethnicity pertain not only to the history and changing status and positions of the Chinese in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, but also to the ways in which the so-called "Chinese Question" figured in, as well as evolved with, Filipino nationalism. Though wary of nationalism's exclusionary practices, I never thought that cosmopolitanism was the opposite of nationalism, nor did I think it futile to try and make nationalism more inclusive and pluralist. If you carry a Philippine passport, you know from experience that borders exist and there are limits to human mobility and community.

I entered the University of the Philippines-Diliman in 1986, just after the People Power (EDSA) Revolution toppled the Marcos dictatorship, and I taught for a few years at the UP Department of English and Comparative

Literature (DECL) after graduating in 1990. I experienced being a student and teacher in that era of political and intellectual ferment as a form of awakening. I was well aware that the DECL had nurtured a number of progressive intellectuals and activists in the 1960s and early 1970s. In the early 1990s, it was also a place where junior faculty members were reading and discussing not only Marx and Engels, Gramsci, Althusser, Benjamin, and Balibar, but also Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari, and also Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Lu Xun, Ngāgī wa Thiong'o, Kawabata Yasunari, Nawal el Sadaawi, Gabriel García Márquez, and the Bhagavad Gita.

This eclecticism was part and parcel of the general trend towards “pluralism and convergence,” to borrow from Virginia Miralao and Cynthia Bautista’s characterization of Philippine studies in the post-EDSA years.¹ In terms of theory and method, there is greater variety in perspectives and approaches, even as researchers are able to find some common ground for discussion and debate in lieu of polarization. Certainly, the most notable development of the past thirty years has been that the center of gravity of Philippine studies has shifted from the United States to the Philippines, at least in the social sciences, if not always in the humanities.

Working abroad after completing my PhD studies had not been part of my original plan, but for a number of reasons, personal and otherwise, I joined Kyoto University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). I deeply appreciate CSEAS for giving me the space, time, and above all the intellectual and institutional support to do the kind of research and writing that interested me. I was even able to publish a novel and two collections of short fiction during this time. I’m not sure this kind of freedom to do what you

want to do—as opposed to being subject to the dictates of tenure and promotion (including self-promotion!) and intellectual fashion—is available anywhere else in the world, certainly not in many other universities in Japan or the Philippines, or the US and elsewhere. Being in Japan piqued my interest in migration studies, but it also gave me the opportunity to be part of the larger collective endeavor among Japan-based scholars to actively promote area studies in Asia. This may have had something to do with my feeling “bound” not just to the Philippines, but also to Japan, the latter by virtue of having a Japanese spouse and raising a Japanese-Filipino-Chinese daughter.

Between story and history

Serizawa: I first learned that you wanted to be a writer when I watched your Frank Golay lecture delivered at Cornell in 2019.² Meanwhile, your novel *Recuerdos de Patay and Other Stories* won the Cirilo F. Bautista Prize for Best Book of Short Fiction in English at the Philippine National Book Awards in 2016. In 2021, you were awarded the Grant Goodman Prize for your contribution to accelerating Philippine historical studies. Although you may not identify yourself as a historian, anyone who reads your work learns a tremendous amount about Philippine history. Furthermore, when we look at the tradition of Filipino writers and historians, the distinction between the two professions is blurred. Jose Rizal wrote novels to expose the untold history of Spanish colonialism. Teodoro Agoncillo wrote short stories and poems while serving as the head of the history department of the University of the Philippines. Nick Joaquin wrote novels, but also many interesting historical essays. These figures were trained in Spanish, a language in

which *historia* means both history and story. Perhaps they, though consciously or unconsciously, bridge the two out of the need to explain their claims, and even frustrations. As someone engaged in similar work, how do you explain this blurriness? Meanwhile, in your exploration of the “Chinese question,” you use novels, movies, and TV programs to question the “border” between Chinese and Filipinos (or Southeast Asians) and counter the exclusivity of nationalism. Is this also related to bridging the two (history and story)?

Hau: As you point out, the line between history and literature can be blurry, because they both deal with styles of storytelling and writers of both have to think about the textual strategies that they use to present their work. The main difference is not whether they tell the “truth,” as each one claims to tell the truth in different ways, but how they make sense of the world and try to convey their understanding of the world. I don’t think of myself as a historian, but in the course of research and in the course of writing fiction, I found myself wanting to learn more about the history of the Philippines and other countries. I enjoy reading works of history far more than, say, works of sociology or political science (let alone literary criticism and theory!).

It also seems to me that the fictional works I most enjoy are those that have a deep sense of history—it’s not that they have to be historical novels per se, but that they are imbued with a keen historical sensibility that makes us better understand a place, a group of people, a situation, and a happening. I am thinking of Pramodya Ananta Toer, Nick Joaquin, and Resil Mojares (who began his career as a short story writer before he became a cultural historian), all of whom have reflected deeply on the history of their countries while situating these countries in the larger world,

and this reflection is clearly evident in their work. It also helps that they write beautifully (I can’t say the same of my own academic writing). Works of history can themselves be works of art, while works of art can themselves be a form of history.

Living as minority

Serizawa: Your life seems to have been always one of a “minority” while moving around. You were born in Manila to a Chinese Filipino family, you did your MA and PhD in Cornell as a Filipino student, and you have worked in Japan as a Filipino professor. Has this experience of being “minority” shaped your research interest and works? If so, how?

Hau: I think it was Resil Mojares who said that the “margins” are good places to be, at least intellectually. You get to see things from the “outside,” so to speak, and ask questions that insiders may not think (or want) to ask. I’m not one to romanticize the status of the “outsider.” Existentially and emotionally speaking, it can be quite fraught and alienating to be treated as an “alien” in whichever country one finds oneself in, whether it is the Philippines, Mainland China, the US, or Japan. At the same time, a curse can be a blessing. Take Philippine studies. The shift in the center of gravity of Philippines studies is not just a product of geopolitical, economic, demographic, and institutional change. It owes something as well to the intellectual repositioning of the Philippines away from the margins, or more accurately, the active reclaiming of the margins as a site of intellectual exploration and production. For years, Philippine studies conducted outside the Philippines—especially in the US—had been viewed largely as marginal. Not only was the Philippines accorded tangential, if not peripheral,



Takamichi Serizawa

status in American, Spanish, Latin American, and even Asian-American studies; it also was considered an “outlier” in Southeast Asian, Asian, and Malay studies. More recent scholarship, however, reveals that the problem is not the Philippines’ marginality, but rather, the narrow parochialism of the intellectual frameworks that prevented scholars from seeing the Philippines’ connections with the world.

Home and field

Serizawa: Typically, area studies has been conducted by going to the field, collecting data, bringing them home, and writing articles and books. In your case, however, this relationship between field and home is not so clear or fixed. As a Filipino professor, you go to the Philippines, China, and Southeast Asia and collect data from these fields, and bring them back to Japan to write articles and books. Can you share your thoughts on the relationship between home and field in conducting area studies?

Hau: For Southeast Asian scholars, home and field

are often the same thing, so the presumption of exteriority, whether existential or intellectual or institutional, doesn’t hold in the ways that it has done for American or Japanese area-studies scholars working on Southeast Asia. My undergraduate degree was in English Studies, for which I studied American, English, and world literature, so I was already doing area studies. There are Filipinos who grow up speaking English and feel closer to American culture linguistically and culturally. In my case, I grew up speaking a mixture of Hokkien, Tagalog, and Cebuano, and only learned English in grade school, but English is the language I primarily write and publish in. If you want to be more nuanced about it, you can say that Southeast Asian researchers may also occupy positions of privileged exteriority in relation to their own “peoples” and “countries” by virtue of their social and cultural capital, accrued through higher education and their class, ethnic, gender, sexual, metropolitan, linguistic, urban, national, regional (i.e., within and beyond the nation), and other backgrounds. Not even

homegrown and home-based scholars can presume to speak on behalf of “their people,” let alone community or nation.

— *Academic imperialism*

Serizawa: In 2000, Syed Hussein Alatas criticized the traditional approach of area studies as academic imperialism because in the discipline, the “field” of Southeast Asia becomes only a place to collect “raw materials” that are then “manufactured” in the universities of developed countries. Under this academic imperialism, local scholars from Southeast Asia are encouraged to take secondary roles, such as translator, introducer, or broker. According to your experience and work, how can we critically re-examine and overcome this academic imperialism?

Hau: The situation may be more complicated today. More Filipinos are being trained, and are working in, the Philippine academia, even as more Filipinos are being trained and are working in places outside the US. For Philippine studies at least, although US-centered (and US-centric) scholarship continues to have allure and prestige, more Filipino scholars are opting to address non-US audiences. The era of the translator/introducer/broker is over, though one can see it being retooled as part of, say, identity politics within the US by Southeast Asian American scholars.

As for my work, I wasn’t all that interested in publishing in the US or the UK to begin with, and I was privileged: a) to have been mentored by professors like Benedict Anderson, who strongly encouraged and supported my decision to write for a Filipino audience, and b) to have found a safe haven in CSEAS to enable me to do so. More recently, I have collaborated with Shiraishi Takashi to publish a series of Japanese-language articles—

part of an ongoing book project on the making of the East Asian region from the Plaza Accord to the Asian Financial Crisis—in a journal intended to be read by Japanese lay readers.³ Criticizing academic imperialism is important, part of the ongoing and much-needed decolonization of the mind, but it is also important to create more “safe havens” where researchers can engage in the kind of research and activist scholarship that is neither censored nor confined to the translator/introducer/broker niche.

— *The decline of Southeast Asian studies in the US and the rise of Southeast Asian studies in China*

Serizawa: Southeast Asian studies in the US has declined since the end of the Cold War as the area lost its strategic value to the US. (This is not to say, however, that the golden age of US Southeast Asian studies was during the Vietnam War when many scholars and large budgets were mobilized.) Since the 2010s, as China has become the world’s second largest economy, many universities in China have launched Southeast Asia studies programs because the area has become an important economic zone for the country. This pattern tells us that Southeast Asian studies retracts and develops in tandem with economic interests and investments, which are the product of geopolitical competition. Meanwhile, as ASEAN countries seek horizontal cooperation to relativize China’s presence, many universities and institutes in Southeast Asian countries have also recently launched Southeast Asian programs. Could you share your thoughts about the Southeast Asian studies emerging in Asia? Meanwhile, how can Japanese Southeast Asian studies contribute to the new phase of Southeast

Asian studies?

Hau: It's great to see Southeast Asian studies flourishing not only in Southeast Asia, but also in East Asia. In part, this regionalization of Southeast Asian studies owes something to geopolitics and economics, and to the strategic interests of countries like China and South Korea, not to mention Japan. The rise of ASEAN studies in Southeast Asia also shows that there is a keen interest in ASEAN, as distinct from Southeast Asia, and the kinds of issues and concerns (such as international and trade relations, institution-building, and cross-border challenges) specific to ASEAN as a framework. Polycentric and regional/transregional/global Southeast Asian studies are clearly the way to go.

But one can also argue that judging the state of area studies by the number of area-studies institutions springing up all over the region may not be the most accurate gauge of the actual state of area studies. In fact, many researchers in this region are doing some form of area studies without being known—let alone identifying themselves—as either area-studies specialists or being based in area-studies institutions. Most times, they are working in their own disciplines and in discipline-based or inter- and trans-disciplinary institutions. Home scholars work on their own countries or look at other countries and regions from perspectives shaped not merely by global intellectual trends, but also by their respective local needs and concerns. US-Southeast Asia and China-Southeast Asia methodological bilateralism has its uses, but it is clearly inadequate to account for what's happening on the ground in Southeast Asia and overlooks Southeast Asian countries' deep connections with each other and with the world.

The “area” in area studies has traditionally been defined as “not-us” (in the post-World War II

period, mainly “not-US” and non-Anglophone), but there is a way to redefine “area” more critically as both “site(s)” and “networks” of intellectual and practical engagement. Japanese scholars and institutions have actively promoted Southeast Asian studies and networking with their Southeast Asian colleagues and institutions. In a sense, they have a longer history of doing so compared to China and South Korea. One thing I should add is that in my conversations with Japanese friends and colleagues, I never get any sense that Japanese researchers are interested in either their country or their institutions being or becoming “dominant” in area studies. They are highly conscious of Japan's colonial/imperial, wartime, and postwar history and prefer to support Southeast Asian colleagues in their present endeavors rather than tell them what to do (whether this entails pointing them to where area studies are headed, as if the state of area studies in their locations can be generalized to other locations, or, worse, urging them to ditch area studies altogether because they lack funding or “legitimacy”).

— *Mentorship*

Serizawa: I have conducted my post-doctoral studies under your mentorship since 2016. Because of your great support, I was able to publish a monograph in 2020.⁴ I have personal experience of how your mentorship cultivates students' interests and allows their research outputs to flourish in the best way possible. How did you develop your mentoring skills? Is this also influenced by your former mentors? Could you provide some advice or point to training programs for both graduate and postgraduate students who are conducting area studies?



Hau: The mentors I have been privileged to have had in the Philippines, the US, Japan, and elsewhere were supremely encouraging and supportive. They took the time to talk to young scholars and read their work, doing their best to promote that work. They really set the bar high for mentorship, and I can only aspire to live up to their standards and expectations.

CSEAS has its visiting research fellowships, which regularly bring in good scholars from Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Now it has also expanded its postdoc program to nurture younger scholars. These are all excellent programs for promoting mentorship, but I rather prefer to use terms like “friendship” and “collegiality” because the personal networks that people develop over the years are equally, if not more, important. The internet has made it easier to keep in touch and to share one’s research. I always tell young scholars that if they are fortunate to have a few good friends, classmates, or colleagues with whom they can share and test their ideas, who can comment frankly and constructively on their work,

and who have their backs (so to speak), then they are all set, regardless of where they work and live.

(26 November 2021)

Notes

- 1 Virginia A. Miralao, “The Philippine Social Sciences in the Balance: Reflections at the Close of the Century,” and Cynthia Rose B. Bautista, “The Social Sciences in the Philippines: Reflections on Developments and Prospects,” *Philippine Social Sciences in the Life of the Nation*, 344–80, 381–409.
- 2 Caroline Hau, “For Whom Are Southeast Asian Studies?” presented at the 11th Frank H. Golay Memorial Lecture on Oct. 25, 2019. (<https://www.cornell.edu/video/caroline-hau-for-whom-are-southeast-asian-studies>, accessed on 14 December 2021)
- 3 白石隆、ハウ・キャロライン「オンリー・イエスタデイ」『究——ミネルヴァ通信』109号（2020年4月）–128号（2021年11月）。
- 4 Takamichi Serizawa, *Writing History in America's Shadow: Japan, the Philippines, and the Question of Pan-Asianism*, Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies 21, NUS Press and Kyoto University Press, 2020.