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Author(s)	Takao, Fujikawa
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A new Imperial History is intriguing, but can we celebrate it?

Takao Fujikawa

“What am I? What am I?”, does the Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek, a mythical creature in Australian children’s literature ask. That is the most important question to be tackled with in present historical studies because there is supposedly no single truth, but multiple perspectives. Am I critical of such development? I am a great believer in Greg Denning, who advocated history as performance,⁽¹⁾ and therefore I may be thought of as a practitioner of the new imperial history. However, I am actually ambivalent in several respects.

As a long, but not a particularly eager member of the Japanese Association for the Study of British Imperial and Commonwealth History, I might well celebrate the new imperial history. But I cannot do so without reservation. Nevertheless, now I feel it even more necessary to commend the new imperial history, because I have just read a book titled *What is the Commonwealth?* recently produced by that Association.⁽²⁾ I have realized that most articles in the book written by members of the Association belong to traditional political history sometimes smacking of ‘neo-imperialism’. The Association actually includes translators of David Cannadine’s *Ornamentalism*. The translators even provocatively added a new subtitle, *From Orientalism to Ornamentalism* to the translated version.⁽³⁾ Well done, guys!

Generally speaking, we as Japanese citizens definitely need a Japanese imperial history because most Japanese under my age lack the knowledge and image of the Empire of Japan, which could be very harmful to mutual understanding between Japan and our neighbours. Studies like Dr. Matsuda Hiroko’s are always welcome additions to the knowledge of our past. On the other hand the British Imperial history in Japan may help provide researchers of the Empire of Japan with comparative perspectives and methodologies. It is also possible that it might degenerate into merely a spectacle in history. Or, should empire serve as a universal abstract concept to understand global history?

Before answering the very first question, I want to share roughly the concept of the new imperial history with you. Professor Adele Perry provides us with one version. She states that the new imperial history has shown us that empire stories are often circuitous rather than linear

(1) Denning, Greg, *Performances*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

(2) 山本正・細川道久編著『コモンウェルスとは何か——ポスト帝国時代のソフトパワー』ミネルヴァ書房、2014年。

(3) 平田雅博・細川道久訳『虚飾の帝国——オリエンタリズムからオーナメンタリズムへ』日本経済評論社、2004年。

and that an empire is a sort of a web bisected by horizontal as well as vertical lines of authority and communication. She stresses the importance of networks of empire. Online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, which is the most convenient tool for a desperate scholar like me, gives us another typical feature. In that understanding the British Empire was a cultural project as well as political and economic system. Empire building shaped the cultures of both colonized peoples and Britons themselves. Especially it is emphasized that the British culture at home was profoundly shaped by the empire. The focus is more often on race and gender than political, economic and military achievements.

The British imperial history after the imperial turn commonly decries the national or nationalist framework of history based on nation-states. Durba Ghosh explains the imperial turn as “a turn from the study of domestic or national history toward a study of empire, thus complicating the presumed territorial, cultural, and political boundaries between empires and nations.”⁽⁴⁾ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins’ *Gentlemanly Capitalism*, P.J. Marshall’s works on the British in India, Andrew Porter’s work on missions, John MacKenzie’s works on popular and cultural imperialism are part of such history. Members of the Association are familiar with their works. Although the new imperial history clearly adopts the position against the national history and partly overlaps the former in subject matters and methods, it has a distinctive feature according to Antoinette Burton. The new imperial history draws on feminist theory, postcolonial studies, postmodernism and “is not a turn toward empire so much as a *critical return* to the connection between metropole and colony, race and nation”. It also attempts to unmask “the complicity of history writing in patrolling the borders of national identity as well”.⁽⁵⁾ Ghosh regards the new imperial history as pitting itself as a revision of the “old” imperial history and as focusing on culture, gender, and race rather than high politics, the economy, or military expansion.

In the Association, I believe, there are a few who have consciously adopted the method of postcolonialism or actively embraced the importance of the trilogy of race, gender and class. I am, therefore, inclined to emphasize the importance of the new imperial history and works like Professor Perry’s, which reveals intricacies of race, gender and class across boundaries and stresses the importance of the relationships between colonies.

I, for one, sometimes show students an example of Mauritius and Australia as indicating the close connection between British colonies, which is unthinkable even in the age of globalization and easy travel. Nineteenth century Australian newspapers constantly referred to Mauritius, a sugar plantation colony in the west of the Indian Ocean, as if within its own territorial boundary. There are a constant flow of people, goods and information between them in the 19th century. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the oldest extant newspaper in Australia, referred to Mauritius 262 times during the 1860s and only 7 times during the 1940s in the heading of articles. The Indian

(4) Ghosh, Durba, “Another Set of Imperial Turns?”, *American Historical Review* 117, 3 (2012), p.772.

(5) Burton, Antoinette, *After the Imperial Turn*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, p.2, p.8; see Curthoys, Ann and Marilyn Lake eds, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, Canberra: ANU Press, 2005, Chap.4 with regards to characteristics of postcolonial history.

Ocean might have been much smaller in the imagination of 19th century Australian colonists. Microscopic history of migrants or colonists moving between colonies may unveil networks of the Empire totally forgotten by present Australians.

Jan Kociumbas' Vol.2 of *the Oxford History of Australia* includes the chapter named 'Hunters and Collectors', which suggests the early influence of imperial-mindedness. However, it mentions slavery and abolition only in connection with black African convicts or the discussion about the system of convict labour. Evidently slavery and abolition are not constituent part of Australian history in that volume. But if you extend the contemporary geographical boundary of Australia and assume that Mauritius is part of the Australian colonial world, you might draw a totally different historical picture. Geographical boundaries are more or less imagined than real. Reflecting the present national border onto the colonial past is simply ahistorical or out of historical context. In the 1830s when slavery was abolished and indentured labour was introduced, Australian newspapers quoted a number of articles from Mauritius newspapers and published a number of letters from correspondents. Slavery and abolition were important issues as much as production of sugar. They also reported about 'apprentices' of former slaves and contract workers from India in Mauritius. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the revolt of Indian labourers, or contract labourers and proposed "certain well imagined concessions" together with "the repressive and severe control of the law", by comparing it with working class disturbances in France and England.⁽⁶⁾ Imperial connections could have affected racial and political identity of colonial subjects in Australia.

Not only convicts but also those Europeans who had not acquired the full citizenship were sometimes compared to slaves in the West Indies. In 1849 Adam Bogue, a candidate for the Legislative Council, at a meeting of the nomination of candidates for Sydney, said "however beautiful as an abstract proposition the theory of universal suffrage might be, there would be danger in giving it too suddenly. He said it would be dangerous, as the too sudden emancipation of slaves were(sic) dangerous. He did not mean to compare the intelligent and independent people of New South Wales with the Negroes of St. Domingo, but even they would be better if educated for the reception of such a boon as universal suffrage would be". Although he pretended that he did not compare workers of NSW to black slaves, he actually compared them on the same basis.⁽⁷⁾

So far so good. Still, I have some doubt as to both the new imperial history and the imperial history in general because of their common feature, that is, a stance against history of nation-states. I admit that I have been in the camp of proponents arguing against the national framework of history, not only as an advocate of the British imperial history and comparative history, but also or even more so as a researcher of Aboriginal peoples, women, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups. It has been necessary to criticize the national history because

(6) *The Sydney Morning Herald* (27/11/1837).

(7) *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19/12/1849).

it functioned to oppress subordinate groups, to generate unreasonable hatred against non-nationals and to prevent the conception of reality based on the close connections of the world.

However, I believe that circumstances have been rapidly changing and we need to change our strategy. Probably all of us could agree that we live in the age of globalization and cannot escape from its decisive influence. We are exhorted to think globally and act according to global standards as were our forebears urged to comply with the standards of civilization before WW II. We are actually facing globalization, but at the same time we are also facing globalism which advocates that globalization is an inevitable process by describing it as natural and normal and denounces any system or group which does not seem to comply with global standards irrespective of whether such standards are rational or irrational. Many people in power, international business men, professionals, neo-liberals and investors, criticize the national framework of state and attempt to curtail social services and erode state functions. In such a context a simple criticism of the nation-state as imagined may help strengthen the torrents of neoliberal and globalist attacks on social and welfare services.

It is true that we also witness the rise of neo-nationalism and new forms of aggressive racism in the last few decades. As Catharine Hall argues, the new imperial history could be thought of as part of the cultural or history wars. In fact conservative politicians have used these Leviathans to consolidate a weakening nation-state. Many nation-states faced with globalization have adopted neoliberal economic policies, which have enabled the sluggish economy to cope with the competitive world market. On the other hand most governments have reduced the expenditure on welfare and privatized basic utilities. Government service has been increasingly curtailed to the less wealthy, creating a widening gap between rich and poor. The ties between the state and citizens have become weaker in terms of material benefits. Many governments such as Australia, USA, Britain and Japan have attempted to make up for the diminished material relationships between the states and their citizens by pursuing conservative cultural and social agenda. History wars then ensued. I believe that we need to counteract the rise of neo-nationalism, but now we also need to be more cautious to do so, because a mere criticism of the nation as imagined may lead to helping the reduction of state functions, and thus depriving the less wealthy of essential social services. The nation-state with so many apparatuses of disadvantageous differentiation is now probably the only institution which can provide increasingly impoverished citizens with a minimum safety net for the time being. In short, our sword has become double-edged. Arguing the fact that our world is globally constituted and that we live in hybrid society seems to be superfluous in the widespread chorus of "Think globally". Eroding simply the legitimacy of nation-states does not show us any alternative to the dominant perspectives.

Secondly, although I am happy with social history part of the new imperial history, I cannot swallow some theoretical propositions or I feel uneasy when I need to accept them. I am not sure if Professor Perry positions herself as a proponent of the new imperial history. I still want to quote one sentence from her paper to show my anxiety. "Putting this particular set of histories at the centre confirms the point that feminist historians have made for two decades now: that gender, kinship, and intimacy were critical to empire in its many iterations". At first glance I feel

like saying, “If you study a few particular families, gender, kinship, and intimacy will loom large and become critical in some way. Otherwise, I will be surprised”. A wicked and naughty idea. But this is not the point. I sometimes do a similar thing in disguise. I rather feel uncomfortable with “critical to empire in its many iterations”. “Iterations” may need to be explained, but I want to focus on “critical to empire” here.

In the introduction of her book Kathleen Wilson states that there are “three themes central to a cultural history of British expansion”. They are the impact of empire on British culture and identities, the transoceanic networks of everyday life cutting across the boundaries of nation and the separate spheres, and the role of representation in generating or contesting British imperial power.⁽⁸⁾ I believe that these three central themes seem to be too much narrowly focused. If they are studied microscopically with a few examples, I feel even more uncomfortable with the assertion of the centrality of the three themes.

I prefer a history that also deals with economic, political and military macro-history. However, I do not suppose that this type of criticism is productive as long as divergent perspectives and standpoints are necessary and invigorating. What I am really concerned with is what this year’s Whiteness Studies conference is concerned with. Angela Woollacott, a keynote speaker, at Historicizing Whiteness conference in Melbourne in 2006 valorized the possible productive results from the imperial turn and postcolonial research.⁽⁹⁾ However, the flier of 2014 Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Conference cautions: “The seeming ascendance of Whiteness Studies is not altogether unproblematic, particularly in relation to perceptions that the discipline has been enlisted in the service of recuperating white virtue. A consequence of this development in Australia has been an attendant elision of Indigenous sovereignties and the ontological relationship to land through which Indigenous people harbour their sovereignty”. I suppose the writer of the above flier is Aileen Moreton-Robinson, one of Australia’s leading Indigenous academics, and her criticism could be true of the new imperial history.

Emphasizing the networks of the Empire may marginalize groups of people who hardly voluntarily moved.

How were Aboriginal peoples presented or represented in the new imperial history? Through the eyes and subjectivity of Edward Eyre, explorer and governor, Lancelot Threlkeld, white missionary, and white feminist activists for Aboriginal rights in the inter-war period.⁽¹⁰⁾

(8) Wilson, Kathleen ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.18–19.

(9) Woollacott, Angela 2007 “Whiteness and ‘the imperial turn’” in *Historicising whiteness: transnational perspectives on the construction of an identity*, Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2007, pp. 7–15.

(10) See Evans, Julie, *Edward Eyre, Race and Colonial Governance*, Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2005; Johnston, Anna, “A Blister on the Imperial Antipodes: Lancelot Edward Threlkeld in Polynesia and Australia” in Lambert, David and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.58–87; Johnston, Anna, *The Paper War: Morality, Print Culture, and Power in Colonial New South Wales*, Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2011; Paisley, Fiona, “Citizens of their World: Australian Feminism and Indigenous Rights in the International Context, 1920s and 1930s”, *Feminist Review* 58, 1998, pp.66–84.

By emphasizing networks of empire, transoceanic movement, hybridity and fluid cultural identity, one of the most important parts of imperial history, the extermination, dispossession, subjugation and internment of Aboriginal peoples are only indirectly touched upon or even set aside. The people on the networks may be unduly magnified as a projection or reflection of present researchers' subjectivity at the price of an attendant elision of Aboriginal history.

The networks of empire were extremely skewed webs not least because of cost. There was a clear division between cabin passengers who traveled to and fro and steerage emigrants who usually crossed the ocean only once excepting fortunate few. Writing and sending letters were expensive. Australian convicts sent tokens instead of letters to their loved ones as a last resort. Transoceanic cables were also initially prohibitively expensive. Government, merchants and newspapers were ordinary users. By focusing on the people who were able to move and communicate relatively freely and frequently over the oceans, we may be exploring the space of the privileged few and representing it as empire.

All history is contemporary history as Croce says. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. But I am inclined to. Practitioners of the new imperial history in Britain were clearly influenced by racial tensions and riots within Britain such as the Notting Hill race riots in 1958, 1968 rivers of blood speech by Enoch Powell, the 1981 Brixton riots and the Bradford riots of 2001. Many of them avowedly referred to these incidents and concomitant situations as their starting point for research. They then discovered or rediscovered black Britons, hybridity and fluid identities back in history. They attempted to find a mutually constitutive frame of metropolitan centre and colonial periphery in the past and often tried to find the representation of 'British Self' within it. I feel uncomfortable with this overall project focus on representation, because the existence or non-existence of '**real**' encounters of racially and culturally dissimilar peoples in racial riots and struggles over jobs are contemporary and historical preconditions to their own research. The new imperial history needs to theorize such structural reality into their own analysis. I suppose that the '**real**' presence, big enough to cause anxiety and fear and counter reaction creates a '**real**' difference in history as the '**origin**' of the new imperial history suggests.

Which city in Japan has the highest murder rate? As long as I watch TV dramas, Kyoto has the highest murder rate. Almost every week I watch men and women murdered in the streets, famous temples, hotels and gardens which I am quite familiar with. In Kyoto even Geisha girls, bus attendants and undertakers become detectives to solve murder cases. Still a large number of people flock to Kyoto not to watch murders, but to enjoy sightseeing. Ordinary people can tell the difference between reality and fiction. Nineteenth century London without real racial riots, genocides, plantations worked by forced labour, Asian strikebreakers, etc. may be full of racial fantasies, exhibitions of savages, travel literature and adventure stories, but it would be totally different from the encounter spaces even if they share the same language and discourse. You will be able to find denigration of Chinese dens, slam clearance, and cries of yellow peril in penny papers in London, but they did not produce any large-scale actions or movements.

Reading back the present into past is an intriguing project, but sometimes smacks of stupidity.

Catharine Hall, as to Ann Johnston's paper on Threlkeld, argued that "he disturbed each of the colonial spaces in which he worked. His identification with the marginalized and the dispossessed and his critique of hierarchical relations.....rubbed up against those who were concerned for a quieter life".⁽¹¹⁾ But my impression of Threlkeld papers is different. His constant demand for various items for everyday use to keep up appearances may be a bigger source of irritation.⁽¹²⁾

Lastly I totally agree with Professor Perry as to the necessity of the integration of migration and colonization histories. Ann Curthoys, an Australian feminist historian, made the same point.⁽¹³⁾ I only want to add that such integration must have the power of revealing national and global structures as well.

(11) Lambert, David and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.340.

(12) Gunson, Niel ed., *Australian reminiscences and papers of L. E. Threlkeld, missionary to the aborigines, 1824-1859*, vol.1 and 2, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974.

(13) Curthoys, Ann, "We've Just Started Making National Histories, and You Want Us to Stop Already" in Burton, *op cit.*, p.86.