

GSI Caravan

Project Title: Revolutionizing the concept of the “universal” through the experiences of small nations and collectivities

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Project Overview

With the increasing pressure of economic, cultural, and linguistic “global standards” together with the concurrent realignment of the world order accelerated by the erosion of American hegemony and the rise of emerging nations, the identities of nations and other forms of collectivities are newly put into question. The changing landscape has problematized the conventional approach adopted in the main areas of global studies in the English-speaking world, such as the field of international relations, in which the perspectives of “major powers” are taken for granted, resting upon the notion of the “universal” defined in the modern Western context. Rooted in this awareness, the project aims at reexamining the “universal” from the perspectives of “small nations.” The use of the term “small nations” (shôkoku) implies the inclusion of “small nations and collectivities.” Acknowledging that the more commonly used term is “small states,” as can be observed in its usage in international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and in the studies of international relations and international politics, we argue that this expression limits the scope of discussion to sovereign states. Our project, while primarily focusing on nations, also deals with collectivities that do not fit into this category. These include regions, provinces, and smaller communities within nations that see themselves as major powers as well as social movements protesting against the policies of such nations. These “small nations” often embody multilayered “strains” and “distortions” created in the process of modernization and globalization. The project is a joint research enterprise that attempts to shed light upon the lived experiences of these “core locations” (Baik Young-seo), illuminating the various contexts and concrete forms in which these experiences become translatable into a universal experience of the humankind.

Religion and language can be pointed out as the two main pillars that characterize human culture. It is undeniably so that the current global standard largely shaped by the historical context of Western global hegemony in the modern period—especially that of Britain and the United States—is underpinned by the principle of secularism and the primacy of English. The project considers religion and language to have played crucial roles in the formation of the identities of the “small nations” as they faced the “major powers,” and thus pays attention to the impact of religion as well as of different international and local languages including French as another *lingua franca*.

While the reexamination of the “universal” undertaken in this project consists in bringing a jolt to and revealing the logic of the majority from the perspective of the minority, we also try to

carefully avoid reducing this central-peripheral relationship to one between ruler and subject by attending to the multiple forms of mutual dependencies and interactions found between the two poles. As one example, instead of taking religion as that which opposes the secular world, we consider how religion and secularism can themselves be reconceptualized in parts of the world where such dichotomy cannot be held as self-evident. We must also bear in mind that more often than not, these “small nations” aspire to become a greater power themselves. On the one hand, this would encourage them to exercise “soft power,” helping them pursue achieving the status of a “middle power” in the international society. On the other hand, the growing mindset as a “major power” could prompt part of the population of the “small nations” to behave repressively towards their domestic minorities, causing as it were a situation of “double-colonization.” Although such situations often entail experiences of suffering and pain, attending to the multilayered nature of subjects living under these conditions will allow us to once again consider what we mean by the terms, “majority” and “minority,” and subsequently, how we understand the concept of the “universal.”

The chief members of the project include Kiyonobu Date, Taro Tsurumi, Ching-yuen Cheung, Hiroyuki Ogawa, and Kazuyo Tsuchiya, all of whom are faculty members of the Department of Area Studies, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Komaba. With their disciplinary backgrounds in the history of thought, religious studies, historical science, sociology, and international relations, they have conducted research on different regional fields including the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Israel, the United States, Canada (Quebec), Japan, and China (Hong Kong). The project pursues the goal of creating a new field of area studies based in Komaba through its global partnerships with researchers sharing the same areas of interest at prominent overseas universities (e.g., the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Yale University in the United States, Sciences Po Aix in France, and Université Laval in Quebec).