

A Short History of the Sentanken-NIOD Workshops

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In the spring of 2006, while I was finishing my PhD at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD), I was asked to contribute to a workshop with a number of Japanese scholars who were visiting the institute. Now, six years later, I find myself again working at the NIOD, having recently returned from five years working at Kwansei Gakuin University. It would be an understatement to say that the influence of the Kwansei Gakuin – NIOD collaboration has impacted both my professional and personal life. In this short essay, I will briefly outline my view on the most visible aspect of that collaboration, the workshops co-organized by the Institute for Advanced Social Research and NIOD.

The workshops that have been organized by NIOD and the IASR every two years since 2006 have, in my view, formed the backbone of the now long-running collaboration between both institutes. Alternately held in Amsterdam and Nishinomiya, they have enabled both faculty and students in both countries to get acquainted with different research traditions and approaches, as well as with each other. As a co-organizer of every meeting since 2006 I am happy to say that I have quite lost track of all the professional relationships and collaborations that have been formed there. Clearly, the workshops were not only interesting in themselves, but they also provided an opportunity for participants to expand their networks and find new inroads for collaboration.

This is especially true for graduate students and early-career researchers. Especially in Japan, opportunities for young and upcoming scholars to present their work in front of an international audience are limited. These workshops are an excellent environment to gain experience in a relatively friendly and intimate environment, and to meet, or be introduced to, scholars who can provide guidance and advice. Moreover, in the past workshops the contributions of graduate students have been interesting and valuable. The benefit for established scholars of being exposed to their new and fresh insights may eventually prove a greater benefit of these workshops than the help young scholars can get from their elders.

A relative weakness of the workshops, thus far, has been its publication record, although many of the papers presented have later been published independently of the workshop. But the proceedings of the 2010 workshop on racism have now become the basis of a book, which will be submitted for publication this summer. Publishing proceedings of the workshops, or rather developing book publications based on workshops, with reputable international publishers, is an achievable and reasonable ambition for these workshops, which can help raise the international profile of both participating institutions. Another advantage of publications based on workshops, is that they can enable graduate students to gain valuable experience in international publishing.

One of the reasons why the workshops have been inspiring, is that the two institutes differ quite dra-

matically. The NIOD is essentially an historical research institute and archive, whereas the IASR is predominantly devoted to sociology and other social sciences, with a strong commitment to graduate education. The collaboration, consequently, has been interdisciplinary as well as international. Although the diverse backgrounds of the participants have contributed greatly to the quality of the workshops, it has also posed a problem ; are there enough themes around which to organize a workshop to which a sufficient number of researchers from each institute can make a meaningful contribution? Thus far, workshop themes have included postwar reconstruction, racism and war memories, but it is clear that the possible themes are finite.

It is questionable, then, whether the current approach to the bi-yearly workshops is entirely future-proof. Especially if the workshops are to form the basis of a series of publications, it may prove necessary to both specify the themes further, and to involve more outside participants. Such a change would obviously change the nature of the collaboration -whereas the collaboration has thus far been primarily been focused on an exchange of ideas and researchers from within each institution, more open workshops would mean that the collaboration between the two institutes becomes a gateway for academic exchange between Japan and the Netherlands in such fields as historical sociology, the study representation, and war studies. Given that both institutes are relative heavyweights in their respective fields in Japan and the Netherlands, it seems quite fitting that they would play a role as intermediaries between the two countries.

Both NIOD and IASR have committed themselves to continuing the workshops in at least the immediate future, and I believe that is a wise decision. There is ample room for improvement in these workshops, and I believe many more opportunities will be reaped by the people involved in organising the next meeting(s). Doubtlessly, the nature of the workshops will change as a result, but their original intention, to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas between Japan and the Netherlands I believe will remain unchanged.