

International Symposium “Crossing Boundaries: Migration, Mediation, Morality”

【Report 1】

This symposium provided a truly interdisciplinary perspective on the now highly pertinent topic of international migration. By bringing together leading scholars from fields of anthropology, sociology and the physical sciences, the three-day event allowed participants to cross not only the boundaries of nations and ethnicities, but also disciplines and different angles of looking at the same phenomenon.

Despite the disparate disciplines of its presenters, the symposium accentuated the thematic keyword of “identity” of various peoples, both at the group and individual levels, and asked the audience to question existing identities that are currently taken as granted and matter-of-fact. In one way, the questioning is done by zooming in on little-known minorities (such as Prof. Mirzai’s African-Iranians, Prof. Kuroki’s Lebanese-Brazilians and Prof. Fletcher’s Englishmen in colonial Shanghai). In another way, it occurs when the definitions of commonly accepted terms are problematized (such as Prof. Bates’s “slaves,” Prof. Goto’s “heretic” and Prof. Oka’s “homeland”). By providing nuanced and complex answers to the question of “who are we,” the presenters put forth brand new notions of social belonging that is worthy of continued developments in future studies.

This symposium was particularly innovative in bringing together a group of presenters from the physical sciences, who provided a much longer view of human migration, beyond the confines of race, nation and social groups so central to social scientific research. Prof. Maat, Nakayama and Ota all managed to detect genetic changes in biological organisms (including humans themselves) that suggest how cultural changes, compounded by different environmental conditions in different geographies, concretely shaped how humans live and die. The impact of human migration, as studies of genetics and the environment tells us, changed much more than just the identity of the humans themselves but also many other living creatures. Migration, thus, allows boundaries to be crossed between social and physical sciences in ways that few other topics could so clearly.

The resulting discussions from the presentations are undoubtedly a source of great inspirations for younger scholars and the general audience. At a personal level, my own research, already interdisciplinary in nature, benefits from further extending into many

other disciplines via the frameworks proposed by the symposium's many presenters. The ability to think flexibly across theories, concepts and indeed, a limited part of the world, is a key takeaway that I would like to implement in my own conceptualization of what is a good piece of research in the field of migration studies.

(Written by Mr. Xiaochen Su, Ph.D. Student, Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies, The University of Tokyo)

【Report 2】

The symposium “Crossing Boundaries: Migration, Mediation, Morality” was an enlightening and precious occasion for me. I was not one of the speakers but was able to participate as an assistant of the symposium organizers. During the symposium, speakers shared research results on human migration of various fields.

To me, the documentary film “Playing with Nan” (2012) directed by Dr. Dipesh Kharel was the most impressive part of this symposium program. The director did not use excessively dramatic images and music, but instead let the cast talk about their abundant emotion and showed the changes threatening a family caused by one of its member's “Crossing Boundaries” as a migrant worker. Dr. Kharel captured the deep grief of the parents who had to send their son abroad because of their economic situation and the suffering of the son's wife who came to feel the spatial distance between her and her husband made it more difficult to understand each other. The documentary showed only a family's personal affairs, but the scenes also seemed universal, as though they could happen to any audience. On the other hand, the film presented the problem on a grander scale, as it indicated in a detached tone that cruel labour environments for foreign workers were tolerated in present Japan, although it was his countryman who overworked the film's main figure, a Nepalese man, with huge debts and low wages. Japanese people, who probably made up the majority of the symposium's audience, and Western people whose countries also accepted “cheap labourers” from overseas (labourers who resign themselves to harsh working conditions as long as they are better than those in their own countries) may have faced the international structure in which people of impoverished countries are forced to “cross boundaries”, just like in the family's case depicted in the film.

When a symposium sets a highly relevant theme like “Crossing Boundaries”, many of

audience members might expect to listen to an interpretation of the history that has formed the circumstances of the present world and of problems developing in our current society. Content that can strongly move an audience is not always advisable; however, it is still important to broaden the view of the majority who, consciously or unconsciously, exploit or marginalize immigrants and refugees and to raise their awareness of the issues presented in the film. In this light, I reaffirmed the power of film through “Playing with Nan”.

Research presentations are also powerful, as they have their own roles, like providing objective numeric data and analyses of the subjective views of concerned parties. It is also important that results of the studies are shared widely in an open place like this symposium. Then, how much further can research organizations and academic societies go to turn the spotlight on and to remedy real-world problems while maintaining objectivity and academic quality? — The symposium “Crossing Boundaries” left behind this question to me.

(Written by Akiko Itahashi, Assistant Professor, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia and ASNET, The University of Tokyo)