

# Development of Geography and Knowledge Generation System

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## I. Introduction

Some Myanmar living in a foreign country said when they land at the Yangon airport they feel that they are returning to a countryside. Actually, it is a truth. I felt the same feeling when I landed at the Yangon airport one evening on March, 2002. When I was in Japan I used to return many times to Tokyo from the countryside by air in the evening. Before landing to the Haneda airport side-road lights and lights from motor vehicles and houses continuously enter into the sense for nearly thirty minutes. In case of our capital, all we can see are some spots of light of houses and the line of side-road lights only about ten minutes before landing. However, I simultaneously feel that I should do much more for the development of our country.

As I am a school teacher, first thing I should do is to promote the level of higher education by using my knowledge. To promote the education level I should start from geography which is my specialization. With this intention in my mind, I would like to discuss some points that should be done for the up leveling of geographic discipline in Myanmar. First, from five years experiences of learning in Japan I would like to point out some critical aspects that propel the development of Japanese geographic discipline. Then, based on those outlines, I will discuss how to apply those points in the development of our geographic society, based on the general situation of Myanmar education.

## II. System regulating the Japanese geographic society

When there is a well developed knowledge generation system, most of the students and teachers can easily upgrade their knowledge through participating in the system. However, if such system is poor, the students and teachers have to make many efforts to upgrade their knowledge. In addition, only a small number of hardworking student or teacher can attain the higher level. This section discusses the system that generates the development of Japanese geographic society. This system can be divided into three levels, namely, university, national and international levels.

### 1. University Level

In Japan, geography departments are sometime attached to the graduate school of arts and sometime to the graduate school of science depending on the university's organization policy. In Tokyo Metropolitan University, geography belongs to the graduate school of science and the graduate students are awarded Master of Science (M. Sc.) and Doctor of Science (D. Sc.) degrees. In the Tokyo

University, geographic discipline traditionally belongs to the graduate school of science and M. Sc. and D. Sc. degrees are awarded. Recently, however, some sub-fields of physical geography like geomorphology and climatology were separated as the specialized fields and attached to the graduate school of earth and planetary sciences. Again, the discipline of human geography was separated from the mother graduate school and attached to the graduate school of arts and sciences. M. Sc. and D. Sc. degrees are awarded to the graduate students who are belonging to graduate school of earth and planetary sciences. On the other hand, Master of Arts (M. A.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D.) degrees are awarded to the students who are attaching to the graduate school of arts and sciences.

In addition, each department in Japanese universities usually consists of many sub-departments. Geomorphology, Climatology, Environmental Studies, Geographic Information System, Environmental Geography, Urban and Human Geography are sub-departments of geography in Tokyo Metropolitan University. Each sub-department has one or two professors, one or two associate professors, and up to three assistant professors. Each sub-department held weekly seminars on Tuesday or Wednesday attended by all professors, Ph. D. and Master's candidates, and fourth year students. All these attendants including professors have to make presentation related to the improvement of their own researches. Free commenting and criticizing systems are used in the discussions. All members generally know the field of study of other members and can give advices not only in the seminar room but outside of seminar room.

In addition, there are presentations related to the research design, mid-term report, and final defense at the departmental level. These more important presentations are made with the presence of all department members and students. All graduate students have to acquire designated credits by means of participation in those seminars. Fortunately, there is no exam for Master and Ph. D. candidates. Credits are considered as a part of their exam.

Special seminars, given by the visiting professors from other famous universities (generally from Japan, but sometime from foreign countries) are also an important source of knowledge acquisition for the students. There are two types in doing these seminars. First type, intensive course, is held three or four days continuously (from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm). Second type, regular seminar, is conducted through out the semester. After completion of the course, students usually have to submit the report in the related topic. Students can also get credits through attending those seminars. Through this system, the student can get the different ideas and knowledge not obtainable in their own university.

Above mentioned points are three basic contributors for the development of geographical knowledge at the university level. Seminars of this level provide specific knowledge related to student's specialization.

The benefits of this university level knowledge generation system will be further discussed. Since both of the sub-departmental members know each other's specialization, searching for the literature and confirmation of geographic research problem are greatly facilitated. Actually, discussion is not finished within the seminar room, it continues through evening meals. Such dinners are usually held with the presence of senior and junior students and sometime with the professors.

In other words, it can be said that sounding research designs for the students are generated at the sub-departmental level. Next step is to make a presentation of those research designs at the departmental level. It can be said that sub-departmental level efforts are verified and tested at the higher level. Suggestions from the alternative point of view are also received in this stage. After this stage, students have to intensify or redesign their research works by utilizing the suggestion received at the departmental level. Research design presentations are usually conducted at the end of first year Master course or at the second terms of second year Ph. D. course. Since the time is sufficient for the students to redesign or intensify their researches, they can save much of their time in a misleading way.

Students have to revise their effort at the sub-departmental level by using suggestions received at the research design seminar. At the half of second year Master course and beginning of the third year Ph. D. course, the students have to conduct a mid-term seminar that report the progress of research at the departmental level. In this stage, the students generally present their efforts in terms of consolidated results. Some students having no progress do not conduct mid-term seminar. The student without conducting mid-term seminar has no right to submit their thesis or doctorate dissertation in coming academic year.

The final defense is held at the end of last academic year. Before one and half months of final defense, the students have to submit their complete thesis or dissertation to the departmental examiner board. Examiner boards are generally composed of three or four professors who are specialized in the field of the submitted thesis. After final seminar presentation and defense, the faculty examiner board composed of all professors of the faculty, decide whether to accept or reject the submitted dissertations based on their quality. Accepted dissertations have to revise some minor errors before submitting it to the university.

Above system of research trend and control measures save much time for students in misleading research trend.

## 2. National Level

Association of Japanese Geographers held bi-annual meetings. One meeting is usually held at one university located in Tokyo area while the other at the regional university. In these meetings, the most of the professors and industrious students make presentations and receive the advices from the specialists. This association publishes very interesting and good papers monthly at the *Journal of Geographical Review of Japan*. This journal is published in Japanese for ten months and, in English for two months each year.

In addition, conferences for economic geographers, human geographers, climatologists, etc. are also held bi-annually or quarterly. These specialized conferences also publish specialized journals in their respective fields. For instance, Japanese economic geographer conference publishes *Annals of the Japan Association of Economic Geographers (Keizai Chiri)* quarterly while human geographer conference produces *Human Geography (Jinbun Chiri)* in every two months base.

Moreover, regional meetings like Tohoku region and Seito-Uchi region are also held in regular base. They also publish regional journals like *Quarterly Journal of Geography* for Tohoku region.

Small meetings are also held on some specific fields like spatial analysis, quantitative analysis, etc. held in small specialized groups. Although they are not revealed in terms of publication famous specialists meet in those gatherings and discuss for the development of the related topic very frankly.

Those meetings of different kinds and different levels give chances to both professors and students to go outside of university campus and encourage geographical knowledge through co-operation. Excellent results from these national and regional conferences are published and shared by all other geographers. This system of national level geographic knowledge sharing is one of the essential activities for Master and Ph. D. students. There are designated credits for student for participation in those activities.

### 3. *International level*

Japanese universities have chances to held international conferences and special lecture of foreign professor in specific fields with the support of university. Japanese professors and Ph. D. students also have a chance to attend an international conference both in Japan and in foreign countries at the expense of university. These activities can be called as the direct acquisition and distribution of advanced geographic knowledge in Japan.

Another way through which Japanese geographers acquire advanced geographic knowledge is the importation of current journals and periodicals to the library of geography department. Japanese geographers also make an intensive discussion based on the articles of western journal and think out ways to be applicable for the development of Japanese society. Many universities publish university research report annually. *Geographical Reports of Tokyo Metropolitan University* and *Science Reports of Tsukuba University* received in the geography department of Yangan University are good examples of it. Those reports are not for economic purpose but for sharing of geographic knowledge between universities. Those research reports go through out the geography department of the world.

Direct knowledge acquisition and journal importation methods are two important parts of the international knowledge generation system that propelling the development of geography in Japan.

### III. Simplicity and honesty

The facts mentioned above are the system for the acquiring and distribution of knowledge. It is also an incubating system of young Japanese geographers. However, this system alone could not work without the proper and right attitudes of the geographers. Although Japanese are Asians, they have broad-mindedness. Most of the Japanese professors think about the future of their students. They allow their students to attend the classes (that seem to be very useful for the student) of other professors of different university. In my case, although I was attached to the Tokyo Metropolitan University I could attend the classes of the University of Tokyo and could receive many advices from a professor of Meiji University. Those lectures and advices are very useful for my specialization and for my future. Generally speaking, Japanese geographers are very frank in the distribution and acquiring of knowledge. If they do

not know something they simply admit it and they will find out those problems one way or another. They say "Let me learn more and try again" which is common in the conferences.

#### **IV. Development of knowledge generation system in Myanmar universities (Discussion)**

Before discussing the application of Japanese example to Myanmar, I simply would like to admit that the situations of teaching staff in those two countries are quite different. Japanese professor can live on their salary alone. In addition to their basic salary, they have many research grants and university research expenses. In case of our country, it is difficult to live on the salary alone. Research cost and grants are very few and very small in amount.

Therefore, it is useless to practice Japanese example directly in Myanmar. We should think the possible ways of improving and developing our geographic knowledge by considering Japanese example and existing resources in Myanmar. I would like to point three areas that are urgently needed to do for the development of geography in our country.

First, research works and research activities are very few in our geography departments. Not to mention to know the research topics of other universities we do not even know all the research topics or interests of our colleagues working in the same department. We should give attention not only to my own research but the research interests of our colleagues. This point is very important in literature searching. Since the nature of geography is multidisciplinary, references can be spread everywhere and each individual will be difficult to find it. While searching your references in a library you may find a good reference for your colleague. Your cooperation in noting and giving this reference to your colleague will be of great help for him/her. Alternatively, you can get important references through your colleagues. It is, therefore, very important to know the field of interest of each other. To get this practice we need to hold many seminars at department level.

Above point is also applicable for the Ph. D. candidates. They should give regular seminars to report the progress of their researches. It will encourage the students to make continuous effort on the research and can save the time that is supposed to be used in the wrong way of research approach. The period to report such a research progress should be no longer than six months.

The second point is related to the poor connection between the universities. Until last four or five years, geography teaching staffs through out Myanmar could meet each other at the Yangon University in the occasion of matriculation evaluation. But, recently we have no chance to meet each other. Especially, for the younger generation teaching staffs it is even difficult to know each other if they are working at different university. Therefore, it is necessary to spread out the practice of research cooperation that mentioned at the university level to the national level. Through this practice we can promote the strength of our discipline.

The nature of our discipline is based on spatial variations. Geographical researches are greatly hampered by the lack of research network among the

universities of Myanmar. Through the integration of research findings conducted in every university we can easily make regional synthesis. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a research network among the universities of Myanmar and to hold regular meetings. Through this national research network we can construct the system of geographic knowledge development at the national level.

The third point concerns with the international knowledge acquisition and importation. We have very limited literature resources, and those resources are still limited for access by the individual. Therefore, it is necessary to share our knowledge and literatures with our colleagues. In addition, the opinion of an author written in a book can be misinterpreted due to the insufficient knowledge or/and narrow view point of the reader. This problem can only be solved by means of intensive discussion between geographers. Therefore, instead of reading a book individually we should *share* our existing resources and should make *intensive discussion* for the benefit of geographic knowledge development. In this point, as I mentioned earlier Japanese geographers emphasize their research on the very recent issues imported to their library. However, if we can share our limited resources (both old and new books and periodicals) we can do it effectively. To be able to do so we need an efficient library system and coordination for development.

With the development of knowledge generation system, the education level of teaching staffs and geography students will increase gradually. To accelerate this system development further, it will need to publish a geographical research journal regularly. Through this journal we can effectively share our research findings and new geographical knowledge with our colleagues. In addition, this journal will encourage our geography staffs to conduct better researches.

Three points emphasized above are urgently needed for the development of geography. Although we have many limitations to practice this system, we should start it now. Recently, changes were occurred in the department of geography, Yangon University. These changes are good initiatives for the construction of geographic knowledge generation system. There are regular seminars at geography department level. These seminars are very effective in the development of our geographic knowledge generation system.

Seminars on both university and national levels are also initiated since the last two or three years. *School Family Day Seminar Paper Reading Ceremonies* and *Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science Paper Reading Ceremonies* are good initiations for the development of knowledge at the national level. Participations to the occasionally held international conferences at the Yangon University are also one of the good sources for direct knowledge acquisition. Although, majority of the participants in these conferences are Ph. D. candidates, other teaching staffs from other universities also should not lose this big chance.

The last point we should do is the adoption of cooperative mind in sharing of knowledge. Since above mentioned knowledge generation system for Myanmar is based on the economized way, we could only do with cooperation. Finally, I would like to urge that since initiatives for the development of knowledge generation system have already started with our limited resources, let's participate it with all efforts.