

An Introduction to Papers from the Symposium “Changing Spaces of Interaction: Medieval and Early Modern East Asia”

Spaces of interaction in pre-modern maritime northeast Asia continue to change. New questions and new approaches complicate how historians shape, and how state officials, local officials, local populations, and traders shaped contact. Pre-modern Japan, for example, is now also viewed from contested places, by othered peoples, and through forms of envisioning that position the islands peripheral. As interaction history incorporates perspectives that set the Japanese archipelago and islanders secondary, this field benefits increasingly from multidisciplinary, multilingual, and multihistoriographical skills.

The symposium “Changing Spaces of Interaction: Medieval and Early Modern East Asia,” sponsored by the Institute of Asian Cultural Studies, International Christian University, on February 23, 2002, strove to distinguish relations from prevalent regimes of spatial constitution. Fujita Akiyoshi, Watanabe Miki, Namikawa Kenji, and Kenneth R. Robinson presented. They and the audience were treated to Ainu movements led by Kondo Yoko, Lecturer of Dance at International Christian University, and to the erhu and koto music of Cheng Nonghua and Oda Yasuko.

In the papers that follow, Watanabe Miki adds new focus to analyses of the blurred forms of administrative and territorial boundary that joined Ryukyu and Japan from the early seventeenth century until the first years of the latter’s Meiji government. She reframes boundaries between and within these two countries into zones that were constantly reconstituted by participants according to the issue and their interests. Namikawa Kenji, like Richard White and other historians of North American encounters among Indians and western Europeans, demonstrates that sustaining the absence of violent conflict necessitated accommodation in a multi-ethnic setting. Echoing further White’s depiction of the middle ground, his findings suggest that community can pose more salient shapings of identity than ethnicity. Kenneth R. Robinson sees maps of Japan in late Chosŏn period printed atlases embedding Japan and other countries in multiple times and multiple spaces. In combination with other maps in the atlases, the images of Japan contributed to the composition of a maritime northeast Asia to be viewed from Chosŏn. (It is hoped that Fujita Akiyoshi’s paper will appear in a subsequent issue.) While the authors have not (yet) employed Henri Lefebvre’s insights into the production of space, its process, and its product, their treatments remind of this theoretical landmark, or watermark.

Kenneth R. Robinson