A Mirror for Japanese Archaeology

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports what the author experienced about Japanese Archaeological daily practices with specific focus upon their organisational and legal aspects when he visited Japan in 2012. Critical and sympathetic comments are made in comparison with the picture on the ground in Europe.

KEYWORDS: Japanese archaeology, European archaeology, Archaeological practice, Rescue archaeology, Cultural resource management

"*You don't need me. What you really need is a mirror. Because any stranger is for you simply a mirror in which to reflect yourself.*" (The Face of Another [Tanin No Kao], Kōbō Abe 1964)

1. Introduction

In the mid-1980s, a young British archaeologist named Alan Saville visited Japan. His recollections and views (Saville 1986) simultaneously painted a picture of applied archaeology in both Japan and Britain at that time. He was impressed by the positive atmosphere in Japanese archaeology and Japan as a whole, which he saw as a marked contrast to the then prevailing situation in Britain, and he was very impressed by the sheer scale of operations in terms of the number of field projects and the facilities to deliver them. Saville saw imperfections too—an over-emphasis on fieldwork and rapid, brief technical publication that he thought lacked synthesis and discussion, but again could contrast this positively with the situation in Britain, where projects funded by the *Manpower Services Commission* (a governmental unemployment reduction scheme) were leading to a backlog of unpublished material which would later take more than 20 years to clear.

After his return from Japan, Alan Saville went on to have a distinguished career in British archaeology, becoming Senior Curator Earliest Prehistory (Palaeolithic/Mesolithic) in the Department of Scottish History and Archaeology at the *National Museum of*

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Scotland and President of the *Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*. British archaeology changed significantly from 1990 onwards after the publication of "PPG 16" (DoE 1990), government guidance that led to the adoption of 'polluter-pays' financing, meaning that developers were responsible for funding archaeological investigations and would not get permission to build if they did not. This also led directly to the expansion of private-sector archaeology companies in the UK, and the demise of many of the organisations set up on the pre-1990 model, such as the now defunct *Western Archaeological Trust* that Alan Saville worked for at the time of his visit to Japan.

2. Background to my visit

In August 2012, I was kindly invited by Katsuyuki Okamura of *Osaka City Cultural Properties Association* to visit Osaka to present a lecture on the history of archaeological practice in the UK, to meet Japanese archaeologists and to visit sites and organisations involved in archaeological practice in the Kansai region. This gave me the opportunity to strengthen my contacts with Japanese archaeologists and to see applied archaeology as it is delivered in Japan. This paper is my account of my experiences—and how they compare with Saville's, nearly 30 years before.

I was once a field archaeologist, working in the UK, Europe and south-west Asia, but then spent ten years working for the *Chartered Institute for Archaeologists*, the professional association for archaeologists in the UK before establishing my own consultancy company. My interests are very much in the professional structure of archaeology, how it is undertaken and delivered, and this has led to me coordinating a series of studies of the labour market in archaeology in the UK (carried out every five years since 1997–98) with comparative studies across Europe. I was awarded my PhD by the *University of Edinburgh* in 2011 for this work, and am now actively interested in harvesting comparable data from around the world.

Going to Japan gave me the opportunity to compare my knowledge of how British archaeology is delivered with my perceptions of Japanese archaeological practice and so to cast an outsider's eyes over what I thought was good and where I could see potential risks facing the Japanese system. My impressions are based on what I was told, what I saw and what I have read in a limited range of sources that have been published in English.

3. Archaeology in Europe

The core of my company's research work has been labour market intelligence projects, with a particular focus on archaeology. Our work has gathered trend data on the numbers

of people working in British archaeology, their ages, genders, skills and qualifications, salaries earned together with information about the kinds of organisations that they work for.

I have also led work which gathered and shared information on archaeological employment across twenty-one European countries. The results of this project, *Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe 2012–14*, have now been published as Aitchison *et al.* (2014). Key results from this European work include:

- it is estimated that nearly 25,000 people work as professional archaeologists in the 21 participating states, where a total of over 1 billion Euro (135 billion Yen) with an overall estimated total of 33,000 archaeologists working across Europe as a whole;
- a slight majority (50.3% to 49.7%) of European archaeologists are women;
- it is normal for people working in archaeology to hold a degree—on aggregate, 94% of European archaeologists are graduates and the majority (69%) have postgraduate qualifications;
- in twelve of the 21 participating states, archaeologists were paid less than the national average for all workers—a figure of 24,901 Euro (3,360,000 Yen) was calculated as the mean salary earned by European archaeologists across all participating states;
- archaeological practice in the participating states is organised on different models, with varying levels of commercial activity balanced against state agency engagement

4. The organisation of archaeological practice

When visiting several excavations and archaeological organisations in Kansai, it became clear to me that when seen from a European perspective, archaeological practice in Japan is organised differently. This is manifest both on the ground (in term of workforce and recording methodologies) and off-site.

On site in Japan, there are relatively few people. Archaeological practice in the UK is much more labour-intensive—and it was particularly interesting to see *belt conveyors* in use in Japan, something that doesn't happen in the UK, where wheelbarrows will always be used to remove spoil. Furthermore, the work on archaeological sites in the UK (with the exception of operating mechanical excavators) is undertaken by people who are considered to be archaeologists—graduates who have responsibilities for interpreting and recording as well as physical excavation. By contrast, in Japan the number of archaeologist (or cultural heritage specialists) is very few, as the majority of people on site are workmen, who have responsibility for physical work while the cultural heritage specialists oversee their work. It also appeared—in my brief visits to only four

sites in Kansai—that relatively little on-site recording and interpretation of deposits and archaeological context was undertaken, in contrast with the UK norm of intensive single-context recording.

On- and off-site (in post-excavation processes), the workforce in Japanese archaeology appears to be more hierarchical than in the UK, where there are much flatter structures of responsibility. It was also noticeable that, whereas very nearly half of British archaeologists are women, only a very small number of Japanese fieldworkers are—but almost all of the post-excavation finds analysis and pottery reconstruction work is done by women.

5. Legal frameworks

My interpretation of Japanese archaeological practice, and of potential risks that it faces, has to be structured around the way that archaeological heritage management is managed legally—and it has to be considered that the Japanese approach to predevelopment archaeological intervention has evolved in response to economic growth rather than through legislation (Okamura & Matsuda, 2010)—the legal frameworks have followed economic imperatives, rather than being primarily concerned with cultural matters. This is not a criticism—indeed, it has been the norm in industrialised countries in the last 30 years, starting from the point that archaeological remains have been treated as environmental as well as cultural resources.

While they are being managed as fragile and non-renewable environmental assets (to be evaluated as part of the environmental impact assessment process), Japanese archaeological resources are formally described under *The Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties* in cultural terms—archaeological materials buried in the ground are "buried cultural properties" (*maizo bunkazai*), and then excavated archaeological objects can be designated as "important cultural properties" or "national treasures" under the category of "tangible cultural properties." After excavation and interpretation, sites that are considered to be of significant value may be designated as "historic sites" or "special historic sites" under the category of "monuments" (Matsuda 2014).

6. Comments

The frameworks and processes put in place mean that in Japan there are now very nearly no archaeological sites destroyed through development without investigation, and thus destruction is controlled and managed through the excavation process. And this is my first query—is it appropriate that every site should be treated as having equal value, that every site should be completely excavated and that every pot should be refitted in

the post-excavation process? Is this the best use of resources to add to our knowledge about human life in the past? Even with the long-term economic changes since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, field archaeologists in Japan have continued to be busy, thoroughly excavating sites and accumulating cultural material in the way that Saville described in 1986. It could be argued that introducing an element of selectivity—putting more resources into the excavation and, crucially, the interpretation of the most valuable sites while accepting that, beyond knowing that they existed at a particular time and place, some sites will simply not add value to the sum total of knowledge about life in the past.

Conceptually, this is a difficult issue to address. Japanese archaeological practice is very good at conducting excavations, but information overload means that these are not adding to knowledge in a way that is proportional to the effort being expended. Buried cultural properties are protected for cultural reasons, but their applied interpretation is firmly in the field of environmental economics (whether this is openly recognised or not), and engaging with some of the concepts there—particularly of sampling and significance—could lead to better understanding.

Financially, *The Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties* has not precisely required archaeological investigations to be funded under the principle of "the polluter pays" (Tanaka 1984, p. 84), but the commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs can specify "necessary measures to be taken" (Matsuda 2014), after a court ruled that developers should cover the cost of excavation but with the condition that there should be the limit defined by an "appropriate level of investigation" (Nakanishi 2014)—without what would be "appropriate" remaining unspecified.

Without the details being precisely established in law, there is a risk of this model being overturned or realigned in favour of the developers' interests—and they have financial might and so lobbying power behind their arguments. This forms a particular risk to archaeological practice when Okamura (2014) considers that many individual Japanese archaeologists don't actually like the concept of "commercial archaeology"—working for the developers' money—and many consider the social value of the work that they do, which they (and the law as it currently stands) see as investigating and preserving cultural remains on behalf of local communities and the nation to be more important. But, as already discussed, this is actually an environmental resource that the developers are putting at risk, and so they should be mitigating the damage they cause—and that mitigation should be achieved through requiring the funding of archaeological excavation and interpretation.

"And interpretation" is emphasised because of another potential weak-spot in the system of practice. Currently, the amount developers have to pay is "is usually calculated according to the volume of soil to be removed or the numbers of workdays required"

(Nakanishi 2014)—a mechanical calculation that is not based on the archaeological complexity of a site and its interpretation, but a model that predicts and restricts cost (not unlike the hypothecated taxation system adopted in France since 2001 and discussed by Schlanger & Rossenbach [2010]). This funding model suits the developers more than the archaeological organisations—and it minimises scope for negotiation on the basis of archaeological considerations.

Most of the actual, physical fieldwork is undertaken by workmen, rather than by professional archaeologists (or cultural heritage specialists). The workmen are expert at physically excavating sites and recovering artefacts, but not at recording or interpreting the sites, nor at planning activities such as recovering palaeoenvironmental data. And the workmen are typically contracted directly by the developer to work with the archaeological organisation leading the excavation—and so, in theory, if the obligation on the developers was reduced to simply fund excavation and artefact recovery, not recording and interpretation, then they could only employ workmen and the archaeologists could be cut out of the system. If this were to happen, then developers would continue to pay for material to be recovered, but no longer for interpretative, archaeological work.

In addition to these two very real risks—loss of the funding source by legislative change, and loss of access to market by developers using workmen only, there is another, largely unrecognised risk facing applied archaeological practice in Japan.

"Archaeologists working at the boards of education and semi-public archaeological foundations are not only in charge of the implementation of rescue excavations but also the protection and restoration of archaeological sites in each prefecture or municipality, as well as the dissemination and publication of information gained from archaeological investigations for educational purposes" (Matsuda 2014).

Matsuda identified this in terms of the educational benefits that this brings—but it could also bring up a potentially negative issue. If the same people (or organisations) are deciding on implementing policy—whether or not fieldwork projects should take place—are also the same people (or organisations) that then carry out the fieldwork, then there could be a significant conflict of interest. They are acting as both curators (of the archaeological record, on behalf of the public) and contractors (commercialised fieldworkers, responsible to their developer clients). Developers could be confronted by an organisation that first compels them to pay for an archaeological investigation, and then that informs them that it is the same organisation that they must pay to do the work. Because those organisations have multiple interests—in ensuring that fieldwork takes place to record archaeological remains (for the public benefit); and in ensuring financial continuity (whether technically for profit or not) by carrying out fieldwork—there is very definitely the potential for a conflict of interest, when professional judgement on the necessity of fieldwork might be influenced by the desire to do the commercial work that

it brings.

Until the 1980s (and later in some places), it was normal for municipalities in the United Kingdom to have a single archaeological "team" that both provided advice and undertook fieldwork. With the advent of new regulations from 1990—which ensured that developers were compelled to pay for archaeological fieldwork, but they could also choose who would do that work for them—these local authorities largely withdrew from commercial fieldwork, partly in response to the potential for there being conflict of interest issues, but also because these services were being more efficiently delivered by private sector organisations.

Finally, there are risks that are feared but that are not in fact real threats to archaeology.

These 'imaginary fears' are fears of change associated with the increasing role of the private sector, and are remarkably similar to 'anti-privatisation' arguments in UK archaeology in the 1990s—that local knowledge is always superior, meaning that outsiders from another part of the country won't understand the archaeology here, and that competition is a bad thing that will somehow drive down standards.

Okamura (2014) presents widely held views that "The biggest challenge the current AHM [Archaeological Heritage Management] system is faced with is the growth and expansion of private archaeological units," and specifies fears over quality, geographical coverage and reduction in the number of locally based archaeological units.

In the UK, complaints that were made on the basis of the territoriality argument did not come from developers or the public, but came from archaeologists protesting about other archaeologists. Many confused local knowledge with quality of work, which lead to some to "… view competition as leading to a decline in standards. However, distance travelled does not equate to loss of competence and by 2002, any perception of 'territoriality' was economically determined, rather than politically—this is the friction of distance, as it costs more to operate further from the centre (it can lead to increased costs, but does not affect quality)" (Aitchison 2012).

With fieldwork costs in Japan being calculated on the basis of cubic metres of soil to be removed, archaeology is already a commodity market—there is not competition on price, because the prices are already set.

7. Conclusions

So I consider that there are some real risks facing Japanese archaeology—that developers will outsmart the legislation, and that the workmen could be commissioned directly without archaeological involvement. There is a currently unrecognised risk, of the potential for conflicts of interest to arise. And there is an imagined, politicised fear, that competition is a bad thing.

If these risks are recognised, then the first step has been taken to mitigate them and to maintain an active, (financially) healthy and (publically) valued applied archaeology sector in Japan.

Postscript

The nature of archaeological practice in Japan is fascinating, and more detailed comparative work could be extremely valuable. Currently, plans are being made to expand the scope of the studies of the archaeological labour market discussed for the UK and Europe—firstly, by continuing to repeat those studies in order to build up time series datasets that allow trends to be identified over time—and secondly, by launching comparative studies in other parts of the world.

This global *Discovering the Archaeologists of the World* initiative has been discussed in a recent special issue of *Archaeologies, the Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* (Aitchison 2014), and a pilot project to start work in North and South America has begun during 2016. There is potential for a comparable *Discovering the Archaeologists of (East) Asia* project to compare employment and working practices in Japanese, Korean, south-east Asian and Chinese archaeology and which can then feed in to the global project, gathering data that would support archaeologists, archaeological employers and educators in Japan; if methodologies and results are shared, then a truly global picture can begin to be built.

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