

**Centering the Periphery:
National Identity and the Problem of Asian Regionalism in Australia and Japan**

This paper addresses both of the overarching themes that are targeted for discussion at the December 2006 conference, *Japan Relates: Australia, Asia, the World*. (1) Japanese Studies in an evolving global context; (2) Japan, Asia and Australia in a new era of global flows. It opens by commenting on the incestuous relationship that began to develop in the late-nineteenth century, and that was subsequently legitimized with the formal establishment of Australian and Japanese area studies in the twentieth century, which has often resulted in these area studies specialists reinforcing each nation's respective historical, cultural and geographical claims of uniqueness relative to Asia and, indeed, to the world at large. The consequences of this relationship are both ironic and problematic: for the inhabitants of Australia and Japan themselves; for the specialists who study them; and ultimately, for relations between Australia, Japan, Asia and the world. Ironic because throughout this time period, Australia and Japan have each made their respective locations on the spatial and cultural periphery of Asia the center of their national identity and accompanying claims of uniqueness. Problematic because: (1) until recently, area studies specialists have lacked either the training or the incentive to undertake the kind of cross-border comparative studies of countries like Australia and Japan that could illuminate these similarities and study them in larger historical, political, economic and cultural contexts; (2) this failure on the part of Australian and Japanese area studies, as traditionally practiced, has perpetuated the aforementioned concepts of national identity and uniqueness that continue to govern Australian and Japanese views of Asia and the world, and continue to govern their domestic and foreign policies.

However, resolving this dilemma need not require renouncing area studies, per se. The best empirical studies of nations like Australia and Japan might be incorporated into new research projects that eschew their fixation on the "nation" in favor of comparative or transnational approaches that better address contemporary discourses on regionalism and globalization.