For the Japanese, Asia has been said to be ‘close yet far away’. It is a presence that on the one hand reflects so much of the Japanese psyche, and yet in other aspects can seem absolutely ‘other’. How should we in Japan interact with Asia? To seek an answer to this question that spans both the past and future, we chose as our bridge to the continent the topic of ‘cancer in Asia’ as a serious and shared challenge for all Asians, regardless of nationality.

No one can escape from the past, just as every one of us must carry on living, bound by the ties of blood and community in which we have been raised.

To date a rich discourse has been built up surrounding the words ‘memory’ and ‘record’ and it is these words that have accompanied Japan, as an Asian nation, on its journey through the postwar Cold War and US hegemonic structures, as it has joined the community of nations in friendship. These words continue to have strong and deep resonance, given the nature of what we must face today in order to survive.

‘Memory’ and ‘record’ could be used as metaphors for the information contained in the human body. That information is like a message from the past to the future—both a ‘memory’ and a ‘record’.

Behind every fragment of information is a story into which is woven the memories of myriad unknown people.

History is a collection of the lives of countless people. As time continues to pass by, the historical debt we owe to the past is intertwined in our lives in an unbroken line.

Although understanding of history has many and varied interpretations, the information contained in the human body remains unwaveringly straight and true.

While health-related issues and challenges are part of the basis for social sciences, reminiscent of Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’, the life sciences are a part of a body of ‘knowledge’ with which each person is blessed equally, transcending time and place.

‘Science is an accumulation of data, or in other words, past facts. Therefore, there is no science that disregards history’. These are the words of Prof. Tomizo Yoshida (Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tokyo 1958–62), the person who endeavored to raise the level of cancer research in Japan to a global standard, starting his work from the desolation of immediate postwar Japan, a time when medical research was barely possible, from where he built up the foundations for Japan-US research cooperation.

Prof. Yoshida spoke of ‘cancer being a part of the human body’, concentrating on the phenomenon he had witnessed whereby cells in the body suddenly seemed to gain autonomous power to replicate excessively due to external factors, developing into cancer. Cancer is said to be a highly individualistic disease, differing from one person to another depending on what they have eaten or the lifestyle they have led. It is also intricately linked to various ‘histories’ from the past that are passed on to descendants from parents, grandparents and their forebears; a disease that grows and further debilitates over time.

Science seeks to condense and distill the individual identities of countless human lives into homogeneous data to be processed and handled. This abstraction of data is, in a sense, like the linking of thousands of gusts of wind, so that the resulting data become a massive vortex that can be analyzed using theorems and probabilities. It is said that through massive data analysis implemented by data mining it is possible to decipher stories that would otherwise prove elusive. However, there is information that can fall through the gaps in such data and be lost from view.

Confronting cancer is like encountering the history that is engrained in the human body, into which are interwoven stories of family and community ties. To accumulate information relating to cancer, it is necessary to therefore focus our attentions on building continuous relationships based on trust and attempt to decipher the workings of human life.
Given that cancer treatment is particularly hard to deal with and imposes a severe economic burden, a response to cancer is dependent on the regulations and practices of each country. The World Health Organization has also recommended each country to establish and implement its own National Cancer Control Program, which means that for the foreseeable future cancer treatment as a whole will continue to be regulated and perceived within a national framework. Our idea in creating this seminar was that cooperation in cancer research would help to form a bridge to future cooperation with Asia.

In recent years, in the midst of moves to develop medical and pharmaceutical products as part of a next-generation growth strategy in the ‘life innovation’ sector, cooperation in medical care in Asia has been progressing rapidly, given the region’s astonishing economic growth.

Until now, Asian researchers have come together in the Asia Cancer Forum (www.asiacancerforum.org) in a modest but ongoing attempt to discuss various issues relating to cancer. These include such questions as what are the major topics of scientific research to be addressed in Asia, as well as what measures will be beneficial in the short term and the potential for longer term collaborative endeavors.

Given that Asia is a diverse region in which standardization is currently a difficult challenge, leading some to suggest that data accumulated in Asia are not readily usable, our intention was to engage in discussions on the ways of gathering and utilizing information on cancer that are not situation specific.

‘It is easy in rational terms to place all responsibility on data alone. However, data is not everything. In human terms, data is like the bones of the body. Even if a body is cremated the bones remain, although the person is no longer there’. These are also the words of the above-mentioned Prof. Yoshida and they describe the very essence of the life sciences. It is our aim to consider and analyze the vast quantities of ‘memories’ and ‘records’ that cancer leaves deeply embedded in the human body, collecting, in a certain sense, the small gusts of wind each person leaves behind and collecting these into a massive vortex for analysis.

As we work to distill the identities and individualities of countless human lives into homogeneous data for analysis, we must consider what issues need to be questioned that cannot be effectively addressed by data or theory alone. Compared with when Prof. Yoshida spoke the above words, there is an almost unbelievable amount of data available for use in cancer research. So how should we consider and utilize that data in Asia, where there has been no shared systemized scientific framework?

It is anticipated that views on cancer will undergo major changes in the future, particularly in Asia. We are now in an era that demands the creation of indices on cancer in Asia. The real picture of contemporary Asia is one in which matters relating to cancer are increasingly coming to the fore.

This seminar was an attempt to approach matters relating to cancer in Asia from the perspectives of different fields of specialty. We asked a number of eminent lecturers to talk in their own words about their perspectives on the shared challenge of cancer, not necessarily from a scientific angle, but with a view to creating a wider body of wisdom. Each lecturer sought to respond sincerely to the compelling question of how to ‘survive cancer in Asia’, giving the seminar series a clarity and concrete focus on a topic that is not often discussed in non-medical academic circles. For the students who audited the seminar, each starting out from their various area of specialty, the seminar provided an encounter with a universal challenge that transcends disciplines, stimulating them to draw on their own specialist area to find answers to this universal challenge. The process by which people learn through discourse on a single theme of ‘cancer in Asia’ is one through which various perspectives are developed. Each lecture weaved a further strand into a multi-threaded discourse, which encouraged students to identify common threads, recognize real and pressing issues, and gain a perspective on cancer that can be relativized into their own area of specialty. Through the use of digital media our aim is to give open access to this ongoing seminar so that other regions of Asia can participate and contribute to the network of multi-disciplinary knowledge on cancer in Asia.

In an era of information overload and confusion, the reliability of global and expert knowledge is being called into question. I believe that the body of knowledge in the humanities, which catalyzes person-to-person relationships, will help to open up further scientific discourse in Asia, and help to identify and clarify challenges that data alone cannot achieve. I launched the Asia Cancer Forum out of a desire to create a discourse on how we can capitalize on the linkages we share in Asia to face up to the challenge of cancer. The Asian region has a rich and interwoven history and, by further promoting cooperation with Asia, we hope to create a multi-disciplinary academic foundation that will link our historical and cultural backgrounds.

In today’s world, where life sciences are seeking to integrate various sources of information, by expanding our horizons beyond the confines of single disciplines, it should be possible for us to harness the dynamism of Asia and weave together a body of wisdom for our continued survival.

In that sense, I believe that the title ‘Surviving cancer in Asia’ could also be considered to imply a connotation of ‘Surviving in Asia through cancer’.