

Future tasks for Japanese Studies. A personal reflection

Dr. Michael Facius, Centre for Transnational Studies, University College London, michael.facius@ucl.ac.uk

Fifteen years onwards, I cannot say for sure what first piqued my interest in Japanese studies. I know I enjoyed learning languages, and that a language as foreign and complex as Japanese seemed like a challenging and exciting addition to linguistics, which I had already decided on. Japanese was not the most exotic language I had been fascinated by up to that point, having dabbled in Klingon in middle school (I know, don't laugh). But geeky infatuation was something entirely different from sitting through ten hours' worth of language training and four tests a week – and still I only started to grasp how everything fit together after the second semester or so. Naturally, the writing system was a big part of both the allure and the difficulty of Japanese. I had only just wrapped my head around the patterns and elements of the characters and their myriad readings when I was confronted with the fact that Japanese could be Chinese and the other way around. In a class on Sinitic *kanshi* poetry, I was surprised to learn that the famous Tang period poet Li Bai could in fact be enunciated in Japanese without making any changes to the characters on the page!

My fascination with this unique way of reading, annotating and translating Sinitic writing – and scholars in translation studies argue to this day which of these is the most accurate word to describe the Japanese practice of *kundoku* – never waned. What I found increasingly puzzling is how it completely blurred the lines between languages, which, even in linguistics, are usually construed as countable, separate entities. In my MA thesis, I approached the issue from another angle, looking at the grammatical integration of foreign words both from Chinese and European languages into Japanese, but the limitations of structural linguistics made me miss a decisive fact, as my supervisor pointed out in his appraisal: which words count as foreign is not a matter that can be decided purely on grounds of phonetics or prosody. It is also a matter of language politics and of actual language use.

The selection process of the name for the new era that began in May with the enthronement of the new emperor is a case in point. For more than a thousand years, era names in Japan had been chosen from classical Chinese literature. This time around, however, prime minister Abe for the first time selected a combination of characters taken from the Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, an eight-century anthology of poetry. Commentators interpreted this choice as part of Abe's commitment to a revival of nationalist politics. Scholars were just as quick to notice, however, that parts of this so-called national classic were in fact written in classical Chinese and the style, imagery and vocabulary of many poems heavily patterned after Chinese precedents. In other words, the

reiwa or “beautiful harmony” that we all hope Japan will be blessed with in the upcoming years depends on Japan’s ties to the outside world.

What I always found so intriguing about *kundoku* is that it is one of the most unambiguous examples for the ambiguity of culture: A word, text or cultural artifact does not have to be either Japanese or Chinese, it can be both at the same time. This is precisely what Japanese scholars and politicians at the turn of the twentieth century came to dislike about *kundoku*: their goal was to create a Japanese national language and literary canon, and ambiguities and Chinese influences distracted from the ideal of linguistic purity and cultural homogeneity they wanted to achieve. They attempted, with some success, to redefine Chinese classics from something akin to the Bible or Greek and Latin literature, that is a shared East Asian heritage, to something foreign, gradually erasing it from the Japanese canon and school curricula. Even though residues of *kundoku* survive today, in book series such as Furigana Programming, which teaches programming languages through *kundoku*-like annotations, its cultural currency in Japan and that of the Sinitic tradition, apart from perennial favorites like the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, is low.

The public effacement of the worldliness of Japanese culture is not limited to *kundoku*. My first assignment in the survey course on Japanese history was to research and speak on *sakoku* – the notion that in the Edo period, from the seventeenth to early nineteenth century, Japan underwent a period of seclusion from the outside world. In the literature I read in preparation for my paper, this was still presented as a historical fact, but thanks to the cumulative research of Japanese, European and American historians alike, it is now widely accepted that neither the intention nor the outcome of the shogunal foreign policy of the early seventeenth century was isolationist, that trade and cultural exchange persisted and even that many more commoners than previously imagined came in direct contact with foreigners. As is the case with Sinitic writing, however, the complexity of cultural exchange and engagement with the outside world is often absent in the public image of the Edo period. I was pleasantly surprised by the exhibitions at the Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture and the Kyushu National Museum, both of which, with a fair bit of regional pride, stress the significance of Kyushu’s connections to the world beyond the Japanese archipelago. Much more common, however, is the endless repetition of a very small set of iconic national symbols that function as synonyms for the Edo period and Traditional Japanese Culture both domestically and abroad, such as the aesthetics of kabuki theater with which All Nippon Airways recently greeted its passengers in their safety instructions video.

To uncover and push against the effacement of the inseparable entanglements of Japanese culture with the outside world seems to me one of the ongoing major tasks for Japanese studies. A research program such as this does not have a political agenda, even though people who hold on to a narrow idea of nationalism tend to feel somewhat uncomfortable about it. If the task of the humanities is to

research and understand the complexity and diversity of human existence, it is a scholarly imperative to situate Japan in its broader contexts. While this kind of research is already being carried out and can build on both Japanese and Euro-American frameworks such as new *sekaishi* and global history, to give two examples from my own field, there are institutional roadblocks that need to be overcome to stabilize its long-term success. Historically, Japanese studies were set up to generate expertise in a national framework in the context of area studies, and these were often occupied with explaining the uniqueness of Japanese culture “Chrysanthemum and the sword”-style instead of its ambiguities and entanglements. Intellectually, these limitations have long been discussed and eventually overcome, but institutionally, Japanese studies are still more often than not organized along clear-cut geographical and disciplinary divides. Curricula often privilege a national framework over transnational and regional perspectives. And job postings still tend to follow traditional categories such as premodern Japanese literature, with early career researchers with interdisciplinary and border-crossing interests like myself finding themselves caught between two stools. Future Japanese studies should strive to become ever more permeable in terms of intellectual, disciplinary and institutional boundaries.



What I found exciting as a German studying Japanese history was the change of perspective it entailed. For good reason, schooling in German history and public debates centered on National Socialism, the Second World War and the Holocaust. The purpose of national history after 1945 has been to remind us of our dark past so we would never allow it to happen again. While recent political trends around the world prove that such a reminder is needed now more than ever, it was still refreshing to be able to immerse myself in a culture as an outsider without the need to navigate issues of national identity. The distance felt intellectually liberating and allowed me to see the culture I was brought up in with new eyes.

As a queer student, learning that things are and were different in Japan had a personally transformative effect at times. Japanese attitudes towards sexuality offered a stark contrast to what I knew about Christian Europe: Samurai warriors had male lovers! Pornographic *shunga* prints were light-hearted and humorous and part of Early Modern popular culture! Kabuki theater had an openly erotic flair and was often performed by prostitutes before the Tokugawa government banned first first female, then young male actors. Learning about these facts helped me appreciate the contingency of Western values and historical experiences. When Victorian morality entered Japan in the Meiji period, sexual mores changed and both same-sex activities and *shunga* prints became problematic. At the same time, exoticizing and racialized ideas about “Far Eastern” and Japanese sexuality proliferated in Europe. A hundred and fifty years after the British and other Europeans lectured the Japanese about their uncivilized attitude to sexuality, British scholarship had completed

an about-face by showing that *shunga* could indeed be appreciated as artworks. Indeed, the 2013 exhibition at the British Museum was the first of its kind and kickstarted the first Japanese *shunga* exhibition two years later at Eisei Bunko in Tokyo. Japan scholars are now also trying counter a renewed exoticization of Japanese sexuality popping up in Western media coverage in recent years: Passengers read manga porn on the train! Japanese are having less and less sex! A man married the hologram of synthetic voice Hatsune Miku! What at first glance seems to be based in fact in truth “merely repackages long-standing stereotypes”, as Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook argue in their recent volume on “Intimate Japan”.

As non-Japanese scholars of Japan, it is one of our continual tasks to explain Japan in our home countries, to engage with preconceptions and misrepresentations and hopefully contribute to deeper understanding. I am often asked in private conversations whether it is true that in Japan books are read from back to front. That would not make much sense anywhere, would it, but many books are read from right to left, I reply, hoping to destabilize assumptions about what is normal. But in many regards the role of the Japan expert, vis-à-vis our students, our friends, but also the general public (to the extent they are willing to listen), feels both presumptuous and insufficient.

Presumptuous, because after more than a century, it might just be the time for Europeans and Americans to finally lay to rest the role of the arbiter of what is good and bad, backward and progressive about Japanese culture. The Japanese public surely is not in need of external validation anymore, and even if well-intentioned, this role feels unhealthy in an academic context. More than once have I overheard conference chats where European or American scholars, even while mining Japanese literature for their own research, were dismissive of Japanese-language scholarship only because it does not always conform to Anglophone expectations of evidence, exposition or reasoning. In such situations, I feel strongly that we should strive even harder for intellectual openness and cooperation.

When I was in Tokyo in spring, I went to see two small exhibitions, both of which, it is only fair to point out, would have flown under my radar if a Japanese friend had not recommended them to me. One was hosted by the Chanel Nexus Hall in Ginza. It juxtaposed *shunga* in the possession of Uragami Sōkyū-dō with abstract erotic photography by Pierre Sernet, starting a beautiful and tantalizing dialog about visual representations of the erotic. The other, unrelated but similarly themed, exhibition took place in a small private gallery located on the second basement floor of a building two blocks further down the street. The topic was Japanese gay erotic art, and it was curated by Tagame Gengoroh, one of the most influential contemporary gay artists. Looking at the beautiful faces and chiseled bodies in various states of arousal, now elevated to Art and arranged for the gaze of an audience quite different from the one for whom they were originally intended, I was reminded of the documentary series “Gaycation” created by lesbian US actress Ellen Page in which she visits

various places around the world to explore local queer culture. Western activists often complain about there being little progress in terms of gay rights in Japan, but one of Page's interlocutors in Tokyo's gay neighborhood Shinjuku Nichōme, an older gay man, startles her by declaring that he does not experience the current situation as better compared to gay life in Tokyo some decades ago, which he describes as "a thousand times more beautiful".

There is no denying that many gay and trans people in Japan are suffering under the status quo. Simultaneously, considering that many gay activists and queer theorists in the US and Western Europe are disappointed with what gay marriage brought us –how it both stalled further political progress and sacrificed radically different ways of living on the altar of mainstream acceptance –, I felt, strolling through the exhibition space, that there is still room for Japanese studies outside Japan to consider Japanese attitudes and experiences more seriously. I am not talking about a false choice between Western universalism and Japanese ethnocentrism here, nor am I trying to play down oppressive social norms and policies. What I mean is instead is, to borrow the words of Kuan-Hsing Chen, using Japan as method. Returning to *sakoku* once more, one striking example for how to use the Japanese experience as intellectual leverage is Kawakatsu Heita's "Sakoku and Capitalism". Instead of perpetuating the idea that Japan's alleged seclusion was a unique historical phenomenon, he posits Japan and Great Britain as two ends of one continuum, as two models of how to organize foreign relations, and from this angle reconsiders the different effects these models had on the development of capitalism.

Again, there is also an institutional level that can foster or impede this kind of conversation. A precondition is the willingness of Japan scholars to cooperate beyond the confines of area studies but equally that our colleagues in (Western) philosophy, political science or French literature are willing to listen and stop relying on us only as token "non-European" specialists. In Japan, on the other hand, English-language Japanese studies programs are still too often institutionally separated from other institutes and faculty, and I know of more than one colleague trained in Japanese studies who ended up working in the English or German departments at Japanese universities because the Japanese academic job market still too often shuts out foreign applicants when it comes to regular teaching positions.



When I talk about dialog, I am not just referring to conversations between academics and the wider public, or between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars. Crucially, we also need to listen to our students. On more than one occasion, I have heard colleagues express some disappointment about the fact that many students choose to enroll in Japanese studies because they like manga, anime or J-Pop and, according to these colleagues, are baffled when they find out they have to read the

literary canon, learn about ancient history, or engage with economic policies. But what exactly is bad about starting a BA out of enthusiasm? And there is certainly no need to look down on popular culture. Manga contains multitudes. When I checked out the manga exhibition that opened in late May at the British Museum, I loved how the curators stressed that manga is not just for kids or for entertainment but is used in educational settings as well. In my field, I have made good use of the manga version of the NHK documentary series “Sono toki rekishi ga ugoita” or the “visual encyclopedias” that high school students read in order to get a better grasp of the complexities of Warring States or late Tokugawa events and politics. Earlier this year, I was invited to Venice by the local Japanese studies students’ association to give a lecture about video games and history. Despite my more esoteric excursions about historical representation and what constitutes “Japaneseness” in videogames, participants were listening intently and used up the full time allotted to the Q&A session. Many students came up to me afterwards to share how happy they were to find out that a topic that means a lot to them is worthy of academic inquiry.

But Japanese popular forms can be harnessed for much more than accommodating students’ interests and making subjects more accessible. If reading historical manga can aid learning about history, should the same not also go for creating one? If many students enjoy drawing manga at home, could we not also update our methodologies and assessment strategies? I do not see a good reason why a manga could not constitute a proper term paper. It should be entirely possible to devise criteria to assess a manga on, say, the Japanese health system or the Dutch processions to the shogun in Edo by academic standards. I was also quite fascinated with Matthew Penney’s recent article for *Mechademia* called “A Nation restored: The Utopian Future of Japan’s far right”. Penney extracted statements from far-right publications to reconstruct a full vision for Japan’s future. In a sense, his article is a work of fiction or speculative writing, but it is also a work of scholarship that brings into focus more clearly the causalities and assumptions behind political claims. This, too, is a methodology that can be employed both play- and fruitfully in a classroom setting.

Then there’s the other end of the conventional cultural hierarchy. When I last visited the Holy Hall of Yushima, the Confucian shrine in Tokyo, I was surprised to find out that the Hall had revived the Edo-period tradition of the Chinese Studies academies. It now offers classes and examinations that follow both the curriculum and teaching style of these schools: Confucian classics and *sodoku* reading practice. I felt reminded of Nakano Mitsutoshi’s “Reconsideration of Edo culture” and his call for a contemporary “Edo literacy”. Could we not incorporate something like this into Japanese studies pedagogies? I for one would enjoy reviving *kundoku* and practicing writing Sinitic poetry in class.