

## Celebrating Hybridity with Critical Spirit

It is fitting that the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Toshiba Foundation coincides with the year when the era name changed in Japan. This coincidence invites parallel assessments: just as we are looking back at the Heisei era and thinking of the Reiwa era, it is high time to review the role of the academic study of Japan, and more particularly that of the humanities: they have recently come under threat, and although the situation is improving, Japanese humanities, including both researchers in Japan and abroad, are not contributing enough to global debates.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, therefore, I would like to explore the following question: what role should academic researchers, especially those in the humanities, play in an increasingly connected world?

### I. The Difficulties of Interpretation

I would like to begin to answer that question by reflecting on the meaning of the name of the new era: Reiwa. Any era name is well-wishing, but what precisely is the wish contained within these two characters? A heated discussion on this topic flared on the Premodern Japanese Studies mailing list, which has more 1000 worldwide subscribers: 37 members sent 85 messages, an unusually long discussion thread. Their immediate interpretations stemmed from the most common use of the first character as an imperative, leading to a meaning close to the title of Robert Whiting's 1989 book *You Gotta Have Wa*. However, various scholars then pointed out that in its original 8<sup>th</sup> century context, the first character meant 'auspicious', 'splendid' or even 'beautiful'. Meanwhile, the second character seems much more straightforward in meaning 'harmony', a translation also suggested by government officials.<sup>2</sup> However, in its original context the character referred to the 'mildness' or 'softness' of the wind stirring the cherry blossoms. No consensus emerged on an ideal translation, but all agreed on the fact that era names in general, and this era name in particular, are like inkblots: their interpretation tells a lot about the interpreter.

There are two facets to the particularly ambiguous character of this era name: the first is the potential for opening up a nuanced discussion on what Japan should be about in the following decades; the second is that there will always exist pressure to impose a dominant and politically correct interpretation, as seen already in the 'beautiful harmony' translation suggested by the government. I will illustrate these two facets by discussing one of the public events that celebrated the new era: as part of an event hosted by Marunouchi

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<sup>1</sup> See Shaun O'Dwyer, 'Must Japan's Humanities Go Global?' Japan Times, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2019, available from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/04/11/commentary/japan-commentary/must-japans-humanities-go-global/> [last accessed 9<sup>th</sup> June 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Tomohiro Osaki, 'Japan Assures World that Reiwa is All About 'Beautiful Harmony' and Has Nothing To Do with 'Command'', Japan Times, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2019, available from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/04/03/national/japan-assures-world-reiwa-beautiful-s-harmony-nothing-command/> [last accessed 8<sup>th</sup> June 2019].

Building, the calligrapher Bisen Aoyagi in an Edo period samurai armour executed a calligraphy performance featuring the characters of the new era.<sup>3</sup> I understand that a sense of continuity with the past needs to be established through recourse to ‘traditional’ cultural forms. And there is little to object to the mobilization of ethic initiative invoked by the calligrapher in the post-performance interview: “Just as our predecessors made the Heisei era a peaceful period, our generation is now supposed to carry forward the new Reiwa era.” But as a specialist in premodern Japan, the use of a samurai armour struck me as anachronistic, especially considering the militaristic and nationalistic uses to which samurai imagery has been put in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this context, another statement by the calligrapher made me raise my eyebrows: ‘I’d like to devote my life to making sure this era is peaceful and pass it on to the next generation.’ This sense of devotion may be sincere, but it is problematic at least from two perspectives: the first is the nationalistic and martial overtone suggested by the armour, in contrast with the invocation of peace; the second is the fact that the calligrapher is a woman, who expresses here an implicit position of submission and subordination that many women in Japan today do not subscribe to.

An added difficulty is the fact that the character *wa* present both in *Reiwa* and in *Heiwa* (peace) is associated with Japan and Japaneseness. It is one of a number of characters, such as *kokoro*, that can accommodate a wide variety of meanings and cultural attitudes. Ever since the Seventeen-Article Constitution attributed to Shotoku Taishi, ‘Harmony is to be valued and an avoidance of wanton opposition to be honoured.’ But this implies that a state of conflict is brought into balance. *Wa* is therefore not a stable state, but a dynamic state, a temporary reconciliation of conflicting elements.

## II. A Hybrid World of Flows

That interpretation of *wa* is, perhaps surprisingly, adequate for describing our contemporary experience. Our world now is about periphery, fragmentation, identities in flux. In our connected world there is no ‘pure’ state of cultural phenomena. The issue of primary sources and authentic contexts is still essential, but equally important is that of temporary mix and flow. An interesting example of that fluidity is one of the few words of Japanese origin to have entered contemporary global usage: *pecha-kucha*, a presentation format which consists of a continuous slideshow of twenty images shown for twenty seconds each. The format was invented in Tokyo by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein-Dytham architectures. One could argue that it is not a ‘Japanese’ format, and indeed its informal character seems to contradict the text-heavy and convention-bound Japanese presentation formats. But it is precisely the flexibility of perspective and effectiveness of communication in a short format that Japanese culture has excelled in.

These are not new ideas: already in 1955, the literary critic Shuichi Kato urged his readers ‘to discover the positive meaning of fully hybrid characteristics of Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Heisei to Reiwa: The End of One Era, Beginning of Another’, Japan Times, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019, available at <http://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/56274> [last accessed 8th June 2019].

culture'.<sup>4</sup> And a recent book by Yvonne Spielmann entitled *Hybrid Culture* argues that Japanese culture has a specific take on the hybridity of analog and digital media in a connected world.

In fact, the 'mild' or 'soft' meaning of the character *wa*, closer to the eighth century context of the characters for *Reiwa*, is even more appropriate to describe the fluidity of the current cultural landscape in Japan. Even when dealing with a 'purely' Japanese phenomenon, we must acknowledge that it never developed in isolation. There were always flows of knowledge, materials and aesthetics, although the speed of that flow varied. The logic of these flows is more complex than cause and effect or diffusion and influence. In my experience, most of the time cultural permeation happens through mediated forms. For example, in Romania the generation of my parents perceived premodern Japan through the mediation of a British novel - James Clavell's *Shōgun* - and its US-produced TV adaptation. I would like to apply for funding from Japan to study the influence of such ideas about Japan in Central and Eastern Europe. Although this area is identified as being of strategic interest by the Japan Foundation, funding is restricted to topics with direct Japanese geographical or ethnic origin, the implicit assumption being that only topics with an authentic Japanese pedigree are worth studying. To begin changing this status quo, it is worth delving further into the characteristics of hybridity and flow, because these have direct bearing on the future role of academia.

Following the example of Michele Marra, the 'softness' of *wa* can be put side by side with the philosopher Gianni Vattimo's concept of 'weak thought'. This opposes 'hard' abstract concepts such as 'truth' or 'beauty' with 'soft', circumstantial, event-based concepts. This is in accord with the Japanese situation: a meaning or action does not have intrinsic value, but draws its value from the degree to which it is appropriate to a given situation. This is where the ambiguity of era names starts to make sense. In such a worldview, binaries and opposites dissolve into a sequence of coming together of forces, a state of flux.

The 'softness' of *wa* also applies to identities. I was shocked to see an ad for the Japan launch of the South-Korean social game for mobile phones *Summoners War: Sky Arena*.<sup>5</sup> It showed a young woman called Ema, speaking in Romanian: 'For me, it is very important to live in a beautiful way. And for this I do everything I can, both at work and when having fun.' Then Ema breaks off into slang Japanese while playing the video game, and concludes: 'I guess it's ok just to have fun'. What a difference from the acute awareness of my foreignness and isolation during my undergraduate studies in Osaka and Kanazawa! I thought: this younger generation is at a different level of fusion of horizons: they don't just experiment with living in and with Japan like previous generations, they live hybridly and casually. There is a lightness of touch that reminds me of the fluidity with which the painter Leonard Foujita negotiated his identity throughout his stays in France, South America and Japan. Foujita was also a judo practitioner, and I believe that this helped shape his permeable attitude to identity change. In that sense, the 'softness' of *wa* is close to the

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<sup>4</sup> Shuichi Kato, 'Japan as a Hybrid Culture', *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 1-1 (1986), p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5aoTCSVbvs> [last accessed 06<sup>th</sup> June 2019].

term 'jijutsu' used by Lafcadio Hearn in his 1895 book *Out of the East* to describe the Japanese skill of appropriating foreign knowledge and aesthetics. More than a century later, however, the racial and nationalistic overtones of Hearn's writings have not entirely disappeared from contemporary discourse in Japan, and must be countered with an expanded concept of 'softness' that acknowledges transnational and transcultural interdependencies.

### III. On the Future of Japanese Studies

Given this dynamic and hybrid cultural landscape, what is the future of the study of Japan as an academic activity? First of all, when it comes to theoretical sophistication, Japanese Studies are lagging behind other Area Studies. Thanks to the work of researchers such as Naoki Sakai, this lag is less marked in modern Japanese studies. But when it comes to premodern studies, theoretical considerations are often little more than an afterthought to historical case studies.

To illustrate that drastic statement, allow me to draw an example from my own research field. In the history of Japanese art, there has been a reluctance to apply new methodologies: most studies in the field employ a combination of iconography, philology and social history. Recent approaches such as the ontology of images, neuroarthistory, global art history, which have been applied in European, Chinese or South Asian art history, are not being applied enough in the case of art in Japan. Again, the field of the history of Chinese art has been participating much more actively to the wider discussion through the work of scholars such as Craig Clunas or James Elkins. It is undeniable that general interest has also shifted towards Chinese art as shown by the increasing prices on the art market. In comparison with Chinese studies, my impression is that Japanese Studies are not keeping up.

In my own current book project, I am applying some of these recent approaches ideas to the history of popular art in seventeenth-century Japan. A large number of stories and images refer to painted portraits literally becoming alive. This means that people of the time treated images in a different way than today: rather than seeing them as inanimate copies of reality to be exhibited behind glass panels in a museum, people of the seventeenth-century treated images in a similar way to people of Elizabethan England who half-believed in the reality of the ghosts in Shakespeare's plays, or to the Christian Orthodox believer who experiences icons as animated by the flickering of candlelight. Taking such parallel phenomena in the discussion may not add immediate relevance to historical study cases. But such parallel case studies have yielded theoretical tools that help think through the Japanese material and bring new understanding of it.

The larger point here is that historical reality may be accessible through historical objects, but the role of historians has always been to provide their own point of view by navigating between diverse historical data points. Establishing linear paths within a limited data set such as imperial genealogies or Buddhist sutras is relatively straightforward and can provide important insights. But the more diverse the data set, the more complex the paths

have to be. For this purpose, non-linear paths of argumentation are necessary. In a sense, humanities is in the business of dealing with inherently diverse data sets. Humanities' value is the ability to craft multi-stratified and evocative narrative paths that provide wider answers to wider questions.

Those characteristics of the Humanities also inform the redeeming potential of Orientalism as a productive term. As an alumnus of the School of Oriental and African Studies, I am proud to call myself an Orientalist in the positive sense of having in-depth understanding of a region of Asia that can provide insights for the entire global community. In my case, I share the task of putting the history of Japanese art in contact and in discussion with the entire community of historians of art.

While the above has concerned the untapped potential of theoretical approaches, there is also a need to update the methods employed in Japanese studies. As a specialist in early modern Japan, I am concerned especially with the relevance of this sub-field. At a symposium I co-organized in 2015 we identified three major areas of opportunity for premodern Japanese studies. The first are access to primary sources and archival research, which are facilitated immensely by the availability of digital scans on open-access online databases. Until recently, there had been no sustained efforts to coordinate such databases. The situation is changing, however, through initiatives such as the adherence of the National Diet Library Digital Collections to IIF (International Image Interoperability Framework). The accessibility of primary sources is increasingly supplemented by access to specialised skills through workshops and apps such as KuLA or The Hentaigana App.

Secondly, the categorisations of research materials should be re-envisioned from interdisciplinary perspectives: this again would be facilitated by shared databases, and needs to be done to obtain funding outside Area Studies and to connect with researchers in global history, for example. Humanities should also initiate joint research projects with sciences, which forces both sides to reassess their perspective and devise a common vocabulary. For example, I admire the collaboration of art historians with neuroscientists in the emerging field of neuroarthistory. For Japanese studies, however, I cannot think of a comparable example.

Thirdly, we should develop international and cross-disciplinary research networks that use digital technology to keep in touch and organise multi-sited projects. For example, in the history of cartography, which I also research about, it is not only academics but also museum and library curators and private collectors that need to be included in the network. For that purpose, a non-field-specific interface needs to be used. This means that digital workspace tools designed for businesses like Google can be effectively used, in the form of social media accounts, coworking tools such as video messaging and simultaneous editing of documents, or shared editable databases. Their use needs training and skills that need to be integrated in the academic environment through a dedicated department similar to current IT departments but closer to the newly established Leiden University Centre for Digital Humanities. A recent initiative in this direction is the platform *Digital Humanities Japan* that takes the form of a Resource Wiki that includes mailing list features, links to shared

databases and data sets, as well as teaching and research resources such as Japan-specific digital tools.

The above networks should bring more than just an adoption of digital technology: they should also develop methods of joint research which are inclusive and do not perpetuate existing biases into new technologies. For example, a recent member-based survey of the Premodern Japanese Studies mailing list revealed a widespread dissatisfaction from predominantly junior and female scholars, who felt that the discussion was monopolized by older white male scholars who acted as gatekeepers. This relates to the necessity, discussed above, of embracing a non-monolithic concept of identity and culture that fosters alternative viewpoints and methodological advances. Young and female scholars are an untapped resource that could enrich and develop the field. In this sense, the Japanese Studies community should integrate the signals given by online databases such as Women Also Know History and Women in the Study of Asian Religions.

Another area in which the Humanities are called upon to make a relevant contribution is the ecological crisis caused by human activity on the surface of the Earth, what Bruno Latour calls the 'critical zone'. The Japanese Humanities have a distinct tradition of reflection on environmental issues. This is shown by a recent volume on *Japanese Environmental Philosophy* as well as the main theme of the anniversary symposium of the journal *Monumenta Nipponica* in 2018: 'Environment and Ecology in Japan: Approaches and Methodologies.'

#### IV. The Need for Effective Communication

All of the above suggestions boil down to one imperative: that of effective communication. This has always been one of the main tasks of the academic, but in the present situation of manifold crisis the ability to engage with a global audience becomes more important than ever. I think we need to reorient our awareness at the wider developments. This does not mean that we should seek out other connections at the expense of depth of knowledge on a particular topic. But the task of the humanities scholar has always been to balance erudition with wisdom. If the humanities are to remain relevant, its practitioners need to adopt and adapt the latest communication tools.

There is an existing practice of public debate within Japanese Humanities, called *danron* in Japanese. That practice, however, needs to be extended to a transcultural and broad-minded context, such as the recent published debate on the significance of Leonard Foujita's war paintings.<sup>6</sup> Public engagement can also be achieved through newspaper articles or through other platforms such as the Public Domain Review. For example, on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, Tristan Grunow from the University of British Columbia initiated the *Meiji at 150* project that included podcasts,

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Michael Lucken, Yōko Hayashi, Les tableaux de guerre de Foujita – Entretien. In: Yōko Hayashi, Sophie Krebs (eds.), *Foujita : oeuvres d'une vie, 1886-1968* (Montreuil: Gourcuff-Gradenigo, 2019), 63-77.

lectures, workshops and online teaching resources. These are incredibly helpful for a wide audience at all levels of the academia and beyond. However, they bear little to no bearing on the decision to prolong a job contract. If academics are to sustain engagement with digital and public media formats, this situation needs to change and a system of rewards or fellowships for such activities needs to be implemented.

In a sense, public engagement through effective communication is one of the best uses and testing grounds of the critical spirit which is essential to academia. Humanities scholars are best placed to navigate the information flows by employing their skill in devising elegant and also nuanced interpretations of diverse data sets. They also have the option to dissent and to disagree in pursuit of values that are larger in scope than daily news. The Humanities can thus provide the wider public with an informed ethics that helps develop a nuanced position towards the world and our role in it.

## Conclusion

It is not the task of academics to provide slogans. But they are able and should provide necessary narratives that are eloquent but not definitive, while maintaining nuance and depth. In that spirit, I'd like to provide my own take on the meaning of Reiwa: 'Celebration of Hybridity'. It is meant as a call for the future role of Japanese Studies scholars in a dynamic transcultural landscape: come out of your disciplinary shells; spend more time on finding a common but nuanced vocabulary; use the potentials of digital technology to build more inclusive models of sharing knowledge. This will bring academic research closer to a form of participatory citizenship that perpetuates the fruitful tension of diverse perspectives. In that sense, I would rephrase the statement of the armour-clad calligrapher with which I started this essay. We need to 'preserve peace' not as a 'natural' and inviolable consequence of inherited values but rather as an active practice consisting of day-by-day negotiations of values and meanings in the public arena.