



# The True Home of Japan Studies Is Not Japan: Academic rivals are skilled at reading cursive script and transliterating classical Chinese into Japanese

Matsuda Koichiro, Professor, Rikkyo University

## Who really “owns” Japan studies?

In the list of academic fields eligible for Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, no such field as “Japan Studies” exists. If one searches the list for the keyword “regional studies,” there is “East Asia,” “South East Asia,” “South Asia,” “West and Central Asia,” etc., but there is no “Japan.” Although there are research and education organizations with Japan studies in their title (I also conduct joint research with them), I think that they take an extra effort when applying for research funds. It is not my intention in this article to criticize how, within Japan, Japan studies are treated as if they do not exist in that grant scheme. Yet, if it is true that the readers of this article (including specialist researchers) assume that Japan studies are mostly undertaken by “outside” observers of Japan, they have likely been led to this misconception by the system.



Prof. Matsuda Koichiro

In this article, I lay out something like a simple record of observations on the state of recent Japan studies: observations informed by my research and participation in academic conferences overseas, as well as joint projects of publication with overseas researchers. In this way, I intend to break down assumptions that divide researchers into “insiders” and “outsiders.” I have gained this information and experience through opportunities of research leave abroad (mainly at the University of Cambridge), presentations and joint research at several European universities and research institutes, experiences at Japan studies and Asia studies academic conferences all over the world, review of overseas degree theses and papers for periodicals, and also my experiences interacting with various overseas universities in my role as organizer of international exchange at Rikkyo University where I am based. Although there may be many other university teaching staff with similar experiences, I specialize in the political thought of the Tokugawa (or Edo, 1603-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods, and thus I feel that I am able to provide a slightly difference perspective to researchers in fields such as science and technology, medicine, or business. Lastly, although I have a certain amount of

knowledge regarding the state of research in South Korea and Taiwan, in this article the focus of my statements is primarily on countries that mainly use English; that is, European countries, Australia and North America.

### **The overall level of Japan studies**

It was some twenty years ago, when I spent two years research at the University of Cambridge's Clare Hall, that I first started making conscious efforts to write in English and present at Japan studies and Asian studies academic conferences that use English as a working language. The chance I was given to present at a Japan studies seminar that was regularly held by Cambridge's Faculty of Oriental Studies, and an attendance at the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS) conference held in Finland gave me the opportunities to meet many young researchers. Following this, I have submitted papers to present at the EAJS, as well as Asia studies and Japan studies conferences in Australia and North America. Interested readers may do an Internet search to find a large number of Japan studies academic conferences held in various places around the world. If funds and schedule allow, and smaller events are included, one may find a number of opportunities to participate in conferences each year. Additionally, in Japan there is the annual Asian Studies Conference Japan (ASCJ), with which I have been involved as a member of the organizing committee since 2002. I sometimes assembled the panel to review papers for this event, but mainly I have been involved on the reviewing side.

Although before then too I had paid attention to research trends in published works and papers on political thought of the Tokugawa and Meiji periods, but around the year 2000 when I started to have close contact with Japan studies researchers, the standard of research reached a turning point.

In particular, it became clear that more students preparing their doctoral theses and recently-graduated young postgrads were using high-level materials that couldn't have been read fully without proper prior training. Discussions, meanwhile, were more frequently based on in-depth knowledge of the latest research findings. In the field of political thought, for example, there weren't any researchers who had just read English translations of works by a political scientist and political theorist, Maruyama Masao (1914-1996) then made assumptions about the general historical course of early-modern and contemporary Japanese ideas. In addition, there were several students from overseas (in fact, from countries that speak Western languages) who had read original sources in classical Chinese, then written doctoral theses in Japanese on Tokugawa period ideas. Compared to previous generations, who had often used existing research in English and secondary Japanese sources, received help from their supervising professors in Japan, then ultimately written their theses in English (or the language used at the university where they did their original degree) before getting their doctorate, this generation were at the same level as researchers who had been trained at Japanese universities

Japanese language teaching at universities outside Japan is also increasingly able to serve the needs of high-level research. Several universities, and sometimes research groups too, hold workshops for both postgraduates and researchers already with posts in order to teach the reading of cursive script and transcription of classical Chinese, as well as how to read print documents with difficult vocabulary and grammatical structures. I myself have taken a role at a workshop for researchers in Australia that included seminars analyzing the source of vocabulary and expressions used in Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909)'s Commentaries on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan.

Incidentally, at the same workshop, very in-depth lectures on the grammar of classical Japanese were led by Olivier Ansart and Lionel Babicz, French researchers who teach at the University of Sydney. Ansart studies the philosophy of Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728), a Japanese Confucian philosopher of the Edo period, while Babicz does comparative research on French and Japanese colonial rule. While of course the materials were in Japanese, the presentations were given in English. Those already teaching at university also ensure they can read original materials in the language of their research, and they make sure to work at maintaining that ability. That's because, unless they do this they won't be positively regarded in the world of research, and in some cases, they may find themselves unable to work as researchers.

## **Education to develop researchers**

When you look at the programs and presentation submission applications for academic conferences, as you might expect, Japanese live-action films, anime and subculture are popular. There are also many items dealing with martial arts, gender, food and lifestyle. With the young generation in particular, it is true that they first become interested in Japan through these kinds of subjects, then specialize in Japanese and Japan studies at university. Yet, while it is easy to enter research that analyzes visual materials, producing original work is hard, and once past doctorate level it is tricky to focus exclusively on such research.

The issue is how to devise ways to nurture a new generation of researchers from among these young people who start with curiosity about Japan then go on to become interested in Japan studies: researchers who can properly read documents and go through the necessary academic processes. Within Japan there is a tendency to think that researchers in such fields as history and ideas achieve that status almost exclusively through their own efforts, but overseas there are high expectations for those studying the humanities. It's a stimulating experience for me to negotiate with overseas universities that see their mission as using public funds to support students until they reach the level of researchers. At the several European and Australian universities with which I am relatively familiar, such as the University of Cambridge and the University of Leiden, supervisors expend considerable effort in securing research funds for postgraduate students working

towards their doctorates. At the same time, their success in developing doctorate level researchers influences not just their own evaluation, but that of their department. In that respect, their situation is close to that in Japanese science faculties.

Of course, not every student who gets a Ph.D. in Japan studies goes on to teach at university. While there are posts available in many countries for those who hold a Ph.D. from an institution in the English-speaking world, competition is still very fierce, and there are almost no tenured first posts available. Not being able to make a living as a researcher even after receiving one's Ph.D. is something academics all over the world worry about.

On the other hand, there are diverse work opportunities for those who have managed to acquire difficult languages to the extent that they can read ancient texts, write articles in competition with researchers from various other countries, and who are active giving papers and participating in discussions at academic conferences. Some embark on careers similar to research, such as librarians, editors of specialist publications and journals, or even in the media and ordinary companies. In the future, Japanese postgraduates in the Japan studies field will likely have to compete with such individuals.

Once they have been able to secure research funds, those postgraduates engaged in Japan studies must spend time studying in Japan. At this point, links with Japanese universities become crucial. When I oversaw international exchange activities at Rikkyo University, quite often I served as a link or official overseas contact for sections run by acquaintances at universities abroad. But when it came to accepting research-level foreign students, or sending students from here, somehow it was difficult to satisfy the other party's expectations and I sometimes felt quite worried.

If the aim was for students to acquire undergraduate-level Japanese or achieve a general knowledge of the situation in Japan, our Japanese tuition curriculum and educational system was quite adequate, and it was easy to accept those students. However, I was asked to provide cultural exchange suitable for postgraduates working towards Ph.D.s from universities that had their own Japan studies courses. I can't say that we were adequately prepared to meet those needs with a high-level researcher development program; that is, curriculum and teaching staff system. While they have no shortage of teaching staff with internationally recognized results in individual fields, Japanese universities trail other countries when it comes to creating the necessary systems.

## **Japan studies are escaping the spell of Japan**

When I look at Japan studies trends in the research field with which I am relatively familiar, i.e. that of political thought, first of all there is ample research into early-modern political thought. Let me give some examples. Kiri Paramore (Leiden University) carefully reads classical Japanese documents by early-modern Japanese Confucianists

and produces works that touch on currents of thought in both Japan and East Asia. David Mervart (Autonomous University of Madrid) focuses on changes in global economy and society during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and analyzes discourse on the economic and social situation of Tokugawa Japan.

What's more, there is an increasing quantity of results from research grounded in Japan studies, but which involves the uses of various archives in numerous languages. For example, there is also empirical research by Professor Sandra Wilson (Murdoch University) and Professor Barak Kushner (University of Cambridge) on the complicated processes and awareness among countries involved in war crimes tribunals, and also research by Professor Charles Schencking (The University of Hong Kong) on the social and international impact of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Research is also progressing on the domestic and overseas influence of Asianist thought and movements. I am involved in a little of this myself in English translations of materials related to Pan-Asianism in Japan has been published, edited by Professor Sven Saaler (Sophia University) and Professor Christopher W.A. Szpilman (Teikyo University.) There is also excellent research into the attitudes of Japanese people grounded in everyday life matters such as family, sexuality and work. In particular, research has appeared that doesn't take "Japan" as a single entity, but focuses on specific regions, involves spending extended periods of time in those locations, and may even use quite unusual materials to cast light on the special features and diversity of regions.

In this way, "Japan" as a research subject is a general name for a cluster of memories; a rich accumulation of varied experiences, observations, and thoughts from the regions that have come to be called "Japan," and which exists amid the great flow of global history. Such trends are not limited to Japan studies overseas. Of course, researchers based in Japan have also realized that they cannot compete if they only use Japanese materials and study among themselves.

As research themes and analytical methods become more sophisticated and diverse, the term "Japan Studies" is losing meaning as a field of study outside Japan. What's more, I also welcome the trend away from getting wrapped up in searches for national characteristics, such as research that aims to discover some so-called Japanese thing.

In my work as a reviewer for English articles published in Japan studies journals, academic presentations and doctoral theses, however, there is something that concerns me a little. Japan studies researchers have a closely linked network with other regional studies, and in that sense the field is highly interdisciplinary. But to look at it from my own perspective as someone who has trained in the specific area of political science that is research into the history of political thought, ironically, I sometimes find their knowledge of and theoretical training in history of thought and philosophy to be superficial. Sometimes, when it comes to Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), Hobbes (1588-1679), Rousseau (1712-1778) and Heidegger (1889-1976), those who have specialized in Japanese thought in Japan are more knowledgeable and aware of research trends than those in

Europe and the United States. Also, Japanese research on Confucian thought, as well as the history of Chinese and Korean politics, law and economy is of a high standard. In practice, it is probably easier to undertake deep study of both Western thought and Chinese and Korean thought in Japanese than it is in English. In this particular respect, Japanese is superior as a research language.

To judge by the increasing numbers of young people from a diverse range of non-English speaking countries (speakers of German, Chinese etc.) entering Japan studies in the English-speaking world however, this advantage may soon disappear. In order to make use of Japanese's advantage as an academic language, and especially to produce impactful results outside the world of Japan studies, it is not enough for researchers themselves to simply work hard; both funding and skillfully designed educational systems are needed.

*Translated from "Tokushu—Haabaado ga chumoku suru 'Atarashii nihon': Kuzushi-ji, kanbun-yomikudashi wo shutokusuru raibaru tachi—'Nihon kenkyu' no genba wa nihon dehanai (Special feature: The "New Japan," as seen from Harvard University: Academic rivals are skilled at reading cursive script and transliterating classical Chinese into Japanese—The true home of Japan studies is not Japan)," Chuokoron, March 2019, pp. 54–59. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [March 2019]*

---

**MATSUDA Koichiro, Ph.D.**  
Professor, Rikkyo University

Born 1961 in Hiroshima Prefecture. 1991: Received Ph.D. from Tokyo Metropolitan University. Specializes in the history of political thought. Works include *Edo no chishiki kara meiji no seiji e* [From Edo learning to Meiji politics] (winner of the Suntory Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities,) *Gisei no ronri, jiyu no fuan* [The theory of fiction and anxiety over freedom], *Patriotism in East Asia* (Joint Editor) and "From Edo to Meiji: The public sphere and political criticism in nineteenth-century Japan," in *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*.

---