

# Japanese Literature in Global Contexts

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## A Familiar Situation

Starting out with a concrete example of the subject's implications, this paper discusses the symposium's theme: rethinking "Japanese Studies." Yet, what do we mean by Japanese studies and what are we attempting to achieve? By drawing on our experience as scholars of Japanese studies we may overcome conventional divisions between academic fields and geographical areas by making effective use of the subject's inherent "in-between-ness."

In August 2009, the conference "Codex and Code: Aesthetics, Language, and Politics in an Age of Digital Media" was held at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm. The Nordic Association for Comparative Literature (NorLit) organized the conference in cooperation with a number of Swedish academic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The conference's principal purpose was to examine the challenges that literary studies encounter in an age of digitalization and globalization. The aim was to encourage an exchange concerning how the field of literary studies should respond to on-going changes in media, technology, politics, and the economy. The conference was organized around a number of thematic sessions in which researchers and scholars in Comparative Literature, Classical and Modern Languages, Media and Communication Studies, Film and Theatre Studies, Aesthetics, Philosophy, and other adjacent disciplines presented and discussed papers.<sup>2</sup>

One of my Ph.D. candidates at the time, Stina Jelbring, was in the final stage of her doctoral dissertation, and the conference presented an excellent opportunity to discuss her work. She participated in a session entitled Literary Studies in Modern Languages, organized by

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Culture and Communication, Linköping University; The School of Computer Science and Communication, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH); The Department of Comparative Literature, Stockholm University; The Department of Culture and Communication, Södertörn University College; and The Department of Comparative Literature, Uppsala University.

<sup>2</sup> The sessions' titles included: Avant-garde; Challenging Gender and Sexuality: Texts and Adaptions; Children's Literature; Contemporary Aesthetics; Critical Theory; Drama Theory and Aesthetics; English Language Literature; French Literature; Law and Literature; Literature and Narrative Spaces; Literature and Science; Literature in New Media; Literature—Religion—Philosophy; Literary Studies in Modern Languages; Materiality I; Materiality II; Media and Mediality; The Moving Image; Narratology and Intersemiotics; Older Literature: Methodological Problems in Research; Poetics; Popular Culture; Pornography; Post-colonialism; Psycho-analysis; Publics of Literature; Rhetoric; Translation, Theory, and Practice; Word, Image, Sound: The Materialities of Language.

a colleague in the department of Oriental Languages at Stockholm University, Martin Svensson Ekström, Associate Professor of Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

Four papers were presented in the session:

“Alternative Postcolonialism in Hongkong Drama Translation,” Chapman Chen, University of Joensuu, Finland;

“Decontextualization as Basic Approach to Japanese Court Literature,” Stina Jelbring, Stockholm University, Sweden;

“Litteraturvetenskapen i Sverige: Analys av en begreppsförvirring” [Comparative Literature in Sweden: Analysis of a Confusion of Concepts], Esbjörn Nyström, Tartu University, Estonia; published in *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 1 (2010);

“Teoribrist eller metodologisk precision inom Octavio Paz-forskningen?” [Lacking in Theory or Adding Methodological Precision to the Research on Octavio Paz?], Petronella Zetterlund, Lund University, Sweden.

Regrettably, the lively inter and intra-disciplinary discussions with scholars from the departments of Literature, Languages, Aesthetics, Media and Communication, Film and Theatre, Philosophy, and others that we looked forward to attending were limited, to say the least. Apart from four speakers and the session’s chair, the audience consisted of two members, including myself. Perhaps the subject matter of the presented papers was too disparate to provide a common ground for fruitful discussion. This situation is emblematic of Japanese Studies, however: while it welcomes interaction with the academic community at large, it remains marginalized, enduring an unrequited love of sorts. Remarkably, Esbjörn Nyström’s paper on “Comparative Literature in Sweden” presented in the same session provided an excellent model to analyze the relationship between Japanese Studies on one hand, and the study of literature on the other.

Both Literature and Language departments carry out the study and research of literature in Sweden. If we examine the publication of doctoral dissertations in the country between 1999 and 2008, 45.9% and 54.1% were from the departments of literature and language respectively. Approximately 80% of the dissertations published by the literature departments covered Swedish literature, comprising 37.6% of the total number of dissertations published; 30.3% were written in English and primarily from English departments, although some were from Slavic and Oriental language departments as well.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this situation, the general impression derived from Swedish media and academic journals is that literary research is only conducted by the departments of literature in Sweden, dubbed departments of “Litteraturvetenskap,” a Swedish variation of the German term

<sup>3</sup> Stina Jelbring publicly defended her dissertation in April the following year, 2010: “A Decontextual Stylistics Study of the *Genji monogatari*: With a Focus on the ‘Yūgao’ Story.” The dissertation may be downloaded without charge via <http://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?searchId=1&pid=diva2:305647>.

<sup>4</sup> Esbjörn Nyström. “Litteraturvetenskapen i Sverige: Analys av en begreppsförvirring.” *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 1 (2010), pp. 64–65.

“Literaturwissenschaft.” The “Science of Literature” or “Literary Studies” is perhaps its English equivalent, although it is usually labeled “Comparative Literature” on Swedish universities’ English-language websites. The discourse thus assumes that literary studies and research in Sweden is a domain exclusive to “Litteraturvetenskap” departments. Nyström argues that this misconception is due to a misunderstanding of concepts, since Swedish academia makes no distinction between the discipline and the academic subject, or organizational unit.<sup>5</sup> Study and research within the discipline of “litteraturvetenskap,” or Literary Studies, is carried out within the framework of a number of academic disciplines and departments, such as Literature, Languages, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, and Media Studies—to name a few.

## The State of Japanese Studies

Are Japanese Studies a discipline like Literary Studies, for example? Study and research concerning Japanese society and culture based primarily on Japanese (including Sino-Japanese) sources is carried out at various departments including History, Political Science, Business and Economics, Human Geography, Theatre Studies, and Anthropology. For instance, in Sweden, an estimated 37–40% of the circa twenty-five scholars of Japanese Studies work in departments dedicated to their field, while the majority is employed by other departments and organizations. What are the theories and methods of this discipline? In Hisamatsu Sen’ichi’s informative work regarding the formation of *kokugaku* and its relation to national literature in Japan, Japanese Studies appear in *kokugaku*’s very definition. Firstly, Hisamatsu includes the ancient national education system’s local schools in the definition; secondly, it entails studies of Japan within all fields of research (synonymous with Japanology, or Japanese Studies overseas); thirdly, it is a science whose explicit goal is to clarify and reveal what is purely Japanese solely from a native point of view.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this is an academic discipline with specific theories, methods, and goals.

Are we then the *kokugakusha* of our time? Probably few of us identify with the seventeenth and eighteenth century scholars of National Learning.<sup>7</sup> Still, it is hard to deny that foreign education and texts regarding Japan have been, and in some respects still are, very similar to the discipline of *kokugaku*. In fact, many may shudder at the thought of the *nihonjinron* theories of Japanese uniqueness that we grew tired of as undergraduates. Scholars of Japanese Studies in the Nordic region question the notion of “clarifying and revealing what is purely Japanese, solely from a native point of view” as an explicit goal, or its application as a philological methodology.

<sup>5</sup> Nyström 2010, pp. 61–63.

<sup>6</sup> Hisamatsu Sen’ichi. *Kokugaku: Sono seiritsu to kokubungaku to no kankei* [The Formation of National Learning and Its Relation to National Literature in Japan]. Tokyo: Shibundō, 1941, pp. 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> There is no adequate translation of the term *kokugaku* 国学 into English. The phrase “National Learning” falsely implies continuity between the *kokugaku* vision of Japan and modern Japanese nationalism. This term is used with reservation. Cf. Susan L. Burns. *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 231–32, note 1.

Are Japanese Studies a unique academic subject? For undergraduate and graduate students, this is certainly a subject of study, and in some cases the department that they graduated from. Apart from this, Japanese Studies may rather be considered an interdisciplinary organizational unit, in concrete or more or less fluid terms: a sort of scholarly identity that academics adapt to and dispose of when necessary.

### **Japanese Studies as an Interdisciplinary Subject, Organizational Unit, and Academic Identity Marker**

To summarize the above discussion, Japanese Studies in the Nordic region is an eclectic academic subject, employing theories and methodologies from various disciplines dependent on the nature and needs of the research in question; they are based on Japanese and Sino-Japanese sources, and contribute to numerous disciplines. Japanese Studies can often be defined as an organizational unit focused on research and training pertaining to Japanese culture and society; at other times, it functions as an international community of scholars whose academic interests in some way pertain to Japanese culture and society.

During my early Ph.D. studies in the 1970s, I expected that the continuously growing community of Japanese Studies would exert some influence on its associated disciplines, such as literary theory. Yet, as years passed, this idea seemed more easily imagined than realized. As mentioned in the introduction, conference papers pertaining to subject areas other than Europe and North America are frequently relegated to a separate session regardless of their content. One reason for this is probably that they seem alien in some way, and are considered irrelevant to the discipline in question. The conference papers mentioned in the introduction partially illustrate another commonly encountered and frequently internalized problem, in which academics from associated disciplines assume that scholars of “Non-European” Studies lack equal theoretical and methodological awareness, a phenomenon reflected in the title of Zetterlund’s paper, “Teoribrist eller metodologisk precision inom Octavio Paz-forskningen?” [Lacking in Theory or Adding Methodological Precision to the Research on Octavio Paz?]. In the paper, Zetterlund describes how her unique method of close reading produced results that were otherwise unobtainable with readymade theories of literature and established approaches to Paz’s works.

Stina Jelbring’s conference paper, “Decontextualization as Basic Approach to Japanese Court Literature,” illustrates another way of countering negative expectations regarding theoretical and methodological awareness, by testing modern Western literary theories and methods’ applicability to “alien” materials. In this case the materials were classical Japanese court literature—with particular emphasis on *The Tale of Genji*. Jelbring argues that decontextualization, as a consciously applied method, may highlight new interpretations and comparisons, while spawning fresh perspectives on analytical categories and concepts.

## **Overcoming Conventional Academic Organizational Divisions and Making Use of the Inherent In-Between-Ness of Japanese Studies**

How do we overcome conventional academic organizational divisions and make use of the inherent in-between-ness of Japanese Studies? The methods may vary, but my personal approach through the years has included participation in joint literature and literary history projects, in an effort to lessen the marginalization of Japanese Studies in academia.

One of the projects began in 1996, when literary scholars from universities throughout Sweden gathered in Stockholm to discuss how they could cooperate to enhance and broaden the knowledge of non-western literature at their respective institutions, while also sharpening their theoretical and methodological tools. A group of approximately twenty-five scholars drafted a joint project application; after three years of discussions, seminars, planning, and requests for grants, "Literature and Literary History in Global Contexts: A Comparative Project" received full funding for six years from the Swedish Research Council, and was launched in 1999.

One of the project's key purposes was to address the difficulty of crafting a credible, comprehensive perspective of world literary history. The overarching aim was to find valid methods and approaches for the study and analysis of world literature, and to lay a foundation for the compilation of a world-centric literary history. Existing works surveying literary history worldwide may serve as valuable sources of information, although their treatment of different literary cultures tends to follow different principles, and even vary in conceptual basis from section to section. The project group thus decided to investigate concepts of literature, genre, and processes of appropriation and transformation among literary cultures over the last two centuries. Four subgroups were formed: one focused on concepts of literature and their application in global contexts, another on genre concepts and the comparison of genre systems, while the remaining two examined worldwide literary interactions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The subgroups met once or twice each semester to discuss practical matters, relevant research problems, articles, and participants' contributions at various stages. A general seminar was arranged each semester for the duration of the project, featuring international scholars as guest lecturers. The responsibility of arranging these seminars alternated between subgroups; this ensured that, as a rule, the guest lecturer would also participate in an adjacent subgroup meeting. Moreover, when the project reached a certain stage, international experts unaffiliated with the project scrutinized each volume and conducted thorough explorative discussions with the relevant subgroup.

A small managerial group comprising the volumes' designated editors directed the project. Apart from myself, who was appointed project leader, the group included Tord Olsson, Professor of History of Religions at Lund University; Margareta Petersson, Professor of Literature at Linnaeus University; Anders Petterson, Professor of Literature at Umeå University; Bo Utas, Professor of Iranistics at Uppsala University, who initiated the project in 1996; and Annika Lundström from Stockholm University, who administered the project. For full transparency, detailed minutes of the managerial group's proceedings were distributed to all project members.

Funding from the Swedish Research Council covered seminar costs, outside experts, and six months of full time work per article. Additionally, a fixed amount was allotted to project members for travel expenses and research materials. This, in addition to reduced teaching hours, allowed participants to plan and perform their duties in an efficient manner, freely participate in conferences, and collect research materials without financial burden.

The project resulted in the publication of *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, a four volume series covering notions of literature across cultures, intercultural approaches to literary genres, and literary interactions in the modern world.<sup>8</sup>

To foster a relationship between the project and researchers globally, approximately twenty-five project members organized an international conference in 2004 featuring twenty-seven guest speakers from various locations worldwide. The conference's proceedings were published in *Studying Transcultural Literary History*, edited by Gunilla Lindberg-Wada (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).<sup>9</sup>

The theme of the conference was the feasibility of a world literary history as envisioned by the project. The response was quite positive, and a working group comprising guest speakers and some members of the Swedish managerial group formed to gauge its potential, and to devise a template for such a literary history. After the group's initial meeting in 2005, its work was formalized in 2008 with the establishment of the Stockholm Collegium of World Literary History, which currently comprises thirty-five fellows from various universities around the world, including members of its Executive Board.<sup>10</sup> The Collegium was officially established in Stockholm because it was considered the most politically neutral location for such an endeavor, which is presently the Collegium's main function.

*Literature: A World History* is intended to be a clear and rather robust overview of world-wide literary history condensed into four volumes, striving to cover international literary cultures more fairly and coherently than its counterparts, while simultaneously providing a more balanced representation of epistemologies, methodologies, and differing cultural perspectives. Its strength lies in its overall grasp of literature as a cultural phenomenon and in its synoptic view, which requires readers to consult additional sources for more specialized information. It is scheduled for publication by Wiley-Blackwell in the near future.

My experience as both a participant and leader of the two literary projects has convinced me that time is of the essence if scholars of Area Studies intend to "make a difference" in their respective disciplines. The many years spent planning projects, and the fruits of their realiza-

<sup>8</sup> *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, ed. Anders Pettersson, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, Margareta Petersson, and Stefan Helgesson. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006: *Notions of Literature Across Cultures* (Volume 1), *Literary Genres: An Intercultural Approach* (Volume 2), and *Literary Interactions in the Modern World* (Volumes 3 and 4). For information about the volumes see <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/175409>.

<sup>9</sup> For information about this book see <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/175423?rskey=yKRnlN&result=1&q=Studying transcultural literary history>.

<sup>10</sup> For a list of Fellows and some information on the Collegium see <http://www.orient.su.se/forskning/forskningsomraden/samhorande-forskning-1.38179>.

tion, have contributed to an academic milieu of mutual trust and reciprocity. In parallel, scholars have made new forms of knowledge available to participants, and offered them invaluable opportunities to sharpen their methodological and theoretical skills through open discussion and creative criticism—two characteristics that have typified our seminars and meetings.

In addition to establishing concrete goals, appropriate funding is also a necessity, and was more easily obtained for the former project than for the latter. *Literature: A World History* failed to meet any research grant requirements since it was not a national, European, or “third-world” project; funding was occasionally available for meetings and discussions, albeit under the guise of conferences. In contrast, meetings and seminars for “Literature and Literary History in Global Contexts: A Comparative Project,” received ample funding from the Swedish Research Council, which enabled the publication of *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*. Adequate funding for each contribution to the series constituted an ideal model for project funding and organization, which I wholeheartedly recommend to my colleagues and other institutions involved in grant-funded research.