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Japanese Studies in the Ibero-American Context

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Given the sheer size in terms of territory and population, along with the number of countries and academic institutions spread over the area known as Hispanic Ibero-America (countries in Europe and Latin America united by the Spanish language), and given the prevailing situation of Japanese Studies in these regions, we can safely say that there is still much work to be done in this field. The reality is that there are only a few programs and scholars devoted to Japanese Studies, certainly not enough to cope with the growing interest in Japan seen in Ibero-America largely during the last 25 years.

There are at least three major reasons for the slow progress of Japanese studies in these countries. One of these is the complicated and dissimilar modern destinies of each of these nations. There is also a decided need for trained specialists capable of carrying the field forward in academic circles. Unfortunately, these factors have coincided with a frequent lack of a strong institutional vision and consequent allocation of resources. In addition to this, the perception of Japan within the popular imagination of the Hispanic world has often been that of a distant and even exotic territory (a kind of locally creolized version of Orientalism). Occasionally, even the nearness of Japanese contemporary cultural products and so-called “globalization” contribute even further to the propagation and pervasiveness of a stereotyped version of the complex reality of Japan’s diverse pasts and presents.

In this sense, and regardless of the efforts undertaken by different institutions throughout the Hispanic world, there exists at present only a single undergraduate program in Japanese Studies in the region. This is a Japan area program that carries out its functions simultaneously at both the Autonomous University of Madrid and that of Barcelona, Spain. It was established about ten years ago, and it is mainly centered on the teaching of the Japanese language, along with other general courses about the area such as history, anthropology, literature and political science.

The Spanish have also recently established a Master’s program in Japanese Studies based at the University of Salamanca, but it seems to have faced several difficulties during the last six years and unfortunately I do not have sufficient information to discuss the specifics of this academic program.

In the case of Latin America, we should point out the Center for Japanese Studies at the National University of La Plata in Argentina, as well as the Center for Oriental Studies, at the Catholic University of Peru. However, neither of those centers has any programs whatsoever in Japanese Studies. The main function of these centers is to offer language courses and only occasionally other courses related to Japan and Asia for the humanities' programs in their respective institutions. The only Japanese Studies programs in Hispanic Latin America, then, are those housed in the Center for Asian and African Studies at El Colegio de México, based in Mexico City.

El Colegio de México is a public graduate institution dedicated to study and research in the humanities and social sciences. In 1964, with the support of UNESCO, the Center for Asian and African Studies (or CEAA) was created, modeled upon the structure of SOAS at the University of London. The Center is divided into six geographic areas of study (Africa, The Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Japan), and it boasts the oldest graduate programs (Master's and Ph.D.) in Japanese studies in the Hispanic world. Although CEAA was originally designed to serve the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs in training future diplomats, it drastically transformed itself during the 1980s into a Latin-American initiative with the mandate to produce future researchers in Japanese studies. It is also important to point out that the Center receives students from different Latin-American countries, and sometimes also from Spain, who study here. Many of these graduates have returned to their home countries and currently hold positions at universities and research centers, working to promote the study of Japan.

The Master's Program in Japanese Studies is a two-year program mainly focusing on Japanese language, Japanese history and political science. Its permanent staff includes six professors, although every year the Center receives visiting professors from Japan, Europe and the United States, who teach additional courses. Among some of the visiting professors who have recently visited CEAA, we should mention Befu Harumi, Ueno Chizuko, Wakabayashi Mikio, Katō Tetsurō, Gina Barnes, Constantine Vaporis, Andrew Gordon, Oguma Eiji, and Martin Collcutt, among many others. Such visits to Mexico continue to be generously sponsored by funds received mainly from the Japan Foundation, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Colegio de México itself, and also thanks to the exchange agreements the institution has with various universities.

The Ph.D. Program in Japanese Studies was created in 1997 as a four-year curriculum with a primary focus on Japanese history. It is expected that all students carry out a

year-long research stay in Japan, in order to work with primary sources and to exchange opinions with Japanese scholars. The current number of Ph.D. students graduated from this program is eight. It is also worth mentioning that two of the Ph.D. dissertations in Japanese Studies produced by the Center have been honored with the Mexican Academy of Science National Prize for the best Ph.D. dissertations in the Humanities for the years 2003 and 2007.

Another strong feature of these graduate programs is the extensive library collection regarding Japan related topics that the institution has built up over time. Although it cannot be compared with major libraries in Japan, or the United States and Europe for that matter, the library Daniel Cosío Villegas holds the largest collection of books about Japan (and in Japanese) in the Hispanic world. It holds approximately 22,717 titles regarding Japan of which 8,808 are in Japanese. In addition to this, the library also stands as a major reference point for many Latin-American scholars working on Japan within the region, many of whom carry out brief research stays in order to work with the library holdings.

Nevertheless, there are some problems we have faced in the area over the course of the last 20 years. First of all, and despite the important efforts of different institutions and scholars, there is, to date, only a limited body of original research about Japan which has been published in Spanish. Even translations of critical classical texts about Japan remain few and far between. Still, there has been an impressive volume of original research published in Spanish by the El Colegio de México Press, and, very recently, the significant endeavors of Ediciones Satori, a small publishing company from Spain, which has undertaken the translation of Japanese literature. Another problem we have had to grapple with is the fact that the present distribution networks for scholarly books in Spanish language are intricate and very local. In this sense, the impact and availability of many of these publications in Spanish is also limited. This problem is not exclusive to the Hispanic world, but it has become an obstacle in the wider spectrum of Japanese studies globally. As a result, there is a concurrent need to publish such materials in either English or Japanese (or both), in order to broaden the discussion with other scholars outside of the Spanish-speaking world.

There has also been a marked shift in the topics that are of interest to many students. During the last 15 years it has become common for students to express interest in literature, religion, art history, and contemporary history, for example, which differs from the

focus on economic history and political science, which was more prevalent during the 1980s. This has been a major change, and we have been looking for ways to expand our permanent staff.

Some other challenges need to be added to our list of priorities in the near future. For example, the importance of an undergraduate program in Japanese Studies in Hispanic Latin America is becoming increasingly clear. The two years allocated to the Master's program at El Colegio de México are insufficient to give students the necessary language skills in order to carry out relevant research. Currently, it is becoming more and more common to receive students who arrive with previous knowledge of the Japanese language, but we cannot rely on this as a norm. It is impractical then to think that a single institution will be able to cope with the growing need of an enormous region such as that of Hispanic Ibero-America. It is here where we should investigate the possibility of organizing collaborative projects with other universities and research institutes throughout Ibero-America, as well as with other major centers worldwide. This will most certainly not be an easy task, of course, but I strongly believe that it will soon prove to be an inevitable next step in the evolution of the field of Japanese Studies in this region.