

JAPANESE STUDIES IN MEXICO AND SOME LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

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1. Recent trends in the research on Japanese literature and history in Mexico and some Latin American countries

In the last decade, Latin American countries, and particularly Mexico, have witnessed a significant development in the Japanese studies, specially in such fields as economy, administration, and international relations, in accordance with the political tendencies and needs of the times. A consistent number of books and articles on these topics have been published, with a rather enthusiastic response by the community of scholars and the public in general. The economical success in the second half of the 1980's was in part responsible for the renewed interest in Japan and its economic and administrative practices, as well as its relations with the rest of the world, in an era signed by major political change and commercial friction.

Publications

In the fields of Japanese literature, art, history, thought, and even the social sciences, enthusiasm for Japan did not show the same impetus observed in the economic-related studies, but, fortunately enough, the humanistic tradition of approaching culture by Latin American scholars remained unchanged among some of them, and a substantial — if not great — number of academic contributions were published in this period, thanks to the efforts of these scholars.

Japanese literature was represented by two volumes of translated short stories written by different authors since the Meiji era; a volume of short stories written by Ogai Mori in the last years of Meiji; an anthology of modern Japanese poetry from Meiji on; an anthology of essays and short stories by Kôbô Abe; the translation of one of Abe's plays for the stage; etc. . . Many articles on Japanese literature and history appeared in the quarterly **Estudios de Asia y Africa** (now in number 95, after an uninterrupted quarter of a century of publication), edited by the Center of Asian and African Studies, El Colegio de México, a special issue of which was entirely devoted to Japan, its literature, and its history. El Colegio de Michoacan published a book on the philosophy of Nishida Kitarô. The National Autonomous University of Mexico published a book on Bunraku.

Japanese history was represented by a book on the role of the young people's associations in the rural community under the Tokugawa regime, published by El Colegio de

México; and by a study of the Japanese immigration in Mexico, by the same publisher. Strangely enough, the absence of Japanese art was surprising: nothing was written about it in specialized publications. The interest in Japanese art lies far below of that of literature and history.

In Argentina, various essays on the Japanese educational system and the Japanese university in the Meiji era, as well as a book on the same topic, written by an expert, have gained a good reputation. The newly published journal **Tokonoma**, devoted to Japanese literature and culture, has been well received by specialists and the public in general.

Teaching and research

In the sphere of teaching, there are permanent courses and seminars on Japanese history and literature in the Master's program of the Center of Asian and African Studies (CEAA), El Colegio de México, as well as a course on Japanese culture and literature in the Formation of Translators program, at the same institution. Usually, Japanese professors sent by the Japan Foundation every year give lectures to the students on topics different from those of the permanent staff. El Colegio's library has a good collection of books on Japan, both in Japanese and Western languages, as well as a Document and Information Center on Japan (CIDOJ).

In the Master's program, graduate students interested in Japanese literature or history can specialize in those fields and write a thesis on their chosen topic. In recent years, two students wrote their Master's dissertations on the Japanese naturalistic novel and Tayama Katai, and on the Japanese confessional novel (**shishôsetsu**); another one is working in the field of the urban changes suffered by Tokyo after the Great Earthquake of 1923, from a semiotic perspective centered in the visual elements of the city, mainly architecture, street advertisements, and transportation, and how these changes are reflected in the novels of the period. One graduate from El Colegio is now in Nichibunken, Kyoto, making research on the Japanese immigration to Argentina.

With regard to research, three of the four professors from El Colegio are making research on Japanese history and Japanese literature. The topics include the Japanese immigrants to Mexico; the life and work of Seki Sano, a man of the theater who spent the last part of his life in Mexico; and a comparative study of the ghost stories written in Japan and Mexico at the turn of the century.

In Argentina, there is an Interdisciplinary Section of Asian and African Studies, Faculties of Philosophy and Literature, at Buenos Aires National University. Struggling with the lack of funds and bibliography, four young researchers are doing their best for keeping alive the traditional interest in that country in Japanese Literature: one specializes in Ogai Mori and Sôseki Natsume; another, in Buddhism and literature; another is trying to penetrate the hermetic world of Kyôka Izumi; the fourth, besides teaching Japanese, is making research on Japanese Buddhism. They receive periodical and irregular visits of Japanologists from abroad, who help them to expand their knowledge on Japan. In FLACSO, a national research institute, there is a specialist in the history of Japanese education who has published a

comparative study of the education in Japan and Argentina and is working now in the field of higher education in Meiji Japan.

In Colombia, in the Asian Studies Center, University of Los Andes, there is an expert in Japanese literature, thought, and history.

Going back to Mexico, both El Colegio's affiliates in Michoacan (COLMICH) and in the North Border (COLEF), in Tijuana, have Japanese studies in their programs: in Michoacan, the only research-professor devoted to Japan is an expert in Japanese philosophy; and in Tijuana, the professor in charge of the Japanese studies section is an specialist in Japanese poetry and its influence on Mexican haiku.

Trends and tendencies

In Latin America we do not have an association of specialists in Japanese studies, but we have the International Association of Asian and African Studies (ALADAA), which has become the best place to gather the specialists on Japan of the sub-continent every two years, during the international conference held in an Latin American country, different each time. Besides that, we have local associations of ALADAA which organize national conferences every two years.

In the last International Conference of ALADAA, held in Acapulco, Mexico, in November 1992, there was a section devoted to Japanese Literature which gathered twelve participants from Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. The Director of the Japan Foundation in Mexico attended the sessions. Although the topics varied from the vision of Meiji Japan through travel diaries written by Latin American visitors, the world of some Japanese novelists of the Meiji Period, and Japanese haiku and its influence on modern Latin American poetry, there was one common element: Meiji Japan.

In the same Conference, there was a discussion panel on the rôle of the Japanese community in Latin American countries since the beginning of the century; and a special session on the rôle of Seki Sano in the development of modern theater in Mexico.

All this leads us to think that in the fields of literature, history, and thought, what matters for Latin Americans specialists now is Japan and its modernizing process. A recapitulation of the research currently being done in Latin America shows us the following authors and topics:

Ogai Mori; Sôseki Natsume; Kyôka Izumi; Japanese naturalistic novel and Katai Tayama; the Japanese confessional novel; Japanese ghost stories of the Meiji and Taisyô Periods and their Mexican counterparts; José Juan Tablada (a Mexican poet) and the Japanese haiku; transpacific contacts and the impressions of Latin American travelers who visited Japan in the Meiji Period; Seki Sano and modern Mexican theater; Kitarô Nishida and modern Japanese philosophy; Japanese immigration to Latin American countries; the history of Japan's education system; the construction of Tokyo as a modern city and its rôle in the shaping of a urban sensibility; etc. . .

The conclusion seems to be that what matters to Latin American scholars is the modernizing process that took place in Japan at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, and the similarities (or dissimilarities) with the same process in their own

countries.

The transpacific contacts in modern times have two faces: the Latin American travelers who visited Japan during the Meiji era could be described as the first "Japanologists," the pioneers of a discipline that almost one century later is beginning to show some modest, but important results, in the academic field. By contrast, the Japanese presence in Latin America, through its immigrants, was an important factor in the modernizing process.

In the field of literature, Meiji Japan seems to capitalize the attention of the scholars, one of the reasons being that the understanding of the process through which Meiji literature went in order to become "modern" could explain the modernization of Latin American literature itself. One of the topics of discussion most popular these days among the specialists is the emergence of the **genbun icchi** movement, which signified a revolution in the Japanese literary world. But in this respect the ignorance of classical Japanese among scholars constitutes a handicap that should be rectified precisely because **genbun icchi** was a reaction against the traditional way of writing considered not suitable for expressing the winds of change brought by modernity.

Another topic of interest, at least for Mexico, is the similarities that exist between Meiji Japan and the Porfiriato (the long period of Mexican history, at the end of the 19th century, and the beginning of 20th century, when Porfirio Diaz ruled the country with an iron fist under the motto "order and progress"). A Mexican scholar currently living in Japan is making a comparative study of Meiji graphic artists and the work of José Guadalupe Posada, the great Mexican illustrator of the turn of the century.

2. Problems for the expansion of the research on Japanese literature and history in Mexico and Latin American countries

(a) The Japanese language problem:

In Mexico and Latin American countries, there are not enough undergraduate programs that include the teaching of the Japanese language. Usually, the students who want to specialize in Japanese literature and history, for which the language is of fundamental importance, must begin from zero, after graduation, when they are already in their mid-20s. There are many institutions where Japanese is taught, but usually the students attending those courses are there for practical reasons (they only seek basic oral communication) and not because they want to become experts in Japan, vis-à-vis the extremely difficult features of the language, especially in its written form. Considering that becoming an expert takes at least fifteen years, those attending the postgraduate program at, let's say, El Colegio de México, will attain a solid level at the age of 40.

Currently, there are three generations working in the field of Japanese literature and history: the veterans, in their 50s; the mid-generation, in their 40s; and the recent graduates, in their 30s.

For those seeking to become experts in the field of Japanese economy and international

relations (two of the most popular disciplines in these days), for which the language is not of fundamental importance due to the fact that most of the literature is available in English, things are much simpler: with a rather superficial knowledge of Japanese, they can become experts.

(b) The problem of finding a job after graduation:

At the time of choosing a career, a high percentage of people think in practical terms: there is a job market and there are salaries according to the job. A time-and-energy-consuming career with a bad remuneration is not a good investment. To become an expert in Japanese literature or history is a time-and-energy-consuming task, and the remuneration is not good. Academic work in Latin America does not have a good reputation as a money-making activity. Thus, only people with a real vocation for academic work will choose Japanese literature or history as a life-long career. These people are very few, but exist. It is our task, with the support of the Japanese institutions, to attract these people.

The other aspect of the problem is the lack of high-level educational institutions with Japanese studies programs in their curricula. Thus, people with a solid background in Japanese literature or history must have a different job to earn one's living and confine their expertise to the bounds of a hobby (as in Argentina); or, in the best of the cases, have an isolated course on their subject of specialization in a much broader program of studies.

(c) The problem of lack of resources:

In Latin American countries (with perhaps Mexico as a limited exception) the lack of financial resources for disciplines that apparently are not in consonance with the national plans of development is a serious obstacle for the pursuit of such a highly specialized discipline as Japanese studies. Although Japan is perceived as a great economic and industrial power, which could eventually become a major business partner (thus the importance of studying its economic and administrative practices), Japanese culture is still thought of as being an exotic, non-universal culture.

Fortunately enough, in Latin America there still exist individuals interested in the study of Japanese culture as an alternative way of understanding a civilization process different from that of Europe. With the effort of institutions such as El Colegio de México and the support of Japanese cultural organizations, these people should be attracted to secure the future of Japanese studies in Latin America.

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