

Japanese Studies and Area Studies at the University of Leipzig

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Introduction

The Institute of Japanese Studies (Japanologie) at the University of Leipzig, together with the Institute of Chinese Studies, is part of the East Asian Studies Department (Ostasiatisches Institut). The Institute of Japanese Studies, as it exists today, is relatively new. It was established in 1996 with the appointment of Steffi Richter as a professor. It is focused on research and teaching on Japanese language, culture, history, and society with an approach that is primarily based in cultural studies. Its teachings and research cover the modern and contemporary periods in particular (from the eighteenth century onwards).

Although the current institute is relatively new, Japanese language has been taught at the University of Leipzig (founded in 1409) since the nineteenth century, when the linguist and sinologist Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–93)¹ offered a course on Japanese grammar. Professor von der Gabelentz was followed by his successor August Conrady (1864–1925). The history of Japanese Studies in Leipzig is intertwined with the historical and social changes that have characterized this city and Germany as a whole: the establishment of the Nazi Regime; World War II; the postwar period with the establishment of the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, 1949–90) and the renaming of the university as Karl–Marx Universität in 1953; the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; the reunification of the two German states and the socio-economic changes derived from these latter events.² Although this is a fascinating history, space limitations and the nature of this article do not allow me to delve into its details.³ Thus here I will focus instead on the most recent developments of the Institute of Japanese Studies, in particular its interaction with the newly created Centre for Area Studies.

1 The philosopher Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944) met with von der Gabelentz during his stay in Leipzig.

2 The name of the university was changed back to Universität Leipzig in 1991.

3 For a detailed analysis of the history of Japanese Studies in Leipzig, see the inaugural lecture by Steffi Richter, “Japanologie in Leipzig—was war, was sein wird” http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~japan/cms/uploads/media/antrittsrede_richter.pdf, and the website of the Institute at <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~japan/cms/index.php?id=94>. After the 3/11 disaster in Japan in 2011, the Institute of Japanese Studies has actively contributed to disseminating information on this topic in the German language. See <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~japan/cms/index.php?id=107> under “Situation in Japan” (accessed February 14, 2014).

The Institute of Japanese Studies offers both undergraduate and graduate studies. Among the subjects taught, an important place is occupied by teaching and research on media and popular culture. For example, a research project on manga, which also involved the Faculty of Manga at Kyoto Seika University 京都精華大学, has been part of the research conducted by the Institute. The results of this project were published by the University of Leipzig in a volume edited by Steffi Richter and Jacqueline Berndt, *Reading Manga: Local and Global Perceptions of Japanese Comics* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006). This was followed by an international symposium in collaboration with the Centre for Area Studies in October 2010. The symposium, “Why ‘Manga Studies’ Matter: East Asian Perspectives onto a Global Phenomenon,” was attended by both faculty members and students of the two universities and, as a faculty member of the Centre for Area Studies, I myself presented a paper titled “Japanese Religions through Manga: a Study-of-Religions Approach,” which is based on the research I have been conducting at the Centre for Area Studies on Japanese religions, popular culture, and the media in a global context. This symposium was one of the outcomes of the collaboration between the Institute for Japanese Studies and the Centre for Area Studies, which began with the establishment of this research center in 2009 and my appointment as a senior researcher there in 2010.

Publications from teaching staff of the Institute of Japanese Studies are numerous, but a few examples bear mentioning here: Steffi Richter, *Das Ent-Zweiung: Wissenschaftliches Denken in Japan zwischen Tradition und Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1994); and “Das Ende des ‘endlosen Alltags’? Post-Fukushima als Japan-Diskurs,” in S. Richter and L. Gebhardt (eds.), *Japan nach “Fukushima”: Ein System in der Krise* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012); and Kobayashi Toshiaki, *Nishida tetsugaku o hiraku* 西田哲学を開く (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2013).

The Centre for Area Studies (CAS) and Japanese Studies in Leipzig

As mentioned above, a new development at the University of Leipzig has been the establishment of the Centre for Area Studies (hereafter, CAS) in 2009, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It belongs to the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philosophy and is an interdepartmental and interdisciplinary centre devoted to research on different areas of the world. The main research program of CAS is “Cultural Encounters and Political Orders in a Global Age,” although other projects are undertaken there as well.⁴ The centre aims to combine area studies with systematic disciplines, such as anthropology, religious studies, law, history, and political science.

4 For an overview of CAS, see its official website at <https://www.uni-leipzig.de/~cas/>.

Depending on their area of expertise, its faculty members collaborate with different departments and institutes including East Asian Studies, African Studies, Middle East Studies, and so on. In my case, I offered courses on different aspects of Japanese religions in contemporary society and collaborated with the institutes of East Asian Studies, Religious Studies, and the Global Studies program.

My research at CAS was devoted to Japanese religions, popular culture, and the media. In particular, I conducted research and writing a book on the use of popular culture formats, notably manga and *anime*, as well as the use of famous pop icons (e.g., Hello Kitty) by Japanese religious institutions, and the creation of these institutions' own pop icons. This was analyzed by taking into account global dynamics and issues of secularization and the challenges religion is facing in a consumerist society. Together with more "classical" topics, such as "Women and Buddhism in East Asia," "Religion and the Secular in Japan," and "Religion, Art and Culture in Modern Japan," I have offered various courses focused on Japanese religions and popular culture. Some of the courses I have offered include "Religion, Manga and Anime," "Religion and Film," and "The Internet and Global Religious Communication," with a significant portion of the latter two related to religion in Japan, including Buddhism, Shinto, and New Religious Movements.

The collaboration with the Institute of Japanese Studies and East Asian Studies has been productive in a variety of ways: teaching, research, organization of conferences, and invited lectures. In this context, I collaborated with, among others, Professor Steffi Richter (Japanese Studies), Professor Philip Clart (Chinese Studies), Professor Christoph Kleine (Study of Religion),⁵ and Professor Matthias Middell (Global Studies). Within the framework of the CAS Public Lectures Series, (in 2011, for example), I invited Professor Isomae Jun'ichi 磯前順一 (Nichibunken) and Professor Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝 (Kokugakuin University) as guest speakers to talk about the concept of religion, and religion, and media in Japan, respectively. This collaboration is ongoing and has resulted in the publication of their two papers based on these two lectures in the peer-reviewed journal I founded in 2011, *Journal of Religion in Japan* (JRJ), published by Brill. Moreover, it was thanks to the collaboration with Professor Isomae, to whom I would like to express my gratitude, that I have been able to finalize my research residency at Nichibunken (International Research Center for Japanese Studies).

With regard to networks and collaborative research, one of the main goals of CAS is to overcome a biased Eurocentric approach to area studies, and to collaborate extensively

5 I closely collaborate with the Institute of the Study of Religion in Leipzig, both for teaching and research.

with colleagues coming from universities and research centers worldwide. In the field of Japanese studies, for example, collaboration and intellectual exchange with Japanese colleagues is fundamental to a better (and mutual) understanding of subjects related to this discipline.

Research and Education regarding Japan-related Subjects

Japan-related subjects are taught at the Institute for the Study of Religion (Religionswissenschaft) and the Global and European Studies Institute. With regard to the former, since the appointment of Christoph Kleine as a professor of the History of Religion (Buddhism) at the University of Leipzig in 2008, this institute has offered courses and undertaken research on religion in Japan.⁶ The field in Leipzig is still new and research courses and supervision of students on various aspects of Japanese religions are offered by Professor Kleine, PD Dr. Ugo Dessì, and myself. Our research interests include Japanese religions (especially Buddhism) in medieval and premodern Japan, and the concept of secularity in premodern Japan (Kleine); Japanese religions and globalization, and Shin Buddhism (Dessì); as well as Japanese religions, popular culture, art and the media; and the Gion matsuri in Kyoto (Porcu). Since 2012, Professor Kleine and PD Dr. Dessì have been involved in the project “Japanese Religions within the Context of Globalization and Secularization,” supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

Among the most recent publications on Japanese religions by teaching staff of the University of Leipzig are the following: Christoph Kleine, “Religion and the Secular in Premodern Japan from the Viewpoint of Systems Theory,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 2/1 (2013): 1–34; Ugo Dessì, *Japanese Religions and Globalization* (Routledge, 2013); and Elisabetta Porcu, “Observations on the Blurring of the Religious and the Secular in a Japanese Urban Setting,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 1/1 (2012): 83–106;⁷ and “Pop Religion in Japan: Buddhist Temples, Icons and Branding,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (2014).

The Global and European Studies Institute (GESI) offers a Master’s Program in Global Studies. Students have the opportunity to attend courses on different areas of the world that are taught by, among others, the teaching staff of the Centre for Area Studies. Japan-related subjects are offered within the module “Regions in Globalization

6 I am referring here to the recent history of the Institute. However, we should mention that in 1915 the Lutheran pastor Hans Haas (1868–1934) was appointed professor of religious studies in Leipzig. He spent about ten years in Japan as a missionary and was a specialist in Japanese religions.

7 This paper is currently being translated into Japanese at the request of the 21st Century Center for Excellence Program at Kokugakuin University, Tokyo.

Processes: Asia and the Middle East.” Two main fields are covered: different aspects of Japanese religions in connection with contemporary society and culture (Porcu); and politics in Japan (Ganseforth). The students who attend the Master’s program come from all over the world and from a great variety of disciplines, and thus have different methods and interests. Just to provide an example of how varied classes can be, I have had students attending my courses hailing from Spain, Azerbaijan, Armenia, China, Taiwan, South Africa, India, Germany, the U.S., Brazil, Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia, South Africa and New Zealand. The great majority of them do not have a background in Japanese studies (and/or religious studies and East Asian studies). Therefore, we need to balance and tailor our classes in a way that is understandable to any student and, at the same time, engage and motivate not only them, but also students coming from Japanese studies.

Conclusion

As we can see from this brief summary, today’s Institute of Japanese Studies at the University of Leipzig has a relatively short history, having been established in 1996. However, the history of Japan-related teaching—mainly Japanese language—dates back to the nineteenth century, via the classes offered by a famous sinologist. The close connection between Japanese studies and Chinese studies in the Department of East Asian Studies continues today. This is, however, not the only collaboration between Japanese Studies and other institutes at the University of Leipzig. I have sketched a brief outline on the collaboration with three other institutes and research centers with which my work in Leipzig is connected: the newly established Centre for Area Studies (CAS), and the Institutes of the Study of Religion, and of Global and European Studies. Teaching and research related to Japan are offered there and students coming from backgrounds other than Japanese studies attend courses related to manga and *anime*, religion and the secular in Japan, women’s issues and Buddhism, Japanese politics, Japanese media, and so on. Moreover, collaboration and exchanges with Japanese universities and institutes have been—and would continue to be—beneficial to the growth of Japan-related teaching and research both at the University of Leipzig and in universities and research facilities in Europe.