

Japanese Studies in Latvia: A Historical Perspective and the Present Situation

Agnese Haijima

The year 2011 was special in terms of Japanese Studies in Latvia and Latvia's diplomatic relations with Japan. It marked the 90th anniversary of Japan's recognition of Latvia's *de jure* independence, the 20th anniversary of the renewal of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and the 20th anniversary of academic research on Japan in Latvia.

Asian Studies in Europe started in the age of great geographical discoveries when, beyond the borders of Europe, there were discovered cultures built on different concepts and value systems. In Latvia the beginning of Asian Studies can be traced back to the nineteenth century, but interest in separate Far Eastern cultural aspects can be dated to no later than the eighteenth century.

At first Asian culture was highly praised among the aristocratic class in Latvian society. In the eighteenth century nobility in Latvia used objects of Far Eastern origin for interior decoration in their manors and castles. One example is the eighteenth century oriental porcelain collection found in Rundale castle. Another instance is the presentation of Japanese wood carvings in 1869 by Georg Wilhelm Timm (1820–95) to Riga City Museum (LNMA 2012). Timm was an outstanding painter and ceramist himself, the son of the Riga city mayor, who traveled extensively in Europe and went as far as Algeria (Rudzīte 2008: 58). He possessed a collection of art works, among which were objects from the Far East. Japanese influence was seen not only in interior decoration but also in gardens. F. Vagner's 20 hectare garden in the Tukuma district, established in 1890, is still well preserved, and boasts 103 species of exotic plants from the Far East region (Ozola 2008: 4). From this we can surmise that certain aspects of Far Eastern cultures were studied in Latvia and put into practice by some enthusiasts.

In the nineteenth century, there was no way to study Oriental languages in Latvia, so the first specialists in this field were trained in universities of nearby countries. The earliest known Orientalist who also learned the Japanese language was Otto Karl Julius Rosenberg (1888–1919), born in Friedrichstadt (now Jaunjelgava), Latvia. He attended St. Petersburg University where from 1906 he studied Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Tibetan, Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese. Among his instructors were: T.I. Stcherbatsky, S.F. Oldenburg from St. Petersburg University; Herman Jacobi (1850–1937) who taught Rosenberg during his stay in Bonn; and Rudolf Lange (1850–1933), professor of Japanese Studies in Berlin. In 1912 Rosenberg was sent to Japan where he spent four years studying

Buddhist philosophy and other Japanese religions. He defended his thesis, “Introduction to the Study of Buddhism from Chinese and Japanese Sources,” in 1918, the same year he published *The Problems of the Buddhist Philosophy* in Russian. The latter was published in German in 1924 and brought him worldwide recognition. His main topic of research was “Abhidharmakosha” (The Encyclopedia of Adhidharma written by Vasubandhu between the fourth and fifth century), the fundamental source for the study of Buddhist canonical philosophy (Михайлова 1987: 95). In Japan Rosenberg published a Japanese dictionary that used a graphic system for organizing characters (Rosenberg 1916). This system was created by P. Vassiliev (1818–1900) and later improved upon by Rosenberg, who was the first to publish it in a dictionary format. This system is still the base for all Chinese–Russian dictionaries published in Russia. In August 1919, Rosenberg took an active part in “The First Buddhist Exhibition” at the Russian Museum in Petrograd. That same year, he moved to Tallinn where he died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-one, achieving much in his short life (Popova 2011: 1–8).

Another distinguished personality is Peter Schmidt (Pēteris Šmits, 1869–1938) whom we consider as the first Latvian Sinologist. Schmidt was born into a peasant family in 1869 in the Rauna district of Latvia. From 1892 he studied Chinese and Manchurian languages at the University of St. Petersburg; he later learned Chinese and taught Russian at Peking University. From 1899 he taught Chinese and Manchurian languages at the Vladivostok Far East Institute, and in 1918 he was appointed to the position of professor there; he became Dean of the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy at the same institution in 1919. Since he spent the beginning of his career in Russia, he is also known as the founder of a new Russian school in Sinology. Schmidt devised a new method of teaching Chinese, which went on to be used in Russian universities. He was the first European scholar who visited almost all the nations in Siberia and the Far East who actually spoke the Manchurian language, and his research and publications proved that Tungus–Manchurian languages belong to a separate language group. In 1920 Schmidt returned to Latvia, but despite his outstanding knowledge and experience, he was not allowed to open an Asian Studies department at the University of Latvia. He therefore poured his energy mainly into the Latvian language and folklore studies and became the dean of the faculty of Philology and Philosophy at the University of Latvia. Schmidt produced many articles and books, among which the most impressive is his first article, “History of Chinese Art” in the Latvian language, along with articles in the University’s magazine *Raksti* about the Oroches, Negidals and Samagirs languages; he was also the first author of Chinese (1902) and Manchurian (1907) language textbooks in the Latvian language (Šmite 2005: 1–4). Schmidt’s works can be found in the Scientific Library of the University of Latvia, the National Library of Latvia and the Libraries of Latvian Academy of Art, as well as the Latvian Museum of Fine Arts.

Exchange in various fields between Latvia and Japan improved after Latvia gained its independence in 1918 and Japan established a diplomatic mission in Riga. An important factor in Latvia's ensuing positive relations with Japan was that Japan was one of the first countries to recognize Latvia's *de facto* independence in 1918 and *de jure* independence in 1921, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The first Consul of Honour in Japan was Janis Andrejs Ozolins (Jānis Andrejs Ozoliņš) who from 1917 till 1922 worked as a professor teaching aesthetics and other subjects. After he left, Hanss Hunter, a British citizen, was the Latvia Consul of Honour in Tokyo, from 1925 till 1940. Ozolins had mastered the Japanese language in Japan and worked as a translator of Japanese literature under the penname Andris Burtnieks (Katajs 2003: 287–88).

Japan sent envoys to Riga starting from 1923, six years before the opening of the diplomatic mission in 1929. Shiraishi Masaaki has noted that an important reason for opening a diplomatic mission in Riga for Japan was that Latvia was in a convenient geographical and strategic position for gathering information about the Soviet Union as well as Germany and Poland (Shiraishi 2011: 88). In the interwar period Japan had joint espionage networks against the Soviet enemy with the Baltic States, Finland, Poland, and Sweden. General Makoto Onodera, a military attache, and his wife were stationed in Riga from 1936 to 1938 in order to collect intelligence on the Soviet Union: "He received abundant information from the Latvian and Estonian General Staff Intelligence [...]. Through such joint activities the Japanese infiltrated the Soviet Union with extensive networks of agents" (Burds 2007: 276–77).

In my interview with Professor Shiraishi, he also commented that because of the above mentioned reasons Japan was interested in establishing a diplomatic mission in Riga earlier than 1929, but after the end of World War I in Europe many new countries were established, and Japan in the 1920s was involved in wars and suffered devastating losses in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, so it could not manage to organize and finance many diplomatic missions at once (Shiraishi 2011). Japanese researcher Sonoko Shima wrote that Latvia–Japan relations in this time were marked by three features: first, Japan's policy towards Latvia between wars followed that of the Great Powers; second, Japan's government had an interest in Latvia's economy; and third, the Japanese still had very little information about Latvia and other Baltic states (Shima 2004).

Aside from political and economic reasons, Latvia of the 1920s appeared to the Japanese as a land of European culture. Ayumi Kurosawa, who has written several books on Latvia in Japanese, wrote about the impressions of the Japanese military attache Onodera's wife Yuriko (1906–1998), who traveled forty-two days first by ship from Tokyo to Marseilles in France, then by train and car to Riga. In old age, Yuriko wrote in her travel memoirs vivid descriptions of the life and people in 1930s Riga—the sound of the

carriages in the cobbled streets of Old Riga, the courtly manners of the city's citizens and their love of parties. She described Riga's culture as the "culture of the ballroom" (Klusuma ielec varde 2007). Shiraishi backs this up in his research, noting that the Japanese diplomat Ueda, who worked in Riga in the 1930s, studied ballroom dancing because he did not want to feel inferior (Shiraishi 2011).

Japanese appreciation of Riga's culture was not a one-way street; Latvians also made efforts to explore Japan. The University of Latvia's professor Arveds Švābe (1888–1959), who took an interest in Japanese and Chinese poetry while working in a post office in Manchuria, published in 1921 a translation of Japanese poetry entitled *Japāņu Lirika*, followed by *Gong-Gong*, a collection of Japanese *tanka* in 1922. In 1938 he came out with a selection of Japanese poetry in Latvian translation titled *Sayonara* (Latvian Encyclopedia 2003: vol. 21, entry 41947–41952). The introduction to the book included his analysis of Japanese poetry, as well as some of his own *tanka*. In this way, Japanese literature was one of the first mediums through which Latvians learned about Japan. In 1927 Roberts Kroders translated Arishima Takeo's novel *This Woman* into Latvian, while Antons Birkerts and Arkādijs Vizma translated Japanese poetry into other European languages (Katajs 2003: 288).

After the Soviet occupation in 1940 Latvia was not allowed to maintain direct contact with Japan, but a limited amount of activity was possible, including in the field of translation of Japanese literature. One figure who contributed much to the appearance of Japanese literary works in Latvian during the Soviet years was Edgars Kattai. In total, he has translated about twelve books from Japanese, three from Chinese, as well as penning books introducing contemporary Japan, Japanese and Chinese culture, and historical memoirs. During his long career he has worked on the development of Japanese–Latvian relations, acting as a translator for delegations after the renewal of diplomatic ties, and since the 1960s he has visited Japan more than fourteen times.

Edgars Kattai has a strong, highly individual personality and has accumulated a rich life experience in the course of his experiences in different countries under various regimes. He was born to Latvian parents in 1923 in Manchuria (modern-day China), where his father, a young Latvian from the Valka district, was working on the Manchuria railway. Kattai entered North Manchuria University and graduated from the Faculty of Economics. From 1945 to 1950 he worked as a translator in Harbin and taught the Chinese language at Harbin Polytechnical Institute. In 1955 he arrived in Latvia and put to use his knowledge of multiple languages, translating books from Japanese and Chinese languages into Latvian.

In 1959 he published *The Speaking Tree*; in 1975 he translated Kawabata Yasunari's *In the Kingdom of Snow* and *One Thousand Cranes*; in 1982 Komatsu Sakyō's *The Sink-*

ing of Japan; in 1986 *Japanese Detective* (a collection of Japanese detective stories by Edogawa Ranpo, Matsumoto Seichō, and Morimura Seiichi); in 1990 Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *Ogata's Sacred Report*; in 1994 *Japan: Yesterday and Today*; later followed by the translations of Ihara Saikaku's *Five Stories about Five Women Who Loved Love* (2006); *American School* (stories by Japanese writers, 2003); Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *In Praise of shadows* (2000), and a collection of his stories; a travel guidebook *Japan All Around* (2003); and in 2010 a translation of Japanese folktales *Zidkoka zaros*. In 2003 Kattai published a book simply titled *Japan*, which introduced different aspects of Japanese culture and which, despite its high price of 10 lats, sold out instantly.

In 1986 another Latvian translator Guna Eglite published a translation of Japanese haiku titled *The Shade of the Grass, the Shade of the Sparrow*, it became a hit in literary circles and gained instant acclaim among the general public. Because the Latvian public expressed this love of Japanese literature, other translators joined the scene: in 1997 Ingūna Beķere translated Mishima Yukio's *The Golden Temple*; in 2004 Ilze Paegle translated Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*. Many more translations have followed, and with Murakami Haruki's novels being the most popular.

If Japanese literature has been translated extensively into Latvian, then only a few Latvian classical works have been translated into Japanese. Among them are the poetry of Janis Rainis, Andrejs Pumpurs epos *Lacplesis* and a Latvian fairy tale. In all three cases translations were done from the Russian language. Hopefully in the future there will be more translations of Latvian classical literature (Katajns 2003: 289).

Apart from activities in the field of literature, the Soviet regime allowed for limited cultural exchange with Japan within the framework of sister cities. In June 1974 Riga became sister city with Kobe, when the leaders of both cities (G. Ziemeļis and Miyazaki Takuo) signed a friendship agreement in Riga that resulted in many successful projects. Activities included frequent choir visits on both sides from where many Japanese gained the impression of Latvians as a singing nation, as well as visits from dance troupes, sports teams, artists, painters, and journalists. In the center of Riga there is a clock presented by Kobe showing the time both in Riga and Kobe. At present gardening specialists from Kobe are making a Japanese Garden in Riga in the area of the former Meteo Park. In 2010 the Kobe city delegation arrived in Riga. I was their official interpreter and witnessed the laying of the foundation stone of this garden. Previously, Riga city gardeners planted birch and fir trees in Kobe city.

In the years of the Soviet occupation, a number of Latvians went to study at the best universities in St. Petersburg and Moscow, which specialized in different Oriental languages and cultures. At the Moscow Institute of Eastern Studies, Sigma Ankrava and Viktors Ivbulis studied Indology, Leons Taivans specialized in Indonesian studies, and

Janis Sikstulis in Arab language and culture. Peteris Pildegovics learned the Chinese language in Russia's Far East, Vladivostok. Later these people returned to Latvia and towards the end of the 1980s met together and started to make plans for the establishment of an Asian studies department at the University of Latvia.

Their chance came in 1991 after the renewal of Latvia independency. Right away, in September 1991, the Department of Asian Studies was established at the University of Latvia, as part of the Faculty of Foreign languages. This was also the first academic establishment in the Baltic states with the purpose of studying Asia and North Africa. Prof. Viktors Ivbulis became the department's first head. Thus it is that Latvia celebrated the 20th anniversary of Oriental studies in 2011. The department started its work with a two-year Japanese language college led by Edgars Kattai; later in 1993 B.A. programs were established for Japanese and Chinese languages. For the first few years Japanese was taught by Edgars Kattai and Brigita Baiba Krumina. Krumina had mastered Japanese language through self-study, and before her activities in the university she had established a Japanese language and culture school for pre-university level learners. The following years saw new specialists join the university. In 2000, Krumina, together with her students, completed a Latvian-Japanese dictionary (Krumina 2000) as well as translations of Japanese literature.

Chinese at Latvia University was taught by Peteris Pildegovics, his son Andrejs Pildegovics and Ina Forande, who had mastered the Chinese language at St. Petersburg University. Peteris Pildegovics is one of the best Sinologists in Latvia who, while working in the Latvia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prepared the opening of Latvia Embassy in China, for a period of time served as the Latvian ambassador to China, in January 2010 published a Chinese–Latvian dictionary and is at present the chair of the University's Confucius Institute. After the B.A. program for Chinese studies at the University was established, in 1994 the first group of B.A. Sinology students, thanks to the diplomatic success of Peteris Pildegovics who had negotiated scholarships with the Chinese government, were sent to study China, among them I myself.

After my return from studies in China, I started to study the Japanese language and Edgars Kattai was my first Japanese language teacher in Latvia. He possesses a keen, sometimes sarcastic, sense of humor that demonstrates his perceptiveness of his surroundings. In his lessons his students were never bored, given that sometimes instruction was given in the form of anecdotes. Edgars Kattai always supported me, whether by helping me to write letters to Japan or by writing recommendations for scholarships to study in Japan. Despite the sincerity of the teacher, the mastering of Japanese language in Riga at the end of the 1990s was difficult. There was a lack of professional textbooks, very few opportunities to meet native speakers, and close to zero possibility of going to

Japan because of the lack of money and limited student exchange. Japanese language had an elite foreign language status, so if the student was not accepted by one of a few Japanese language instructors in Riga there was no hope for him or her to ever learn the language.

In 1998, being already an M.A. candidate at the University of Latvia, I married a Japanese and came to Japan for the first time, not expecting that I would stay eleven years. After two years of Japanese language studies in Latvia, when I first arrived in Japan I could not understand anything. My real education thus began in the streets of Japan, among Japanese people, but most of all in my Japanese family. Five years later, when through self-study I passed Level 1 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, I was accepted by Nagoya University for their doctoral studies program, with the support of a Monbushō (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) scholarship. This study period in Japan was one of the hardest in my life, given the volume of academic study, combined with taking care of two young children, working, and other personal problems. It took another five and half years for me to complete my doctoral dissertation and gain my Ph.D. degree in philology with a specialization in Japanese language and culture, the first in Latvian history given to a Latvian scholar.

During my stay in Japan, Asian studies in Latvia continued to develop and so did relations between the two countries. In 1996 Japan opened an information center in Latvia. In 2000 the Japanese Embassy was opened in Latvia, while the year of 2006 marked two major events: the opening of the Latvian Embassy in Tokyo and Their Majesties' visit to Riga. From 1998 until 2003, the head of the Department of Asian Studies was Professor Jelena Staburova, a sinologist and graduate of St. Petersburg Asia Institute who had arrived in Latvia after marrying a Latvian. She has translated the Chinese classics *Lunyu* and *Laozi* into Latvian, and written books on Chinese philosophy and Latvia–China–Taiwan relations.

A new Japanese specialist who had studied Japanese language in Germany, Ilze Paegle, started work at the University of Latvia in the 1990s and laid the basis for a new B.A. program for Japanese Studies. At the same time she continued translating Japanese literature. In 2006 she translated Tanizaki Junichirō's novels *Naomi* and *The Key*. Unfortunately she left Latvia after marrying an Armenian.

In 2003 Professor Leons Gabriels Taivans, a theologian and Indonesian studies specialist, became the new head of the Department of Asian Studies. In his youth, he experienced many hardships in obtaining a higher education during the Soviet occupation. Being the son of ex-Minister of Education and Culture in the independent Latvia government and later a pastor Leons Taivans (1896–1969), he was forbidden to enter the

highly prestigious Moscow University to pursue Asian Studies. In order to “improve” his documents for KGB checks, Taivans went to Russia, worked in a factory for three years, and mastered Russian. When he handed in his documents for university entrance, he falsely presented himself as a Russian from a working family. He was accepted into Moscow University’s Faculty of Indonesian Studies. When Russian authorities discovered his real nationality several years later, he was forbidden to go to Indonesia for studies (Haijima 2012). Despite numerous difficulties, he received his doctoral degree in history from Moscow University in 1991. Taivans is the author of six books in Latvian and Russian. At present he enjoys a large following among his students in the University of Latvia, and often appears in interviews with the media in Latvia commenting on issues concerning Asian countries.

With Taivans’ energetic organization of the Asian studies department, new specialists were attracted to the university. Japanese language native speakers Sari Hashimoto, Ayumi Kurosawa and Reiko Inoue were invited to teach there. Kurosawa has a distinguished personality. She arrived in Latvia in 1993 to work as a teacher of Japanese language in a Japanese language and culture school. She published two books on Latvia in Japanese. In her first book *Latvia in Sunrays* (Kurosawa 2004: 4–12), she speaks of many curious episodes witnessed in Riga in the 1990s: the empty shops with no goods or a fat cat sleeping on the counter; people wearing gray clothes and rarely smiling; and old trams running through the cobbled streets of central Riga. She criticizes much, but praises some aspects, for example, the famous Latvian handicraft master Jete Užāne, who, being confined to her wheelchair, pours energy into knitting fantastic woolen gloves with traditional Latvian adornments. In her second book *Latvia in Blue Winds*, she writes that she cannot understand why in Latvia countryside guidebooks there are marks with a heart sign. “Are they love hotels?” she wonders. “No, they are toilet signs, because a heart is similar to reversed hips” (Kurosawa 2007).

Apart from native Japanese teachers, Professor Taivans invited other trained specialists to teach Japanese studies modules, including Irina Bezruchenko and Ieva Tretjuka who studied at Waseda University, Liga Rozite who studied at Osaka University, and me.

Taivans has pointed out several hindrances to the development of Asian studies in Latvia, including the tough economic situation of students who are not able to pay for gradually rising tuition costs or who have to work in order to be able to survive, thus taking away from their study time. Other problems include low wages for teachers, which prevents the university from inviting high quality specialists from abroad, insufficient cooperation with universities abroad, and bureaucratic red tape that slows down the introduction of new subjects (Taivans 2007: 1–5).

In 2010 Associate Professor Frank Kraushaar, a specialist in Chinese classical literature, became the head of the Asian Studies at the university. In the same year he founded the Research Centre for East Asian Studies. In 2009 he successfully organized the conference for the European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS). Recently several publications related to Asian Studies have been published by the university, including the University of Latvia magazine *Orientalistika* (Orientalistics) and *Eastwards: Western Views on East Asian Culture* (2008).

Nowadays the scope of Latvia–Japan exchange is broad. It is not possible to mention all the events that have taken place recently, but they include *ikebana* displays, Japanese puppet theater shows, tea ceremony events, exhibitions of Japanese art, *taiko* drum performances, and kimono shows. In 2003 the Japanese government gifted 15 computers to the university. In 2005 the Japan Foundation presented the university books for Japanese language studies and for research on Japan. Since 2009, when a permanent Japanese ambassador was assigned to Riga, a wide range of activities have ensued, stimulating not only diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchange, but also positively influencing the development of Japanese studies in Latvia through financial grants, and academic contacts and events.

At present, Japanese language and culture is the most popular subject among Far Eastern languages and cultures in Latvia. The University of Latvia, which is the center of Japanese studies and academic exchange in Latvia, currently has about 100 students enrolled in Japanese Studies, while at least 50 other students are learning the Japanese language in other educational establishments. The university has academic exchange agreements with several universities in Japan and at least five students go to study in Japan every year. An annual Japanese language speech contest, organized by the University of Latvia and the Embassy of Japan, attracts a large audience in Riga, while a Latvian language speech contest has been held at the Latvian Embassy in Tokyo. During recent years the Japanese Studies program has received more than one hundred books from the Japanese government and a number of Japanese professors have given guest lectures at the university on a wide range of subjects from economy to calligraphy. Although things are gradually developing and the range of activities is expanding each year, there are still many aspects of Japanese studies in Latvia that need to be explored.

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