

Japanese Studies at the University of Belgrade: From a Personal Point of View

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Our lives are usually governed by chances. I will not indulge here in a philosophical debate about whether chances are really random coincidence, or if they are predestined situations and circumstances. But I cannot deny that my career and even my life have been determined by a decision that I made when I was eighteen, and it is one that I have never regretted.

After completing high school in 1985, I had to decide what to study next. Unlike most of my friends, whose interests meandered from medicine to astronomy, the one thing I was sure of from a young age was that I would one day be a teacher. I always found myself helping friends by explaining things to them, so I simply could not see myself in any other profession besides teaching. Added to this was my aptitude for languages, and so I ended up applying to the Faculty of Philology. I only had to decide on which particular language to study. I had been learning English, which was common, since I was five, and I had also learned French and Latin, as well as having attended an Italian language course. Suddenly I hit upon a brilliant idea. I could learn a more exotic language and enjoy exploring the cultural inheritance of the people. And so I decided to study Arabic.

Firmly convinced of the finality of my decision, I entered the Faculty of Philology at Belgrade University. However, I was met with a big surprise. For the first time ever in the former Yugoslavia, Japanese and Chinese Language Studies were offered by the Department of Oriental Studies. I can still remember the butterflies of excitement in my stomach. Japan and China! What could be more exotic than that? At the time there were only two or three TV channels, and of course no computers or other information technologies that are available today, so I did not know much about either of these countries. To be specific, my knowledge mainly came from books on the Far East and history and art lessons. But my imagination soared. Those ancient cultures! What a challenge. I am giving up Arabic! I am going to enroll in...which one? Chinese or Japanese? How could I make a choice I would not regret? Once again, my decision came

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down to chance. At that moment I remembered that I had a friend who had attended a Chinese language course. Well, I thought, I will learn something that no one else knows. *Alea iacta est*. The die was cast. I would enroll in Japanese Language and Literature Studies. I would learn about Japan, Japanese, their culture, art and literature, and then I could pass my knowledge on to the others in my country. I would become a bridge between our peoples.

I have never regretted the decision I made that day. I immediately fell in love with the Japanese language with its complicated writing system, its hierarchical language structure, as well as its fascinating grammar, which sometimes shows similarities with Indo-European languages but is at other times so completely different. All the same, I felt disappointed by the small number of Japanese books that had been translated into Serbian. There were only ten of us there studying Japanese, and as is usually the case, we became fast friends.

But what also brought us together was a completely unexpected situation that threatened to blow up into a serious problem. As we found out later, the creating of both groups, Chinese and Japanese, was based on the ability, enormous effort, and selfless work of one man—Professor Dejan Razic (1935–1986). He is considered to be the first Japanologist in Serbia. After completing Studies in World Literature at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, he studied Japanese and Chinese language and literature at the University of Sydney, where he later worked as a lecturer in Japanese literature, and Chinese and Japanese languages. In 1971 Professor Razic returned to Belgrade, and soon started Japanese and Chinese language courses at Kolarac National University. In 1974 Professor Razic began working at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade as a lecturer in Chinese, and in 1976 in Japanese. It was there in 1982 that he defended his doctoral dissertation, “Naturalism in Modern Japanese Literature,” and was awarded the first doctorate in philology of the Far East in Yugoslavia. A year later he became a teaching professor of Far East Philology in the Department of Oriental Studies. At that time, Chinese and Japanese were only elective courses. His greatest desire was to establish independent Chairs within the Oriental Studies Department. His boundless enthusiasm, hard work and devotion made him succeed. The first students enrolled, with me being one of them.

However, the story does not end there. Life is merciless and Professor Razic became gravely ill. The future of our group became uncertain, but, fortunately for us, this great man was not the only enthusiast who put the welfare of the group first. Professor Ljiljana Markovic (nee Djurovic) managed to defend her doctoral dissertation in Japanese literature, and thanks to this we avoided the fate of being transferred to other departments. But, the next year, a new group of students were unable to enroll in Japanese Studies.

Soon after a new lecturer arrived, Kayoko Yamasaki, who later received her M.A. and Ph.D. from our faculty. We received aid from the Japan Foundation as well, which has continued to send us educational materials and an even more priceless treasure, Japanese teachers.

All ten of us completed our studies successfully. I was the first to graduate (in 1989), and to my great fortune I managed to fulfill my dream. I became a teacher of Japanese Language and Literature Studies, and finally got an opportunity to learn further and to pass my knowledge on to the next generation. I conducted classes for first, second, and third year students of Japanese language, which I am still doing today.

I also began to fall in love with Japanese literature. My favorite writers have always been Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Mori Ōgai, and I have translated their stories. Through intertextual elements in Akutagawa's works, I became interested in Far Eastern Antiquities. I also translated a collection of Ainu folktales (*Chitose no Uepelere*), which brought me another step closer to what I do today. Then I dived into the world of Serbian (Yugoslav) national literature, and my search for international motifs in various traditions started. Many scientists point to the coincidence of ideas, beliefs and customs among different peoples, which have resulted in systematic comparative research on universal themes and motifs. It is especially interesting to find plenty of similarities and common characteristics between geographically distant nations, with entirely disparate cultural, religious and socio-historical backgrounds, as is the case, for example, with the Japanese and Serbian peoples.

My mentor, Professor Kayoko Yamasaki (now Associate Professor) recognized my sensibilities and affinities. She suggested that I write my Master's thesis on the oldest preserved work of the Japanese language, the *Kojiki* (712). At the same time, Professor Yamasaki's husband, Hiroshi Yamasaki Vukelic, a noted translator from Japanese to Serbian and vice versa, proposed to me and to my younger colleagues, Dalibor Klickovic (now Assistant Professor) and Divna Glumac (now Lecturer), to try to translate the *Kojiki*. Our hard work, combined with our shared friendship, lasted seven years, and in 2008 a scientific translation of the earliest Japanese work was published. For our efforts we received a Special Award from the Japanese Literary Translators Association for 2008, and the translation was also shortlisted for the Serbian Literary Translators Association's "Milos Djuric" prize. At the same time my book, *The Sun and the Sword: Japanese Myths in the Kojiki*, was published. It is based on my Master's thesis and deals with international themes and motifs in this work.

Japanese Language and Literature Studies are gradually evolving. Eight teachers, along with constant help from colleagues sent by Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and approximately forty freshmen every year, make for very different circumstances

from when I was a student. Since 2006 the Faculty of Philology has begun the process of accreditation, implementing the Bologna Declaration. This is an ongoing process, but we successfully completed the first, and almost the second rounds. In addition to compulsory subjects related to Japanese language, literature and culture, or some other important subjects like other foreign languages, students can choose elective and optional subjects according to their personal preferences.

I am especially pleased because students respond well to two new subjects brought about by the Bologna process. One is a first year course “Introduction to Japanese literature,” conceived as an opportunity for students to learn about Japanese literature at the beginning of their studies. First of all, our intention is to instruct students about the most important works of Japanese literature. I am responsible for ancient literature (besides the *Kojiki*, I am researching other classical works, and my doctoral dissertation was a comparative study of *Taketori monogatari*). Professor Dalibor Klickovic teaches students about modern Japanese literature (his research areas focus on Akutagawa and Sōseki), and Professor Kayoko Yamasaki reveals the secrets of Japanese poetry, both old and avant-garde, to students. The other new subject is a second year course called “Interpretation of Japanese texts,” delivered by Professors Kayoko Yamasaki and Divna Glumac (a lecturer who is otherwise engaged in linguistic studies). At these classes students are encouraged to express their creativity and to show interest in literary texts.

As a group we also use a variety of extracurricular activities in order to encourage students, such as poetry workshops, with Professor Kayoko Yamasaki as moderator. The rest of us whole-heartedly accept this way of presenting poetry, and students have responded to it warmly.

At present, we are the only place in the region to organize the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). I am proud to have been able to bear witness from the beginning to the development of Japanese Language and Literature Studies in the Faculty of Philology at Belgrade University. It has developed into a serious scientific department, taking great care of its students. Thanks to the Japanese government and various Japanese universities, and in collaboration with the Japanese Embassy in Belgrade, our students are being sent to Japan in order to experience directly the country they are interested in, and to learn as much as they can there, and then to come back home. We need these specialists for the sake of Serbian Japanology. Our first Japanologist, Professor Dejan Razic, also returned home, and thanks to that, we, his successors, were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to enjoy our studies.