

# Japanese Studies in Romania: A Personal Research Profile

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With the enthusiasm of a graduate student who wanted to pursue a teaching career, I started teaching Japanese at Spiru Haret University in 1998. The Japanese Studies programme at Spiru Haret University began in 1992, a year after the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures (present-day Faculty of Letters) had been founded. Nowadays the Faculty of Letters—hosting the Japanese Studies programme—is one of four institutions in Bucharest that teach Japanese language and culture: three private universities (including Spiru Haret University)<sup>2</sup> and one public university (University of Bucharest). Moreover, all the private universities in Bucharest teach Japanese as *fuku-senkō* (minor).

My philological background (a B.A. in Japanese and English Language at Bucharest University) was complemented by a B.A. in Philosophy (culture and religion) at the International Academy for the Study of Religions and Cultures (Bucharest) in 2003. In addition, in 2001 I attained a Master's degree in the Philosophy of Culture at Bucharest University and in 2007 I completed my doctoral degree in Philology at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (Bucharest), one of the leading institutes belonging to the Romanian Academy. I have also been the recipient of a number of scholarships to Japan: in 1994–1995 I had a Monbushō scholarship to study as an undergraduate student at Ochanomizu University (Tokyo), and from June to September 2000 I participated in the Short-Term Training Program for Japanese Teachers at the Japan Foundation (Urawa). In the summer of 2012 I conducted research at Rikkyō University (Tokyo) as a visiting researcher.

Going back in time, my first steps in Japanese studies were, in fact, attempts to translate several Japanese short stories into Romanian. There were already several translations of Japanese literature, some from Japanese, but most of them from English or French. That is why I started translating Mishima Yukio's *Tetsugaku* (1999), Kawabata Yasunari's *Shashin* (2000) and *Arigatō* (2000), Dazai Osamu's *Hashire Merosu!* (2000),

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2 Before 1989, the year that marked the Romanian revolution and the end of communist era, all universities were public universities. After 1989 a number of private universities were formed, alongside public ones.

Abe Kōbō's *Warau Tsuki* (2000) and *Chikuonki* (2000), Satomi Ton's *Tsubaki* (2001) and other short stories. In 2000 I received the "Terra Griphonis" magazine award for literary translation from Japanese. Eventually, a collection of 14 short stories written by Miyazawa Kenji was released under the title *Kai no hi* in 2004. As I stated in the preface to that collection, the book is an array of different short stories bringing together a thematic emphasis on folklore or on the universe of childhood, with a tantalising taste of dreaming about far away places such as marshes, huge frozen lands, deserted mountains, solitary ocean beds or abandoned mills changing overnight into magnificent concert halls. Though working in fits and starts, the art and process of translation has never ceased to fascinate me. For instance, my translation of *Wakare-michi* by Higuchi Ichiyō was published in a well-known Romanian magazine (*Lucefarul de dimineata*) in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the increasing need for Japanese language resources that could be used for practical courses, I was faced with the challenge of producing such materials. In 2002 my first such book was published, called *Romanian-Japanese Conversational Guide* (co-authored with Angela Hondru).<sup>4</sup> A second edition of the book was published in 2005. The goal of the guide was to make direct conversation easier in real life situations, such as going shopping, having fun, talking about the family, the house, the weather, travel, or describing people and jobs and so on. At the end of the *Conversational Guide* there is a Grammar Appendix outlining the main parts of speech in Japanese such as the noun, the adjective, the verb, the case particles, etc. The book proved very useful for elementary or lower-intermediate level students of Japanese.

As I have already mentioned, teaching materials, along with dictionaries, written in Romanian were scarce or limited in scope. In the 2000s, Japanese language students had to resort to Japanese-English or English-Japanese dictionaries, a rather difficult task since this meant that he or she had to master two foreign languages. Such an undesirable situation called for a Japanese Character Dictionary, with accessible information in one's native language. After four years of hard work, I finally published the *Japanese Character Dictionary: Jōyō Kanji* in 2003.<sup>5</sup> In the preface I gave a brief explanation of the history of kanji and a list of radicals with their meanings. The contents of the dictionary were, somehow, standardized: it comprised all the *jōyō* kanji, with the *kun-yomi* and the *on-yomi*, the stroke order, including examples of some compounds in which they are used. In the case of the verbs, the transitive and intransitive pairs were

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3 Morning Star.

4 *Ghid de conversație român-japonez* (Romanian-Japanese Conversational Guide). Iași: Polirom, 2002 (318 pages). ISBN 973-683-892-7.

5 *Dicționar de ideograme japoneze: Jōyō Kanji* (Japanese Character Dictionary: Jōyō Kanji). Bucharest: Universal Dalsi, 2003 (439 pages). ISBN 973-8157-79-x.

underlined with a simple or a dotted line so as to be easily taken apart. At the end of the dictionary, along with several lists of kanji according to the stroke number, there are also two original indexes grouping the kanji by the scientific field in which they are employed (i.e. society > conventions > unities of measurement: 丈, 寸, 合, 尺, 匆, 升, 畝 or science > biology > botany: 咲, 葉, 芝, 麦, 花, 芋, 植, 稻, 生, 豆, etc.) or by resemblance (i.e. 手 vs. 毛; 閉 vs. 閑; 大 vs. 太 vs. 犬). The latter indexes could easily be used as vocabulary exercises connecting different semantic fields (such as art, family, mass-media) or as writing drills that emphasize the differences between several similar characters.

In 2005 another book designed for taking one's first steps in written Japanese followed: *Japanese Language: Introduction to Kana Writing*.<sup>6</sup> The book encourages students to pay attention to kana writing, as the first stage in learning Japanese: hiragana covers 7 units and katakana another 7 units. The novelty of the book consists in the usage of mnemotechnics that link an image of a Romanian word to a given syllable represented by a kana sign. The book also contains appendixes about the evolution of kanji into kana, the look-alike graphemes, *wasei eigo*, and the phonological adaptation of *gairaigo*. The Romanian Ministry of Education listed the book in the bibliography for the high-school teaching syllabus for Japanese language classes, along with the *Japanese Character Dictionary: Jōyō Kanji*.

My interest in folklore studies took shape in 2001 when I became a Ph.D. candidate. The topic of my thesis was a comparison between Japanese and Romanian legends with respect to daytime and nighttime. "Incursiuni în spații nocturne în legende japoneze" (Visiting Nocturnal Spaces in Japanese Legends, 2003)<sup>7</sup> was the first paper to be published within the framework of my research concerning daytime and nighttime. In Japanese legends, nighttime places emphasize ambiguity, uncertainty, blurry shapes or a pending answer. At a physical level, nocturnal places such as caves, wells, abysses, marshes or tombs are characterized by dim light or even by the lack of light. In most of these places the darkness represents the motherly womb that can restore or completely alter the world, projecting the existing elements into new, unexplored dimensions.

Another paper I published was "Visul ca iluminare în povestirile japoneze" (The Illuminating Dream in Japanese Tales, 2006).<sup>8</sup> The paper revolves around the mechanism

6 *Limba japoneză. Introducere în scrierea kana* (Japanese Language. Introduction to Kana). Bucharest: Editura Fundației România de Măine, 2005 (268 pages). ISBN 973-725-415-5.

7 "Incursiuni în spații nocturne în legende japoneze" (Visiting Nocturnal Spaces in Japanese Legends). *Spiru Haret University Annals, Philology Series*, Year V, no. 5. Bucharest: Editura Fundației România de Măine, 2003, pp. 91–102. ISSN 1454-8291.

8 "Visul ca iluminare în povestirile japoneze" (The Illuminating Dream in Japanese Tales). *Anuarul*

of dreaming in Japanese tales. As in Chuang Tzu's anecdote there is a very thin line between dream and reality, therefore the dream is an exercise of attaining enlightenment or of revealing certain aspects about past mistakes. A puzzling dilemma during day can be solved at night with the help a god who emerges in people's dreams, giving useful pieces of advice or even handing down all sorts of things that come in handy afterwards. Moreover, the reality-illusion-revelation relationship sparks off the spiritual awakening and self-awareness, changing perspectives and altering perceptions.

"Atmospheric Change and Dynamic Ambiguity in Japanese Legends," published in 2007,<sup>9</sup> is significant for listing a number of the symbols that emphasize the atmospheric dynamism (weather conditions) such as clouds, storms, fog, or smoke, all regarded as representations of the mutability of things. Clouds are either a barrier between the seen and the unseen world, or a manifestation of evil forces that reside inside them. The unleashed force of the storm can carry people from one world to another, determining a shift in perspective. Related to clouds, fog is a symbol of ambiguity in which old shapes are replaced by new ones. Clouds move on an aerial horizontal axis, while a storm is perceived as a chaotic movement. Unlike a cloud or a storm, the function of fog is that of concealment, not of motion.

Since my previous articles dealt with the nighttime aspects in the legends (the dream, the nocturnal spaces, and the dynamic ambiguity in the atmospheric change), the paper "Illusory Fire in Japanese Folktales: *Kitsune-bi*, *Tengu-bi*, *Oni-bi*, *Hoshi no tama*" (2008)<sup>10</sup> shows a particular interest in the quality of light, especially illusory light. It is well known that in Japanese folklore badgers and foxes can emit light. In addition to the luminous representations such as *kitsune-bi* (fox fire), and *tanuki-bi* (badger fire), there are also *tengu-bi* (*tengu*'s fire), *oni-bi* (demon's fire), and even *hitodama*, the souls of the dead people manifesting as green blue or red fireballs. In some Japanese legends the brightness is represented as mischievous beauty, therefore fire could mean (visual) attraction, but also distraction. The shift from attraction to distraction, from guidance (showing one's way in the woods) to temptation (balls of light leading the traveller astray) brings about the illusory feature in the flame: that of causing deceit and mischief.

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*Institutului de Etnografie și Folclor* (The Yearly Book of Ethnography and Folklore), vol. 17. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2006, pp. 129–39. ISSN 1220-5230.

9 "Atmospheric Change and Dynamic Ambiguity in Japanese Legends." *Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, new series 1. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2007, pp. 19–30. ISSN 0034-8198.

10 "Illusory Fire in Japanese Folktales: *Kitsune-bi*, *Tengu-bi*, *Oni-bi*, *Hoshi no tama*." *Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, New series 1–2. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2008, pp. 107–121. ISSN 0034-8198.

“Foxes and Demonic Possession in Japanese Traditional Culture”(2008)<sup>11</sup> rounds off the cultural symbolism of the fox. It is believed that foxes have magical attributes, including the ability to possess human beings. In medicine, *kitsune-tsuki* is a psychosis unique to Japanese culture. Those who suffer from this condition believe themselves to be possessed by a fox. Symptoms include cravings for *tōfu*, *abura-age*, *azukimeshi*, restlessness, and aversion to eye contact. The victims are typically young women, whom the fox entered beneath their fingernails or through their breasts. Pregnant women are also prone to *kitsune-tsuki*. Exorcism, often performed at some Inari shrines, may induce the fox to leave its host. In Japan, *kitsune-tsuki* was noted as a disease as early as the Heian period and remained a common diagnosis for mental illness until the early twentieth century.

The enlightening features in the construction of a cultural hero expand upon the symbolism of light. Such is the case of Kōbō Daishi, regarded for his combination of historical and folkloric viewpoints. My paper “Kōbō Daishi: What the History Books Do Not Tell”(2009)<sup>12</sup> recalls his invaluable talent as poet, architect and sculptor who persisted in exploring the collective memory especially because of his allegiance to human worries and his emphatic participation in every day life.

“The Japanese Legend as an Interdisciplinary Narrative”(2010)<sup>13</sup> examines the legend as a conveyor of information that concerns subjective human experience. Each legend informs, explains, instructs, warns, or exemplifies through multiple cultural channels that disseminate important messages referring to different scientific fields filtered by folkloric empiricism: geography (emphasizing the local colour); history (creating a depiction of a popular historical hero seen through the eyes of the common people); art (providing imaginary elements about how certain sculptures or paintings have been created); religion (showing the common people’s perspective on religion or on the characters who have shaped spiritual life); agriculture (supplying useful advice about how and when to plant different plants) and so on.

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11 “Foxes and Demonic Possession in Japanese Traditional Culture.” *Spiru Haret University Annals, Philology Series*, Year XI, no. 11. Bucharest: Editura Fundației României de Măine, 2008, pp. 145–62. ISBN 978-973-7849-89-2.

12 “Kōbō Daishi: What the History Books Do Not Tell.” *Spiru Haret University Annals, Philology Series*, Year XI, no. 12, vol. 2. Bucharest: Editura Fundației României de Măine, 2009, pp. 349–64. ISBN 978-973-7849-89-2.

13 “The Japanese Legend as an Interdisciplinary Narrative.” In *Proceedings of the 5th World Congress on the Advancement of Scholarly Research in Science, Economics, Law, and Culture*. New York: Alderton Academic Publishers, 2010, pp. 47–62. ISBN 978-1-935494-09-6.

A particular standout was the book *Diurn și nocturn în legendele japoneze (Daytime and Nighttime in Japanese Legends, 2010)*<sup>14</sup> which includes the findings of my doctoral dissertation. Needless to say, the symbolism of daytime and nighttime centres on the description of time. The calendar and especially time units are to be considered when referring to time perception.

Along with the temporal dimension, space is another hallmark in the symbolism of daytime and nighttime. The horizontal axis of space examines coordinates such as forward/backward or right/left. Nevertheless, when switching to a 3D perspective, the positive vertical axis of ascent (climbing up, flying, imponderability) crosses the negative vertical axis of descent (falling, descending and travelling to the underworld or to the undersea realms). Within the same framework, there are some nighttime places impregnated by shadow and darkness (the forest, the cave, the pit, the abyss or the tomb) as well as daytime types of spaces, fully exposed to the daylight (the field, the ladder or the stairs, and the mountain). The perception of the space can be extended to the spiritual places of soteriology: heaven (as a place of light and bliss) and hell (as a space of agony and infinite darkness).

Apart from the universal time-space coordinates, daytime is defined by the presence of light, whereas nighttime is limited to darkness. Nocturnal attributes refer to shadow, clouds, smoke, and fog. In contrast, the representations of light are associated with fire, embers, candles, lamps, or lead to glowing treasures (including gold and silver) or to ascending symbols such as birds, arrows, trees and windows. The daytime rhythms organize human actions and daily activities, including work. On the other hand, sleep, dream and the process of waiting induce nocturnal impulses. Moreover, the temperature can also be a coordinate adjustable to the daytime and nighttime elements. Even certain feelings could develop in respect with the temperature: love is associated with warmth, while fear is sensed as a chilling emotion.

“The architecture” of day and night can hardly be analyzed into clear-cut units; it rather works by means of opposite pairs: day/night; light/darkness; up/down; warm/cold (*coincidentia oppositorum*). The blending of the nocturnal element with the daytime constituent gives birth to various combinations such as a daytime element in a nocturnal segment (the sun, moon and the stars); a nighttime component in a daytime division (an eclipse); a daytime element in a daytime segment (a rainbow) and a daytime factor in either the nocturnal or the daytime section (lightening, volcanic eruption). The daytime/nighttime elements are also part of the visual system, encompassing visibility and vision.

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14 *Diurn și nocturn în legendele japoneze (Daytime and Nighttime in Japanese Legends)*. Bucharest: Printech, 2010 (469 pages). ISBN 978-606-521-582-5.

In this context, the optic function triggers the image accuracy: clear/unclear; close/distant; reality/illusion. The daytime type characters are perceived as bearers and messengers of light (angels, saints, gods), therefore providing advice and support for the other characters. On the contrary, the nighttime type characters, meaning those who are active at night, are either anthropomorphic (ghosts, *oni*, *kappa*, *umibōzu*, *tengu*, *yamauba*) or zoomorphic (the snake, the mole, headless horse, the bat, the mosquito, the spider, the owl, etc.).

It goes without saying that all these daytime or nighttime types of symbols (no matter whether they are time, space or character related) are to be found in a set of Japanese legends that shed light on their function and attributes. Generally speaking, in almost all these representations, the Japanese culture encourages “the twilight” segment (neither complete darkness nor blinding light), or to be more precise, the moment of entering darkness from light. The dusk ushers in the aesthetical values of ambiguity, mutability, suggestion, fitting in perfectly with the Japanese cultural paradigm. The “praise of shadows” is actually the praise of the manifold reality, a subtle world of in-between sensations and nuances that build up the substance of imagination.

Obviously, the above-mentioned book is not an exhaustive study of all the possible ideas regarding daytime and nighttime. As a follow-up, my paper “The Four Faces of Time in Japanese Folktales”(2011),<sup>15</sup> elaborates on another aspect of this symbolism: the changing seasons. By organizing time in the calendar, the Japanese created meaningful units with accurate moments of time such as the two equinoxes and the two solstices. Spring, summer, autumn and winter build up the four faces of time that compete with each other as pairs of opposites, but, at the same time, complement each other. To the Japanese people, the most important seasonal rhythms are spring (as the time of seeding) and autumn (as the time of harvest). A secondary prominence is assigned to summer (as the time of heat and drought) and to winter (when weird creatures such as the Snow Woman come forth).

In addition to these symbols and motifs regarding daytime and nighttime, I also have written several other contributions to Japanese folklore studies that have not been published yet. For instance, the paper “Tokoyo: A Horizontal Eschatology,” presented at the Symposium of “Constantin Brailoiu,” Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (Bucharest) in 2009 embarks upon decoding an imaginary topos, while “In Search for Chimeras: Hybrids of Japanese Imagination,” presented at International Conference “Japan: Pre-modern, Modern and Contemporary. A Return Trip from the East to the

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15 “The Four Faces of Time in Japanese Folktales.” In *Language and Literature: European Landmarks of Identity*. Pitești: Editura Universității din Pitești, 2011, pp. 369–77. ISSN 1843-1577.

West—Learning in, about and from Japan,” Dimitrie Cantemir University (Bucharest) in 2011 identifies three Japanese chimeras, *nue*, *baku* and *raijū*, and elaborates on their emergence in Japanese folktales.

In the meantime, at the initiative of the Association of the Japanese Language Teachers in Romania, founded in 2005, yearly symposiums have been organized. The paper presented at the First International Symposium of Japanese Linguistics and Methodology combined my doctoral research topic with Japanese linguistics under the title “Glancing Games: Linguistic Games”(2006).<sup>16</sup> The paper was designed to be a rough inventory of idioms concerning the eye (*me*), but, at the same time, it was an attempt to identify the main functions of the eye (*me*) is not a mere perceptive organ (*medama*) that might affect our look (*me-tsuki*) or our visual power (*shiryoku*), but it also stands for observation, attention (*chūmoku*), discrimination, discernment, judgment, insight (*ganshiki*), care, compassion (*dōjō*) and it can influence our point of view (*mikata*), shaping our life experience (*keiken*). Of course, the paper helped me sort out the resources on visual perception and as well as those on the accuracy of image, as part of the daytime type of function such as clear/unclear, close/distant, and reality/illusion.

The system of colours, regarded as the gradual effect of light, was the topic of another paper, “Opening to Colours: A Basic Lexicon in Japanese”(2009).<sup>17</sup> Berlin and Kay (1969) established a set of eleven colours as semantic universals. In Japanese, the morphemes *shiro* (white), *kuro* (black), *aka* (red) and *ao* (blue/green) are marked with a specific relation to light characteristics referring to the parts of the day. *Aka* emphasized the phenomenon of colour, i.e. glowing, and *ao* primarily referred to the space between light and darkness. Talking about the ability to develop figurative meanings, except for the morphemes *shiro*, *kuro*, *aka*, *ao*, other terms are considerably limited. Several English loanwords for colour terms (*pinku*, *gurē*, *orenji*) are more salient than their native Japanese counterparts. Though the paper offers a linguistic approach, it also proved extremely useful for my Ph.D. thesis in terms of the perception of light.

To conclude, my research has taken three main directions: translations from Japanese into Romanian, educational activities (that have produced several teaching materials and dictionaries), and folklore studies focusing on Japanese legends. Naturally, I still have some other future projects that I am thinking about, but only time will reveal the best way to explore them.

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16 “Glancing Games: Linguistic Games.” *Proceedings of the First International Symposium of Japanese Linguistics and Methodology*. Bucharest: Arvin Press, 2006, pp. 77–88. ISBN 978-973-7849-89-2.

17 “Opening to Colours: A Basic Lexicon in Japanese.” *Dunărea de Jos University Annals*, Year II, no. I (2). Galați: Europlus, 2009, pp. 168–77. ISSN 1844-9476.