

Japanese Studies in Finland

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Professor Kimura Hiroshi: Since last October we have been conducting a series of seminars, or a “round table,” that focuses on Japanese studies in various foreign countries. We have invited foreign scholars to speak here. Today, I’d like to organize this seminar in a slightly different fashion, conducting it in the format of an interview.

Could members of the audience pick up the questionnaires that are on the table just outside this room? The way in which we’d like to organize today’s seminar is as follows: I have previously handed to our speaker five questions, starting from basic and progressing to more difficult and profound ones, about Japanese studies in Finland.

Our guest today is Ari Pekka Korhonen from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, who this year is Visiting Associate Professor at this Center.

So, the first question is a very basic one: In your country how many students do you have in Japanese studies programs, and how many scholars, just approximately, do you have, who are in full time positions specializing on Japan, and how many students are studying Japanese language? That’s the first part of the first question.

The second question is: could you describe one or more academic institutions in which research on Japan is carried out? And also, hopefully, libraries with collections of works in Japanese or works on Japan.

And thirdly, could you identify or introduce to us academic or other organizations promoting research on Japan—for example seminars, symposia and team research projects?

Professor Ari Pekka Korhonen: First I want to tell you something about Finland ...

Kimura: About Finland? Your country?

Korhonen: Yes.

Kimura: But. . . I'm sorry. . . Finland is so well known.

Korhonen: This is relevant.

Kimura: Oh, really—but may I ask you to be careful of time. You see, for each question we only have three minutes.

Korhonen: Oh. (Laughter.) One basic fact.

Kimura: Okay.

Korhonen: Three basic simple things about Finland: One: the population is five million; a little more than Kyoto ...

Kimura: Very little.

Korhonen: ... but not much more. So we are not talking about many people. Two: because we are a small nation, we are oriented towards learning foreign languages, because foreigners in general are not oriented towards learning Finnish. Three: there are no special military, political or economic interests towards Japan, which means that the number of people interested in Japan is surprisingly big. About the number of students studying Japanese I can tell you the figure 150, but it does not mean anything without qualifications. Some of them are studying Japanese with the intention of learning the language really well, but most are not, for their own reasons. They simply may be interested in taking a glimpse at a little known language.

The number of researchers can be said to be something like fifty, but this

number also does not mean very much in itself. It includes people in various disciplines who have written something about Japan. I do not know most of these works, because they are not related to my field. The core of researchers that have written particularly much on Japan is much smaller, including at least Olavi K. Fält, a historian, in the University of Oulu; Rein Raud, who specializes in literature in the University of Helsinki; Ilmari Vesterinen, an ethnologist, and myself, both in the University of Jyväskylä. The number includes also people like Annamari Antikainen, an international relations specialist in Åbo Akademi University in Turku, who has written about Japan as an external actor in ASEAN. Japanese studies do not have any boundaries in terms of basic disciplines.

As for institutions: Japanese studies are carried on in most Finnish universities, with those institutions just mentioned being perhaps the most important. But it is carried on at various levels, it is of various kinds, and it is taking place in varying times. Similar comments apply to collections of books on Japan. We have no outstanding libraries in this respect, but there are some good collections in the Universities of Oulu and Helsinki.

Associations: Well, there is no organization called Finnish Association of Japanese Studies. It just does not exist. It is not needed, and it would be composed of too few people. We have an association of East Asian Studies. Its membership is basically national. Then we have the Nordic association, which includes Sweden, Norway and Denmark, in addition to Finland. It is called the Nordic Association of Japanese and Korean Studies (NAJAKS). That would be all.

Kimura: Thank you very much. The second question is also not a very academic question, but still I am very much interested in asking this question. First of all, personally, why did you decide to enter into Japanese studies? Then, in general, in your country, is people's interest in Japan very high or low in comparison with those interested in China, Korea or other Asian countries, for example. And how about the trend? Has interest in Japan been decreasing or going up very rapidly, particularly, again, compared with interest in China?

Korhonen: Three minutes again?

Kimura: No, you can speak more.

Korhonen: There is nothing especially negative about Japan in Finland, I think. General interest is, let's say, quite high. Of course we know that Germany or Russia are near to us and very important, but people are interested in the outer world in general, and Japan is one of the countries that comes up regularly in the news. People do not have particularly deep knowledge about Japan, but they know where it is. They know something about the country where the Nissans and Toyotas come from. Finnish images of Japanese people are particularly coloured by Kyoto, because the old song 「上を向いて」 was translated into Finnish as "Geisha Kiotosta" (Geisha from Kyoto). It was published in the 1960s.

Now geisha is not what you think. It is something quite different in Finnish. Finns do not know very many Japanese words, but they know geisha. They also know the word samurai, and that samurai is man. Geisha is woman. Thus geisha must be the wife of a samurai, or his loved one, or girl friend.

Why me? Why did I become interested in Japan? Kurosawa Akira and Hokusai. I liked these two very much. I also wanted to do foreign studies after finishing my Master's degree, and I wanted to go somewhere far away. Japan is far away. A further reason was that Mombusho gave me money for this.

Interest in Japan? It is not in decline. There never was a peak, so there does not have to be a fall. It could be the same, or it could be increasing, gradually. This is related to the other question: compare interest in Japan to interest in other countries. There is more interest in China than in Japan, and also interest in Southeast Asia is growing faster than interest in Japan. Japan may be a big market theoretically, but it is difficult to enter; Southeast Asia and China definitely stand out much more clearly in terms of the national interest. Thank you.

Kimura: Thank you. The next question is one of the most important, in my mind. Namely, I'd like to distinguish two ways of studying Japanese. First is Japanology, by which I mean that people get interested in Japanese affairs, mainly for exotic reasons, and particularly they are interested in learning languages, culture, folklores, tradition and etcetera,

etcetera. And the second approach is what I call just Japanese studies, by which I mean that they are interested in Japan simply as one of the countries in the world, particularly in comparison, in their minds, with other countries, say the United States or the U.K. or Southeast Asian countries. Those who take the second approach, I think, make an assumption that each country has a different culture, and yet, when it comes to politics, administration, diplomacy and economic activities, they have something in common which can be compared with each other, against each other, on same standard or measurement. This has been illustrated in this series of seminars by Tim Kern and also Professor Baxter and others when they talked about studies in Germany, the United States, and other countries. So. . . would you please comment on this distinction between so-called Japanology, on the one hand, and Japanese studies (in which many students try to emphasize the discipline rather than the area, so that they can apply same kind of standard to any country), on the other?

In your own country, can this kind of distinction be clearly recognized or not? Or—I hesitate to say it—but in your country is interest in Japan still just simply curiosity about exotic things, and are students spending most of their time studying language rather than trying to compare Japanese affairs with affairs in other countries?

Korhonen: The distinction between Japanology studies and theory oriented studies is not meaningful in Finland, because we don't have any military interests in Japan. This distinction was, as far as I know, created in the United States after the Second World War, when the country suddenly had to grab control of the world both theoretically and practically. Thus specialized area studies and general theories of the international system were created as mutually complementing parts of a whole, but represented by two different groups of people. We do not have this distinction in Finland at all. Also we do not have a specific body of knowledge oriented especially to Japan or Japanese culture, and which would have long roots in the academic world.

We have a fairly distinguished historical record of linguistic studies in Finland, but the researchers have mostly concentrated on Arabic,

Mongolian or Korean languages. Japan has been on the sidelines of this tradition. Modern Japanese studies in Finland are very much a creation of the Mombusho, just like Nichibunken. Before I came to Nichibunken, in this sense, I already was a brother of most of you. In terms of Japanese studies, we have the same mother, so to speak.

This means that in Finland almost all Japanese studies in social sciences and humanities have been created during the past 20 or 30 years. Mombusho scholarships are still the normal pattern. We are all individuals. There are no specialized institutes for Japanese studies in Finland. We all act as individuals within our own basic disciplines. We are political scientists, historians, ethnologists, movie or theatre specialists, and so on. As a consequence we are all basically theory-oriented scientists doing more or less empirical studies on Japan, but we may not be engaged in Japanese studies continuously. And for us Japan is not a world of its own, but only a country situated within a larger area. So, because Japanese studies are so new in Finland, many distinctions found in countries with longer traditions do not exist.

Kimura: The fourth question is: In your country, what makes your Japanese studies unique, in terms of what you are contributing to the world academic community of Japanese studies? Can you name some great Finnish scholars, or works written in your language or English by Finnish scholars, or a field? Is there something that makes your Japanese studies unique?

Korhonen: Your question has two parts. In Finland, three names stand out. Tuula Moilanen is an outstanding figure. She graduated from the University of Jyväskylä, but lives now in Kyoto. She is more an artist than a scholar; a hangaka [woodblock artist]. She has written three books about Japanese paper making, old style book binding, and how to make Japanese woodblock prints. She is quite famous in Finland. Another person is Olavi K. Fält of the Department of History of the University of Oulu, and a third is Ilmari Vesterinen from the University of Jyväskylä. Both of them have published interesting and readable books about Japanese history and society. These may be the principal contributions to Japanese studies in

Finland, but I do not know the work of everyone.

It is more difficult to answer about the situation outside of Finland. Your criteria are quite demanding. There is a fair amount of studies published in English. But it is possible that I myself am the most well known Finnish researcher on Japan, and as you know, I am not especially well known. Things take their time.

Kimura: The final question is a very simple one. In your country, in order to promote Japanese studies more, what's the question, or problems and tasks, you have to deal with? Financial problems, or shortage of teachers of Japanese language, for example, or area studies versus discipline theory oriented scholars—that kind of antagonism or attack or criticism of area studies from the theory-oriented, discipline-oriented scholars? Or even factionalism among scholars, or performance of Japanese economy? What are the main problems and tasks you have to deal with in the future, in the coming 21st century? Or are there no problems?

Korhonen: Perhaps the greatest problem for us is that we have to remember to eat and sleep every now and then. But we also need to find someone who is willing to pay us a salary. Because to be a specialist in Japan is not going to guarantee you bread and shelter.

Kimura: So job opportunity—right?—improvement?

Korhonen: Yes. Japanese studies is no career. You have to be a political scientist, or sociologist, ethnologist, historian, art historian or whatever, because those are the fields where you compete with others for positions. And you have to be good in that.

Kimura: Not area studies?

Korhonen: No.

Kimura: But didn't you say that there's no distinction between Japanology and Japan studies in your country?

Korhonen: No, I said it isn't a meaningful distinction.

Kimura: We need a distinction because theory specialists attack you. Many specialists say that you are the only one ... they are attacking ...

Korhonen: They are not attacking. They may be attacking in the United States; they are not in Finland.

Kimura: Okay, all right. So please, continue.

Korhonen: We'd all love to have a lot of money, so we could go to Japan once or twice a year to appreciate its beauties, but one can also manage to do research with less frequent visits.

Kimura: Money from where? From Japan or from the Finnish government? Or from foundations such as the Japan Foundation, or other sources?

Korhonen: The fact is that who pays you also has a kind of say in your publications. Maybe not directly, but there may exist certain expectations... I came here for the first time with Mombusho money, then I have been here three times with Finnish money, and in this time once again with Japanese money. You have to try to keep some kind of balance.