

JAPANESE STUDIES DEPARTMENT  
AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE:  
REDEFINING ITS RELEVANCE AND VIABILITY

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This paper is restricted only to the discussion of the Japanese Studies Department at the National University of Singapore. Less elaborate efforts at trying to learn about Japan have been implemented in other departments or faculties at the University. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies has also established a small Japan Study Unit. There is also in existence a large number of language schools, most of which are pecuniary-based and of standards which may serve, at best, a rudimentary understanding of the Japanese language.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is divided into three sections. The first examines the reasons for the creation of this department which, as the name implies, is an "umbrella-type" or multi/inter-disciplinary centre with Japan as its source of attention. This department was set up in 1981 and the broad strands of its development will be summarised in this section. The second section focuses on specific issues which are critical to the development or growth of this department: course-development, clientele expectations, constraints and opportunities as existed within the university and implications for the department, and the issues of manpower and resource

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<sup>1</sup> This is the theme of another paper. Data collection on this topic has been completed.

supply. The third section examines the future of the department after taking note of its development and its relationship with other centres on Japanese studies. Will the department maintain its existence even if the "learn from Japan" is given less emphasis?

## [I] GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEPARTMENT

The decision to set up this centre at tertiary level could be attributed to Premier Lee Kuan Yew. This was one of the three requests he proposed to his counterpart, Masayoshi Ohira, when he paid an official visit to Japan in 1979. The other two requests were the proposal for a Japan-Singapore Institute of Information Technology and the possibility of assistance by Japan to the Engineering Faculty at the University of Singapore. Kyodo News sources indicated that the Japanese Studies Department concept was first made known to Japanese Foreign Minister, Sunao Sonoda, shortly after the Prime Minister's arrival in Japan. Lee had told him that courses on Japan were one way to further promote better understanding between Japan and the rest of Asia.<sup>2</sup> The joint communique of the two prime ministers mentioned these three requests. Japanese studies indeed was the last of the three to be mentioned. The focus was then on the Information Technology Institute which Japan promised to do a survey on before agreeing to implement it. The communique placed the two other requests together, noting that the two prime ministers also "discussed the possibility of the assistance by Japan in the field of engineering at the University of Singapore and the setting up a Japanese Studies Department

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<sup>2</sup> *Straits Times*, 24 October, 1979.

in the University of Singapore ".<sup>3</sup>

This was indeed the genesis of the department. It was also the first time that Singaporeans were told of the decision to have such a department.

Lee's thinking in having such a department stems from the desire for Singaporeans to learn as much as possible from those resilient societies which have displayed a continued capacity for survival and growth. The government had previously encouraged the people to learn from his Tokyo trip also, when Lee referred to the need to learn from Germans in the course of one of the interviews he gave to a foreign magazine.<sup>4</sup> Learning is to the government, as essential feature of our capacity for continued growth and survival. The constraints imposed by the overall absence of land, manpower, markets and resources could only be overcome by the continuous upgrading of our skills and infrastructure and hoping that such advantages would be well appreciated by foreign investors when they decide on siting their industries or service facilities.

Learning is however not confined mainly to imbibing of the so-called "useful" characteristics found in another society. Singaporeans have also been taught not to learn the "unhealthy" or unsuitable aspects found in other communities. For example, the government has consciously persuaded the people not to be influenced by: the wasteful (or polemical)

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<sup>3</sup> Text of the Joint Communique, last paragraph. This communique was reproduced in the *Straits Times*, 25 October, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> "We Can Learn From West Germany", is a headline that appeared in a news item in the *Straits Times*, 10 June, 1979. In that news, Lee was arguing how Singaporeans can learn to be democratic and disciplined just like the Germans who had to undergo tremendous changes in their economic restructuring in order to ensure a much more strengthened economic power.

from Western industrial relations; the deleterious effects of welfarism; the abuse of unemployment benefits; the reckless features of consumerism; and consequent loss of the work ethic. But then, why did Lee want to have a specific centre which will focus on the study of language, history and culture of Japan and why was the effort made to cajole the Japanese authorities to assist Singapore's attempt to develop such a centre? It would seem that Lee's request did not result from prior discussions with the two Singapore universities which, in the meantime, had been offering courses on Japan (including language instruction at their language laboratories) though on a less systematic basis and geared primarily to discipline-based interest. Interesting to note too, was that although Lee had been to South Korea just prior to his Japan visit, there was no request to set up any Korean centre.

There is no doubt that, to Lee, Japanese investments will make a major impact in boosting economic growth in Singapore and the rest of the ASEAN countries. Taking note of our own limitations of size, resources and manpower, Lee was perhaps thinking of how much more Singapore could enhance its bargaining strength by developing a better understanding of the Japanese and, hence, assist the latter in making the economic presence of Japan a much easier task. The number of local manpower who could understand the Japanese in terms of language proficiency, cultural awareness and thinking, was indeed dismal. Some seven years later, he made the same point when he said there were still no Singaporeans who have the skills to deal with the Japanese. He would like to see more of our specialists who could fathom the thinking of the Japanese, and at the same time, be able to read in Japanese without having

to rely on translated versions.<sup>5</sup> In short, he was looking for Singaporeans who could deal with the Japanese on "Japanese home-ground conditions".

It should be pointed out that Japan is not an unknown country to Premier Lee. Lee's first experience with Japan was more as a shock when Japanese troops succeeded in taking over Singapore from the British in 1942. He was humiliated by some Japanese soldiers during the war period and he also learned a bit about them when he worked at the Domei News Agency.<sup>6</sup> The brutal features of the Japanese military were not forgotten, but he too was caught up with some of the popularly-spread "romantic" notions (some of which could be best described as "myths") such as the widespread attachment of employees to one sole source of employment or the undying sense of loyalty to group solidarity and support.

The introduction of this topic in the Tokyo meetings reflected perhaps three lines of Premier Lee's thinking. The centre was not wishful thinking—Lee wanted it to be operational as soon as possible. Secondly, whilst the *modus operandi* was to lie with the Singapore authorities, especially those in charge of the university, he wanted to be assured of a proper "back-up supply" since he was aware of the limited number of Singapore-based Japanese specialists. A possible third reason could be his desire to impress upon the Japanese business-political community of Singapore's firm determination to handle the "Japan issue" by its

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<sup>5</sup> Reported in *Straits Times*, 21 October, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Aspects of his life during the Japanese Occupation have been reported in many books on Lee. Lee himself has mentioned a couple of times the wartime period. The fact that the Japanese had been a main source of change in Lee's thinking can be seen from his comment that he did not enter politics but rather it was the Japanese who had brought politics to him.

horns—namely, a firm commitment by Singaporeans to learn from what Japan has to offer.

The desire to have such a centre had obviously caught the officials at Kasumigaseki unprepared. How was the Foreign Minister to reply? Or rather, what was Prime Minister Ohira going to say to Premier Lee when, at the time, Ohira's own power base as prime minister was shaky in view of his poor leadership role at the recently held electoral poll? Lee obviously had a reputation as a no-nonsense, demanding type of leader.

A flurry of activities took place resulting from this proposal. The extent of the surprise, within Japanese policy-administrative circles, could be seen from the exchanges of notes (and more importantly, verbal and phone discussions) between Kasumigaseki and Japan Foundation. A point of interest was that a key person at Japan Foundation then was E. Shiina. Shiina knew the thinking of Singapore to some extent, for he was earlier a Mombusho-dispatched Japanese language teacher who taught Singapore students interested in Japanese as one of the "acceptable" third languages. Even now, Shiina cannot but help recalling the anxieties of the Japanese agencies as they studied proposals and strategies when dealing with this request from the Singapore Prime Minister.<sup>7</sup> He and his colleagues did not realise that they were not alone in this effort.

This proposal also became a main point of discussion at the University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Though Premier Lee's proposal was another "shot" in the blue, the logic and rationale was clear and unambiguous. The Faculty assigned a committee to examine this matter on how such a centre could be established. This

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<sup>7</sup> From an interview with Shiina in 1990. Shiina has now returned to teaching at university level in Japan.

committee comprised the Dean and Vice-Dean and those heads whose departments have courses or sections of courses dealing with Japan. These heads were from Malay Studies, Chinese Studies, History, and Political Science. Three others, namely, Ang Kok Peng, Kyoko Tanaka, and Meow were recruited mainly because of their exposure to Japan: Ang was the first ambassador to Japan, even though his position at that time was Chairperson of the Chemistry Department in the Science Faculty; Tanaka was the only Japanese national teaching full-time at the Faculty; and Meow, mainly because of his one year's experience as a Fulbright professor teaching Japanese politics at Trinity University at San Antonio and his research on Japanese political-business linkages at the University of Michigan's Centre for Japanese Studies. In short, there were no overall exclusively-trained Japanologists in this committee.

Nonetheless, a meeting was convened by November 3, 1979, or about a week after the release of the joint communique of the two prime ministers. There was not much background to fall back on and what was available to the committee was exactly what most people would have read from the newspapers. This meeting was critical for it defined the objectives of the department/centre and these were stated as:

- (1) the attainment of a satisfactory knowledge of the Japanese language;
- (2) ability to read original source materials for a proper understanding of Japanese culture;
- (3) a proper balance between language study and the study of the related subjects of literature, history, philosophy/religion, politics, sociology/anthropology.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> File 1654 No. R.604/79, p.1.

The urgency of the Prime Minister's remark had also prompted the committee to feel that such a course could commence by the following year, i.e., Session 1980/81, even if such a department could not be formally established by then. If more time was allowed, the department should be established by 1981/82—but any time later than that was not to be encouraged. The courses would be implemented on a year by year basis even though the second year students could read the Japanese studies' first year courses as a "minor" student. Professor Wong Lin Ken, head of history was nominated to be the caretaker of this department until a suitable person was appointed.<sup>9</sup>

The proposed department was rather small though operational by itself. Four teaching posts were to be created in the first year of operation, namely, Session 1981/92. The number of students to be enrolled would be restricted to forty. Offices, but more specifically, a language laboratory and materials in the library would have to be augmented.

What was to be the contribution of Japan? Whilst not stated explicitly, it was felt that the academic standards and requirements of this department would have to be the same as the other departments and assistance of Japan would be of a supportive nature. It should not be involved in policy matters. The supportive measures outlined by the committee were:

- (a) funds for the setting up of a Japanese language laboratory;
- (b) the identification of scholars who may staff the new Department;
- (c) the secondment ... of a librarian who could help develop the Japanese Collection and train a local assistant librarian;

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

(d) provision of scholarships ... to enable the University's own graduates to undertake postgraduate studies in Japan and build up a core of local staff for the Department.<sup>10</sup>

A syllabus committee was formed to indicate the types of courses which could be offered by this department. It was chaired jointly by the head of the History Department and the heads of the Chinese Studies Department and the Language Laboratory Unit; namely by Ang Kok Ping, Tanaka and Meow. This committee scouted all the known syllabi of other centres in the United States, Britain, Australia and Japan. The main concern was to define a suitable organisational philosophy that would give the department academically sound standing. A key sentence in the minutes of the syllabus meeting was that the committee "reaffirmed that the proposed department ... should provide sufficient flexibility in order to enable such graduates to seek employment in the commercial, manufacturing and government sectors. The department's focus should be inter-disciplinary and should concentrate on the more modern period."<sup>11</sup>

The committee outlined the minimum four year courses. The main emphasis was on language acquisition in the sense that one compulsory course per year would be on language. Exposure to the non-language areas was given adequate attention, even though the emphasis was not to restrict this to an understanding of Japan's past.

The department was in operation by Session 1981/82. There was no fanfare except a disclosure a year earlier by the Japanese ambassador, Mr. Toshihiro Nakajima, at the Rotary Club West inauguration speech, of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Notes of the Meeting of the Syllabus Committee, paragraph 2 (mimeo.). The notes were sent to all members of the committee.

this new department. In that address, he mentioned that the Japanese government was "prepared to finance the project as well as bear the cost of recruitment and employment if required."<sup>12</sup> Two applicants for the headship were processed and both were done with the assistance of the Japan Foundation which had sounded out suitable academics for this job. Both were literature specialists who specialised in the study of *Genji Monogatari*. These two applicants delivered lectures on aspects of the *Genji* and were interviewed for the job. Mr. Mitsuke Kumekawa of the Ferris College was selected for the appointment, though initially in the post of acting head. His time of appointment—May 1981—was also taken to be the official date for the establishment of the department. Two other staff members to fill the linguistics and international relations were made two months later.

Whether Kumekawa foresaw the operational problems or not, is a question that would be best answered by him. How were the organisational and manpower issues to be solved despite the fact that no questions would be raised in Singapore over the department's viability? A key issue would be whether the department was able to translate into tangible forms the organisational objectives and ideas in academic programmes and to ensure that these would fit within the overall university's academic standards. It was also essential for the head to ensure that the quality of the students would measure up to the expectations of the clientele groups such as the government, and the private and public employers who would like to have strong Japan-based studies. The continued employment of the graduates would depend on the

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<sup>12</sup> *Straits Times*, 26 June, 1980.

quality that could be instilled in them. Finally, it was also essential that the graduates would be as good (if not better) than the "ryugakusei" or graduates of Japanese universities in both the language and the non-language fields.

Kumekawa brought to the department a kind of quiet charm and modest humour. He was equally effectively bi-lingual in both English and Japanese even though his training was exclusively with the University of Tokyo. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that he had perhaps under-emphasised the above mentioned issues. But then in the discharge of his role, he was confronted with another factor which has affected many of his peers. By 1981, the "boom" in Japanese studies was already beginning. New centres or sub-centres on Japan were set up or about to be established. This was particularly so in regard to language training, although the demand for non-language specialists was also rather high. Trying to get staff was indeed a serious problem and whilst the better known would stake their future on more well established ones, the newer departments invariably would have to contend with a flow of much weaker applicants or those who were academically very sound but would nonetheless like to overprice themselves. It was thus not unusual for new staff, failing to get the position he wanted, to come in for less than a few months before tendering his resignation. It was not that this university was a poor paymaster, for some of those who were leaving were also referring other's for appointments in the department.

Second, there was also a state of fluidity in the development of Japanese studies as an area study. What was this umbrella-type regional study area? Why should a specialist on Japanese history come to this

department if his academic interest would perhaps be much better served in the more conventional History Department? The image of the department is thus a critical factor in the soliciting of staff members. As mentioned earlier, the department was to start on a rather modest beginning. Forty students could be a large number for many smaller universities, but within the Singapore context, this was a very small number. It would be better (in terms of calculation of career choice) for new staff to find their places in the more established departments, some of which dated back to the beginnings of tertiary education in Singapore and had an active student population of a few hundred.

But such a matter was not to be restricted to the non-language areas only. In language teaching, there were still lots of areas of controversy ranging from teaching methodology, the levels of instruction to aim at, and the fact that TJFL, on a systematic basis, was of rather recent origin. There was a high demand for linguistic competency in the students. Premier Lee himself had also stated his high expectations. He would have wanted students able to handle the language with a proficiency that would enable them to deal with the Japanese without any trouble. Although no mention was made of a comparison, the fact that he was thinking of Singaporeans able to read, speak and write difficult Japanese without any hesitation at all would be almost equivalent to the way in which the Singaporeans have been handling the English language medium. The syllabus committee, too, expressed the same feeling. The three language courses from Year One to Year Three were "to give the student sufficient competence in the use of the current standard language as a means of communication or a tool of research. A student who has

successfully completed the course is expected to have a useful competence both in speaking, and reading modern books, journals and newspapers. Oral drill and practice in the language laboratory form an important part of the course, especially in the first patterns of spoken Japanese." <sup>13</sup> Although it is possible to argue that the earlier syllabus committee was over-ambitious, it should be noted that the members had gone through the course descriptions on language as offered by the more established centres.

Finally, as the department has to operate within the format of the Arts and Social Sciences Faculty, its mode of operation had to conform to those of the faculty. The time allotted to language would have to take into account the overall "pressure" faced by a student in the faculty. How would the student react to the possible need to spend "more" time in the department? Would the department be able to attract students on the promise of more work than the workload as found in other departments?

But not all these were negative. For example, the Faculty was in a position to assist the department. Some teaching staff in departments such as History and Political Science had their loads spread to cover courses in Japanese studies. This was a useful method for it constituted staff shortage caused by resignation or delay in job-assumption.

In the first year, the department offered places for 115 students. This was higher than the initially proposed figure of forty. The number included first and second year students. Second year students were doing Japanese studies as a "minor". Two courses were offered in that year, namely, Japanese I and Introduction to Japanese History. Demand for

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<sup>13</sup> Untitled paper, p. 4.

places was relatively high as 190 first and second year students applied to do the courses.<sup>14</sup>

By the following year, the issues of staffing became serious. The interim report for the second year mentioned the desires of existing staff. Each seemed to voice concern over at least one of the following issues: resignation, going for further studies, or additional compensation as a method of inducing retention. Considering the fact that two more staff members were brought in, the report concluded that the department was fast approaching a "critical juncture".<sup>15</sup> Staffing, however, was not ignored for a third new staff was recruited while Kumekawa was appointed as a full head of the department. In that year too, the aptitude test was used to evaluate student admission but this method was dropped a year later.

A review of the annual reports seems to indicate that staff members were very much involved in servicing extra-teaching activities such as translating articles for governmental sectors, serving as translators for seminars involving the use of Japanese and English, and assisting in interviewing appointments of Japanese speaking tourist guides. Together with the task of implementing their specific courses and undertaking the tutoring of language courses (a task also done by the non-language teachers), there was thus hardly much time available for research.

Kumekawa resigned at the end of four years in order to return to Japan. For the Deanery, there was the urgent problem of how to keep the department moving. Dean Thumboo (and Lau Teik Soon who was Acting-Dean for a spell) reviewed the whole situation and decided that the

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<sup>14</sup> Departmental Annual Report, 1981/82, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> He was responsible for the annual report of Session 1985/86.

headship should fall back on a local person who would at least give a sense of consistency to the department. It was on this ground that I was persuaded to think of such a transfer from my more comfortable position in the Department of Political Science. Although not a Japanologist by formal training, I decided to take on this assignment as I regarded this new appointment as one way to complete an "unfinished job" left by the Planning and the Syllabus Committees. However, I said I would like to spend my sabbatical in Japan before assuming the assignment. The acting dean finally assumed the additional assignment as "Vice-Dean In-Charge of Department" for a year until my return from sabbatical.

When I took over the appointment in July 1986 or the sixth year of the department's existence, I submitted a "Review Paper to the Dean". This paper reiterated the objectives of the department which was based mainly on the "learn from Japan syndrome". The paper argued that in learning from Japan, the students should not be restricted to the learning of specific "lessons" such as the positive aspects of industrial relations and so on. Such a form of "technique-learning", however, would have to be moderated by availability of ostensibly less-related courses (such as literature and culture) because (a) skill learning can be appreciated and sustained by a better understanding of the cultural and sociological milieu which makes the evolution and development of such skills possible, (b) the department is not a technical institute and has to be equally concerned with the broader values of higher education, and (c) the department's viability has to extend far beyond the immediate objectives of the learn from Japan campaign.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Review of the Japanese Studies Department, July, 1986 (typed), p. 1.

The paper highlighted four areas. The first was the poor use of the library for materials written in the Japanese language. The Japanese Collection Section at the Central Library had 12,500 volumes and 119 journals in Japanese but the borrowing rate was rather dismal. In Session 1986-87, there were 888 borrowings and most of the newspapers were mainly read by Japanese students who were learning Chinese at the university. The reasons for the low use were obvious, one of which was the fact that the facilities were beyond the reading/comprehension capabilities of the students.

The second area to be highlighted was staff matters. A loss of self-directed momentum could be felt and almost every matter was pushed to the head for decision. Whilst some staff members were conscientious, this was not the case overall. For example, there was a reluctance for the instructors to go beyond what they had learnt or researched when courses were taught. This poor attitude could be partially attributed to a lot of compelling reasons but be that as it may, remedial measures had to be undertaken for improving morale whilst teacher-student relations were also fine-tuned through the use of the mentor scheme.

The third area was concerned with the quality of students. Those who came in were mainly from the Chinese-medium stream and whilst we were concerned with the quality of proficiency in Japanese language, we had also to be concerned with their proficiency in English as well. This was not an easy question to solve, for uppermost in our mind would be the extent to which the students could undertake the pressure of having to understand (or learn) two languages—English and Japanese—whilst at

the same time, carrying out their other obligations as students of the Faculty.

Finally, whilst the Review Paper argued that the focus on language for the students was justifiable, the need to inject courses and non-structured activities (such as seminars, conferences) would give these students a broader breadth of understanding about Japan.

All was not lost, but there was much more that had to be done. That was the conclusion of the Review Paper. What was required was to have "a firm sense of direction [which] will certainly put the department on a firmer foundation and perhaps raise it to a worthwhile centre of Japanese Studies in this region".<sup>17</sup> The need to broaden contacts and staff sourcing from further afield was stressed and this would include untried areas like Taiwan. In tapping local sources, the more talented students were persuaded to pursue further studies as part of staff recruitment.

Two basic themes were to characterise the pace of departmental developments. The first referred to the orientation of the department. Staff and students were reminded that whilst the focus was to learn as much possible of Japan, this was to be from a Singapore-oriented perspective. The students should have self-esteem and a respect for their own culture before trying to seek what another culture has to offer. In addressing this matter, one of my letters stated explicitly that:

For us, a Singapore-oriented Japanese Studies Department is still paramount. If I am asked to make an analogy as to what the department should be, my answer is that we should not try to become the "bonsai", however much praised in Japanese aesthetics. To me, the bonsai is a badly crippled plant under constant pressure and pain as to make the viewer aware of his higher plane of

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

aesthetics. I would rather see this department blooming like the economically beneficial rubber tree—transplanted in a Singapore-based soil yet growing luxuriantly. Our graduates would be the new seedlings—able to grow comfortably and yet appreciating the benefits of the original and transplanted cultures. For although we should try to learn more from Japan, the final analysis is that we should also in the process of so doing make our students more appreciating of our own culture and society.<sup>18</sup>

In trying to develop a thriving "rubber tree syndrome", the concept of teaching was further expanded. For whilst formal training, as contained in courses, would remain and would still constitute the basis of academic assessment, the department implemented a range of extra-curricular activities in the arts and aesthetics. Many of these activities go on after so-called normal office hours. For example, *koto* practice is done after the usual office hours so that the staff members would not be unduly uncomfortable with the students' practice. By encouraging the students to take part in such activities we hope that they will have a much keener appreciation and understanding of the cultural rubric of the Japanese. None of these activities would count for academic ranking since they were regarded as hobbies, but those who were specifically good in them would be encouraged to apply for the departmental scholarships to enable them to pursue their art form to a much higher level in Japan. Among the activities introduced were *koto*-playing, *sado*, *ikebana*, *buyo* and *haiku* appreciation. As many of our graduates would eventually be entering the Japanese employment sector, a karaoke club was also started. It is indeed gratifying that our students and graduates have performed in these traditional arts in both Singapore and Japan. This exposure to the fine arts

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<sup>18</sup> Letter to the Vice-Chancellor dated 28 October, 1986.

perhaps completes their education on Japanese studies.<sup>19</sup>

The second theme implemented, since 1986, was termed "expansion amidst consolidation". This feature was to affect all aspects of the department: staffing, student enrollment, course reviews, improvements in standards of research and teaching. The department's growth, although influenced by the overall Faculty development and the guidelines from the Deanery, had to be maintained without disruption.

The details of the key issues are found in the next section. Suffice it to say, this exercise was not without its problems but each of the issues was resolved without disruption to the continuing growth of the department. Matters which were regarded as not relevant to departmental interests were discontinued. For example, unless requests were made by the University administration, activities such as translating articles (on a gratis basis) for governmental agencies would not be permitted.

A five year programme was in the meantime drawn up. This basically involved strategies in improving the credibility of the department as well as its standing *vis-a-vis* other centres. Some key features concerned measures such as improving staffing and removing curriculum weaknesses. The standards of the students would become higher and this fact would eventually be recognised by our graduates' employers. It was also hoped that by the end of the five years, the department's vitality

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<sup>19</sup> The department is thankful to the many hosts and instructors who are responsible for these activities. Most of these voluntary instructors flew in for a few days on a monthly basis during the teaching session to teach the students. The department is also grateful to receive a scholarship for S\$500,000 from Mitsui Bussan; interest from this capital sum is used to send students to Japan to further their training in the fine arts during the long vacation periods.

should be apparent to our peer groups and other centres and that this strength would lead us to the next ten objectives, namely, that the department would become a research-cum-information centre in six identified areas within the next ten years. The areas that were to constitute this research-cum-information base are: Kyushu regional study, Japan-ASEAN area study, language research, modernisation and identity in contemporary literature, sociology of aging, and public policy studies.<sup>20</sup> In selecting these six areas, we were influenced by our peculiar geographical location and from a review of the activities of centres elsewhere. It was felt that we should emphasise areas not particularly endorsed by others (for example, looking at Kyushu as a regional area), or if the circumstances happened to be in our favour (such as Japan-ASEAN focus). Information dissemination,, data sourcing, manpower identification and networking, and the conduct of research on these areas would, over a period of time, enable the department to acquire some form of credibility in those areas, and at the same time complement other centres of Japanese studies. A core of local staff were also to work on inducing other scholars elsewhere to be participants in some of our research or to be advisors where possible. It should be pointed out too that a lot of clientele support was achieved, from such sources as the university, the business community, academic and peer groups, the graduates of the department and the Japan Foundation. The last few years thus saw the emergence of a multifaceted approach, each of which was

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<sup>20</sup> A much more detailed paper to explain the choice of these six areas was the discussion of a paper presented at the meeting with officials of the Keidanren Mission who came to the University in June, 1989. It is entitled "Japanese Studies: Research Programmes" (typed). A copy can be found in the departmental records.

aimed at strengthening the department.

The five year programme is already over and the department is now on the ten-year programme, namely, to establish the basis for an information-research centre to complement its undergraduate training. The success of such a programme would definitely see further improvements to the undergraduate programme inasmuch as the professional interests of the staff would also be similarly enhanced. Can we succeed? This is perhaps a question to be raised towards the conclusion of this paper.

## [II] ISSUES AND RESPONSES

The department is now in its twelfth year of growth. Although predominantly undergraduate in focus, there are facilities for postgraduate studies based on patterns found in British universities. Programme-directed or course-work type of graduate studies will eventually take precedence as it is believed that a more structured approach would be very much more quality-defined.

The number of undergraduate students over the years is summarised in Table 1. It should be stressed that the number permitted to study this subject is somewhat moderated by the Deanery which has to take into account the overall teaching capabilities of all the other departments and to ensure that students pursuing their course of study are motivated by a sense of keenness. For our department (and as in the case of some of the others) the aptitude test was reintroduced in 1987 since it was seen as a fairer method in student selection. Experience has shown that even with this test, the number of applicants is always much higher

than the number to be enrolled; interest among the students for this course has remained high. In the meantime, the aptitude test is being reviewed every year. The latest test includes basic knowledge of Japan, *kanji* ability, and language learning aptitude. The "export" of courses to other faculties has also commenced since Session 1991/92 although the emphasis is initially on the acquisition of the Japanese language.

**Table 1: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**  
Department of Japanese Studies

*Student Numbers (Major)*

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Honors	MA	Total
1981/82	54	—	—	—	—	54
1982/83	100	37	—	—	—	137
1983/84	117	44	33	—	—	194
1984/85	133	55	42	8	—	238
1985/86	100	59	52	8	1	220
1986/87	145	66	58	9	3	281
1987/88	141	109	61	7	2	320
1988/89	180	96	106	8	2	392
1989/90	208	141	94	10	1	454
1990/91	216	167	136	13	1	533
1991/92	195	159	159	15	4	532
1992/93	190	155	158	22	4	529

Note: The numbers refer to "major" students.

Source: Departmental record.

As seen from Table 1, the increase in student enrollment has leveled out. For the current session, enrollment numbers include 525 undergraduate and four Masters' students. The figures exclude "minor" students and those from other faculties who were taught under our "export" courses.

The running of any department is seldom free from issues or problems. Perhaps, in the case of Japanese studies, some of them could be slightly more unique. For convenience, the discussion in this section examines four main issues, though not necessarily in terms of priority or emphasis, *viz.*, staff development, course review (language and non-language) and academic standards, research activities and the development of graduate training facilities, and alumni matters. It should be pointed out that the strategies adopted reflect the dynamic situation as found in the area of Japanese studies and not may not be applicable or relevant to other academic departments.

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staffing has always been a critical problem to most centres of Japanese studies. Who are the scholars and how are they to be attracted to a particular area or centre? The availability of home-grown specialists would reduce the problem to some extent since the homing instinct would persuade them to remain at their national institutes. But, for a centre which is quite recent, the home-grown product will take at least up to a decade before signs could materialise. The last few years have seen a continuing conscious effort to attract scholars from all known sources—the United

States, Britain and Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Taiwan. Academic markets such as that of Israel are not ignored either. Visits were also made to many of these centres to introduce the department and to brief the more senior scholars and scholar-administrators on the department in Singapore.

On staffing matters three aspects are important. The first is that whilst recruitment should be a year-round activity, it is equally necessary that contingency plans be available to overcome staff attrition. Staff attrition is a feature which cannot be avoided since other places of employment are also campaigning for staff. In the area of language teaching, the sex-imbalance in favour of females will have to be acknowledged and even disruptions such as pregnancy could also lead to temporary staff shortfall. It would thus be prudent to have staff who can teach in more than one sub-area as one form of contingency.

The second feature which could be introduced is the visiting professor/lecturer scheme which would enable a noted scholar to come for a relatively short period of time. Good scholars are not frequently available for a normal employment contract, but they would be more than happy to come for as long as up to two years.

Third, staff recruitment has to aim at getting those who are well known or have the abilities to develop further intellectually. The strength of a department is basically in its staff. If this is not adhered to, the department's capabilities will decline.

While the search for more staff has to continue, especially when its approved manpower strength has increased, the prospects for those already recruited will have to be enhanced. Research and rewards for such

research have to be stated clearly while stress is placed on improvement in teaching with course review carried out by staff. Staff development schemes—conferences, consultations with more qualified seniors in Japan or elsewhere—have to be built-in aspects of personnel management. Thus, when compared to the three staff in 1981, we have today a complement of 23 full-time staff and a pool of 10 part-time tutors. Vacations for the four remaining positions are likely to be filled very soon. But, more than just placement, there is the general recognition that the present group of colleagues are much more enthusiastic and research oriented.

On the whole, the staffing position today is a very much improved situation. Whilst the Faculty's 1:10 staff-student ratio was adopted, a proposal which was made much earlier and accepted, namely that the ratio in the case of language would have to be even more manageable, at ratios such as 1:6.5. Teaching assistants whose jobs it would be to assist the language lectures in small group tutoring, would not be required to do research, and therefore their teaching work load could be made much higher, namely, 15 hours per week instead of the usual 10 to 12 hours for lectures and above.

The use of teaching assistants was based on a recommendation made by Professor Fumiko Koide who is still one of our consultants and is constantly reviewing and updating our teaching programme in the language section. The provision of teaching assistants has enabled the department to improve teaching quality while they also help in reducing the number of part-time tutors.

In the meanwhile, active encouragement is given to students to

pursue a teaching/research career. Two students are now in the United States studying for their Ph.D. Both have completed their Masters in this department and are full-time staff. Two other staff members are permanent residents. There are a couple of Masters' students, some of whom will also proceed abroad for further training. By the end of this decade, it is hoped that 60 percent of the staff will be Singaporeans or those with permanent residence status. The remaining positions will have to be filled by expatriates who also help to make intellectual life more creative and help the department to benefit from different sources of ideas.

## COURSE REVIEW

The stress on course review is already apparent as it is an integral aspect of the drive to improve. This drive is directed towards (a) improvements in the quality of our students on graduation in terms of their overall systematic knowledge of Japan and an appreciative sensibility to some of the more aesthetic features and distinct cultural milieu; (b) ensuring that courses that are taught are of relevance in terms of employment or in any discussion on the so-called Japanese "situation"; (c) self-improvement by teachers and researchers to facilitate a critical analysis not just of overall curriculum design in the department but also of one's own teaching and thinking on specified subjects.

Before noting the extent of the course review, the original aim of the Syllabus Committee in 1979 is worth stating. In that preliminary four year syllabus, it was stated that language would occupy an important area. Language was to be one of the two courses to be offered in Year One

while in Year Two and Three it would be one of three subjects. In Year Four, it would be one of seven subjects. The demands expected of the students in language acquisition by this committee was rather high, but when viewed against the course descriptions and intentions of other well-known centres, the standard expected was reasonable. It was also felt that for students who were of mainly Chinese ethnic origin, the handling of the written script would be much more manageable when compared to non-Chinese trying to learn the language. By the end of the third year, the student should have sufficient competence in the use of the current standard language as a means of communication or a tool of research with competence in speaking and writing. At the Honors Year, "students are expected to be able to use and read articles and books in Japanese, in addition to reading works in English".<sup>21</sup> It was also expected that the students would have a good briefing on history, cultural history, politics (two courses), economic history, economics, literature (two courses), society and Japan-Southeast Asia relations.

Course modifications and new courses were subsequently introduced over the years. The number of courses offered was dependent on the manpower situation and other administrative factors. A student could only specialise in Japanese studies in the fourth year. In the first three years, he or she would have to take courses from three departments.

When I took over the department's administration, the non-language section was my first source of concern. The matters included curriculum development for raising standards. This involved re-examining the concept of how TJFL was to be taught. The teaching

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<sup>21</sup> Untitled paper, p.4.

methodology was reevaluated with a view to seeing how results could be further improved.

The reforms in the language section are discussed in detail in another publication devoted to the issues of language instruction,<sup>22</sup> but for example, a lot of time was previously spent in ensuring only one style of teaching (or even the sub-style) was acceptable. Numerous meetings were called by the language teachers, in 1986, over a decision to prevent students from using the dictionary on the grounds that the frequent resort to such explanatory texts would jeopardise their acquisition of the language. One result was that very few students were able to use the bilingual dictionary, nor could they refer to other terms through such sources. If one notes the fact that many of the students will subsequently be working in a Japanese environment, the absence of a dictionary (or worse still, the inability to use such a dictionary) would be almost short of disastrous. There was also a strong attempt to rely exclusively on the so-called communicative strategy and an almost universal rejection of more conventional methods. Notwithstanding various attempts to improve and lengthen the hours of learning/exposure, the standards of Japanese among the students were far from encouraging. A few exceptions, namely, those who had prior training at the Ministry of Education's Language Centre or whose parents were partially Japanese, managed to save the department's image for at least, they could speak understandable Japanese. Obviously, the department was not producing the standards expected of the Syllabus

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<sup>22</sup> Details on modification of the language teaching method is discussed in another publication published in June 1993. Some mention of the changes were made in the departmental newsletter, JSEAN No. 3, March-April 1992. See Seah Chee Meow, "Language Learning: Capitalising on the Basics" 1-3.

Committee.

Language improvement measures were introduced in Session 1991/92. Among the measures taken was the deliberate act of bringing in a number of non-native teaching staff, initially of Taiwanese origin, the use of Mandarin (and at times, Fukien) in explaining language grammar usage, and a consistent stress on pre-communicative (or structural school) strategies. The arguments for this thinking were explained to both students and staff. The employment of the non-native who had experienced the difficulties of learning Japanese has led to greater empathy with the students. The use of Mandarin and Fukien also makes it less necessary to explain why Japanese is unlike the so-called "Western" culture. (For example, there was no need to explain why the Japanese used "shitsurei", "sumimasen" or never use "no" for an answer since these were done by the Chinese community as well). Very few native speakers would be able to comprehend this aspect just as much they are unable to realise that much of the *on-yomi* of *kanji* were from Fukien sources. By ensuring that the students have a good exposure to the grammar and vocabulary—a strong point of the structural school—the students can then proceed by Year Three to a more communicative-blend of methodology and with the understanding that what has been learnt in the first two years will remain valid and useful in the skills of communicating.

Other than strengthening the students with the rudiments of the language, we have chosen to stress the integration of *keigo* (honourific language) as part of course instruction. *Keigo* is being brought into the Year One lessons and it is hoped that students will have that built-in flexibility in distinguishing and using the language in a more proper

manner. Also, from that First Year we have introduced the use of *kanji* from the beginning of the course.

Up to now, the new system is in operation for the first and second year. For the second year, the students were divided into two groups on the basis of their receptivity to the language. This "streaming" is student-oriented for the basic intention is to pace the instruction in accordance with the aptitude of the students for the language. The streaming is designed to ensure that there will be available a group of students of approximately one third of the year's intake to be able to handle the language more effectively and they are thus likely to get jobs which seek a heavier use of that language.

The third year should see a continuation of this method except for two exceptions. The first is the hope that only Japanese will be used throughout the language lessons. (Indeed, for the "faster" stream in Year Two, the use of a different explanatory language—be it Chinese or English—was discontinued halfway through the course as the intention is to solely use Japanese in the language classes). The second feature is the introduction of the communicative strategy as one aspect of the teaching methodology. It is hoped that the students will have a basic grasp of the language by the end of Year Two. By the fourth year, a translation course will also be introduced. It is also expected that many of the non-language courses will also have Japanese reading supplementary materials.

How do we evaluate this new programme? Whilst the Japan Foundation's Proficiency Test is not a totally valid form of assessment for our purposes, the department nonetheless urged its students to take this examination since the results constitute another form of assessment of the

level that could be attained by our instruction. The expectations are clear. Students in Year One should finish Grade Four by Foundation standards, whilst students in Year Two should complete either Grade Two or Three (the level depending on their proficiency). By Year Three, we expect the more linguistically-inclined to complete Level One which is the requirement for entry to Japanese universities.

The department is aware that the number of hours for language teaching is still far from sufficient. With this new approach, the exposure hours in the first three years is about 240 hours per year. As an additional or supplementary measures, computer-assisted-instruction (CAI) is also used and since it is student-motivated, the student should be able to add more such exposure hours. The students' library (which is also packed with simple books and *manga*) is already another attempt to get the students to be more acquainted with the language. Other methods that have already been implemented are the introduction of language training classes during the long vacations, the use of immersion schemes in Japan (initially for Year Four, but now extended to include Year Two), the implementation of a host family system in Singapore, and the posting of students to Japanese-managed industrial or commercial attachments during the long term vacation. It is interesting to note that the students who attached themselves to these companies will have to write a report and this will be compared with the feedback provided by the employers.

Two specific proposals are also under active consideration as part of the continual review system already noted above. The first is the post-graduate diploma in Japanese language and it is hoped that graduates will be able to serve a variety of roles ranging from language teaching to

translating skills. The diploma will also be seen as a requirement for entry to a programme-based Masters in Japanese language. For the non-language section, the devising of a similar-type programme for the Masters students is also under consideration. The department plans to implement these programme-based graduate schemes in another few years after ensuring that the undergraduate aspects of instruction are fully consolidated.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Research is the keystone for any academic institution. Research can be the spill-over of a committed faculty community. The emphasis on research is already known to all staff members and whilst the concept of "publish or perish" is not implemented, staff members are fully aware of the relationship between teaching and research. Research may be applied or it may deal with the "esoteric" but whatever the focus, it will no doubt be of importance to the department.

In this department, whilst there are no restrictions on research topics (and since funds are available from the university), there is nonetheless an attempt to define the "directions" which the department should eventually assume. The basic assumptions are as follows. First, although this may be a small centre it must be known eventually as a centre that excels in some aspects of Japanese studies. Second, there is no need to try to pursue the same lines of research for which other institutions are already well-known. Why should we, for example, probe into power changes in Tokyo when that subject has been pondered over by

many other well-known scholars and well-endowed institutions. It may be more time saving and cheaper to read their papers. For us, it may be better to choose even subjects which are "rejected" or "down-graded" by others and if we can build a good base, at least we can take some credit for being a good centre in a perhaps not so exciting field. Third, we have to think in terms of a broader and more dynamic base for research. Joint research with scholars abroad is possible inasmuch as it is possible to use data already found in other libraries or institutions. The recruitment of researchers from abroad, even as short-term fellows, will also be considered. Fourth, in selected areas, we will have on-going projects and over a period of years, recognition of these projects will hopefully be attained.

Six areas have been identified and projects are indeed going on. The details were mentioned much earlier and they were indeed features of the five year plan. However, if success is achieved to a large extent, these will also be the areas for our graduate programme focus as well. Research and graduate studies are thus seen as integrated attempts to induce a more active academic culture. The department is able to gain access to many known institutes and outside researchers in those six areas. A few more research projects are expected to take shape in the near future.

In line with research interests, the department sponsors an international conference which will be held on a bi-ennial basis. The first was held in 1989 and the second in 1991. The third was held in October 1993.<sup>23</sup> Other than these big conferences, there are ad-hoc workshops

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<sup>23</sup>The third conference focused on four workshops, namely: Teaching Japanese in the Singapore Environment; Masaoka Shiki and Haiku; Kagoshima: Regional or National Actor?; Policy Implementation in Japan.

which are held on other occasions and most of them tend to be problem or issue-specific such as those encountered in language teaching. There is also a regular seminar series for staff members (and visiting scholars) to present their findings and preliminary results.

The second step is to have a strong publication section. The department publishes its Paper Series and this is now complemented with a Monograph Series. All publications are refereed and there is also a slate of noted academics who are members of our Consultative Committee. The department is pleased that it is receiving papers submitted by scholars from abroad seeking publication in these two series.

#### ALUMNI MATTERS

The Department has its own alumni club. Now in its second year of existence, it is comprised of students who have studied in the department either as a major or minor student. The response to the club has been very warm and the department is pleased to know that many of the graduates have continued to maintain links with each other and in the process to convey information on jobs and career opportunities.

The department's obligations to the students do not end with their graduation; instead, we move to another level of obligation and graduates are aware that efforts will be made by the department to assist them and such assistance will eventually include further forms of training. Already, those who have taken classes in some form of Japanese fine arts can continue to practice with the students or even among themselves on the campus. Language is another area which has to be given further attention,

more so when their level of attainment was not that high on graduation. Whilst we are happy to know some of the graduates have taken further language courses as provided by their employers, such news has certain bitter-sweet implications. For on the one hand, we are pleased that the graduates were still willing to learn, but we are also sad that we failed to give a level of training which their jobs required. Certainly, one purpose of course review is hopefully to reduce such a problem encountered by our graduates.

The Alumni Club is regarded as an integral aspect of the department. The latter in turn will keep the Alumni members aware of what we have been doing and will continue to sound them out for comments and advice.

### [III] REDEFINING OBJECTIVES

While it is true that the objectives of the Japanese Studies Department were clearly stated in 1979, the department cannot be complacent but instead has to ensure the strength of the department and investigate how further achievements can be attained.

The department is a component of the Arts and Social Sciences Faculty. This means that on all matters of academic concern, the guidelines of the Faculty will have to be affirmed. This is also the case when the department is involved in "export" courses to other faculties. Whatever is done in the department is based on the assumption that it will contribute to the Faculty as an operating unit of the university. Course review, for example, has to note the philosophy of the Faculty and its

*modus operandi*. It is possible that many more innovations could be introduced in a different administrative set-up. As the situation stands, many changes that could be introduced would have to fit the present format.

The modular system of instruction is one possible example of how further innovation in the teaching system may be achieved. If this system is introduced, we can foresee three advantages for the department. The first is the promotion of greater flexibility in course arrangements, especially in the language learning area. It may be possible for the department to introduce a wider range of courses to suit students' interest (and eventually, employers' needs). For example, it may be possible to say that a student may need only to attain an intermediate level in the Japanese language for the purpose of graduation but the more motivated students may go beyond that level. It may also be possible to think of situations to allow those with prior knowledge of Japanese to skip some of the basic courses and proceed to those levels more suited to their level of competency. The second advantage is the maximising of further advantages found in existing schemes. For example, it could be possible to use the short-term visiting fellowship scheme to have talented teachers come and deliver courses over a semester period. Further improvements in the quality of teaching and in the students' thinking could well result. Third, with the modular programme it is possible to arrange some form of auditing with well-known universities. For example, students who go to Japan for further exposure and training could be asked to take certain selected courses and have their grades acknowledged as part of the requirements for the degree. However, how and when these ideas can be

implemented will depend on the overall acceptance of the modular concept.

The rationale for the existence of the department depends on how successful we have succeeded in the following areas: (a) have our graduates being usefully employed? Are they in key managerial or operational posts? (b) has our training equipped our graduates with those skills required by employers? (c) how successful are we as a research-oriented department and have the staff acquired a keen interest in the pursuit of research activities? Will we be recognised as a research-cum-information centre in certain areas of Japanese studies? and (d) will we be able to produce a sufficient number of Japan-related specialists in both the language and non-language areas who have done well in their professions?

These are the four key questions. If the answers are positive or likely to be positive, we can take some comfort. When Lee Kuan Yew spoke, in 1986, of the absence of Singaporeans who can think like the Japanese or who are able to use the Japanese language, he was indirectly referring to two important aspects which this department must achieve. We have not fully succeeded in the second task and neither should we try to console ourselves by saying that the language is indeed a difficult one to master or that it may take up to six years of continuous exposure before the language can be handled relatively well. Our essential task is to ensure that this can be achieved within our existing constraints and this explains the urgency for the new approach that is now adopted in language teaching. The first part—how to understand the Japanese psyche—is perhaps one area in which we have succeeded to some extent. At the least,

the department can claim to have the components which can help the students to understand the Japanese much better.

The department is now at its next stage of development, namely, to be an information-cum-research centre and to use that as a complement to its current undergraduate training. In pursuit of this goal, we are conscious of the need to strengthen the relationship with other centres in the world, and more so with those in Southeast Asia. The fact that we have produced a bi-annual newsletter is an indication of our concern for the region, for that newsletter is *inter alia* meant as a form of collecting and disseminating information on Japanese studies in Southeast Asia. There are still many areas on which cooperation can be further attained: joint research projects, staff sourcing, data sourcing, and networking with other researchers or those who have a specific area of interest. But above all, the recognition that all these can be possible if we continue to maintain a strong academic department. That is the core of our viability whether now or in the future. If the strengthening of the department is evident, there is no need to depend on the "learn from Japan" strategy to justify our existence—our viability will go beyond that level. This is indeed the reason why the department should remain like a rubber tree and not a bonsai, for the former is at least able to grow well and has an output that is a welcome to the economy. Our department should thus behave like such a rubber tree and contribute in its role to the academic community and the economy. It should then also be less inhibited in its development as the climate is now much more tolerant.