

Challenges and Perspectives: Japanese Studies in Bulgaria

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In the last decade a number of detailed articles were published on the topic of Japanese studies in Bulgaria,¹ so the aim of the following report is to give a brief overview of the history and the present state of Japanese studies, followed by a more detailed portrait of the current situation in Bulgaria in regard to Japanese studies, in order to outline the challenges facing specialists in this field.

More than one hundred years have passed since the first book introducing Japan and written by a Bulgarian appeared: the travel diary of the tradesman Anton Bozukov marked the beginning of a long period of active relations and exchange between the two countries. Political interaction between Bulgaria and Japan began in 1927, the first diplomatic relations were established in 1939.² In 1937 and 1938 the first literary translations of Japanese poetry (although not directly from Japanese) appeared, followed by an introduction to Japanese literature presented by Svetoslav Minkov in 1941.³ In this way political and cultural interactions went hand in hand from the very beginning.

In the following decades more literary works found their way to the Bulgarian public, while the 1970 Osaka World Exposition became a turning point in bilateral relations. Despite the Cold War and ensuing political differences, Bulgaria and Japan began

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- 1 Boyka Tsigova. “20 Years of Japanese Studies Program at Sofia University: What we have done and what we must do.” In *Conference Proceedings Bulgaria-Japan-the World*, Sofia 2013; Gergana Petkova. *Promotion and reception of Japanese culture in Bulgaria*. Seijo CGS Reports N1. Tokyo, 2012; Petkova, Gergana ベトコヴァ・ゲルガナ. “Sofia Daigaku Nihongaku senkō ni okeru ibunka kan komyunikēshon nōryoku o sodateru katsudō/akutibitei” ソフィア大学日本学専攻における異文化間コミュニケーション能力を育てる活動・アクティビティ. *Kokusai Kōryū Kikin Budapesto Nihon Bunka Sentā 2013 hōkokusho* 国際交流基金ブダペスト日本文化センター2013報告書.
 - 2 Further reference on the topic in Evgeniy Kandilarov, „Поглед към българо-японските отношения след Втората световна война (Bulgaria-Japan relations after the Second World War),” *Evolution* N 6, 2005 and „България и Япония. От Студената война към XXI век (Bulgaria and Japan: from the Cold War towards 21st century),” Sofia, 2009.
 - 3 Further reference on the topic in Boyka Tsigova, “Ibunka no sokumen: Burugaria no Nihon bunka kan—Sono rikai to Nihon bungei sakuhi no kaishaku o megutte” 異文化の側面: ブルガリアの日本文化観—その理解と日本文芸作品の解釈を巡って, *Bulletin of the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies* N 28 (2004), pp. 377–90; and Boyka Tsigova, „За превода на японска поезия в България (On the translation of Japanese poetry in Bulgaria),” *Panorama* 2005, pp. 145–53.

interacting regularly in various spheres such as technology, trade, and art; knowledge transfer and skills exchange that began in the 1970s are still flourishing to the present day.

The 1970s also marked the birth of the nucleus of Japanese Studies in Bulgaria, with the first specialists who graduated abroad returning to their home country and becoming the driving force in the teaching, research and promotion of Japan in Bulgaria. The past 40 years have seen the translation of many literary works, and research findings and essays on Japan have continued to foster awareness of and interest in Japan. As a result of the efforts of specialists, translators, researchers, journalists and writers, it is not an exaggeration to say that nowadays Japan occupies a very special place in the hearts of Bulgarian people.

Survey results on the image of Japan in Bulgaria support this sentiment.⁴ Asked to describe Japan and its people, respondents use only positive adjectives (such as exotic, gorgeous, harmonious and traditional with regard to the country itself, and disciplined, dutiful, hardworking and polite with regard to its people). These conclusions, as surveys show, are the result of a solid knowledge about Japan, with precise answers about traditional and contemporary Japanese culture, technology, lifestyle and thinking.

In response to the Bulgarian public's increasing awareness of and keen interest in Japan, more and more institutions are offering various ways to experience Japanese culture. Private language schools and state education institutions offering Japanese language courses⁵ are on the rise. There has been a proliferation of cultural experience clubs like Urasenke and Ikebana, martial arts associations, Internet forums for young

4 The current paper refers to a number of surveys conducted in the years 2010–2014 by the Japanese Studies Program at Sofia University: *The image of Japan in Bulgaria* (145 participants, general public, May 2010), *Are you familiar with the Japanese traditional culture and way of life* (87 participants, general public, November 2010), *Career path of Japanese studies graduates* (50 JS graduates, March 2011), *Hayao Miyazaki's anime art* (85 participants, JS students and general public, March 2014), *Japanese students' profile* (53 current JS students, May 2014). Further details on some of the results could be found in Gergana Petkova, *Promotion and reception of Japanese culture in Bulgaria*. Seijo CGS Reports N1. Tokyo, 2012.

5 In the capital city of Sofia there are three state schools with already well-established programs in Japanese language (“William Gladstone” School N18 with its Japanese Culture Centre, “Prof. V. Zlatarski” School N 138 with its Ikuo Hirayama Centre, and the professional school “Henry Ford”), and currently a new program is being introduced to 40 SOU in the Lyulin residential area by Lyulin Municipality within a broader educational and social scheme to motivate students.

people interested in manga and anime, aniventure events, and haiku contests. It seems that after being introduced to Japanese culture, Bulgarians do wish to include it in their everyday lives.

Of all these institutions Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” plays a central and important role. Established in 1888, the university is the oldest and the largest institute of higher education in Bulgaria. It is also the sole institution where Japanese language and culture are taught as a major at B.A., M.A. and doctoral levels.

The first ever course in Japanese language to be offered to the Bulgarian public was held there in 1967, while in 1990 the M.A. program in Japanese studies was established.⁶ In less than 25 years the Japanese Studies Program produced over 300 graduates who formed an active and productive Japanese studies community in Bulgaria (see Photo 1).

As these are the people who presently and in the future will work toward Bulgaria-Japan bilateral relations, it seems necessary to review how they are formed as specialists, what their motivation is, and what their future perspectives might be.



Photo 1. A Japanese language class.

In May 2014 the Japanese Studies Program at Sofia University conducted a survey among students to verify their background, interests, motivation and expectations. 80% of those surveyed stated that they had not studied Japanese prior to enrolling in the B.A. program. Most of them came from specialized language schools (75%); they defined their reasons for enrolling in the Japanese Studies course as stemming from an interest in languages in general (55%), and the Japanese language in particular (83%), their keen interest in Japanese traditional (53%) and contemporary culture (64%), as well as in anime (47%). Another survey on the art of Hayao Miyazaki’s animation, conducted in April of the same year among a broader target group, showed that anime is indeed a major motivating factor for young Bulgarian’s interest in Japanese language and culture (60%).

On the other hand, going back to the survey results, career prospects do not appear to be the main reason for applying to the Program—most respondents do not know for

6 In the beginning it was a 5-year course combining classes in language and culture. With the introduction of the European framework for the development of education, known as the Bologna system, the program was reorganized in a 4-year B.A. course, followed by a 1-year M.A. course in Japanese studies and a 3-year Ph.D. course, as it operates currently.

sure what they want to do after graduation (75%). From this we may conclude that enrolment in the Japanese Studies B.A. program does not stem solely from practical reasons but is directly linked to young people's interests and lifestyle. These are people who take an interest in reading (80%), music (77%), cinema (53%) and arts (38%), who believe that this kind of study brings them intellectual pleasure and challenges (91%), who think of themselves as slightly different from their peers (62%) and who are convinced that this kind of study will make them a better person (90%).

Even among answers regarding their expectations about the final outcome of their study in the B.A. program, practical outcomes such as gaining a professional level of language command (77%) or going to Japan for a one-year training (60%) are outweighed by answers such as intellectual development (70%), better understanding of culture (70%), opportunities to communicate directly with Japanese people (68%), broadening personal horizons (68%), and making friends (66%).

Indeed, it would appear that their initial motivation is not triggered by practical or materialistic motives but rather by a desire to become more open-minded, more intellectually challenged and better positioned not simply in the labor market but rather as human beings, which they believe arises naturally from contact with the Japanese culture. Most of them see themselves working in the field of international relations (20%), in arts (11%), in culture (9%), in language education (9%) and in literary translation (9%), while those envisaging themselves in the fields of science and research, economy, tourism, as interpreters, or politics, are fewer, despite the fact that the latter are generally considered career opportunities for philologists from Asian Studies majors.

What happens to these students after graduation is a further topic of interest, and to examine this we conducted another survey in March 2011.⁷ About only one fifth continue

7 The survey on career paths of our graduates shows that many young Japanologists have found a career utilizing Japanese studies, which in these times of a very tough labor market should be appreciated. For example, Sofia University is currently an employer of 4 full-time and 7 part-time graduates; Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 7; 18 "William Gladstone" School: 5; 138 "Prof. V. Zlatarski" School: 3; Embassy of Japan: 3; European union structures: 2; Toshiba International (Bulgaria branch): 2; while there are graduates employed at state and private schools and universities in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv; at IT companies and call centers, tourist companies, and publishers. Many of our graduates have continued to further their education abroad and are still living and working outside Bulgaria, among whom three have become university staff in Hong Kong, the USA and Germany, while over twenty work for Japanese companies in Japan, and a number for Japan-related companies in Europe; there are also many translators and interpreters.

on to M.A. and Ph.D. levels in the field of Japanology, while half of all graduates choose M.A. and Ph.D. programs in other fields like PR, Economics, Management, Business Administration, and Virtual Culture. The graduates reported that Japanese Studies alone is not enough and that broadening the philology studies and gaining knowledge and experience in other fields is of greater advantage. Despite the fact that about half of them work in the field, putting to use their Japanese Studies (41%), a large number of respondents stated honestly that in Bulgaria there are no real chances for a good career involving Japanese (25%). And indeed, only half of the survey participants live at present in Bulgaria, while the other half reside in Japan, Europe or elsewhere; this is partly due to the fact that economic cooperation is lagging far behind educational and cultural exchange.

Despite this, in recent years interest in Japan continues to grow and there are new opportunities for career development opening every day. To say that it is an easy or natural process would be an exaggeration, as without the constant efforts on the part of all sides involved in the promotion of Japanese culture in Bulgaria this would hardly ever happen. Of course, having more business opportunities and cooperation would make things easier and make for a more optimistic outlook, yet as this is not the case, the Japanese side and the Japanese Studies community place special emphasis on creating career opportunities for young people. Only time will tell whether or not these efforts are successful.

In other words, the mission of the Japanese Studies community in Bulgaria is to foster awareness of Japan in Bulgaria and to facilitate the flow of information from Bulgaria to Japan, in order to create societies with knowledge and interest in each other, from whence further opportunities for cooperation will arise in the future. It is no secret that the image of Bulgaria in Japan is a most positive one and one our country can boast of, compared to the attitude (or even lack of awareness at all) towards Bulgaria in other developed countries around the world. On the other hand, for over 50 years already in the minds of Bulgarian people Japan has been synonymous with advanced technology, rich culture, perfect organization, and desirable harmony. There is hardly any other country in the world that can raise such unquestionably positive feelings in the hearts of all Bulgarians of various genders, ages and backgrounds. And this is thanks to the decades-long efforts on both sides.

The current state of Japanese Studies today reflects the efforts of the generations before us. Hereafter they will be presented as an example of what is happening nowadays in regard to the promotion of Japan in Bulgaria.

In order to reach the public the Japanese Studies Program at Sofia University has undertaken a number of steps to: 1) respond to the growing interest in studying Japanese Studies; 2) educate highly-professional specialists to continue the promotion of Japan in Bulgaria; 3) publish and disseminate research results in various fields of interest for the general public; and 4) expose the Bulgarian public to Japanese culture in interactive ways.

It is no secret that in the last few decades Japanese studies freshmen at Sofia University gained entry to university with the highest scores of all other majors. Competition is stiff and enrolment depends on entrance exam results (in a foreign language) combined with their overall secondary school diploma. In this way it might be said that Japanese Studies students are among the top students not only in our university, but also in Bulgaria. They are highly motivated and well trained in foreign language learning. In order to respond to the growing interest towards Japanese studies as a major, in 2013 the University announced a rise in the enrolment quota from 15 to 20 people per year, yet together with transfer students, the class still topped out at around 25 freshmen. There is a certain number of drop-outs, yet despite the difficulties in the mastering of the language (80% of our students define the study process as a difficult one), 90% of students manage to graduate, a third to half of the graduates with level N1 in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, the rest with N2 by time of graduation.

In order to educate qualified specialists in Japanese Studies, we conduct regular screenings of the motivation and expectations of students, follow their career paths after graduation, and react to the needs of the labour market by adjusting and updating syllabus and curriculum.

During its 25-year history Japanese Studies at Sofia University has always followed the philosophy that language training and cultural awareness must go hand in hand. Ever since the beginning of the open public courses back in 1967, Japanese language classes have been combined with an equal amount of classes in Japanese literature, history, culture, and economics. Nowadays, the B.A. program is updated with classes in visual culture, ethnography, arts, and contemporary subjects. Even the theoretical courses are enriched by discussions of culture and its relevance to the discussed theoretical themes.

In accordance to the European Framework of Reference for Languages⁸ and the Japan Foundation Standards⁹ in Japanese language teaching, in recent years we have

8 http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf.

9 <http://www.jfny.org/language/standard.html>.

introduced many “can-do” based techniques, so that our students learn how to upgrade and make use of their knowledge. Simple examples include blogs introducing Bulgaria in Japanese,¹⁰ presentations followed by discussions with Japanese native speakers, intercultural exchange sessions with Japanese students (Bunkyō Gakuin Daigaku, Hitotsubashi Daigaku), tourist guide training classes, and others (see Photo 2).

One of the most successful projects in recent years proved to be the “Japanese language summer camp: Balkan Peninsula”—an international event supported by the Japan Foundation Sakura Core Projects Funds. The event has been successfully conducted for three successive years, and is seen as a platform for intercultural communication combined with the study of Japanese



Photo 2. Bunkyō Gakuin Daigaku Students visiting Japanese Studies at Sofia University.

language and culture. Around 50 Japanese studies students and academic staff from 5 Balkan countries (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Turkey) come together for a week to study Japanese, communicate in Japanese and interact actively in a kind of Balkan Peninsula network. The schedule of the event varies from year to year, with the aim of the study being the development of “can-do” techniques including all aspects of language with special emphasis on output skills development.¹¹ In addition, there are classes in Japanese culture (e.g. ikebana, sadō, calligraphy, haiku composition, manga) and a special public event to promote Japanese culture among the local public (a festival of Japanese culture for the general public in the city of Bourgas, in a language secondary school and in a kindergarten). There are also many workshops, evenings of cultural exchange, sports events, and so on to give the participants the opportunity to experience intercultural dialogue and to nourish intercultural awareness in young Japanologists. According to the questionnaires about the event it seems that indeed such an event is of great importance for the motivation of students and for their career development. We do hope that the Japanese language summer camp will continue as an event and will even broaden its scope in the future.

10 <http://bulgariaforjapan.wordpress.com/>.

11 <http://yaki.holy.jp/blog/>.

Another major effort on the part of Japanese Studies at Sofia University is its investment in the publishing and dissemination of research findings, in literary translation and in organizing academic events. An example of the first is the list of monographs published in the last five years by the regular staff (Appendix 1). A project on the translation of *Ise monogatari*, with 11 students taking part, has been completed as a part of efforts to promote Japanese classical literature with the help of young Japanologists (see Photo 3). To involve and motivate our students, an annual magazine was initiated, where students can publish their translations and research findings, presenting at the same time various aspects of traditional and contemporary Japan to the Bulgarian public. Furthermore, three conferences with international participation were successfully held (2009, 2010, 2012) with another one to come in 2015, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the program.

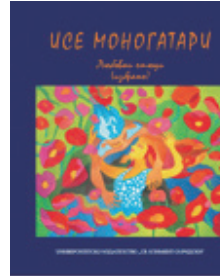


Photo 3. *Ise Monogatari*, edited by Gergana Petkova, translated by student team, Sofia University Press, March 2015.

Parallel to its B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. course, the Japanese studies section maintains a non-degree course in Japanese language and culture open to the general public, the history which can be traced back to the first courses in Japanese back in 1967. Nowadays specialists from various fields who wish to further develop their understanding and appreciation of Japan enrol in this 2-year course and then further combine their interests and professional activities with knowledge of Japan and its language.

The high motivation levels of our students is one of the prerequisites to successfully carry out other public events, like the annual festival of Japanese culture (*bunkasai*) at Sofia University, which has been held for the public for ten successive years. Traditional and contemporary Japanese culture is being introduced in an interactive way so that the Bulgarian public can experience it first-hand, get involved, and share the appreciation of Japan. Our students radiate during these events.

In the beginning of the anniversary year for Japan-Bulgaria relations, on 15 January 2014 our students became the driving force for the exhibition “Bulgaria for Japan” held in cooperation with the National Ethnographic Museum, which presented for the first time to the Bulgarian public the culture of *wagashi* and “house and garden” with models designed by our students. The exhibition was warmly welcomed by visitors and became a very successful example of how our students’ enthusiasm, guided by the expertise of

the academic staff, can result in highly effective cultural promotion (see Photo 4).

Currently, Japanese Studies at Sofia University is launching another project, which began in October 2014, together with the Municipality of Sofia, Lyulin District as part of the student motivation action plan: Japanese language and culture classes in kindergartens and pre-school. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of Japan, its culture and people, and to nurture appreciation of Japan from a young age. The project is entirely on a voluntarily basis, and the Japanese Studies students are again at the fore, with constant support from the teaching staff.

Here we come to the pressing problem of funding, which very often prevents the launch of large-scale events and long-term projects. The university research funds are still very limited, and the private sector does not see the use of investment in academic initiatives, so Japanese Studies either needs to work on a mostly volunteer basis, or to search for funding from outside. In this way we received financial support from Mitsubishi Corporation as a part of the Development Grant policy for three successive years. This helped upgrade the premises, the research facilities, and build an encouraging atmosphere for study and research (with an overall amount of nearly 150, 000 Euro for the years 2012, 2013 and 2014, renovation of facilities took place, library resources were upgraded, technical support like computers, audio-visual system, and an interpretation booth for language training was installed). The grants also helped the publishing and dissemination of research and translation works, and other Japanese culture promotion activities were included as a part of the project in order to reach the general public.

It is also true that in recent years Japanese Studies has faced increasing competition from the growing popularity of other Asian cultures, supported by active promotional policies, and the tension of competition is being felt in all directions—education, culture, business, technology, trade. This also poses challenges to our community which does its best, with scarcely any resources, to maintain the elevated position of Japan in Bulgaria, and to further stimulate bilateral relations. In 2014 the efforts of Japanese Studies at Sofia University was recognized with an honorary certificate from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.



Photo 4. Interacting with the public—Exhibition at the National Ethnographic Museum.

There is of course much to be done in the future. Yet we believe that working for the promotion of Japan in Bulgaria and for the image of Bulgaria in Japan will bear fruit in future, so without hesitation much effort is being invested on the part of the Japanese studies community in Bulgaria. It is our firm belief that Japanese Studies at Sofia University will continue to strive to educate highly qualified specialists to work for the development of Japanese-Bulgarian relations, will further produce original research, and will work for the promotion of Japanese language and culture in Bulgaria and abroad as it has done for the last quarter of a century. And we do hope that the Japanese side will support us all along the way.

Appendix 1: Recent Publications by Japanese Studies Staff at Sofia University (2010–2014)

Author/Editor	Title	Language	Year	Publisher
Student team of translators, under the supervision of Gergana Petkova	<i>Ise Monogatari—Love Etudes, Golden Selection</i>	Bulgarian	2015	Sofia University Press
Gergana Petkova	<i>Japanese Fairy Tales, Part 1</i>	Bulgarian	2015	Sofia University Press
Boyka Tsigova	<i>Zen and the Japanese Traditional Arts</i>	Bulgarian	2014	Sofia University Press
Anton Andreev	<i>Introduction to Japanese Phonetics and Phonology</i>	Bulgarian	2014	Sofia: Zvezdi
Tsigova, Petkova, Andreev, and Koleva, eds.	<i>CIRCLE—The Magazine of Young Japanologists</i>	Bulgarian	2014/vol. 2; 2013/vol. 1	Sofia University Press
Tsigova, Petkova, and Andreev, eds.	<i>Bulgaria-Japan-the World: Conference Proceedings</i>	Bulgarian, English, Japanese	2013	Sofia University Press
Petkova, Andreev, Koleva, and Todorova, eds.	<i>Japan—Times, Spirituality and Perspectives: Conference Proceedings</i>	Bulgarian, English, Japanese	2012	Sofia: Zvezdi
Nako Stefanov, Evgeniy Kandilarov	<i>Japan: Economics, Technology, Innovations and Management</i>	Bulgarian	2012	Sofia: Iztok-Zapad
Gergana Petkova	<i>Promotion and Reception of Japanese Culture in Bulgaria</i>	English	2012	Seijo CGS Reports
Nako Stefanov	<i>Information Development of the East Asian Countries</i>	Bulgarian	2011	Sofia: Iztok-Zapad
Gergana Petkova	<i>The Home of Miracles: Architectural Symbolism in the Japanese Fairy Tales</i>	Bulgarian	2011	Sofia: Zvezdi
Gergana Petkova	<i>Japanese Ethnography: Eight Introductory Themes</i>	Bulgarian	2010	Sofia: Zvezdi