

Toward Shared Awareness of New Questions: An Example from the Current Condition of Historical Studies of Japan (and Japanese Culture) in France

Matthias Hayek

The year 2018 marked many anniversary celebrations and commemorations. They have jogged our memory of important historical events, including the establishment of Japan-France exchanges in the wake of Japan opening its door to the rest of the world, the Meiji Restoration, and the end of WWI, and invited us to consider similarities and differences between the current world situation and that over a century earlier.

Against such a background, over 30 years have passed since the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) was founded. During this period, drastic transformations in global politics and the economy have caused significant changes in the field of Japanese studies itself too.

As I was quite young at the time of the Nichibunken's foundation, it is difficult for me to review those changes. Thus, I would like to focus on the current situation of Japanese studies in France, more specifically of Japanese historical studies (including cultural history, intellectual history, and history of science), in which I am directly involved. At the same time, I will try to reflect upon the challenge of "conducting Japanese studies abroad", and the role Nichibunken could play in this context.

I. Current Condition of Japanese Studies in France

First of all, I will point out problems inherent in the frameworks of "civilization studies" and "area studies" in the French academic world, and mention the two faces of "introducers of" and "contributors to" Japanese studies, which overseas researchers in Japanese studies are expected to have. Before that, let me briefly introduce the current condition of Japanese studies in France.

Actually, at Nichibunken's 20th anniversary symposium, which was held 10 years ago, my fellow scholar Josef Kyburz, who was in a similar position to that of mine today, expressed his view on the same subject as follows:

"Japanese studies is becoming a part of Asian studies and losing its independence as a field of area studies. The image of Japan is being integrated into that of the East Asian Cultural Sphere characterized by use of Chinese characters, and subsequently losing its own profile."

This means that he already identified trends toward a declining presence of the originality of Japanese culture in studies abroad.

Kyburz took an example of the trends from the fact that the "Japanese civilization" research team, which had been formed in 1979 with some 20 researchers in Japanese studies at the Collège de France, École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), and other organizations, was integrated with similar teams studying

China and Tibet into one in 2006. He predicted that Chinese studies would lower the profile of Japanese studies in both university education and research.

This prediction was proven to be partially accurate, at least regarding research, but I still think it is possible to evaluate positively French research during the same period.

The organization integrating the above-mentioned three research teams was later renamed the East Asian Civilizations Research Centre (Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale [CRCAO]), so "Japanese studies" certainly seems to no longer have full independence. In addition, during the past decade, the entire CNRS had two researchers in Japanese studies retire at the compulsory retirement age, but employed only one researcher in the same field (appointed to a position at another research center), while employing three researchers in Chinese studies, two in Tibetan studies, and one in the Korean history of thought.

Nevertheless, the number of researchers in Japanese studies at CRCAO has not significantly decreased, and the center still has nearly 20 researchers in the same field. This is because academic staff from the Japanese Studies Section of Université Paris-Diderot (Paris 7) were assigned to CRCAO a decade ago, just before I assumed my current position. The collective assignment resulted in major changes in the center's research policy, and, as I explain later, invigorated research activities there. This situation clearly demonstrates drastic changes in Japanese studies in France.

Those changes include an increase in the number of students in departments of Japanese studies around France since the late 1990s until today, leading to an insufficient but substantial increase in the number of Japanese studies instructors. In addition, instructors who started their teaching career in the late 1980s have begun to reach the retirement age, being replaced by the younger generations of instructors. Moreover, studies of classical and medieval literature, and historical, religious, and ethnological studies, which were formerly the mainstream of Japanese studies in France, have relatively declined in their presence, in contrast with the growing presence of early modern and modern cultural history, studies of contemporary literature, and social science studies, including sociological and economic ones, in Japanese studies as a whole.

The changes have resulted in the gradual shift of the center of Japanese studies in France from research institutes, such as CNRS and EPHE, where classical and medieval cultural historians and anthropologists formerly led the field, to universities, paving the way to a new era in Japanese studies. Furthermore, it seems that the center of research assessment in this field has also shifted from France to Japan to some extent.

A factor behind this changing situation is growing interest in learning Japanese at a university in France from the 1990s onward, and the resulting substantial increase in the number of Japanese studies instructor jobs. In addition, many researchers in Japanese studies in their 30s to 50s have the experience of studying in Japan for a medium or long term, and have been trained hard in the Japanese academic world and built academic networks with Japan. Research themes have also become diversified and fractionalized according to situations in Japan, probably leading to a higher level of specialization. It seems to me that these changes have caused changes in the positioning of researchers from abroad in the Japanese academic world. In addition to works written in their native languages or English, the number of works written in Japanese has been growing, and, as its natural consequence, studies by researchers

from outside Japan have been obtaining greater recognition. While the development of the information society can be a factor behind this changing situation, institutions for international Japanese studies, which have increased in number since the 1990s, represented by Nichibunken, have played a major role there.

Researchers from outside Japan have few fellow researchers exploring the same theme as theirs back home, so it is difficult for them to receive due recognition from the perspective of the theme. The biennial general meeting of the French Society of Japanese Studies certainly provides French researchers in Japanese studies with the opportunity to present and discuss their research, but the researchers have begun to take another measure: writing and publishing papers in Japanese to have them reviewed in the Japanese academic world, which helps strengthen the networks those researchers have with Japan.

To take the example of CRCAO, a wider variety of research projects are in progress there than a decade ago, and rather a large number of researchers explore the culture of the same period, though specializing in different cultural elements, and thus have become able to conduct group research, though on a small scale. For example, a group of French researchers have been translating *Nihon Sankai Meisan Zue* (“Illustrated Guide to Specialty Products from the Land and Sea in Japan”)—a book published in the mid-Edo Period, and which is of special interest from the point of view of early modern publishing history, history of knowledge, history of technology etc.—into French for about five and a half years, aiming to publish the completed translation as an e-book within 2019. Such group research initiatives have taken the form of joint research beyond institutional borders, and developed into international research projects where Japanese researchers are also involved. An example is a research group on *Shuhanron Emaki* (“Picture Scroll on Comparison between the Merits of Sake and Rice”) held at the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. The group met constantly for three years from 2009 and published its research achievements as books in French and Japanese in France and Japan, respectively. Another example is the three-year international joint research titled “A Comprehensive Study of Publishing and Learning in the Early Edo Period,” which was pursued as part of a large-scale project organized by the National Institute of Japanese Literature, with participants from the UK, Germany, France, and South Korea. The project has been followed by another project titled “A Comprehensive Study of Interactions of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Japan” organized by the same institute, in which four researchers participate from CRCAO.

As mentioned above, while Japanese studies led mainly by university instructors outside Japan have always featured their interdisciplinarity, they share with Nichibunken the same characteristics of researchers in diverse fields working in the same place. In this sense, it can be said that the organizational structure of Nichibunken itself gives a model for Japanese studies abroad.

These new generations of researchers have been establishing their own status as not only introducers of an unknown civilization outside Europe, who introduce Japanese culture to an audience back home and emphasize its originality, but also contributors to “knowledge” created in Japan.

II. Trends in the Positioning of Researchers in Japanese Studies and the Significance of International Studies of Japanese Culture

Meanwhile, researchers in Japanese studies also occupy another set of positions inside and outside their homeland. The first position is that of introducers of situations in Japan to researchers specializing in the same field or exploring the same theme as them but studying different geographical areas.

This position can also be called the position of contributors to a kind of comparative studies who introduce Japanese culture not as a culture characterized by absolute alterity but as a comparable culture.

As I mentioned before, our studies are always interdisciplinary, and also unique for relationships between disciplines. In addition, comparative studies are associated with historian Marc Bloch, who found the following three purposes of comparative studies in the early 20th century:

- To consider the possibility of applying an explanation (theory) to different contexts to assess the appropriateness of the explanation
- To clearly show the originality of a society
- To apply the same questions to different ages or different places

The first purpose of applying a model can result in a posteriori universalism, while the second one of emphasizing only differences can lead directly to naïve cultural relativism. However, we have followed these two policies in our research efforts while trying to avoid the universalist and relativist biases as long as we can. In this sense, I believe that, rather than essentializing the “originality” of Japan and emphasizing it, there is the possibility of visualizing the originality, and comparing Japanese culture with other cultures in East Asia to reconsider the meaning of the originality.

For example, you can adopt the research policy of exploring a credible explanation of differences between Vietnam and Japan despite their similarities as areas under the immense influence of China. Or, from the opposite perspective, you can put a question whether there are other areas that have developed from the Chinese influence in the same way as Japan, though such development has so far been unnoticed. I have recently been surveying visual representations of fortune-telling about compatibility between men and women, so in my case, it is possible to use “visual representations,” which characterizes Japanese culture, as a starting point, and question whether other areas may also have the concept of “*aiishō*” (compatibility between both sexes), visually represented or not, which has become visible by the grace of the starting point. Furthermore, a comparison with other cultures may enable us to find a characteristic of Japanese culture in how the concept of “visual representations” has developed.

The third purpose can lead to possibilities for new studies through the shift of perspectives based on intellectual exchanges between researchers in different fields and from different countries, but entails the problem of linguistic differences, or so-called language barriers. Here, researchers in area studies from abroad play an important role. As the Nichibunken Director

and Deputy Director explained in their introductions to this symposium, such comparative studies are most significant in countries like Japan as the home of Japanese studies.

As of late, we have been establishing a new status as introducers not only of facts about Japan, but also of the works of Japanese academics representative of their fields, mostly through translations. This is particularly true regarding studies in Japanese history.

We as overseas researchers in Japanese studies face another challenge of translating academic papers written by Japanese researchers and spreading knowledge about Japan to outside Japan. This challenge has been tackled not only in France but also the U.S. and the rest of East Asia, including China and South Korea. Moreover, recent progress in internationalization has made English a global standard language, so it has become clearer that we have to translate not only our works but also discourses of Japanese researchers into English. That would allow students who do not yet have access to original Japanese texts and researchers in other fields to easily learn about basic studies or the most advanced discourses on a theme, and enable discussions based on shared information from studies in Japan, instead of letting only a limited number of researchers use the information, which might make our studies more appropriate. Although there was a long-lasting feeling of resistance to the use of English in Japanese studies in France, some important academic works have recently been translated into English, enabling them to be reviewed internationally. Again, examples from works by researchers at CRCAO include Annick Horiuchi's *Japanese Mathematics in the Edo Period (1600–1868): A Study of the Works of Seki Takakazu (?–1708) and Takebe Katahiro (1664–1739)*, and Charlotte von Verschuer's *Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries*. Concerning my own works, nearly a third of them are in French, while the remaining two thirds are in English or Japanese. In my recent co-edited works *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40-1: Onmyōdō in Japanese History (with Makoto Hayashi; 2013) and *Listen, Copy, Read: Popular Learning in Early Modern Japan* (Brill; with Annick Horiuchi; 2014), We aimed to provide readers with knowledge from the most advanced studies in Europe and Japan and respect each writer's tone of argument and research style as much as possible.

These works, however, are intended for readers engaged in Japanese studies, so I think it is somewhat difficult to use them for comparative studies, if not area studies.

By contrast, there have been new trends in historical studies since the end of the 20th century, and the trends seem to have recently been accelerated. The trends are ones toward opening the door of Japanese studies to “historians” outside area studies.

The trends were heralded by *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Issue 50-2, published in 1995. In this Annales-school journal, created by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, works by Yoshihiko Amino and Shizuo Katsumata were translated into French through the efforts of Pierre François Souyri and Hiroyuki Ninomiya, bringing discourses of historians who had constructed the overall picture of post-war Japanese historical studies to French historians. Such trends are also found in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, contemporary to the above-mentioned journal issue, suggesting that those times were a turning point in Japanese studies abroad.

Moreover, my fellow researcher Guillaume Carré contributed immensely to actively introducing French readers to historical studies from the perspective of status marginality by

Japanese researchers, such as Nobuyuki Yoshida, Takashi Tsukada, and Toshihiko Takano. The first step toward this initiative was *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Issue 66-4, published in 2011. Part of the French world of historical studies shared, and displayed great interest in, their Japanese counterparts' awareness of questions, resulting in new active academic exchanges in the field of historical studies.

Part of the French world of historical studies here denotes a group of historians who explore the early modern European history of families and ego-documents, represented by François-Joseph Ruggiu, Institute for Research on Modern Western Civilization, Université de Paris-Sorbonne. To explore a new frontier for comparative studies, Ruggiu and his group have held joint workshops in Japan and France since 2009, and published their results in *Histoire Économie et Société* in 2017, where young researchers from the group present papers, in addition to Yoshida and other Japanese researchers. Ruggiu himself currently serves as Director of the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, CNRS, and supervises the humanities at the center. We can have lofty expectations for the subsequent development of historical studies.

This new type of comparative studies aims to shed fresh light on European history, with the help of the methodology and questions of Japanese history, as a source of an alternative historical perspective, rather than just comparing the situation in early modern Japan with that in France. In France, Marxist historical materialism declined earlier under the influence of the Annales school and demographic history, and research focus was placed on "individuals" in history of mentalities and cultural history under the influence of sociology and anthropology. As a result, the issues of groups, pressure, and rule were little examined. Therefore, Ruggiu and his group determined that Japanese historical studies, which did not completely deny historical materialism but reconstructed it in an original way, had many lessons they should draw on. This is a good example of Bloch's version of comparative studies as the application of questions. Issue 41 of the journal *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, of which I serve as Chief Editor, deals with the theme of "statuses" and the question of statuses in early modern East Asia and identity. This is also an example of the possibility of applying the new type of comparative studies to area studies.

These trends shall further grow because, as I mentioned above, young researchers have brought back home the methodologies and approaches they acquired while studying in Japan, and will contribute to spreading them.

Methodologies and questions in Japanese-style historical, anthropological, and sociological studies will, hopefully, be used abroad from now on.

III. Challenges Nichibunken should Take up from Now on

Finally, we should return to Nichibunken. Since its founding, the research institute has always aimed to pioneer Japanese studies, and to gather as many researchers engaged in its pioneering tasks as possible.

As a doctoral student, and then as a research fellow, I have had first hand experience of the interdisciplinary approach shared by all the research programs at Nichibunken. All its research

achievements, whether works by single authors or multiple authors, or international symposium reports teach valuable lessons to researchers in Japanese studies around the world.

As a unique institution in the Japanese academic world, Nichibunken is an important research hub and partner for researchers not only in Western countries but also Asian and African countries.

In addition, Nichibunken's databases have recently been further upgraded, and are of an even greater use for Japanese studies abroad serving Japanese studies abroad.

Its policy of publishing reviews of books from overseas research institutes in the journal *Nihon Kenkyu* is also very helpful for strengthening the foothold of overseas researchers in Japan. The English academic journal *Japan Review* has also established its status, and made remarkable changes.

It seems to me, however, that in Western Europe at least, collaboration between organizations still remains at an insufficient level, although individual researchers have built close relationships with each other. As a result, only few international joint research projects other than international conferences have been implemented, and few joint works with Nichibunken have had a high international profile.

In fact, many of the aforementioned joint researches initiatives were conducted with the help of another member of the National Institutes for the Humanities, namely the National Institute of Japanese Literature.

The National Institute of Japanese Literature underwent a remarkable internationalization in the past few years. Although overseas researchers have just recently been appointed as its director and instructors, the National Institute of Japanese Literature has long conducted international joint research, inviting research institutes in Europe and the U.S. with which it has relationships. The institute established a Committee for International Networking to promote a large-scale project concerning classical Japanese books on history, and appointed many overseas researchers as committee members to strengthen international partnership between organizations.

Organizational partnership enables an institute to just select a contact person to indirectly approach all other members of the partner organization, without approaching all the members in person, and to form a new network. From my own experience, I had an opportunity to participate in joint research with the National Institute of Japanese Literature soon after I assumed my current position, and since then I have been involved in many international joint research projects in various ways, and begun to often work with professionals who do not belong to the institute. This experience has had major impacts on expanding my networks with other researchers.

In most cases, such projects cover only an academic field, such as literature and history, but the former example includes bibliographical and cultural historical aspects, where putting common questions is rather easy. Adopting an international style of studies might have the benefits of easing the restriction of borders between disciplines and facilitating discoveries of new perspectives. Anyway, such organizational partnership will greatly benefit research institutes in France, and provide opportunities for French researchers to accomplish achievements that deserve international recognition.

Given its nature, Nichibunken may not be able to easily collaborate with other organization in such a way, but I hope that Nichibunken will get involved in initiatives to share its approaches with researchers outside Japanese studies, as mentioned above. Researchers at Nichibunken conduct research activities in the forefront and beyond borders between disciplines, but I believe that they will have to devote further efforts to not only the most advanced research but also actively introduce materials useful for new types of comparative studies in the current academic world.

To sum it up, I believe that Nichibunken should emphasize its own (epistemological) originality as a researching agency, instead of the (cultural) originality of its research subjects. In my opinion, while keeping on introducing the latest research results concerning Japanese culture, Nichibunken has the potential to share its awareness of epistemological questions that would help pave the way to a truly global form of universalism.