

Japanese Studies in the World: Towards a Critical Renewal From an Australian Perspective

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Over the past four decades, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of young people in Australia wishing to learn about the languages and cultures of Asia. Initially, this trend manifested as the so-called Japanese language education “tsunami” (Coulmas; 1989; Lo Bianco 2000), which, in conjunction with the expansion of Japan’s bubble economy, saw students pursue Japanese language and Japanese Studies learning as a pathway to personal economic gain. Initial human capital motivation, however, was often superseded by a sincere and, in many cases, life-long interest in Japan. As a result, there are many Australians today who have a deep and abiding personal relationship with Japan. It is not unusual for young Australians who undertake in-country studies in Japan eventually to acquire permanent work with a Japanese enterprise or to have a life-partner from Japan. While the recent decade has seen a steep rise in the growth of Chinese language studies, considerable numbers of young people in Australia still wish to learn Japanese and to engage with Japan. The current trend to some extent continues the late twentieth-century’s Japanese language education “tsunami.” Interest in Japanese language and in knowing more about Japan, however, has a history of a century or more in Australia. This paper provides an overview of the emergence and development of Japanese Studies and Japanese language education in Australia, in addition to highlighting several key elements and key identities involved.

The discussion begins with an account of the contribution over the past hundred years of selected Japanese Studies identities in Australia while also referencing the socio-historic background against which these scholars and researchers worked. Attention is then given to the impact of Australian Federal Government policies on Japanese Studies, including language learning and teaching. Constitutionally, education in Australia is a state responsibility. Nevertheless, funding principally derives from Federal — that is, Australian Commonwealth Government — sources. Policies at this level therefore have a major impact on critical matters such as staffing levels and the availability of research funds. Consideration will also be given to the current circumstances of Japanese Studies in Australia, both to the problems faced by scholars and researchers and to networks and systems that support their endeavors. Finally, suggestions will be made on how Japanese Studies might develop into the future not merely in the Australian context but also in terms of the activities of the international community. Of necessity, the discussion that follows can be an overview only and proceeds from the author’s perspective.

The Emergence of Japanese Studies in Australia

Systematic Japanese Studies and Japanese language education in Australia began in 1917 with the creation of a Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney. James Murdoch, a Scot who had worked in Japan as an English teacher and an advisor to the Japanese government and who had come to Australia to teach Japanese, was appointed as the inaugural Department

Chair. Murdoch's three-volume study, *A History of Japan*, is acknowledged as the first English language work providing a comprehensive overview of Japanese history. Murdoch is also famous as a teacher of the great man of modern Japanese letters, Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), who noted in 1911 that his relationship with the Scot was much more than that of student and teacher of language and history (Sōseki 1986).¹ The creation of a Department of Oriental Studies and the appointment of Murdoch was largely due to initiatives by the Australian Department of Defense. Although Japan had an alliance with Great Britain, this emerging Pacific “great power” had been the victor in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War. The Australian authorities therefore viewed Japan as a threat to national security and were eager to collect information about the new force in the region. Adrian Vickers has noted how Murdoch authored offensive magazine articles relating to Chinese (cited in *The Oriental Society of Australia* 2019). Nevertheless, and in spite of the fact that he provided information to the military, Murdoch appears to have had some ambivalence about the notion of Japan as a “threat.” In fact, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Sydney in 1918, the newly appointed Department Chair stated that Japanese Studies in Australia should focus on cultural learning in addition to contributing to fields such as “trade and diplomacy” (Jacobs 1953). Although a full century has elapsed since Murdoch mounted this argument, current Japanese Studies scholars can face similar tensions arising from a mismatch between government research expectations and researcher interest.

The then Australian government's attitude towards Japan set a template for a century of often problematic engagement with the Asian region. Underpinning this engagement has been, and arguably continues to be, an official discourse that often valorizes Europe and accordingly devalues — or even demonizes — Asia. At least since the 1890s and even before, prejudice against the “threat” presented by Asia has had deep roots in some corners of the collective Australian psyche. While officialdom saw imperial Japan as a potential adversary in the early 20th century, similar attitudes marked later relations with other parts of Asia. During the Vietnam War, China's support for North Vietnam led to the construction of the People's Republic of China in highly negative terms (of course, the Australian alliance with the United States was a factor in this respect). For various reasons, relations with Indonesia, Australia's nearest Asian neighbor, have wildly fluctuated since the postwar formation of the Republic of Indonesia. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Australia's attitude towards Asia could be summed up in the general use of the highly offensive term, “yellow peril,” which racially stereotyped people from Asia as some sort of collective “other” to be feared.²

Certainly, many Australians embrace the notion of a closer relationship with sites in Asia and strongly oppose policies based on what are ultimately Europhile assumptions that marginalize people and places in Asia.³ Nevertheless, during the century of Australia's

¹ I thank Professor Ushimura Kei of Nichibunken for bringing this article to my attention.

² The term “yellow peril” was circulated by the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) (Chen 2014: 51) and popularised by German Emperor Wilhelm II (1859–1941) following the First Sino-Japanese War. The concept relates to the fantasized “peril” that white races putatively face from powerful people in Asia.

³ Australia, of course, was home to the notorious White Australia Police, the popular name given to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. This law worked to exclude migrants of non-European background (that is, “non-whites”) from entering Australia. The law was not amended until 1973. Discrimination against →

engagement with Japan, exclusionist positions have emerged from administrations of various political persuasions. On the one hand, the conservative Liberal Party of Australia is home to monarchists who wish to maintain what they regard as Australia's traditional relationship with the former "great empire," the United Kingdom, which they regard as the putative source of Australia's cultural roots. On the other, although leftist-leaning Labor Party supporters generally dismiss the importance of ties with the United Kingdom, there has at various times been a vexed relationship between Asian immigrant workers and the Australian trade union movement. From colonial times, trade unions tended to fear immigrant workers as cheap labor and therefore a threat to Australian workers' jobs. This resulted in campaigns built on premises that must ultimately be condemned as racist. Specific incidents could further inflame tensions of this nature. The murder in Timor Leste of five Australian journalists by the Indonesian military in 1975 saw a rupture in Australian-Indonesian relations that arguably prevailed for at least two decades.

In 1919, two years after the creation of the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne first offered Japanese language as a subject, although no formal Department of Asian or Oriental Studies was established at that time. This was an era during which the influence of an elitist British education system saw ancient Greek and Latin as the de rigueur choices of students interested in "foreign" language education. In other words, the 1919 introduction of an Asian language into the curriculum of the University of Melbourne was an epochal event that presented considerable challenge. Three years later, in 1922, the university appointed its first and, for some time, only Japanese lecturer, Inagaki Senkichi (known familiarly as Moshi). Unfortunately, as Yuriko Nagata (1996) explains in her monograph on the plight of Japanese people detained during the war in Australia, Inagaki became a victim of Australia's aggressive policies towards residents who had come from Japan. Following the Pearl Harbour attack by the Japanese Imperial Navy, Inagaki was interned as a person from an enemy country. During his internment, his Australian wife, Rose, became ill and passed away. At the end of the war, Inagaki was repatriated back to his homeland with other former internees and seems to have never returned to Australia.⁴

Upon Murdoch's appointment as Chair of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney, there were plans to introduce Chinese and Hebrew languages and studies. In 1921, however, Murdoch passed away and, unfortunately, this proposal was never implemented. Notwithstanding the scholarly achievements of Arthur Lindsay Sadler, who succeeded Murdoch as Department Chair, Helen Marriot (1994: 17) notes that 'until the 1960s [the Department's] size remained limited.'

↪ first-nation Aboriginal Australians was also justified under this policy. Many white Australian citizens nonetheless opposed the policy and were involved in protest movements against it.

⁴ In his book *Kindai Nihon no Shokuminchi Tōchi ni okeru Kokuseki to Koseki: Manshū, Chōsen, Taiwan* 近代日本の植民地統治における国籍と戸籍 満洲・朝鮮・台湾 (lit. "Nationality and Family Registers in Modern Japanese Colonial Rule: Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan"), Masataka Endō 遠藤正敬 examines the treatment of *gaichijin* (people of the empire not of mainland Japan) by the imperial authorities. There are interesting — and disturbing — similarities between imperial era policies towards *gaichijin* and the treatment of wartime detainees (including Germans and Italians in addition to Japanese) by Australian authorities.

From the Post-War to the Present

As with the teaching of English in Japan, Japanese language education in Australia was largely suspended for the period of the war. Nevertheless, when trade relations with Japan formally recommenced in 1956, the then Australian Minister for Trade, John “Black Jack” McEwan, observed that “Japan and Australia are two lonely countries on the edge of Asia” (Patience and Jacques 2007). It was logical that a resurgence in the study of Japan would soon follow.

In the two or three decades that followed the end of the war, the study of literature was one focus of Japanese Studies in Australia. Professor Joyce Ackroyd made a major contribution in this respect. Appointed in 1965 as the foundation Chair of the newly established Department of Japanese Language and Literature at the University of Queensland, Ackroyd was a woman of remarkable strength of character and tenacity. At the time, she was only one of a handful of women professors in Australia. (In Australia, the term “professor” is used in the sense of the English university system and is the highest of several faculty ranks.) Born in Newcastle, to the north of Sydney in Australia, Ackroyd took her doctorate in Japanese literature at Cambridge University. She went on to establish an international reputation as a scholar of both classical and modern texts. In 1979, she published an English translation of *Oritaku Shiba no Ki* 折りたく柴の記 (*Told Round a Brushwood Fire*). She also broke new ground by acknowledging the importance of the woman’s perspective with her 1959 work entitled *Women in Feudal Japan*. This work is occasionally cited by scholars even today.

A key figure in fin de siècle Japanese Studies in Australia was Royall Tyler who, like Murdoch, originally came from the United Kingdom. As a professor at the Australian National University (ANU), Tyler received a six-year research grant from the Australian government to produce a contemporary translation of *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 (*The Tale of Genji*). Published in 2002, Tyler’s translation was widely recognized both for its eruditeness and its readability and made a significant impact in English language Japanese Studies and translation studies circles. As noted, Tyler’s translation project was generously funded by the Australian government. In other words, the Australian authorities of the time willingly acknowledged the importance of translation as a means of facilitating cross-cultural, border-crossing communication that assists monolingual people to enter a world that they cannot otherwise access. Furthermore, support for the project indicated support for both literature and the classics. During the past two to three decades, however, translation, particularly literary translation, has fallen into disfavor, and it is difficult to imagine Tyler’s project being funded today. (In fact, there has been a recent devaluing of the humanities as a whole, which — as Julianne Lamond (2019) has noted with respect even to scholarship concerning Australian literature — has made it increasingly difficult for academics working in those fields to access public research funds.) This official dismissal of the value of translation by Australian funding authorities suggests a lack of understanding of the necessity to circulate knowledges from other sites and other cultures in order to maintain a vibrant and responsive local research community.

As has been the case in higher education globally, restructure and corporatization have been recent features of the Australian tertiary system. There has accordingly been a progressive reduction in the level of per capita public funding (accompanied by the questionable policy

expectation that compensatory monies be generated through a growth in international student numbers). One consequence has been a reduction in the number of faculty available to undertake teaching and research duties. Staff casualization is now widespread, a development that has increased pressure on faculty who remain in full-time paid work. This has impacted on Japanese language and Japanese Studies, particularly on the provision of courses dedicated to classical Japanese. Classical Japanese has been a tenuous entity in the Australian context, with not all institutions offering contemporary programs that included this element. Currently, there are no formal university offerings of classical Japanese in Australia, depriving students there of a valuable learning experience. This has largely been the result of the minimum student numbers “caps” that have accompanied university restructuring in Australia. Two or three decades ago, small numbers in specialist classes were accepted as necessary on scholarly grounds. The growth of neo-liberal decision-making based purely on profits generated, however, has largely seen the axing of offerings that do not reach what are often unreasonably high designated minimum numbers of students enrolled. Classical Japanese has been one casualty of this development. In addition to being unable to read medieval texts, students with no background in premodern language forms have difficulty accessing the materials produced by officialdom during the imperial era. It is of concern that the only Australian students who are able to engage in the study of the Japanese classics are those who choose to do so while on exchange in Japan.

Reference has previously been made to the Japanese language education “tsunami,” a phenomenon that occurred in Australia from the mid-1980s to the mid- to late 1990s. At that time, there was a misguided belief that Japanese language proficiency and knowledge about Japan would automatically lead to lucrative work associated with what was then the country with the second most powerful economy in the world. The “lost decades” that followed the bubble collapse, however, led to changes in student motivation. Many young people in Australia now come to Japanese Studies through manga and anime, ensuring that undergraduate numbers remain healthy. Nevertheless, encouraging students to progress to masters or doctoral higher degree studies remains a challenge. Furthermore, the reduction in full-time staff numbers that has accompanied the incremental withdrawal of government funds has seen a diminishing pool of faculty members who are able to undertake the supervision of young (and older) people interested in graduate research.

From a more positive perspective, a feature of current post-graduate activity in Australia is the diversity of topics researched. In addition to the traditional “high” culture fields such as history and literature, there is strong graduate interest in pop cultures, subcultures and in fields not generally associated with “Japanese Studies.” Accordingly, recent thesis topics in Australia have covered themes such as contemporary architecture, *enka* music and the relationship between the traditional and the modern in the Kyoto textile industry. There have also been a number of incisive close readings of manga and anime texts. This has arguably broadened understandings of Japanese Studies and will assist in ensuring the future survival of the field in Australia.

As noted above, the first University of Queensland Departmental Chair, Professor Joyce Ackroyd, was one of the few women professors of her era. From the 1970s, however, second wave feminism saw a steep rise in the numbers of women entering academia. This led to the

emergence of women scholars who achieved eminence at both the local and international levels. It also led to research projects that proceeded on the assumption of a strong gender critique. By the end of the 1990s, women scholars such as Vera Mackie and Tessa Morris-Suzuki had taken their places beside men such as political scientist Alan Rix, literary studies scholar Hugh Clarke, and linguist, J.V. Neustupny, in the pantheon of internationally significant Japanese Studies scholars from Australia. Vera Mackie's *Socialist Women in Japan* (1997), for example, was seen as a pioneering work in the global English-speaking Japanese Studies community. With the emergence of prominent women faculty, increasing numbers of graduate students adopted a feminist perspective in their research or, at the least, chose topics that profiled women's lives and experiences. More recently, this trend has been supplemented by a growing interest in queer theory and an acknowledgement of the problems associated with heteronormative assumptions in research. Morris-Suzuki, who achieved prominence also in the Japanese academic world, broke new ground with her studies of ethnic minorities and attracted graduate students wishing to research in this field from around the world. Both Morris-Suzuki and Mackie have conducted pioneering research into the issue of "comfort women" (Japanese Imperial Army sex slaves). It is no exaggeration to say that the current generation of young Japanese Studies scholars in Australia are building on the research achievements of women such as Vera Mackie and Terra Morris-Suzuki, as well as the work of the men referred to above.

Japanese Studies in Australia Today

In addition to the difficulties previously outlined, Japanese Studies in Australia is arguably impacted upon by "the tyranny of distance," a coin popularized by Australian historian, Geoffrey Blainey, to explain how distance and a concomitant sense of isolation have influenced the formation of an Australian identity (Blainey 1966). Like Japan, Australia is an "island country" separated from other sites by the sea. Leaving Australia to study or research overseas presents a range of challenges, not the least of which can be the financial burden incurred. Declines in available research funds at both the national and institutional level add to the difficulties faced by Australian scholars who wish to engage in meaningful in-Japan research. This has been exacerbated by a reduction also in sabbatical entitlements. Researchers with little opportunity to visit Japan can struggle to stay abreast of current social topics and to maintain a high-level of Japanese language proficiency.

In spite of the challenges faced by Japanese Studies researchers in Australia, there are various entities that provide very positive support for the endeavors of scholars in this field. These include the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the Sydney office of the Japan Foundation. For the past decade or more, the NLA has offered competitive annual research grants that permit early career and more experienced researchers to spend time working on the Library's extremely comprehensive Japanese Studies collection. Although these funds have recently been opened to other Asian Studies scholars, Japan scholars remain eligible to apply. For researchers who are required to leave Australia to undertake archival or similar work in Japan, the Japan Foundation offers a range of awards that, once again, can be competitively accessed by beginning and senior researchers. There are not a few researchers in Australia whose most significant outcomes have

been made possible by Japan Foundation support. In addition to assisting with formal matters, such as the provision of grant application and acquittal information, staff at both the NLA and Foundation office are tireless in the provision of informal back-up for the Japanese Studies community. All members of that community in Australia owe these devoted staff a deep debt of gratitude.

Also significant in this respect is the professional organization, the Japanese Studies Association of Australia (JSAA). The JSAA is the largest Japanese Studies association in the southern hemisphere with activities ranging over a wide variety of fields. Its biennial international conference, which attracts participants globally, is renowned as a gathering that encourages respectful but robust interdisciplinary exchange. The JSAA's publication flagship, *The Japanese Studies Journal*, has a strong international reputation with editorial board membership and readership that extends far outside Australia.

Toward the Future

Japanese Studies is generally viewed as a sub-set of “area studies.” Area studies, of course, has been the subject of strong criticism for the promotion of imperialist and Cold War-oriented perspectives that confine the field within exclusionist parameters (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002). As a result, a number of scholars, including Sakai Naoki (2010), have argued for a model of “transnational studies,” that is, for a need to extend research foci well beyond the borders of any particular nation state. The “transnational studies” model derives from various sources and owes much the work of influential British scholar, Stuart Hall. Born in Jamaica and experiencing life as “the other” in the white-dominated British academic world, Hall became a representative theorist in cultural studies. He was a charismatic figure whose ideas inspired other scholars.

There is no doubt that Japanese Studies needs to discard its outdated “area studies” mantle and to be revitalized through the adoption of a new approach. This, as an aside, will involve a comprehensive interrogation of the meaning of the term “Japan.” Embracing the underlying assumptions of transnational studies will certainly contribute to the liberation of Japanese Studies from the suffocating environment of the area studies enclosure, plagued as it is by the centre/periphery or universal/particular dichotomy. It can only be of benefit to the field to have this dichotomy thoroughly disrupted and ultimately dismantled.

I would here like to introduce as a supplement to a transnational studies approach ideas from an anthology of essays entitled *On the Western Edge: Comparisons of Australia and Japan* (2007). While the main title recalls “Black Jack” McEwan’s “two countries on the edge of the Pacific” aphorism, the use of the term “comparisons” can create a rather passé “comparative cultures” impression. Nevertheless, the collection contains much of value to emerging and established researchers alike. Of particular interest is an essay by Hokari Minoru, a young Japanese man who undertook doctoral research into Australian Aboriginal Studies while enrolled at the Australian National University. Research by Hokari, who very regrettably passed away before completing his doctoral dissertation, was informed by the notion of “connective studies” (Hokari 2007). In his essay included in the *On the Western Edge* collection, Hokari explains how, upon his arrival at ANU, it was suggested that as a researcher in Aboriginal Studies — that is,

a minority group in Australia — he should contact Tessa Morris-Suzuki as a leading scholar of Japanese minority studies. The young Japanese man, however, was stubbornly opposed to this idea, believing that, since there was no direct connection between Aboriginal and Japanese Studies, such a dialogue could provide little of worth to his project. Eventually, however, Hokari had a diametric change of opinion and realized that he “needed to know Tessa’s work” (Hokari 2007: 16). While there were few actual common points between his own and the prominent Japanese researcher’s field of endeavor, Hokari found that there was significant cross-over in the work that each did. In other words, he noticed that completely different fields could have a flexible connection in that they shared generally similar objectives. He also noticed — especially in terms of the fact that “our standpoint in the era of globalisation [sic] is inevitably in terms of our connections between difference places of belonging” (Hokari 2007: 17) — similarities in the social context in which problems under consideration arose. Exchange between scholars in different but indirectly related fields, he therefore concluded, could deepen the understanding each had of her or his research. Hokari was largely referencing connections between Australia and Japan. I nevertheless argue that, just as Hokari did with Aboriginal Studies, scholars of Japan should actively break the frame of Japanese Studies to seek out the points of “connection” that will permit an exchange of views and the conduct of joint research with scholars in different fields. Transformative practices of this nature will allow scholars of Japan to accomplish research achievements that reach beyond a small group of specialists and that have true significance in the contemporary global world.

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