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Aya Hino

Ph.D. Candidate for Double Degree Program
Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca'Foscari University of Venice
Institut für Japanologie, Heidelberg University

Cultivating 'Informed' Imagination

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(Dis)Enchantment

Much like the object it seeks to represent, Japanese studies has been in a constant fluctuation, and for some time, the site of reflections on its established conventions of practices of knowing. In most cases, these reflections revolve around its institutional and methodological challenges. A permanent shortage of funds, a struggle to reorganise its academic structure to respond to international, political and demographic changes, the declining relevance of Japan's relative politico-economic importance which affects recruitment prospects and curriculum development, the demands of neo-liberal performative regime that condition the evaluation processes of research and education, and methodological oscillation between disciplinary theories and multi-disciplinary techniques – these are the familiar tropes for explaining the contemporary condition of Japanese studies. Indeed, much has been said with dismay and with a sense of ever-inducing vertigo. Yet, whatever challenges we may be facing, and whatever idiosyncratic reasons we have for our decision to remain in this seemingly disenchanting environment, we are still enchanted with Japan.

In this short essay, I wish to pursue the mode of reflection that addresses some of the epistemological issues that purveyors of other cultures have raised, and that seeks to reconsider our responsibilities and possibilities, as ones that produce knowledge of Japan from the vantage of the outside – Europe, North America, Asia, wherever you may be. To this end – and here is a disclaimer – this exercise is not intended to offer any practical solutions to the aforementioned-challenges of the scholarship. Rather, I hope that this essay will serve as 'food of thought' for furthering our conversation about the future horizons of studies of Japan.

More specifically, this reflection derives in large part from my general interest in the philosophy of knowledge, and informed by my current research project that seeks to locate Japan within broader scholarly discussions on modern knowledge formation, with a specific focus on its institutional and disciplinary manifestations in the Japanese academy. How does the purported universality of modern knowledge manifest itself in the formation of hegemonic, utilitarian knowledge regimes in Japan? How, on the other hand, has Japan's ambiguous historical position as both coloniser and a country subjected to the imperatives of 'western' modernity also created interesting interstices and spaces outside the institutional monopolies of knowledge for those who sought to challenge the hegemonic? In attempting to 'expatriate' Japan's historical experiences of modern knowledge outside 'Japanese' intellectual history and to re-locate it within a much broader philosophical – specifically poststructuralist and postcolonial – debate on modern knowledge, I am hoping to provide a mode of epistemological and ontological alignments that challenges the static notion of oppositionality

embedded within our historical knowledge – the opposition between the universal (the knowing subject, humanitas, disciplinary theories, the West) and the particular (the object known, anthropos, area studies, the rest of the world). Simultaneously, grappling with these questions has been profoundly reflective for rethinking my own kind of representation as a scholar with various endowments. Throughout this essay, my intention is to 'nudge', so to speak, preconditions of Japanese studies today, from the perspective of critical theories, and to suggest, indeed, interesting 'interstices and spaces' within our scholarship, whereby we might be able to expand the horizon of this scholarly field.

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Metonymy

Story one. It was at a conference earlier this year. The presenter, a scholar of Chinese studies, was explaining how he had organised a collaborative project with 'discipline people' – from political science, economics, sociology, and environmental science, who had little knowledge of Chinese history, language, and culture – to evaluate the multifaceted nature and impact of urbanisation in some of the fast-growing cities in China. After which, a professor of economics asked: "What is the point of area studies anyway?" I found this comment and ensuing conversation both amusing and disenchanting: amusing, because such an enunciation implies, more than anything, the continued scholarly preoccupation with the over-discussed – and, in my view, futile – controversy between disciplines and area studies, which often results in rather paternalistic, authoritative gestures from the former; yet, disenchanting, because this rhetorical question is emblematic of the tendency of bypassing, under the pretence of disciplinary rigor, scientificity, universal applicability, what I think is the most fundamental – and indeed interesting – question of our enterprise. Namely, what does it mean to know and write about other people and other cultures?

To be sure, there is no novelty in this question. Weaving together a sense of scholarly impasse epitomised by the 'crisis of representation', with philosophical critique of 'European' modernity that seeks to dislodge certain social and political categories from their privileged place, many works of scholars in the poststructuralist and postcolonial tradition have already illustrated the significance of this question.[1] Interestingly, however, the sense of urgency that beset humanities, especially anthropology, to reflect upon the condition of possibilities of their knowledge seems to have lost its critical purchase in Japanese studies, and area studies more generally.[2] To speculate, it is because knowing and writing, or else 'textual and cultural translation' of Japan, has been the very raison d'être of the scholarship, and because this unique quality – translation – has been precisely the 'one thing' area specialists utilise to define their scholarship in the shadow of, supposedly, theoretically oriented and scientifically rigor disciplines. Yet, paradoxically, it is this 'one thing' that, in the eyes of 'discipline people', would reinforce the suspicion that Japanese studies is dominated by descriptive 'translators'.

The line of argument I want to pursue here is not that which defends, against disciplinary admonishment, area-centric knowledge of Japanese studies produced through textual and cultural translation. Again, such a polemical argument is futile one, only cajoling us into the self-referential

[1] Some seminal works include: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978; Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986; Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Dipesh Chkrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

[2] Despite this, some efforts have been made by scholars with specific expertise in particular 'areas' to reconsider their own enterprise. See, for instance, Michael Dutton, "Lead Us Not into Translation: Notes toward a Theoretical Foundation for Asian Studies," *Nepantla: View from South*, 3:3, 495-537: 2002; Harry Harootunian, "Memories of Underdevelopment" after Area Studies," *Positions: Asia Critique*, 20:1, 2012: 7-35; Sanjay Seth, "'Once blind but now can see': Modernity and social sciences," International Political Sociology, 17:2, 136-151: 2013.

circle to define the scholarship vis-à-vis theoretically driven disciplines. Instead, I would like here to take a reflexive detour and scrutinise the long-held belief in textual and cultural translation, which often, if not always, manifests itself as almost truculent anti-theoretical empiricism in favour of the descriptive. Among manifold reasons that sustain such a belief in translation / empiricism, I shall take that which relates to training and learning as the point of departure.

Story Two. A student in Japanese studies asked me for some advices on his dissertation. What became apparent towards the end of our conversation, however, was that his concern was not necessarily about how he would engage with the chosen topic of his dissertation, but about his inadequacy in Japanese language. "I need more knowledge of language before I begin developing this project further," he concluded. It struck me, in that instance, how often I had heard that sentence, and numerous variations of it, and how often students had expressed their self-assessed inadequacy, which seemed to be based solely on their lack of language competency. No doubt, some linguistic knowledge of Japanese is a precondition for crisscrossing whatever boundaries there are in between students of Japan and the object of their study. Yet, what it means by 'knowledge of language' remains unclear to me, partly because, as a native Japanese language speaker, I have never fully understood their anxieties caused by their chosen field of study, and partly – and more importantly – also because I understand languages – in my case, European languages – as a mere instrument. You expose yourself to a foreign language, not because you want to master it, but because you want to understand ideas in texts written in that language. This is how I see the purpose of language learning. As naïve as it may sound, I believe one can still engage with other cultures even if her competency in local language is mediocre. Of course, you cannot analyse, say, narrative structure of Japanese literature without profound knowledge of Japanese, but you can explore its reception in European context. Though training in Japanese language is crucial, similarly, or even more important, is the framing of one's research, which requires a kind of skill set that the pedagogy of language learning does not necessarily offer. I was damned how little training those students receive in developing research design and methodologies.

Knowledge production in Japanese studies of where I know the best – Europe – is conventionally language-based, and learning Japanese language has been considered as a rite of passage into the scholarship. Notwithstanding the importance of 'having an access' through language competency to the object of our study, language learning seems to have become much more than the practical; something that (re)enforces the applied nature of Japanese studies at the heart of which lies the tendency towards truculent empiricism. It seems to me that repetitive learning techniques used for Japanese language learning inadvertently reinforces a particular understanding of the relationship between 'text' and 'interpretation', which would be mimetically transubstantiated into the distinction between 'real' and 'thought'. The mimetic, then, produces a set of presumptions that, in a way, dialectically feeds back into and materialised as scholarly programs of Japanese studies, tautologically justifying the empiricist and applied approach to knowledge production. Here, Japanese 'texts' become metonymically Japanese 'culture' – or Japanese 'nation', Japanese 'history', Japanese 'identity' whatever you are translating. Reading Japanese texts become reading Japanese culture. Translating Japanese texts becomes translating Japanese culture. The competency in Japanese language is now assumed as competency in Japanese culture. The methods of language training, or else, textual translation, seem to have been appropriated into the methods of cultural translation.

It is in this form of 'applied translational practice' that has become, as it seems to me, the foundation of knowledge production in Japanese studies. Of course, the metonymic schema of text and culture is not the only determinant of why Japanese studies has become what it is today. The historical trajectory of the coupling between philology and first Oriental studies, and later area studies, has preconditioned the way in which we understand the text-translation-culture nexus. There have been numerous external forces that regulate our scholarship, from its institutional formation to the protocols of publishing, and to the demands of utilitarian regimes of, say, missionaries, colonialists, governments, and neo-liberal markets. The point I want to emphasise here, however, is that, in revealing the metonymy from text to culture, from textual translation to cultural translation, it becomes apparent there is nothing inevitable

about the truculent empiricism of our scholarship. The metonymy is in our training and learning. In other words, the truculent anti-theoretical empiricism is not *the nature* of our scholarship, but something into which we are socialised through our training. This also means that our scholarship can in fact accommodate theories – or, attempts of theorisation – if we are to reorganise our training and learning, which I suppose – and hope – brings us beyond the controversy between theory-oriented disciplines and descriptive and translational area studies, and thus, allows us to re-establish our scholarly position and to effectively respond to the question 'what is the point of area studies anyway?'. Now, then, the question is how exactly we shall pursue this agenda.

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Incommensurability

Story three. Recently, I attended a lecture entitled 'world literature or global literature?' The speaker argued that we had been witnessing the shift from Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* that would transcend the locality with an appeal to human universals, to global literature that is predominantly regulated by the demands of market. This shift not only affects the determination of *which* texts to be translated for the circulation in foreign markets, but also *how* they ought to be translated. Most often, 'how' is dictated by the readers in a foreign market, by what are familiar and understandable to the readers, hence, societal and cultural norms shared among the readers located not in the place of the author.

Though the lecture was primarily about the state of comparative literature, I think this story epitomise, not to mention the coercion of market, the problematic of 'translation' – both textual and cultural – in Japanese studies that I have been discussing so far. By 'problematic', I mean to suggest the following. Translation of, say, a Japanese text into English is understood here as a means of erasing the unfamiliar and establishing equivalence between 'things Japanese' and 'things English'. Take our scholarly engagement with the *Tale of Genji* as an example. We use our accustomed conceptual vocabulary, such as 'sexuality', 'body', and 'agency', to understand and analyse the relationality, being, and thoughts of medieval Japan. However, rarely questioned is the genealogy of these terms that were, in fact, born of a very specific history that belongs to Europe, and are therefore perhaps not amenable to be transposed as universally applicable categories of analysis.[3] Put otherwise, by utilising these categories – though historically and culturally specific, naturalised within academic discourses with universal purchase – the unfamiliar life-world of medieval Japan is translated into the familiar. Further still, cultural differences marked by heterogeneity of time and place are homogenised through such a process of translation.

It is important to remember, first and foremost, that our belief in translation and empiricism is not a promise for neutrally presenting cultural differences, heterogeneity, incommensurability as such. How we read 'texts', how we read 'culture', is already informed by our rarely questioned analytical apparatus today, which has homogenising tendency. Despite the scholarly predilection towards empiricism, we cannot freely enter research without preconditions. What should be (re)instated here is a kind of sensitivity towards our own inadequacy, which allows us to challenge our analytical categories and their naturalised status. Ultimately, what we do is a continuous series of exercises, which, its individual contributions and significances notwithstanding, is to serve the empowerment of an '*informed*' imagination – attempts to know the differences as such, as imaginatively as possible even if we cannot 'translate' them into our own imperatives. And by 'informed', I mean to suggest the necessity of developing training and learning that goes beyond the repertoire of language learning or

[3] Rajyashree Pandey has brilliantly illustrated this discrepancy between our categories of analysis and the semiotics of the body and personhood in medieval Japan. See, Pandey, *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

of disciplinary training, instead that which addresses to the critical perspectives of poststructuralist, postcolonial, or decolonial tradition, and enables us to cultivate reflexive perspectives on the episteme of our scholarship, on the condition of possibility of our knowledge about Japan.

Story four. Though it is not my intention to bore the readers with the details of my own academic trajectory, it is perhaps illustrative to suggest possible moments for recuperating 'informed' imagination. Accident of my birth and education, while provided me with a sense of the historical canvas and the pertinent languages to engage with Japan, has also forced me to engage with incommensurability – a feeling, in Deleuze's term, formed prior to the explanation of how exactly differences are constructed, and thus cannot be represented as a specific difference between two entities or cultures.[4] I was born in Japan and received my primary and secondary education there. Once I moved to the U.K., however, for my graduate training in political philosophy and international relations, a peculiar protocol was annexed to my scholarly being. While my origin became the defining feature of my outsider-ness – both felt and perceived – I also became an insider of a scholarly community, which operates within a historically and culturally conditioned system of knowledge. At that time, I was particularly interested in the concept of sovereignty – indeed European in its origin but has been treated as the fundamental condition within the study of political philosophy and international relations today – and how this concept explains Japan's constitutional development and manifests itself through the governing of Japanese society. However, the more I studied, the more apparent it became that there was an incommensurable difference between the Hobbesian concept of sovereignty and the way in which the notion of governing, social contract, and general will were articulated and understood in Japanese context. Then, my Japanese example could be seen not only as a form of nostalgia of quasi-insider, but also as an anomaly, with little disciplinary implications for universal theory building of international relations. Another moment of incommensurability was when I was working as a program officer at the Japan Foundation. Not to mention the Foundation's own agendas, I had an increasing sense of dissonance between how I understood my own country, which was of course not at all neutral, and the way in which some applications claimed to have recourse to 'the way things really were in Japan'. This dissonance, I think, begs a question, not in the form of either/or – either my or their understanding is correct – but in the form of how – how we know what we know about Japan. Though this philosophical question requires another essay, the point to be emphasised is the following. As purveyors of other cultures, of Japan, we are constantly negotiating, not between two distinctive cultures – 'my' culture and Japanese culture, as if such exist statically and are there to be 'discovered', 'compared', and 'translated' – but among various '*ideas*' of culture: an idea that we have internalised through our own socialisation; an idea that we have been taught at school as pedagogical knowledge; an idea that we have formed when encountering the seemingly unfamiliar; an idea, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, that the notion of distinctive culture exists, and only does so, in the construction of differences as the performative of our own identities.[5] Acknowledging incommensurability is a little apprehensive to say the least. But these are precisely the kind of moment, I believe, wherein we begin to question things hitherto unquestioned, to think things in a different way, and to cultivate 'informed' imagination to expand the horizon of our scholarship.

In place of a conclusion, I want to foreground two points. First, on a rather philosophical note, it is this moment of incommensurability in translation – both textual and cultural – that a range of intellectually exciting possibilities arises. In other words, the moment of language 'dissonance' that Foucault identified is the moment to break the atheoretical circle of Japanese studies, to take more seriously its possible contributions to theory development. Here, language learning – the 'one thing' that Japanese studies, and area studies more generally, utilises to defend its scholarly position vis-à-vis disciplines – should not be undertaken merely to improve fluency and competency, or simply for 'application', but as a means of creating intellectual 'dissonance' that reveals the inadequacy of our

[4] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Paul Patton (trans.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
[5] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994: 199-244.

analytical categories, to take, therefore, cultural differences, heterogeneity, incommensurability more seriously. To this end, I propose an understanding of Japanese studies, not as applied translational practice, but as a reflective hermeneutical circle of, to use Freud's terms, *heimlich* (familiar) and *unheimlich* (unfamiliar). Japanese studies is an engagement with the purported other, the purported difference, an exercise to translate *unheimlich* (Japan) into / through *heimlich* (our analytical categories which is based on a specific history), through the process of which, however, what are *heimlich* (our analytical categories) come to, albeit metaphorically, be *unheimlich* (inadequacy of transposing our categories without any mediation).

Second, it is important for us not to let Japan be selectively studied, according to, say, political wills, the demand of neoliberal performativity, utilitarian efficiency, or whatever funding strategies externally imposed upon the contemporary academy, because letting thus is precisely what breaks the hermeneutical circle that our scholarship requires. But we cannot sit back and wait until such external forces change in our favour. It is important to continue, or even increase the volume of our conversation with those outside the scholarship, be they non-academics, government officials, or representatives of funding bodies, and explain, in their terms and languages, that epistemological and theoretical endeavours are indeed important part of 'Japanese studies', and have potential implications not only to expand the horizon of the scholarship, but also to contribute to a much broader discussion about what it means to know and write about differences.