

The Elusive Adjective

Overcoming Methodological Nationalism in Japanese Studies

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I. Identifying the problem

“Japan” is not a natural category. What counts as “Japan” today is the outcome of historical processes of territorial conquest, state formation, and nation-building – of historical contingencies, in other words, not necessity. The islands that now constitute the territory of the Japanese nation-state were historically characterised by a profound cultural, linguistic, and geographical diversity, but in modern times this diversity has been appropriated and subsumed under the banner of a unified – or, rather, reified – national “Japanese culture”. Even the cultural traditions of the Ainu and the Ryukyu Islands, which are strikingly different from those of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, have been discursively incorporated into the Japanese nation-state. Twentieth-century scholarship has played an important part in this process: influential ethnologists such as Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) placed these cultural traditions into a social-evolutionist frame, redefining them as remnants of primordial, “original” Japanese culture (Morris-Suzuki 1998). The legacy of this ethnological tradition is far-reaching. It continues to affect “Japanese studies” today: as a rule, scholars of Japan still struggle to make sense of diversity that does not fit easily within the parameters of a reified, singular national culture. Admittedly, most of them realise that Japan is home to some “ethnic minorities” and “migrant communities”, and they may acknowledge the existence of hybrid groups such as *nikkeijin* and *hāfu* that blur the boundaries of the nation. However, this awareness has not given rise to widespread critical scrutiny of the underlying category formation. In other words, we know that what does or does not count as “Japanese” is subject to change, but we hardly question the validity of the category itself. In Japanese studies, “Japan” is a given.

Institutionally speaking, Japanese studies is a well-established academic discipline, with its own journals and international associations, and study programs at major universities worldwide. Unlike most other academic disciplines, however, it is defined neither by a scientific method nor a body of theory, but only by its subject matter: *things Japanese*. Haiku poetry, Shingon cosmology, LDP ideology, and Studio Ghibli imagery have nothing in common, cannot be interpreted through the same theoretical lens, and are approached by means of different methodological toolkits. Yet they are all studied at Japanese studies departments,

which persist not because of the innovative character or societal relevance of their research but, more prosaically, because of comparatively high student numbers and a stable supply of Japanese funding. In the current neo-liberal university system, study programs that are economically viable are sustained, regardless of the quality and relevance of the research. Consequently, Japanese studies continues to exist as a bounded academic field, but it is characterised by a high degree of self-containment and isolation, and little productive interaction with other disciplines.

This is not new. As Miyoshi Masao and Harry Harootunian pointed out already in 2002, few Japanese studies scholars have a serious impact on the disciplines (sociology, literature, philosophy, etc.) that they supposedly represent (Harootunian & Miyoshi 2002). Unfortunately, little has changed since they wrote their critique. Of course, as before, excellent research has been conducted by Japanese studies scholars on *things Japanese*, and our knowledge of specific historical or cultural phenomena has improved accordingly. Generally speaking, however, the impact of these studies outside the field of Japanese studies has been limited. One of the reasons for this is the fact that “Japan” continues to be taken for granted in most scholarship within the field. We use the adjective “Japanese” continuously, for instance to refer to a particular canon of fictional texts (“Japanese literature”), an essentialised set of ritual and doctrinal traditions (“Japanese religion”), or a loosely defined body of moral and metaphysical texts (“Japanese philosophy”). But while we may ask what we mean by “literature”, “religion”, or “philosophy”, only rarely do we question the adjective “Japanese”, which is as elusive as it is ubiquitous.

However, the category “Japan” is as much a historical construct as the categories “literature”, “religion”, or “philosophy”, and as much subject to contestation and negotiation – probably even more so, as it is so inherently political. Arguably, therefore, if there is one thing Japanese studies should investigate, it is the historical formation and present-day renegotiation of this category. Some scholars have indeed done so: Amino Yoshihiko (1928-2004) and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, for instance, have challenged paradigmatic understandings of Japan as a transhistorical entity, and shown how modern understandings of the nation and its culture have been shaped historically (Amino 1991; Morris-Suzuki 1998). However, their interventions have not brought about the paradigm shift that was needed: within Japanese studies, the adjective “Japanese” continues to be used mostly non-reflexively, as if it we all know what is meant by it. The field is still characterised by widespread methodological nationalism, which I define as *approaches that take the nation-state as their main unit of analysis, tacitly assume the self-evidence of naturalised adjectives such as “Japanese” or “Chinese”, and overlook the historical and contemporary significance of transnational or regional connections.*

The following two examples illustrate the problem. First, in most undergraduate programs in Japanese studies, the rather foundational epistemological questions “what is our topic of inquiry, and how do we study it” receive little attention, if any. This is a world apart from other study programs in the humanities that are defined by their subject matter. During my BA courses in religious studies (2002-2007), the question “what is religion” was discussed *ad nauseum*. By contrast, in my courses Japanese studies those same years, it never occurred to us to question what was meant by “Japan”. The subject matter was taken for granted by professors and students alike. This was hardly different at other universities where I have studied and worked, and I have got the impression that it is common for Japanese studies programs worldwide. The questions “what do we mean by ‘Japan’” and “what constitutes ‘Japanese culture’” are absent from most study curriculums.

The second example constitutes one of the main venues for academic exchange in Japanese studies worldwide, the triannual conferences of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS). A cursory overview of the programs of the last EAJS conferences reveals that there are some significant blind spots in the field. First, there is strikingly little attention to minority cultures. Although there has been a handful of panels on Ainu or Okinawan topics (including one convened by myself in Lisbon 2017), they are few and far between. Generally speaking, Japanese studies continues to be dominated by Kantō- and Kansai-centric perspectives, while “peripheral” areas are left to ethnologists and anthropologists, thus perpetuating power inequalities between centre and periphery (especially Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands).

Second, at the EAJS conferences, transnational comparative perspectives are virtually absent. This is a great loss, considering the fact that such perspectives are essential for overcoming methodological nationalism as they will help us realise that things happening in Japan are always also shaped by developments elsewhere, and that Japanese cultural practices are by no means as “unique” as we often imagine them to be. Third, whereas some presenters integrate theoretical perspectives from other disciplines, few of the papers are theoretically or methodologically oriented. That is, at EAJS and other area studies conferences, there is a tendency to shy away from theoretical discussions, let alone offer suggestions for new methodological approaches – as if we should limit ourselves to discussing concrete historical and social phenomena and are not in a position to make significant theoretical or methodological interventions. This is a missed opportunity, because Japan provides ample material that could help us rethink established Eurocentric theories in a number of academic disciplines. And finally, as expected, remarkably few papers at EAJS conferences address

“Japan” as such. We all discuss *things Japanese*, but most of us shy away from adopting a meta-perspective and discussing the formation and definition of the epistemic category that binds us together as an inherently multidisciplinary discipline: our main subject of inquiry, *Japan*. This is notably different from religious studies conferences, for instance, where epistemological considerations concerning the conceptual history and multiple uses of the category “religion” constitute a popular topic of debate.

II. Zooming in: methodological nationalism in the study of “Japanese religion”

A closer look at one particular subdiscipline, the study of “Japanese religion”, will shed some more light on the problem. In the past fifteen years, scholars within this subdiscipline have made significant progress in re-historicising the category “religion” (*shūkyō*) and investigating its genealogy. This body of research was spearheaded by a polemic review article written by Timothy Fitzgerald (2003), who accused scholars of “Japanese religion” of non-reflexively projecting the Western category “religion” onto Japanese practices and beliefs, thus constructing their own topic of inquiry. Fitzgerald’s article caused quite a stir, but his criticism of non-reflexive uses of the master category “religion” was arguably justified. Not coincidentally, in subsequent years, a large body of scholarship on the Japanese category *shūkyō* emerged, largely expanding our understanding of its historical formation and political significance (e.g., Hoshino 2012; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014).

What is puzzling about Fitzgerald’s critique is not so much his argument that “religion” is a historical construct that ought to be treated with caution, but his failure to see that the adjective “Japanese” is likewise the outcome of scholarly reification, and equally problematic. In his later work, Fitzgerald suggests avoiding the category “religion” altogether. Surprisingly, however, he follows those he criticises in presenting “Japan” as a single, bounded entity, characterised by a unitary system of ritual and discursive practices that sets it apart from other such entities. Thus, his “critical anthropology of Japanese religion” criticises “religion” (Fitzgerald 2011), but is oblivious to the problems inherent in the adjective “Japanese”, which is treated not only as a natural given but also as the defining variable of a reified tradition. This is symptomatic for the field as a whole: while the second part of the compound term “Japanese religion” has been subject to considerable scrutiny in recent years, the first part has remained largely unchallenged – as if we all know what is meant by it.

The compound term “Japanese religion” (*Nihon shūkyō*) is used widely in English- and Japanese-language academic discourse. It is a scholarly abstraction, created and reified by scholars, who use it to refer to a singular, bounded cultural *system* (cf. Geertz 1966). It is a

body of beliefs, symbols, rituals, and institutional constellations which are characterised by unity in diversity, and which all have certain features in common that distinguish them from other religious traditions – especially “Western” or “Abrahamic” religions, with which “Japanese religion” is often juxtaposed and contrasted. This use of the term goes back to the early-twentieth-century work of Anesaki Masaharu (1873-1949), the founding father of the academic discipline religious studies (*shūkyōgaku*) in Japan (Isomae 2005), and continues to be prevalent today. Crucially, in most academic texts, “Japanese religion” does not equal Shinto, Buddhism, or any other worship tradition; it encompasses and transcends them. For instance, influential post-war theorists such as Umehara Takeshi and Yamaori Tetsuo have postulated that the essence of “Japanese religion” lies in a pre-rational, communitarian, spiritual appreciation of divine nature, traces of which can still be found in various Shinto and Buddhist rituals and beliefs (Umehara 1995; Yamaori 1996; cf. Rots 2017).

The notion of “Japanese religion” as a singular tradition that transcends denominational distinctions and other historical particularities, and is characterised by harmony and complementarity, is also widespread in Anglophone scholarship (e.g., Kitagawa 1987; Earhart 1998). A well-known example is the work by Ian Reader and George Tanabe, *Practically Religious* (1998), which defines “the pursuit of this-worldly practical benefits” (*genze riyaku*) as “the common religion of Japan”. Unlike the Japanese scholars mentioned above, Reader and Tanabe do not adhere to normative understandings of what constitutes “real” Japanese religiosity. However, their work is similar in the sense that it postulates the existence of a singular “religious system” defined by some core features. This system may have various shapes, but it is unified by a commonly shared focus on this-worldly benefits, the authors argue. In effect, they have highlighted one aspect of ritual behaviour, turned this into the central component of “Japanese religion”, and then reconstructed this “Japanese religion” as a singular system with a common denominator.

In recent years, it has become less common in scholarly literature to make generalised statements about “Japanese religion” as a whole, and most monographs in the field now zoom in on the histories of individual temples, shrines, or devotional movements. However, the categories “Japan” and “Japanese” continue to be used widely, usually escaping critical examination. In my opinion, scholars of “Japanese religion” should not only study the historical formation and competing definitions of “religion”, as they have done in the last decade. It is equally important that we ask ourselves how certain practices and worldviews have come to be classified as *Japanese* religion, while others are excluded. Even more fundamentally, we may

ask the question why we need the category “Japanese religion” at all – which, after all, is not an empirical reality but a scholarly abstraction.

The problems of the category are manifold. First of all, a singular-system approach such as this does not do justice to internal diversity, conflict, and change. If one posits the existence of a singular religious system, it is easy to overlook practices that do not fit within the framework, and downplay the impact of historical transformations. Second, such approaches not only group together a variety of disparate practices under the rubric of the nation-state – which, in the case of pre-modern practices, is arguably anachronistic – but also deny the fact that some practices are *profoundly different* from the purported mainstream, while their practitioners are *just as Japanese as others*. One obvious example is Sōka Gakkai, which is deeply integrated into the fabric of modern Japanese politics and economy but does not adhere to some of the basic features of “Japanese religion” often identified by scholars. Other examples include Christianity, which has had a profound impact upon Japanese society despite having an ambivalent relationship to normative notions of “Japaneseness” (Rots 2012); and Islam, which likewise has a significant presence in contemporary Japan. Placing a singular essentialised “Japanese religion” in binary opposition to “Western” or “Abrahamic” traditions is common in scholarly and popular discourse, but denies the lived realities of many people.

Third, like Japanese studies in general, the subdiscipline “Japanese religion” has a serious problem with Ainu and Ryukyuan traditions, which do not fit easily within “Japanese religion” as a reified, singular system. As mentioned, during the imperial period Ainu and Ryukyuan practices were incorporated into the national framework by means of ethnological scholarship describing them as the “primitive” remnants of prehistoric Japanese religion. These notions continue to be advocated by some senior scholars (including Umehara Takeshi) and affect popular understandings of sacred sites and rituals even today (Rots 2019). In academia, such social-evolutionist models are now generally considered outdated, and most scholars acknowledge the fact these traditions are and were profoundly different from those of mainland Japan. As a result, however, scholars of religion typically shy away from studying them, as they do not fit within the “Japanese religion” framework. This is a pity, because we are missing out on some potentially relevant comparative perspectives.

This brings me to the fourth point: by reifying certain practices and beliefs as “Japanese”, and juxtaposing “Japanese religion” with an essentialised “Western religion”, we are overlooking the multiple similarities that exist between ritual practices in the Japanese archipelago and elsewhere in Asia. A single visit to Ciyou Temple in Taipei, Phủ Tây Hồ in Hanoi, or Erawan Shrine in Bangkok is enough to realise that a focus on *genze riyaku* is not

“the common religion of Japan”, as Reader and Tanabe suggested (1998), but constitutes a core feature of ritual worship throughout East and Southeast Asia. More examples of regional similarities could be given. My point is simply that, for most ritual practices taking place somewhere in Japan, the nation-state is not a relevant variable.

III. Conclusion: three suggestions

How can we continue to study and analyse cultural practices and texts without using the nation-state as our main explanatory variable? How can Japanese studies become more self-reflexive, acquire a wider academic relevance, and overcome the pitfalls of methodological nationalism? Or, in popular terms: how do we get out of our bubble? If we want Japanese studies to (re)acquire relevance beyond the discipline itself, and make theoretical and methodological contributions to the humanities and social sciences as a whole (which I think we can, potentially), something has to happen. We need to overcome our methodological nationalism and rethink the meaning of “Japanese studies”. I will conclude my essay by making three suggestions for future research directions.

First, as mentioned, instead of taking Japan for granted as an *a priori* category, Japanese studies should study processes of “Japan-making” – not unlike the ways in which scholars of religion have started investigating processes of “religion-making” (Dressler & Mandair 2011). Clearly, disposing of “Japan” as an analytical category altogether is no option. Japan is a reality: it exists as a modern nation, as a state with corresponding physical territories, and not least as an ideal that carries meaning for large numbers of people. That does not mean, however, that it is fixed. What counts as “Japanese” is a function of discourse, not a necessity, and it is our task as scholars of Japan to investigate the processes by which certain things come to be classified as Japanese, or by which they are excluded from that category. We have to examine those processes instead of being complicit in them. That means that we should take Japan seriously as an *emic* category that may or may not carry meaning to the people we study, and investigate processes of classification and identification on the ground. But it also means that we can no longer take “Japan” for granted as a natural given, and should stop imposing scholarly abstractions such as “Japanese religion” (and “Japanese art”, “Japanese philosophy”, etc.) upon a variety of disparate cultural expressions and texts.

Second, we should start taking diversity much more seriously – not in a unity-in-diversity kind of way, subsuming local differences under the banner of a reified national culture, but by realising that there may not always be a common denominator. The islands that today constitute Japan have historically been home to a wide variety of practices and worldviews,

some of which have very little in common. Moreover, cultural traditions do not necessarily respect modern-day national boundaries. In pre-modern times, ritual practices in Kyushu may have been more similar to those of the Ryukyu Islands or the Korean peninsula than those of the Tōhoku or Kantō regions (Smits 2018). Today, too, local traditions do not necessarily correspond to normative scholarly accounts of “national” religion. The question then becomes: how do local actors relate to such notions, and how do traditions change in response? This interaction (and, possibly, friction) between local, national, and transnational actors and ideas *on the ground* is arguably what is most fascinating, and offers the most promising material for theoretical reflection (cf. Tsing 2005). Yet in order to be able to analyse such interactions, it is essential that we leave behind preconceived notions of the Japaneseness of things, and instead ask ourselves how Japaneseness is produced, negotiated, or subverted.

Third, I advocate a radical comparative approach that seeks to move beyond the nation-state as an analytical category altogether, focusing on *practices* and *localities*, in different parts of Asia (cf. Van der Veer 2016). In order to be able to engage in comparative transregional research, I argue, we should abolish the notion of the nation-state as a foundational, *etic* unit of analysis, and instead approach it as an *emic* category that may or may not carry meaning to the actors involved. In other words, I do *not* argue for the kind of essentialist, generalising Japan-West “comparison” that is so common in scholarship on and from Japan (not least in the “Japanese religion” field). Nor do I suggest that we juxtapose “Japanese” and “Chinese” or “Korean” ritual practices, as if these practices are somehow representative of their respective nation-states. Rather, I think we should move towards intra-Asian comparative studies that focus on particular places and practices, and examine the various local, intra-regional, national, and transnational forces by which these are shaped. This is what I am doing in my new ERC-funded research project, *Whales of Power: Aquatic Mammals, Devotional Practices, and Environmental Change in Maritime East Asia*, which compares human-whale-nature relations as expressed in ritual practices throughout the region. I myself will be conducting fieldwork in coastal villages in Vietnam and Japan, but I will not frame their ritual traditions as primarily “Vietnamese” or “Japanese”. Rather, I am interested in the different ways in which local actors shape their collective identities in relation to natural environments, gods and spirits, and the nation-state.

In sum, if we want Japanese studies to be relevant, we have to move beyond “Japan” as our main unit of analysis, and stop using the adjective “Japanese” as if it were a natural given. However, we cannot simply focus on our particular case studies and ignore the nation-state completely either. Japan is real, even though it is not a fixed entity, and as scholars of

Japan we have to engage with our discipline's master category – not by reifying it, but by studying its formation, and by investigating the processes (past and present) by which certain phenomena are included in or excluded from this category. Furthermore, a transnational, intra-Asian comparative perspective will help us realise that many of the cultural expressions often identified with Japan can be found elsewhere as well, and will shed new light on those expressions. It is time to get out of our “Japan” bubble, and make some serious attempts to build bridges to other disciplines – beginning in Asia.

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