

Japanese Studies in Belgium in the 21st Century: Framing the Impact of Popular Culture

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The initial idea when some courses on Japan were taught and when the first institutions for Japanese studies were established in the world, was that institutions should offer language training plus area courses that surveyed history, literature, and social science disciplines such as political science and economics. The development of the language and area studies paradigm coincided with the rise of modernization theory and functionalist social science ideas. These approaches came to be widely questioned in the 1980s and a more critical approach to Japanese studies transformed the study of Japan and was probably at the background of the reforms here at the KU Leuven where in 1986 Japanese studies was established as an independent curriculum.

From the mid 1980s rising economic power and at the same time the increasing presence of Japan on the international political scene (Nakasone, WTO and G7) apparently caught general attention and general books and articles suggested that Japan had found better ways of approaching society and the economy than many European and American nations facing socio-economic crisis. Japan specialists were for the first time taken seriously in their analysis of the reasons and context this highly successful society. This period marked the rise of an economic competition and politics paradigm for Japanese studies. By the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the transformation of the study of Japan into something of economic value meant that there was a demand for different types of training than in the traditional language and area studies curriculum. Business schools added courses and programs on Japan because of the perceived need for specialists in this field. We saw some schools in Brussels actually offering a master course in Japanese business and economics and felt some competition from these schools. The traditional integrated language and area studies approach to the study of Japan was also under attack in the 1990s because, for example social science disciplines regarded culture and even language as not really necessary. Non-Japan specialists in those disciplines considered their students able to study Japanese society, politics and economics using quantitative datasets and the standard tools of the disciplines and they did not need excess baggage of language and area studies. The number of students drawn into Japanese studies in the 1990s declined compared to the high watermark of the bubble economy at the end of the 1980s paralleling the decline of Japan's economic position in the world best summarized in the world-wide tendency of 'Japan-passing' rather than the 'Japan-bashing' of the 1980s that was reflecting America's frustration and jealousy at the rise of Japan's economic prominence.

Interesting to see is that the so-called cultural studies approaches were already visible in Japanese studies in the early 1990s but these were somewhat overshadowed by the salience of the economic and politics approach. I use the cultural studies paradigm in the sense defined by Patricia Steinhoff as "intellectual currents that first arose in the humanities as an interest in the construction of meaning and then entered the social sciences through critical structuralism and post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and the Birmingham School's interest in subcultures, media and language."

This approach to culture is totally different from the functionalist idea underlying modernization theory as it

encourages the widest possible range of cultural representations, past and present, of subgroups, minorities, social movements and social groups rather than assuming one monolithic “Japanese” culture. This approach requires a high level of language skill and deep understanding of Japan. I want to expand this paradigm the 21st century where the prominence of popular culture developed rapidly. As a bottom-up development in Japanese society various aspects of pop-culture became an interesting topic for research also because it provided insights into subcultures and subgroups of Japanese society. But the way that the cultural studies paradigm in Japanese studies was probably influenced most was by the increasing globalization of the pop-culture movement. Japanese culture in whatever facet did no longer remained confined within the borders of Japan. The globalisation of the paradigm allowed for a new step in the development of the Japanese studies paradigms and influenced teaching of language, social sciences and of area studies in the 21st century. Please allow me to introduce some of the ways that Japanese studies at the KU Leuven has acknowledged this paradigm shift in teaching methods and let me stress that this is still a process that has just started.

Japanese studies?

At the turn of the century the rise of china became obvious; increasing GDP and finally in 2010 it surpassed Japan as the second largest economy in the world. Growing importance of China; even the former Flemish minister of trade enrolled in Chinese studies here at the KU Leuven in 2010. Would the number of students enrolled in Japanese studies decline?

Not really. The number of students enrolled continued to increase since the start of the 21st century to reach 78 students enrolled in 2005-6; 113 in 2006-7; 133 in 2007-8; 176 in 2008-9; 211 in 2009-10; 237 in 2010-11; 215 in 2011-12 and 204 in 2012-13.

Why? Surveys in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2013

2008: 88% fascinations for Japanese culture in general; more than half were motivated by pop-culture.

2009: 75% manga, anime, music are the main motivations for choice

2010: again more than 70% mentions anime and manga (58%)

2013: again 65% manga; 44% anime; 42% music but options for the students to choose from were extended and included ‘history’ (27/38) and ‘fashion’ (8/38): option ‘economy’ (1/38)

Replies are diffuse and motivated by culture and mostly by one aspect of culture. A possible explanation for the fact that Japanese studies still attracts many students is the fact that the three paradigms exist parallel to each other and pop-culture but also other aspects of Japanese culture such as martial arts makes the gap between the every-day world of the generation that graduates from high school and university education, not too wide.

The Japan Expo took place for the 14th time. The Japan Expo is an event dedicated to Japanese culture and pop-culture mainly focussing on manga, animation, music, videogames, “cosplay,” etc. The first edition in 2000 attracted 3200 people and was organised on 2500 square meters while in 2013 the event attracted 232876 people who could enjoy Japan Expo on 125000 square meters.

The KU Leuven has become a forerunner in Japanese Studies among European Universities by its interactive approach to teaching. The Japanese studies section is developing an electronic learning environment that combines training and testing of Japanese language skills through a web-interface, computer-mediated communication and collaborative learning facilities. Many of these innovations offer resources for teaching area-related subjects, and reflect a newly emerging teaching culture that is centred on the student rather than on the instructor. Three problems have to be addressed in the area studies curriculum. First, how to efficiently develop specific language skill in the student's field of choice. Second, how to integrate the various courses that make up the curriculum. Third, how to adjust teaching to changing social needs. Computer mediated teaching methods go a long way to providing answers to these questions. The infostructure under development at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Japanese Studies section rests on three pillars; a portal site, a doctype, and a next-generation online dictionary. The portal site features multiple levels of access. At the outset, students, researchers and members of the general public interested in "things Japanese" will be able to find a transparent overview of, as well as original material pertaining to, new developments in their specific field of interest. The second pillar of the infostructure is a doctype where teaching and research material can be stored in a uniform format, and accessed through a single interface. This doctype collects and shares what is collectively "known" in the participating institutions and becomes the main tool in the self-directed learning effort. The third pillar is a next-generation online dictionary being developed with special attention to vocabulary in specific fields. On-the-fly translation of jargon will lower the threshold to understanding the subject-matter. The online character of the dictionary allows it to continuously "learn" new vocabulary itself. The instructor of a specific course can gradually develop the vocabulary connected with his field.

More recently Japanese studies at the KU Leuven is embracing the growing importance of pop-culture its teaching related projects to link the three paradigms on Japanese studies. A project labelled 'Let's Manga' but this is different from Manga de nihongo: how to innovate the curriculum? Use real manga and other popular media

How?

1. by developing on-line material to help students acquire insights in Manga; its history, different styles, social functions and languages used.
2. By developing a contextual dictionary
3. Linking academic content to manga in i.e. history, politics, economy
4. discourse analysis: how communicate?
5. Language used at various levels and groups = living culture
6. Social analysis beyond academic research

Goals?

1. Foster Independence
2. Foster Interactive
3. Foster Collective effort
4. Help students memorize more easily
5. Stimulate creativity
6. Structure study materials through manga
7. Stimulate an enthusiastic approach >>> importance of the Manga Library

Conclusion

The globalization of Japanese studies has developed with the intermediary of popular culture. Pop-culture has a considerable impact on the Japanese studies community including all stake-holders (students and staff alike) by influencing research methodology, publishing techniques and teachings methods. I have the feeling that we only are at the dawn of more developments related to the cultural studies and popular culture paradigm.