TIFO 30th Anniversary Essay Contest
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The Future of Japanese Studies?
Researching and Teaching Transnational Contingencies

At the age of 21, after dropping out of a degree in medicine and working for a year to fund my move to the United Kingdom, I started university all over again. This time, however, I chose to learn about something I truly liked: Japan. I believe that today's undergraduate students in Japanese Studies around the world carry fundamentally no different incentives than I did nearly twenty years ago. Some may have perhaps clearer ideas (than I had at the time) about what they want to do with a bachelor in Japanese Studies. But they all, like me, share a fascination with one or more aspects of the "Japan" which they may have visited as tourists, read about online, in books or manga, or heard of through teachers, friends or family.

The "Japan" of the 21st century is, nevertheless, not the same. And I do not mean here Japan, as a nation, which like other nations around the world, remains subject to both local and global forces of history. I mean the "Japan" that is taught and researched in Japanese Studies. That "Japan" has shifted, and this has naturally impacted on every one of its subfields, such as "Japanese religion," the multidisciplinary field that has now become my main speciality. What has happened to "Japanese religion" as an area of research and teaching is a good example of the shifts I am talking about, and which I nevertheless believe continue to offer new opportunities for Japanese Studies from 2020 and beyond.

In this essay, I identify two challenges and show through my research and teaching experience how these can be overcome and lead to new developments of the field of Japanese Studies and to new contributions that Japanese Studies can make to scholarly research and higher education in general.

To begin with, I should note that the term I used to refer to my speciality, "Japanese religion," is not even an accepted term anymore. As illustrated by the change of title of the fifth edition of the longest running textbook on religion in Japan[1], researchers who try to argue that there is something particularly "Japanese" about religion in Japan would today face criticism for a simple reason: the orientalist and culturally essentialist

[1] H. Byron Earhart's *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity* was first published in 1969, but in its fifth edition published in 2014, the author changed the title to *Religion in Japan* (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage).

undertone that has become since the 1980s the object of critic of post-colonial theory and practice in academia worldwide. Any study that assumes a cultural particularism from its outset would be now widely viewed as methodologically (if not ideologically) flawed. This criticism has perhaps become one of the biggest challenges faced by Japanese Studies (and Area Studies) research in at least the last 30 years, but I believe that this criticism has also created, during that same period, significant opportunities for Japan-related research to influence the theoretical direction of other established disciplines.

In the field of Religious Studies, Timothy Fitzerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000) attacked the entire scholarly field for its alleged unscholarly and theologically-informed basis, and, despite the criticism it received, was undoubtedly catalyst for a renewed wave of influential critical research that has changed the way we look at and even teach about religion. Worthy of note here is that Fitzerald's argument partly stems from his critique of the application of the concept of "religion" in Japan, to which he dedicates one-fifth of his monograph. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Japanese case-study has substantially contributed to the debate about the failings of our European and Christian-centric understandings of religious phenomena. For example, the fact that *shūkyō* was a Meiji-era neologism meant to translate a very specific idea of "religion," one that was belief-based, monotheistically inclined and private, is now a common example mentioned in introductory classes of religious studies that deal with the difficulty of defining "religion." It is in this sense that I argue that the essentialism for which Japanese Studies were once criticized can be replaced by a critical comparativism that uses Japan as a case study to re-examine each discipline's most fundamental concepts and theories. And this, not by assuming that Japan is an exceptional outlier, but by carefully analysing the specific historical circumstances that have led to Japan being subject to the same global transformations as other parts of the world, albeit (sometimes) under different disguises.

Henceforth, the rise of Japanese Studies as a source of critical knowledge is what I would identify as one of the two roles the field will/needs to play in 2020 and beyond, and to which I want to continue to contribute through my research on alternative religion in contemporary Japan.

Alternative religion has been traditionally associated with the rise of new religious movements (NRMs), which from the nineteenth century onwards sprang up around the

globe in response to a multitude of factors, including the rise of the modern nation, the authority of a scientific worldview, and the appearance of modern media. The scholarly study of Japanese NRMs has significantly contributed to our understandings of the relationship between religion and modern society, politics, and more recently, (especially after the Aum affair) violence. Alternative religion, however, does not have to be limited to religious organisations that, compared to older religious traditions, present perhaps novel structures, beliefs and practices. Religion, in general, has been in constant rejuvenation, adaptation and reinvention throughout history; thus, what has been happening in the last 200 years is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. Rather, what may be especially significant in the modern period is how alternative currents within established religious cultures have become much more visible and consequently more easily turned to objects of criticism, because of the current information age. In my research, I argue that this phenomenon, together with the multitude of factors that continue to contribute to religious innovation today, has resulted in highlighting "alternativity" as an essential quality of religion, one that does not only concern new religious groups, but the way religion is constantly discussed, consumed and sometimes rejected in opposition to an imagined "mainstream," which may be another form of religion, or the "secular," or the "scientific," and depending on specific cases, the "political," "the effectively therapeutic," the morally business-like," "the legal", and so on. What I am arguing, in brief, is that despite the often-criticised notion of "religion as a universal category," the term owes its alleged universality not to its ubiquity per se, but its alternativity. In other words, whether or not we agree on the fact that "religion" is, in general, a modern invention, or whether or not we agree that "religion" is a Western invention, today's "religion's" foremost characteristic lies in the way it is imagined, discussed and practiced as an *alternative* to something else. It is in this alternativity that we can find today religion's political authority, social role and individual attractiveness.

My argument stems from research conducted on the practice of spiritual therapists in contemporary Japan. By "spiritual therapists," I refer to practitioners of techniques that allegedly provide complementary and alternative (to science or other similar practices) means of overcoming personal issues, across the entire spectrum of social, physical and mental distress. This type of "therapies" is usually rejected by the scientific community and criticised by the mainstream media for the irreproducibility of the effects they claim to provide. They have, nevertheless, experienced temporary media attention throughout the twentieth century, most recently under the label *supirichuaru* (spiritual), which in the first decade of the twenty-first century was popularised by television personality and

self-proclaimed spiritual counsellor, Ehara Hiroyuki. Various theories tried to explain what seems to have been a sudden turn towards (but, in fact, just enhanced visibility of) a contemporary spirituality discourse that has been critical of religious organisations and has centred on individual, physical and mental betterment. Scholars across the globe linked this "spiritual, but not religious" discourse to the post-WWII rise of consumer culture, the privatisation of religion, but also the privatisation of healthcare, education and other services which once had been the monopoly of the state. Also, in Japan, the rise of the *supirichuaru* has scholarly been connected with a post-Aum climate of anti-religious sentiment, coupled with a post-bubble social malaise popularly expressed as "the lost decade" (now already "the lost two decades").

Japan, however, continues to present a case study that challenges this approach to interpreting cultural constructs such as today's non-organised, albeit "alternative," spirituality as the next stage in a unilinear historical development from church-centred societies, to nation-based societies, and then to consumer-based societies. Japanese Studies scholars have not only shown that Japan was already modern before the often mentioned turning point of the year 1868, but they have even questioned the idea that an individual/"consumer"-based attitude to religious practice did not exist before "modernity," albeit Meiji Japan. In other words, Japan has been a very good source of criticism of theories linking modernisation to religious transformation, by showing how a religious market offering several options, sometimes within the same religious traditions (such as Buddhism), preexisted the advent of an alleged capitalist ethos of self-transformation. Japanese history is filled with religious leaders presenting alternative interpretations of both common and rare doctrines, and religious seekers producing self-made scenarios of individual salvation.

More importantly for the future direction of the field of religious studies, Japan continues to present an especially rich field of knowledge of the transnational and trans-"disciplinary" (in general, not in the scholarly sense) flow of ideas and practices that have characterised religious transformations since the nineteenth century. Recent research, has for example, examined the mutual impact between evolutionary theory and Modern Japanese Buddhism[2], or between the global environmentally conscious discourse and the association of Shinto with a nature-friendly/animistic religious core[3].

[2] G. Clinton Godart. 2017. *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press and the Weatherhead Institute at Columbia University.
[3] Aike P. Rots. 2017. *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making*

In my own research, a transnational outlook remains essential when I delve into the global historical factors behind the rise of spiritualism and, in general, occultism, among popular masses and intellectuals of (post)industrialized nations, such as Japan. The simple fact that, as I have shown in my research, the majority of spiritual therapies in Japan are either direct imports or adaptations from North American settings impels me to place Japan within a wider transnational network of alternative religious ideals. This network has, as I have also shown, included South and Southeast Asia as well, areas that continue to function as a source of orientalist inspirations, as the expansion of activities of some of my informants in those locales demonstrates.

In summary, I argue that the future of research on religion in Japan, and Japanese Studies in general, lies precisely in uncovering the global, transnational nature of what until recently was far too simplistically called "Japanese" (religion). In my case, for example, I want to understand better not only how discourse about "alternative religion" was transnationally produced, but also how this continues to have a real impact on Japanese daily life. For example, how does media discourse on Japanese politicians' religious affiliations or practice deemed "occult", albeit "unusual," impact on their career? How do lawyers in Japan deal today with cases of embezzlement or fraud committed by spiritual therapists and other religious practitioners who the public considers "non-legitimate"? How do these trends compare with or are inspired by, for example, European discourse on minority religions' rights and trials of cases of infringement of religious freedom?

After nearly 200 years, the focus of studies of religions has finally turned away from trying to describe the autonomous nature of "religion," to trying to understand the complex entanglement of religion with other aspects of human life on a global scale. In the same way, I argue that the future of Japanese Studies lies not in trying to describe "Japan" as a distinct entity, but in developing a better picture of the transnational character of that same "Japan" we used to (and still) consider worth studying.

To do what I propose above a second important challenge presents itself for Japanese Studies today: that is research methodology training. In recent years, several symposia in which the future of Japanese/Area Studies was debated revealed a lack of research methods training for students who spend their entire university life in Area Studies departments. Some scholars continue to argue that Japanese Studies only provide

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Sacred Forests. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

language training, and if students want to be "properly" trained in researching on/in Japan, they should join a discipline-based department, such as sociology or history or economics. The reality, however, is that as a multidisciplinary field of studies, the study of Japan needs a multidisciplinary, or even better, a transdisciplinary outlook. The problem is that, even though such outlook has been honed by scholars in the field and perhaps talked about in individual classes around the globe, the transdisciplinary methods that Japanese Studies scholars often use to gather and analyze data, have not been diligently fleshed out and systematized so that they can be employed for pedagogical purposes. To be clear, I am not arguing that Japanese Studies employ research methodology specific to Area Studies; I am only claiming that the way Japanese Studies scholars combine existing research methods in their work has yet to be systematically recorded and turned into knowledge resources for the new generations of Japanese Studies students.

To my knowledge, there are currently only three[4] sources of information regarding research methods for students and scholars interested in Japan, and they are all, perhaps unavoidably, emphasising the practical and ethical aspects of conducting fieldwork in this country. Although these all make invaluable and highly recommended reading, I personally had wished that authors write more about how their general knowledge on Japan (not limited to the Japanese language), informed not only the way they proceeded with data collection, but also the way they interpreted that data beyond the frameworks of their respective disciplines. If indeed, Japan deserves the production of dedicated "how-to-do-fieldwork" texts, it should also deserve material that teaches specifically students of Japanese Studies how to integrate the knowledge that they have accumulated on various aspects of Japan into their research. This may sound superfluous, considering that most teachers expect students to pick up automatically what they need to understand the topic at hand from what they have already learned. Yet, I argue that this is not a straightforward task, for two reasons.

Firstly, it strikes me as paradoxical that there are students or graduates of Japanese Studies who can produce high-quality research on certain Japanese phenomena but

[4] Bestor, Theodore C., Patricia G. Steinhoff and Victoria Lyon Bestor, eds. 2003. *Doing Fieldwork in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; the special issue "Politics and Pitfalls of Japan Ethnography: Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Anthropological Ethics" in *Critical Asian Studies* Volume 39 Number 4 (2007); and Levi McLaughlin. 2010. "All Research is Fieldwork: A Practical Introduction to Studying in Japan as a Foreign Researcher." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 30/1, No. 10 (26 July).

remain entirely biased or simply ignorant regarding everything else related to Japan. I am not claiming that it is possible to become a specialist in everything "Japanese." I am arguing that Japanese Studies are more than Japanese language training coupled with an overview of "Japan"; Japanese Studies ought to provide opportunities for students to consider how their interest or research in a specific domain impacts on the objectivity, self-reflexivity and criticality with which they need to learn and employ knowledge about other domains of Japan (and beyond).

Secondly, I am not alone in arguing that we need more integration in the way we conduct research and teach about our findings. In the last 25 years, the academic community has been calling for new modes of knowledge production that are more practical, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, transient and reflexive[5]. Today even an entire field of Transdisciplinary Studies is dedicated to a systematic recording of methodologies used in successful multidisciplinary projects so that these may be reproduced for the benefit of other projects in different settings. This is perhaps the only way to achieve the societal impact that scholarly research and teaching around the world are increasingly required to reach today.

Having spent my post-PhD career in the Japanese higher education system, I can say from experience that the possibilities that Japanese Studies could provide for the enhancement of pedagogical methodologies used in, for example, General Education, Liberal Arts Education and other curricula that offer multidisciplinary content in Japan are limitless. The reason is very simple: Japanese Studies are from the outset a sort of "General Education about Japan." Japanese Studies curricula teach various subjects, each of which may be talking conceptually about a different "Japan," but they all ultimately ask from students to "put the dots" together and to a relative degree form their own "Japan." Arguably this is rarely stated in such an explicit way, but Japanese Studies graduation projects, regardless of their topic, require from the student to do exactly that: to interpret a phenomenon through the "Japan"-prism they should have acquired throughout their studies. In other words, contrary to monodisciplinary degrees that ask students to focus on a specific subarea of the discipline for their research in the final year, Japanese Studies undergraduates cannot be "allowed" to put "Japan" aside when they write their dissertations. It is as if, every time they write their graduation project, sociology students, instead of applying certain sociological theories to

[5] See, for example, Michael Gibbons et al. 1994. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies.* London: Sage.

understanding the phenomenon of their choice, had to rethink what "society" means and how it is holistically related to that phenomenon.

My argument is simply that Japanese Studies are inherently integrative, and can, by extent, form the basis for transdisciplinary methodology training that can be employed to help students in multidisciplinary faculties to "find their feet," "connect the dots," and integrate disparate knowledge into specific research projects. To be more precise, this can be achieved by following three principles, based on the work of one of two of my PhD supervisors, Professor V.T. King[6], to which I have been adhering in my teaching and which I would like to further develop in the rest of my career:

> (a) the need to travel across borders and political, ethnic, geographical and disciplinary boundaries to show how"Japan" has to become a contingent device and to encourage students to consider, think about and even experience that contingency through class exercises, debates and collaborative projects.
> (b) always consider the historical perspective of concepts, phenomena, theories and popular discourse about any "Japanese" subject.
> (c) keep in mind the bigger, transnational picture and how the topic "fits" as a Japanese case-study to a bigger or lesser degree with the rest.

Higher education itself has become increasingly transnational. Japanese Studies education cannot be built on assumptions of a monoethnic/monocultural student audience anymore. As I have come to understand in my work, teaching must be collapsed onto the audience. By this, I do not mean that Japanese Studies need to always respond to what the students want to hear about Japan. I mean that considering the significant variation in the socio-cultural background, disciplinary interests and career hopes of today's student bodies, Japanese Studies need to also mirror that variation in the way "Japan" is conceived, taught and researched. In this day and age, where the emphasis on interactive, project-based, collaborative learning has taken centre-stage in pedagogical policies, I foresee no difficulty in combining the transdisciplinary outlook of Japanese Studies with the pluralities of our student body, and to develop a more applied, integrative, and reflective "spin" to our field.

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[6] These are based on the three guiding principles of what Professor V.T.King has called "jobbing social science methodology" (see Victor T. King. 2009. "Borneo Studies: Perspectives from a Jobbing Social Scientist." *Akademika* 77: 15-40).

In summary, like “religion,” “Japan” has become a contingent concept worthy including in questions that ask not “what?” but “how?”. It is not that “religion” or “Japan” do not bear meaning anymore. It is that their meaning lies more into how these concepts are fabricated and used, rather than in what they substantially refer to. Contingency and historical relativism have become essential in our work as researchers and educators. There is no reason not to integrate research methodology and ethics that take these into account to pedagogical work, and vice versa. In arguing this, I am reminded that one of the foremost scholars of religious studies of the last forty years, Jonathan Z. Smith, was apparently famous for preferring to teach undergraduate rather than postgraduate students, because they questioned him on the most fundamental ideas, helping him and themselves (through his answers) to make knowledge their own. *Education comes to life at the moment of tension generated by the double sense of "fabrication," for it means both to build and to lie*, claimed Smith[7]. I cannot agree more.

[7] Christopher I. Lehrich (ed.). 2012. *On Teaching Religion: Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.14.