Bernhard Leitner
University of Vienna

Overcoming Japanese Studies – Or on the Advantage and Disadvantage of Japanese Studies for Academia

"A thing can only live through a pious illusion."

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874)

"There are two meanings to repetition in history. The first is when people evoke events or people of the past when doing something new. […] The second type of repetition is when the past, despite being rejected and forgotten, is nevertheless repeated."

Karatani Kōjin, *History and Repetition* (2004)

How does one think the new? How is new knowledge created? The radically new, not the developed thought, reminiscent of a given thought style. The paradigm shifting thought, breaking with tradition, breaking the circle of the eternal recurrence. Or should one not even make the effort to break the circle? Is it possible that the novel thought emerges through circulation? Does the circle give rise to the new, a difference through repetition? The history of science seems to teach us a lesson here. Innovative knowledge is privileged to grow on moving grounds. Whenever people start moving through the worlds, or minds for that matter, when worlds sway minds and people, something new is formed. And once in a while a rupture occurs, a thought is born. It does not even matter who or what is moving. When Immanuel Kant let his mind move through time and space as categorial foundations, he did not even have to leave his hometown Königsberg once in his whole life to shake the world of thought. Nietzsche had to travel to Switzerland to understand Germany and Nishida Kitarō had to move to Kyoto to set the course for the Kyoto-school.

A not that well known psychiatrist by the name of Kure Shūzō on the other hand, had to travel for months, even years, to turn around the medical world of his homeland Japan in the 19th and 20th century. When he started to study medicine at Tokyo University in 1879, he sure had no idea, that his mission to establish psychiatric care and neurological research in Japan would make him drift through Asia and Europe for four years until he would reach Japanese soil again. And his decision to stay in Vienna for two years heavily influenced the development of Japanese medicine to this day. But why Vienna? What would lead to a temporary stop of his travels? He

went from Yokohama to Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), he took a course through the newly built Suez Canal to land in Marseille after more than two months, proceeding to Switzerland and Germany before finally arriving in Vienna in 1897. What would keep him in Vienna? Maybe a place of knowledge production or to be exact of knowledge circulation? Of course, Vienna gathered some of the most eminent medical scholars of that time. The Vienna School of Medicine, introducing clinical observation and bedside training, Carl Rokitansky's natural scientific pathology and Richard von Krafft-Ebing's lectures in psychiatry revolutionized medical thought and practice and aided the transition of medicine from a system based on natural philosophy to a system based on the sciences. At the turn from the 19th to the 20th century numerous scholars from all over the world gathered in Vienna to take part in this revolution. Specialized lectures would be delivered in English to cater the growing demand from foreign visitors. In 1904, an American microbiologist even founded the American Medical Association in Vienna, a society that existed solely to intensify knowledge circulation between Vienna and the New World. But for Kure, not only these big names constituted a solid reason for residing in this city in the heart of Europe, but also a small laboratory hosted and financed by Viennese neurologist and psychiatrist Heinrich Obersteiner. Although the location was at best rudimentary equipped in the beginning, it heavily drew scholars and students from virtually everywhere on this planet. They would not only come from Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Spain and Sweden, but also did not bother to embark from Brazil, Canada, Chile, the United States of America and last, but definitely not least, from Japan. At Obersteiner's laboratory, originally named Institute for Anatomy and Physiology of the Central Nervous System in Vienna, these scholars were not only trained in recent research methods like tissue preparation techniques and microscopy, but they added and assembled different methods and backgrounds at this tiny space, tiny especially compared to the extensive facilities of the medical faculty of the University of Vienna. Obersteiner made sure to provide the space and keep it a strictly egalitarian space. People of every nation, every ethnicity and every gender should be granted the opportunity to contribute to knowledge production, given they were willing to cooperate and share. What set this place apart from all the others, where foreigners often had to pay considerable sums of money to listen to the lectures of the academic giants, was the fundamental openness to difference, not only in terms of national origin, but also and most importantly of disciplinary backgrounds. Its merit not only derived from a variety of personnel, but also of methods, thought style and interest. It was this cardinal interdisciplinarity ultimately giving rise to a new scientific discipline: Neurology was born, in a small underfunded, underequipped, but not at all understaffed laboratory. A laboratory that in the beginning was not even deemed important enough by the University of Vienna to be fully funded or at least to be provided with rooms and materials. The institute had only one sink. Everything had to go down one drain: water, leftover samples, solvents, chemicals and "water-jet[s] of physiological provenience", to put it in Obersteiner's former student Erwin Stranksy's words. The conditions were clearly suboptimal, yet a scientific discipline emerged from this place, completely changing the way we think about ourselves, how

we think about our brain and ultimately about thinking itself. The Neurological Institute, as it went down in history of science, was the central hub for the establishment of a new form of knowledge.

When Kure began to work on analysing the detailed anatomical structure of the trigeminal nerve, one of the largest cranial nerve chords directing basic sensation and motor functions of the face, he probably could not anticipate where this would lead, not only himself and his career, but Japan and the world. Upon his arrival back in Japan in 1901, he assumed the professorship of psychiatry at the University of Tokyo. He founded the Japanese Society for Neurology (later renamed in Japanese Society for Psychiatry and Neurology, still operating today) and pushed neurological research in Japan. The academic endeavours of Kure and his disciples not only advanced neurological knowledge production in Japan, but also in the world. But we shall let the focus remain on Japan for a bit. For we have to keep in mind: Knowledge production is not a neutral, simplistic or isolated process. It is informed by local contexts and economic, political and cultural settings. In Japan medical knowledge was not only deployed for purely scientific ends. The political agenda of late 19th and early 20th century Japan was to present Japan as a modern nation state in the international race of industrialisation. Contributing to cutting-edge research meant also increased reputation. Naturally, scientific pursuit and academic medicine were not always dedicated to humanistic ends, in Japan as elsewhere.

When I started working on the history of medicine in Japan, I did indeed not know where the journey will take me. I came from Foucault's analysis of power within psychiatry to study the emergence of psychiatric discourse in Japan, went on to research the origins of medical and psychiatric theory and practice of Meiji-Japan in Europe and ended up at my very own origin: Austria. Browsing through the shelves of the medical library in Vienna, I posed a seemingly simple question: Where do all these Japanese journals in the archives come from? It led to other, more complicated questions: How and under which circumstances was this medical knowledge produced? How did it circulate? And what were the ramifications of these flows for Austria, Japan and the world?

To put it in other terms: I went from Japanese studies, to Japanese history, to Austrian history and back to Japan. I growingly noticed the inadequacy of historical accounts in solely national contexts, especially in understanding historic epistemology. I finally arrived in something coined as the global history of science, a discipline itself in the very process of formation. I am affiliated with Japanese studies, it remains my academic home, an institutional necessity. I remain in this circle, but do I have to break out of it? Do I have to escape the domain of a national context? Yes, I do! In order to comprehend I needed to acquire new thoughts. Did I need to study Japanese studies to reach this point? Most certainly yes! It is a paradox: To realise the futility of thinking in terms of a single national context, I had to go exactly through that. And it was essential for this development to focus on Japan. Thinking about Japan, experiencing it myself during my stays in Japan, made me aware of the basic arbitrariness of history and culture. Nothing is set, everything is moving, everything can be different, nothing is natural. By moving

within the circle of Japanese studies I was able to transcend it. Through repetition I could find this difference. The study of a foreign culture, history and language enables us not only to understand another given regional context, but it tells us more about our own context. We gain insight into the other and at the same time it drives us to reflect ourselves from a different angle. As the other, on the other hand, we have the opportunity to see otherness within the other, that the other itself cannot see. Therefor I would strongly argue for the necessity of Japanese studies as an academic discipline. We shall never cease to foster understanding of particular regions, be it Japan or any other country in the world for that matter. For my research, Japan offers a number of intrinsically interesting points. Look at history of medicine, or more specific, the history of psychiatry in Europe: You have to trace developments ranging from the 17th to the 21st century to dissect processes obscured by long time spans. If you look at the introduction of Western derived psychiatry to Japan and its course of development stretching from the 19th to the 21st century, similar processes become observable in a relatively compressed form, making them often more articulate and recognisable. At the same time there is of course difference, it is clearly not the same story, making it even more valuable for history of science accounts. Thus, another aspect becomes observable: Local systems of knowledge start to react, resist and interact with new forms of knowledge. When a new medical discipline is introduced in a different historic, socioeconomic and cultural context, necessarily frictions occur. In return these frictions provoke ever new forms of knowledge. Again, there is an interplay of circulation and difference. The way that scholars in Japan sought after, absorbed, transformed and permeated “foreign” discourses is indeed striking for every historic epistemologist. But a national frame is always already an illusion. For there are no clear-cut borders for knowledge production, nor for people. Exchange has always been the drive for human development and I certainly do not evoke a simplistic notion of development here. I use development not in the sense as a linear progression from, to keep it in familiar terms, premodern to modern for example, but as a shibboleth of difference.

To further develop Japanese studies as a field, we must continuously deploy this difference. We have to overcome Japanese studies by remaining true to its cause. I strongly believe that the study of Japan in global terms is the future of our field. We should not be ignorant of local peculiarities, we should not abandon our profession, but at the same time, we should transcend our disciplinary borders. As Japanologists, methodological openness is and has always been our virtue. And without a doubt there has been a lot of research on international relations of Japan and Japan in the world. But the realm of the international needs to be overcome and give way to the transnational and the interdisciplinary. In my field of research history of science and medicine there has been a lot of output on international relations in specific epistemic branches, but what we do lack to a certain extent is transnational perspectives. For example, the analysis of the emergence of neurology as a specialised medical discipline is an international history. There are different national histories and contexts leading to different motivations and interests for participating in its formation, but to further complicate matters, there are even very personal reasons. Obersteiner’s and Kure’s motivations were most likely not that different from each other, even if they were born into two locally completely different settings,

thousands of kilometres apart from each other. Nevertheless, they both grew up in elitist aristocratic families, in posh neighbourhoods of Vienna and Tokyo and both held an interest in the functioning of the nervous system in animals and humans, while being fostered in a practical psychiatric environment. They both met at a time and place where novel technological conceptions facilitated the opportunities to study nerve tissue to an unprecedented extent, all that amidst an epistemic climate that favoured the materialistic approach to the workings of the human mind and a unique academic environment that even rendered the scientific collaboration of wartime enemies during World War One possible. All this cannot be adequately understood in national, not even in international terms.

I would like to propose a conception of a possible future structure of our field on a philosophical account. Nishida Kitarō began to conceptualise his own thoughts after spending years of reading through various corpora of texts by Kant, Fichte and Hegel, not by any chance a lot of German idealism and being heavily influenced by William James' psychology. He moved to Kyoto University where he founded the so-called Kyoto-school of philosophy to eventually go down in history as the first genuine Japanese philosopher, in the strict Western definition of the term. Presumably under the influence of his former classmate Suzuki Daisetsu, who famously popularised Zen-Buddhism in Europe and America by publishing numerous books and articles on Zen in English, Nishida eventually found an interest in Zazen, the practice of Zen-Buddhism. The radical experience of nothingness during meditation inspired him to attempt to express the conception of *mu*, or nothingness, in Western philosophical terms. Only now we can see how his thought was not only expressed through a philosophical terminology, but how his thought as such was informed by a melding of Western and Eastern notions. And so, this circulation of transnational knowledge gave us the logic of *basho*. The logic of place tries to overcome the classic division of subject and object by focusing on the place of action, not the action or interaction between subject and object themselves, but the place, blurring the difference of subject and object. In fact, it transcends the subject completely by acknowledging its self-contradictory nature, its inconsistency. But his take on this dialectic was to avoid the seemingly compulsory next step of synthesis or resolving the contradiction of the subject itself and the object. Where Hegel would have proposed to resolve the dialectic contradiction of thesis and antithesis through synthesis, Nishida holds that we remain in contradiction, endure it, and focus on the place, on its locality.

Maybe we should think of Japanese studies as an academic place of nothingness. In a very positive sense, that we lack fixed methods, fixed identity and be a place as a discipline. We have to become an open place for reflection on locality in a specific context and endure the contradiction that it must be transgressed to be able to think locality itself (the locality of knowledge, in my particular case). Remain in the circle to make a difference! The core question is left unanswered though: How do we do this? The European Association for Japanese Studies works on bringing together scholars of Japanese studies from nearly every corner of the world. The European Association for Japanese Studies conference is key in academic exchange within different disciplines in Japanese studies and gives us a chance to connect with fellow historians

of Japan and even beyond, to get in touch for example with sociological research on Japan, a matter most important for me as a historian of science also dealing with the sociology of sciences. The Toshiba International foundation funded European Association for Japanese Studies PhD-workshop, which I am lucky enough to have been able to attend, is essential in opening a forum for young scholars to develop their thesis conception in exceptional academic environments. Besides these efforts, I would argue for the advancement of intensified cross-boundary initiatives. Our field, which sometimes remains to be an academic outsider when it comes to bordering disciplines like history, the social sciences or cultural studies, should proactively seek outreach to fellow scholars working on different local settings, but related topics. Throughout my academic genesis I made consistent efforts to collaborate with scholars from the history of medicine, history of science, sociology of science and cultural studies whenever I saw a productive opportunity. I visited a lot of conferences where I was the only scholar working on Japan, and they turned out to be most valuable. I am fully aware that funding large conferences for all the possibly thousands of combinations resulting from this disciplinary overlapping is impossible. But in my personal experience, small symposia or workshops are usually even much more productive. I think the Toshiba International Foundation and the European Association for Japanese Studies could contribute tremendous to the advancement and “overcoming” of our field, by laying more emphasis on topic focused, comparative, transnational and cross-disciplinary research collaboration.