

## A Conversation with Professor Jung Byeong Ho

Director of the Global Institute for Japanese Studies, Korea University

Posted on January 15, 2025

### Taking Japanese Literature Beyond University Walls and into the Wider World

Academia isn't just about what happens within the confines of universities; it's also about exploring real-life issues and understanding society. Many scholars aim to connect their studies to the wider world, hoping to make a positive impact beyond their own institution and around the globe. A case in point is Professor Jung Byeong Ho, the Director of the Global Institute for Japanese Studies at Korea University, a private institution in Seoul, and a Japanese literature specialist in the University's Department of Japanese Language and Literature.

Byeong shares his thoughts on recent developments in the field of Japanese literature: These include his ongoing efforts to facilitate opportunities to connect and collaborate for researchers around East Asia and beyond, as well as how the field is evolving to keep pace with changes in both the academic landscape and society at large.

Interview by Louise George Kittaka\*

### *An Ongoing Love for Japanese Literature*

After studying Japanese at Korea University's Department of Japanese Language and Literature, Byeong arrived in Japan in 1996 to further his studies. He subsequently went on to earn his Ph.D. from Tsukuba University in Ibaraki prefecture.



The main campus of Korea University is situated in central Seoul. The university will celebrate its 130th anniversary in 2025. (Photo: KU)



Professor Jung Byeong Ho, Director of the Global Institute for Japanese Studies, Korea University

Japanese literature has long appealed to Byeong, who chose *Ukigumo* (The Drifting Cloud) by Shimei Futabatei (1864-1909) for his master's thesis at Korea University. Published in three parts between 1887 and 1889, the acclaimed work is widely considered to be Japan's first modern novel.

“I first encountered Ukigumo during the summer after finishing my undergraduate studies,” he recalls. “Though the novel was written in 1880s, the story was never outdated and I was fascinated by how contemporary it seemed.” As a result, Byeong chose to focus on Meiji-era literature from the 1880s and 1890s when he came to Japan to further his studies.

Korea University established the Department of Japanese Language and Literature in 1983 and offers graduate programs at both the master’s and doctoral levels, as well as a graduate school for training Japanese language teachers. Currently Byeong lectures in the Department at his alma mater and also heads the Global Institute for Japanese Studies there.

“We have the only dedicated Japan Studies facility among Korean universities, which we call the Cheongsan MK Culture Center. This facility houses many research organizations, including the Global Institute of Japanese Studies,” notes Byeong. Among the institute’s initiatives is the development of a digital archive accessible to both researchers and the public, featuring a database of bibliographic information for around 50,000 Japanese-language publications from the colonial period in Korea and former Manchuria.

With the aim of promoting humanities research, the Korean Ministry of Education launched the Humanities Korea (HK) program in 2007. The Global Institute for Japanese Studies was one of the first Japan-related research facilities to participate in this HK initiative. “Our agenda was to establish a global hub for Japan Studies. With many researchers from Korea University involved, and a strong infrastructure in place, we have put a lot of effort into promoting international academic exchange, which I think is a unique aspect of our work,” adds Byeong.



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### ***Creating Opportunities for Shared Scholarship***

Byeong is closely involved with the Forum on East Asia and Contemporary Japanese-Language Literature, a network of researchers studying modern Japanese literature and culture from around East Asia. As the field also includes works written in the Japanese language by non-native writers, the forum aims to break down boundaries related to Japanese literature and culture studies.



The Forum on East Asia and Contemporary Japanese Literature’s 2023 conference was held in Bali, Indonesia, attracting scholars of Japanese and Japanese-language literature from across Asia.

“The shared theme is Japan-related matters, such as Japanese literature, culture and cultural content, and how these relate to East Asia or Asia as a whole. We have selected topics that could be shared with scholars not only from Korea and Japan, but also from China, Taiwan, and around Southeast Asia,” Byeong says.

Scholars share ideas and findings on matters such as the reception of Japanese traditional poetry, challenges in translating Japanese literature into East Asian languages, and the influence of Japanese popular literature on East Asia. The Forum on East Asia and Contemporary Japanese-Language Literature’s 2023 conference was

held in Bali and attracted participants from seven parts of the world. However, as Byeong points out, there is still no global academic society covering Japanese literature and culture around the entire world.

While spending a sabbatical year in Kyoto in 2018, Byeong developed a fruitful relationship with the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO), which has supported various endeavors through the Global Institute for Japanese Studies at Korea University. These have included holding special “Toshiba Panels” at the Forum on East Asia and Contemporary Japanese-Language Literature events, along with special stand-alone symposiums.

Another important mission of the forum is to nurture next-generation scholars in the field and Byeong has been making ongoing efforts through organizing affiliated activities.

### Cross-cultural Considerations in Japanese Studies

Byeong notes that the challenging nature of studying and reading in Japanese has shaped interpretations of the concept of Japanese Studies. As more Japanese universities created departments or graduate programs in International (Global) Japanese Studies from the 2000s, many programs began offering Japanese Studies in English (or other languages), making them more accessible to non-native speakers.

While some academics don't see a problem with students of Japanese Studies reading English translations of Japanese literature or writing papers in English, Byeong holds a different view. “When I teach students in Korea, even if there are translations available, I always require them to read the original Japanese text. After all, it's Japanese literature, and the majority of prior research is written in Japanese, so that must be tackled as well,” he explains. “If the Japanese Studies institutes from several countries come together, the common language should be Japanese.”

Since 2014, the Global Institute for Japanese Studies has been publishing *Border Crossings: The Journal of Japanese-Language Literature Studies*, a peer-reviewed international academic journal written mainly in Japanese with abstracts in English. The journal's Japanese title is 「**跨境**」(“Kokyou” or “Cross-Border”), a name selected by a multinational group of researchers from the Forum on East Asia and Contemporary Japanese Literature, who saw it as an ideal fit for their objectives.

Byeong explains that the term **越境** (ekkyou, crossing borders) became popular in the late 1990s, but **越境** may also carry the connotation of abandoning one's culture or environment to cross over to another one. “However, in the case of **跨境** (kokyou, cross-border), the Chinese character **跨** (matagu) refers to ‘straddling,’ as in ‘straddling two different spaces,’” he says.

Byeong points out another issue in the field of Japanese Studies: *Border Crossings* is one of the few Japanese-language journals indexed in Scopus, the world's largest abstract and citation database for peer-reviewed literature, bringing international recognition to the research published in this journal. In general, however, Japanese humanities journals don't create citation index databases.



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“They don’t have a system for indexing citations, which is the standard in places like Korea, China, Thailand, Europe and the United States. I had suggested that Japanese humanities researchers consider creating such a system, but it still seems difficult to implement this in Japan. That’s one of the challenges going forward,” Byeong says candidly.

### ***Keeping Pace with Changes in Academia***

As he helps nurture the next generation of researchers, Byeong also takes a keen interest in new developments and trends in his field. In his student days, the focus was on famous Japanese authors and their most significant works. However, he notes that today’s younger scholars tend to be more interested in popular culture and subcultures than in such prominent literary figures.

“Even in undergraduate courses, when students decide on topics for their academic papers, themes like light novels, mystery fiction or Japanese animation are much more popular now,” he says. Reflecting this shift, courses have become more flexible, allowing students to choose from a wide range of subjects that interest them, even if the author or work is not well-known.

Another change is the increase in the number of female students entering the field of Japanese literature within Japanese Studies. Around 60% of undergraduates in Byeong’s courses are female, and this figure rises to about 70% at the graduate level. This dovetails with a rise in published works by Japanese women and their translations into other languages, providing new material and inspiration for scholars.

In recent decades, academics worldwide have been discussing what is often called the "crisis in humanities," marked by declining enrollment, reduced funding and a perceived lack of job prospects in humanities disciplines. This trend has sparked debates about their relevance in an increasingly science and technology-driven academic environment.

Byeong says this discourse has been ongoing in South Korea since at least the early 2000s. He notes that the role of the humanities is to seek truth, acquire critical and analytical perspectives, and develop professional skills for graduates. However, the bigger question is whether the humanities have adapted to the changing times.

“It’s clear that we are now living in an age dominated by science and technology. In this context, I believe that the humanities—and specifically the field of Japanese Studies—should respond proactively to shifts like ‘Society 5.0,’ which is the age of AI,” he says. “This is why I focus on digital humanities, and I think this is an area we should prioritize in both education and research moving forward.”

### ***Digital Humanities and Shared Perspectives***

Digital humanities is an academic field concerned with the application of computational technology and methods to traditional humanities disciplines such as literature, history and philosophy. However, it has not yet been widely adopted in Japanese Studies, and Byeong is keen to see more time and energy invested in ways to apply digital technology in his field.

In line with this, a special symposium was held in Seoul in 2024 under the theme of “Digital Humanities and Japanese Literature & Culture,” with support from TIFO. A dozen researchers from Korea, Japan, China and Taiwan presented their findings, and the contents will be published in an upcoming edition of *Border Crossings*, which Byeong believes could serve as a new starting point for digital humanities in Japanese literary and cultural studies.

For his own research, Byeong conducted a big data analysis of papers on Japanese literature presented at eight academic conferences in South Korea between 2004 and 2023. Using text mining techniques, he examined how the main themes evolved over time, focusing on changes every five years. Since he is a non-specialist in the field, he approached the project from a general big data analysis perspective.

As a Korean academic with a deep interest and respect for Japanese society and culture, as well as its literature, Byeong says the two countries have much in common. While acknowledging their complex historical relationship, he says they are currently dealing with many shared issues, such as aging populations, low birth rates, climate change, environmental issues and the disappearance of rural areas.

“These are things that not only affect Japan and Korea—they are also very important global issues,” Byeong points out. “In this regard, researchers from Korea and Japan should actively exchange ideas on these major social issues and work together to develop solutions. This is one of the key aspects of my awareness in this area.”

“Research and studies are not just confined to the university—they are about real-world issues. Since you're studying society, it's important to apply what you're learning to the issues and challenges faced by everyone in society. I hope that our research can contribute to these broader issues,” Byeong says in closing.



Professor Jung Byeong Ho discusses trends in digital humanities at the TIFO-sponsored multinational symposium held in August, 2024 in Seoul.

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Louise is a Tokyo-based bilingual writer from New Zealand who contributes to a wide range of domestic and international media platforms. Her areas of interest include travel, popular culture, education, business, and issues pertaining to Japan's international community. She conducts cross-cultural training programs for families leaving or arriving in Japan on corporate assignments and lectures in the comparative studies department at Shirayuri Women's University. Louise is a graduate of Waikato University (New Zealand) and the State University of New York at Buffalo (USA).

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