

A Conversation with Dr. Wolfram Manzenreiter

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Sparking New Connections in the Field of Japan Studies: u:japan Lectures at the University of Vienna

Hosted by the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna, the **u:japan lectures** series has grown from its pandemic origins as a web-based event into one of the most highly regarded and robust hybrid forums for scholarly dialogue and exchange in the field of Japan Studies. Japan-Insights spoke with its advisor, professor Wolfram Manzenreiter, under whose leadership the project has logged ten consecutive seasons and well over 100 lectures since 2020, offering viewers everywhere a window onto the latest research findings of scholars from around the world, while also serving to groom the next generation of Japan specialists. Plans are now underway to curate the growing database of presentations into themed modules accessible to all for teaching and learning purposes.

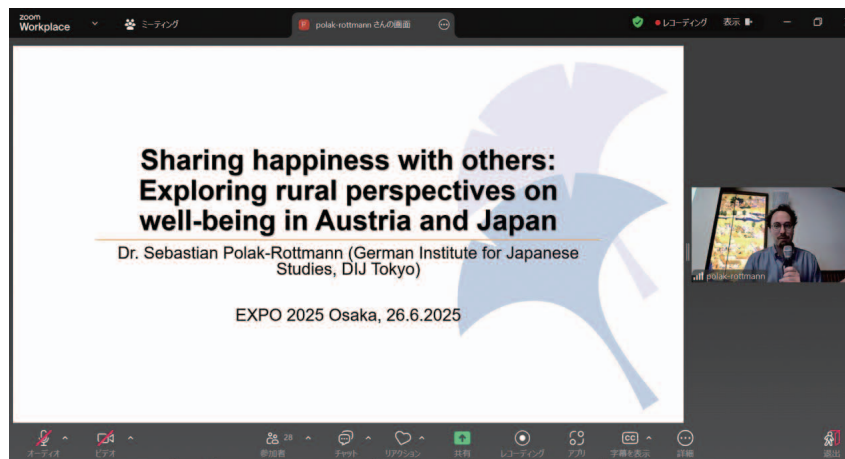
Interview by Susan Rogers Chikuba*



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As part of a public university we have a certain degree of responsibility to use our own knowledge to contribute to the knowledge of others. That is what u:japan is all about—contributing to the understanding of Japan on a global scale.

The u:japan lectures series hosted by the University of Vienna posted its 126th installment in June 2025 when Dr. Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, a senior research fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies, shared insights from his doctoral fieldwork addressing rural perspectives on well-being in Austria and the Aso area of Kumamoto prefecture in Japan. Speaking live from Expo 2025 in Osaka, he underscored the importance of including reciprocal and relational dimensions of well-being, such as neighborly activities and civic engagement, in our discourses on the subject. Now, as head of a research cluster on sustainability in Japan, Polak-Rottmann continues to look at the core areas of resilience, green transformation, and diversity and inclusion.



Polak-Rottmann received his doctorate in philosophy from the school of Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna in 2022, where Dr. Wolfram Manzenreiter, head of research on Japan, was his principal supervisor. “There is no evidence that the general trend toward urbanization is paralleled by an overall increase in happiness,” Manzenreiter offers. “So we were interested in rural notions of happiness and what makes life worth living to those who stay in, or indeed move to, the countryside.” A decade of interdisciplinary and collaborative research into well-being and rural society in Japan culminated in a conference chaired by Manzenreiter in 2024. Positing counterarguments to prevailing narratives that demise is inevitable for communities facing the 21st-century problems of depopulation, high aging, and economic decline, it effectively laid groundwork for further long-term explorations of rural resilience. Polak-Rottmann’s present work, for example, is demonstrating ways in which local stakeholders are uniting as shifting family demographics and challenges posed by natural disasters demand new means of sustaining interpersonal engagement in their communities. Manzenreiter’s team, meanwhile, is looking at the social structuring elements that are shaping both new opportunities for rural autonomy as well as an increasingly more differentiated understanding of diversity across Japanese society. With the opening of Japan’s labor market, how are municipalities—urban and rural—dealing with the increasing number of foreign residents? How does fiction written in Japanese by non-Japanese authors contribute to our understanding of Japanese literature? How are people navigating their sense of identity? The **u: japan lectures** database collates and showcases, essentially, the fruits of such ongoing inquiries.

We have always encouraged our students to engage with the scholars whose names they are familiar with from their reading—to observe them in action, to reach out, and to see that science is something that also happens in dialogue or in conversation. And therefore to break down walls of authority, of hierarchy, and make our students a bit more aware of their own ability to think critically.

Highly regarded in the global academic community for its dissemination of cutting-edge research on Japan, the school of Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna was, in the decades following World War II, the first in Europe to shift its study of Japan from text-based analysis toward qualitative anthropological and ethnographic research and the reflexive methodology of the social sciences. Today it receives an average of 200 students per year. “That’s the largest in Europe by far,” Manzenreiter observes. “We have seen a continuous, sustained interest in Japan Studies since the early 2000s.”



The Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna is Austria's only institution of higher education exclusively dedicated to research of East Asia.

Around the time that he assumed a professorship at the university in 2013, Manzenreiter started thinking about a new way of integrating and developing research that would be more open and inviting not only to his students but to his younger colleagues as well, and that would better serve their mutual interests. “For people working in the social sciences and humanities we have this understanding that we are all contributing to questions that can be answered more efficiently and productively when we align our efforts right from the beginning of the process,” he explains. “There are people working in the same field on similar problems in very different parts of the globe.” His efforts in this direction took on heightened significance when the pandemic struck. Determined not to cancel the guest lectures that had been planned for the semester, his team of early-career and senior scholars found a way to move them all online. Amid the general lockdown, the inaugural season, launched in May 2020, thus welcomed researchers from Nagasaki, Japan; Turin, Italy; Utah, USA; and Paris, France, who presented on such diverse topics as radiation in atomic utopia and dystopia; contemporary shamanic practices; historicization in films of the Heisei period; and the role of aesthetical discourse in politics of identity.

u:japan lectures serves as a platform of academic exchange showcasing the cutting-edge research of established and up-and-coming scholars in the field of Japan Studies. Highly specialized topics looking at newly emerging research questions and popular topics alike draw the interest of followers outside of academia.

u:japan lectures set an early example soon followed by other institutions as a host of online lectures flourished in the academic sphere. From the fall semester of 2020 the program moved into its first full season with verve. It introduced a lunch segment to enable Japan-based presenters and listeners to participate at a more convenient hour. By the end of season two, COVID case numbers were low enough for the final lecture to be conducted in hybrid format. In season three, the range of topics broadened, from labor market migration to contemporary literature and early-modern architecture to manner posters and war memory museums. Season four launched in spring 2022, continuing the hybrid format despite new challenges posed by the omicron wave, while also shaping the series for an eventual post-pandemic format. As in all seasons past, a cross-section of contemporary research on and about Japan was presented. In 2022 u:japan lectures was cited by the university for its “outstanding achievements and special commitment in the area of international networking and cooperation.”

The program has continued apace since. At the time of this writing in August 2025, **u:japan lectures** has welcomed presenters from as many as 18 countries, with the cumulative on-site attendance stretching to 5,000 or more. The lectures are typically held on Thursdays from 6 to 7:30 PM (CET), with occasional lunchtime sessions held from noon to 1:30 PM. Both the livestream and archived recordings are free of charge and accessible to anyone. While at first glance the wealth of topics may appear random, there is an underlying agenda, Manzenreiter points out. “We use the series to connect our younger researchers and those in our PhD program with people who are important to them for their own investigations—for improving their approach, for establishing contacts in the field, or otherwise as sources of information. Those who might play an important role at some point in time for a future career. Or those who will review theses or research proposals, or otherwise be points of contact for employment in a different program in the future,” he explains.



Organized by the Japanese Studies division of the Department of East Asian Studies, **u:japan lectures** is supported by the Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO), the Austrian Japan Society for Science and Art (AAJ), and the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna.

With our ongoing curation of the u:japan lectures database, we are working hard to guarantee it as an evergreen platform for innovative modes of publication and the distribution of new insights on Japan.



Thursday-night **u:japan lectures** often draw a full house on campus. A quarter of the presenters hail from Japanese universities and research institutions; nearly half are from institutions across Europe.

In addition to the archived lectures, the database provides suggestions of how to use the material in a given course of study along with recommended readings, classroom exercises, and even report assignments. Having arrived at a given lecture through a keyword search, educators can utilize the material in a course addressing, for example, women’s rights in Japan or the diversity of food cultures around the world. Some will access it for online tutorials; still others for special online units with or without accompanying textbook material; still others for training purposes or for classroom discussion. Management of this metadata is an ongoing process. In fact, the program has now reached a new stage: From the fall term of 2025, work will begin on collating thematic course modules modelled on the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) format, but tentatively dubbed JOOC (Japan Open Online

Course) to emphasize the focus on Japan. “We still have work to do on making the database easily accessible by people in different layers of our target audiences,” Manzenreiter says, “but our primary focus for now is cutting-edge research on Japan.”

The JOOC themes are still in development, but three topics that seem most likely are gender studies, the rural vs. urban distinction, and cultural representation in media. “To host this,” Manzenreiter says, “what we are looking for is a platform infrastructure that provides open accessibility and ensures sustainable accessibility of various materials, including the secondary tools. It’s difficult to identify sources that can provide continuous support in keeping the project alive. We are, of course, very grateful in particular to Toshiba International Foundation, which is one of our main sponsors. We are also thankful to our university for its support. The irony is that this is not a very expensive program in relation to what it is able to achieve.” One university press has expressed interest in developing a book as a companion to the lecture series. “Ideally this would serve not only as an introduction to the lectures but also provide a frame that links all of the JOOC modules and connects them to broader academic discourses in the field of Japanese Studies,” he says.

While a crossover between a book and a hybrid lecture series is not often seen, we are confident that such a novel endeavor is not only an interesting experiment, but also a promising way to invigorate academic exchange beyond journal articles and peer reviews.

Although the list of **u:japan** presenters is decided long months in advance, Manzenreiter encourages people to become part of the community. “Join our audience at the live lectures—share your ideas with us there. If you have something interesting to present, don’t be shy—try to snatch one of the few vacant spots that we might be able to provide. You can also become part of the community of post-program developers. If you are a teacher or course instructor, come forward with your suggestions and tell us the way you imagine using, or how you have practically used, the lecture materials for your classes. Maybe we can mutually benefit from that,” he offers. In his own introductory course on Japanese Society, Manzenreiter references, along with recommended books and articles, presentations his students would do well to hear. “Sometimes we use the **u:japan lectures** in first- or second-year undergraduate classes as a means of introducing them to working in an academic environment—how to set up a research project, or how to organize a presentation,” he adds. “What is the research question, and why is it significant? How does it relate to, or introduce, other things that have been done in the field? How does this researcher presenting in front of you contribute to a critical engagement with what we know?” The mechanics of research and presentation, the structure and format and even the delivery of the presentation thus all become tools for classroom exploration.

The foundation of our interdisciplinary approach to Japan Studies is high competence in the written and spoken use of the Japanese language, a solid understanding of Japanese culture and society in its historical and contemporary dimensions, and methodological skills.

At present a team of five keep **u:japan** running, variously handling communications, web administration and graphics, camera operation, post-production editing, and database management and IT concerns. In addition, coaching is offered to those presenters who desire it before they go online—a remarkable investment of time and care. “We learned how important it is to make sure that the presentation experience is equally a pleasure for the speaker as well as for the listener,” Manzenreiter comments. “So we take care of the technical side of things at our end while also providing assistance to the speakers. We record the series but we never use the raw material. It is always post-edited for clarity and ease of secondary use in classroom contexts.”

In a time when generative AI poses questions about authorship and authenticity, the live talks are a refreshing opportunity to gather around the proverbial fire—to listen to lived experience, and to engage with the originality behind the research. “From my very personal perspective, for an academic or a scholar indeed there is this

fire—a fire that we want to spark with our contribution,” Manzenreiter offers. “In terms of this lecture series, we want to spark others to think about what makes Japan such an interesting place, historically as well as in the way it manages certain problems and challenges of contemporary times.”



Professor Manzenreiter keeps his academic work alive through active engagement in the communities he studies.



* Writer's Profile: Susan Rogers Chikuba

Susan has been following popular culture, architecture and design in Japan for three decades. As a Tokyo-based writer, translator and editor she covers the country's art, design, literary and culinary scenes for domestic and international publications. She is a graduate of Cornell University.

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