
Special Symposium for the Global Studies in Japanese Cultures Program (JCulP)
“Globalizing Japanese Culture”

Panel Discussion Overview

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Following the presentations by Professors Yoshio, Pitarch-Fernandez, and Takai, the discussants Professor Kōshi Odashima (contemporary British novels, drama, translation theory), Professor Kimiko Kōno (Japanese and Chinese classics, East Asian cultural exchange), and myself, Fumihito Andō (comparative literature, narrative studies), joined a discussion that was held in a limited time. The following is an outline, but I have added a few after-the-fact comments as the moderator and reporter, marked with square brackets.

First, Professor Odashima started everything off with a comment on the last slide used by Professor Takai in her presentation, showing the poster of a “Kabuki Spectacle at Fountains of Bellagio: Fight with a Carp” held in Las Vegas. There one could see performer Ichikawa Somegorō’s name followed by a “VII,” meaning that he is the seventh actor to use that name. In Professor Odashima’s opinion, the fact that the poster featured that information (which would not necessarily be included if the poster were published in Japan) expressed perhaps a characteristic of American culture.

Professor Kōno followed with questions on whether certain genres are favored in the reception of Japanese literature, and whether there are cases where the translated work has some influence on the literature of the country that receives the work. She also added an individual question on how works of Japanese literature are arranged in bookstores such as those in Spain. Regarding this, Professor Pitarch-Fernandez responded that bookstores in Spain basically arrange books by country/geographical area, and within the sections related to Asia, a good portion are filled with books concerned with Japan. In addition, in Barcelona there are two bookstores specializing in books related to Japan. As for genre, haiku is the most well-known poetic form, and when people think of Japanese poetry, they think mostly of haiku. He pointed out that there was a hierarchy in the degree each genre has been received.

On the same question, Professor Yoshio said that in English-speaking countries such as the United States, “haiku” is a particular case, since it has been incorporated into the curriculum of elementary schools, while in comparison modern poetry is hardly introduced (but this is not limited to translations). However, poets and readers of poetry are personally engaged and are conscious that the genre they like is already a minority within the literary field, so from there comes a tendency to have a strong interest in the poetry of other cultures.

Considering from this point of view the issue of where interest in literary works of different cultures and languages may come from, I was struck by the realization that, while one of the main obvious motives may be the similarities one’s preferred genre shares across languages, a stronger factor might be precisely this consciousness of sharing the experience of being a minority genre. [If you stretch your imagination wildly, and consider the genre of “literature” that exists as a higher category than that of “modern poetry,” one could say that if the consciousness that “literature” itself is a minority becomes stronger (even more than now), the interest and desire for literary works of different cultures and languages might overflow or mix across all barriers. Global solidarity out of minority consciousness. Whether that is a desirable future or not is another matter.]

* This section first appeared in Japanese in *Tagen bunka* (Transcultural Studies, Vol.7, 2017) as a write-up of the panel discussion that took place during the Special Symposium. We’d like to thank Yung-Hsiang Kao for preparing the first draft of the English translation for this publication.

Professor Odashima, discussing the literary reception of genre, talked about the role that Fenollosa played in the introduction of haiku and Chinese poetry in the West, and the influence that the genre characteristics of haiku had on poetic movements like Imagism. As an example of transmission in the opposite direction, I mentioned how Tsubouchi Shōyō introduced the novel in modern Japan, both with theoretical (*The Essence of the Novel*) and creative works (*Portraits of Contemporary Students*). Professor Kōno followed up on this point, explaining how, just like the introduction of the novel as a new genre led to a reconfiguration of the Japanese language, so did the 20th-century introduction of haiku into China lead to an awakening of modern poetry there.

Professor Kōno then shifted the subject, raising the question of what kind of “Japan” might be conveyed to the world in this age of globalization. For example, during the presentations, the cover design of translations of Japanese literature was discussed and it was pointed out that there had been a clear development away from stereotypical images such as geisha or Mount Fuji. However, it remained a question whether the cultural representation of Japan had not merely shifted to new stereotypes such as “kawaii.”

Regarding this, Professor Takai said certainly in the case of Japan, there is often no middle ground. The tendency is to focus exclusively either on tradition or on technology. In commercial or policy terms, there is the idea that what matters is simply to awaken an interest in Japanese culture, but thinking in terms of higher education or international communication, it is important to consider one’s position when approaching a culture, and the meaning of cultural research as an intellectual exercise, without being limited by fixed labels. Professor Kōno said “kawaii” certainly is deployed to match the cultural image of Japan sought overseas; Professor Odashima pointed out that the cover of an Izumi Kyoka book discussed in the presentations showed a woman with an anime face in “kawaii” style, for example. The conversion from “geisha” to “kawaii” does not break the stereotype or the label. However, as Professor Takai described, modern editions of traditional works sold in Japan often have cute kawaii or “moe”-style pictures on their covers as well, and such phenomena cannot be considered exclusive to foreign countries.

Professor Pitarch-Fernandez said the diversity of Japanese culture and literature has come to be recognized in Spain from around 2005. Before that, reviews of translations of Japanese literature would regularly mention tea ceremony, haiku, and geisha, etc., no matter whether the work discussed was by Yoshimoto Banana or Mishima Yukio. Nowadays, works and authors are more accurately discussed in their specificity by reviewers and readers (“who are not as stupid as publishers seem to have been thinking”). Mysteries by Higashino Keigo and Miyabe Miyuki, plus science fiction and other genres are more widely read. For example, many are fans of Kawakami Hiromi’s novels not because they are Japanese novels but because of her as an individual writer and her particular works. In this sense, it is important to introduce a wide variety of works, rather than try to shape a single idea of what Japan is.

Professor Yoshio said that interest in Japanese culture abroad now is certainly primarily fostered through kawaii culture and pop culture. JCulP’s promotional materials themselves also try to use those to reach students from abroad, albeit presenting these contemporary phenomena in connection with the classics, for instance relating the love for “small” things in *The Pillow Book* with kawaii culture. Also, on the topic of what image of Japanese culture is expected overseas, writers like Kawakami Mieko, whose stories Professor Yoshio has translated, are very conscious that their work is being read abroad. Murakami Haruki has also touched on this point in one of his essays. This has brought them recognition but also new pressures related to the global market, such as the need to write long novels in order to be appreciated internationally. In a globalized context, the awareness of being read by an international audience produces complex interactions that cannot but affect the creative process.

At this point, (though time was running short) I asked for questions from the audience. Regarding the experience of teaching students in the United States, the following question was put to the three presenters: “Reading Japanese literature in translation means obviously that the students will encounter a different style in the texts, compared to the originals. What parts of the work do students sympathize with, and are they sympathizing more with the literary expression or with the story?” The presentations and subsequent conversation with the discussants had looked at the current state and trends of the publication of translations of Japanese literature, and their position in world literature anthologies, dealing mainly with the intermediaries and channels that influenced the circulation of literary works. This question focused instead on the response of the readers who are receiving these works of Japanese literature in translation.

Recalling her experience at Florida International University, Professor Yoshio said that although about ninety percent of her undergraduate class felt a strong emotional connection from reading Murakami Haruki's *Norwegian Wood*, not many students were able to articulate why they had felt it. Her impression was that they had felt drawn to the main character because he is clumsy, lonely, and cannot communicate well with others. Even though they are constantly in contact with others through SNS, contemporary young people might still not be able to shed their loneliness, so the main character resonates well with their generation.

After agreeing with Professor Yoshio that many readers respond very well to a particular sense of "modern alienation" in Murakami's works, Professor Pitarch-Fernandez noted that while translations of authors such as Kawabata Yasunari often need many footnotes to explain specific cultural objects or practices, in Murakami's case there is almost no need for them ("His characters boil pasta while listening to Beethoven"), and thus his world may feel closer to an international audience. One of the translations shown during the presentations had the blurb "If you want to make sense of the present, you must read Murakami," and certainly it is easy to see how his works would awaken these feelings of sympathy from readers of the same generation all over the world. The sense of living the same "present," and sharing the same alienation is probably strong among his audience.

Professor Takai pointed out how her students had shown intense sympathy for a novel by Yoshimoto Banana, that dealt with universal themes such as sex and death, and especially solitude. In addition, since the work in question had been written while she was attending college, the closeness in age between author and readers might have been a factor in their strong response. Writers in the generation after Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Haruki tend to be read as individual writers rather than as Japanese literature ("Eh, this doesn't seem like a Japanese writer," is a comment she often heard), she added.

Here, because no time remained, I tried to summarize the responses from the three presenters, saying that their experiences pointed to the existence of universal values in literature beyond cultural and genre differences, and closed the symposium.

[As a moderator, I regret that my final summary may have been too concise in trying to bring together the exciting variety of opinions and experiences brought forth during the discussion. Rather, what I want to take away from this symposium is a strong consciousness of the fact that, when we think about the event's title "Globalizing Japanese Culture," we are faced with urgent issues in the methodology and direction of our research in Japanese literature, and our efforts to critically examine Japanese culture in a global context.]