

# Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Three Directions for Japanese Studies

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## Abstract

This article discusses the problem of lingering methodological nationalism within Japanese studies. It argues that methodological nationalism remains widespread not only in research but also in university teaching and public dissemination, which legitimises popular conceptions of Japan as a singular, unified entity that is essentially different from both the West and continental Asia. This methodological nationalism is a consequence of the ways in which disciplinary structures contribute to the reification, demarcation and naturalisation of 'Japan' and 'things Japanese' as distinct objects of study in need of their own guild of specialised interpreters. The article argues that to overcome methodological nationalism, scholars of Japan need to reconsider their choice of subject matter and reflect more upon their use of the adjective 'Japanese'. It proposes three research agendas for the academic study of Japan. First, we should study discursive and institutional processes of Japan-making instead of being complicit in them. Second, we need to rethink 'Japan' as our main spatio-cultural unit by focusing on diversity within the Japanese isles and beyond (including migrant and Indigenous perspectives). Third, we should conduct and contribute to comparative research that focuses on both local particulars and transnational connections, rather than using the nation-state as our main unit of analysis.

*Keywords:* area studies; diversity; essentialism; Japan-making; transnational comparison

## Introduction: Things Japanese (or Not?)

In 2022, the Korean drama series *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* was one of the most popular shows globally on Netflix. It portrays the struggles of a brilliant, autistic lawyer in a society that has little tolerance for neurodivergent disorders. Researchers have credited the series for raising awareness of autism in South Korea,<sup>1</sup> but it also addresses other

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social issues, such as institutionalised corruption, gender inequality, discrimination and the destruction of natural heritage. This last theme is explored in episodes seven and eight, which take place in a semi-rural town on the outskirts of greater Seoul that is destined to make way for a new highway. When visiting the town, the urban lawyers are deeply moved by the sight of a sacred tree on top of a hill, overlooking the town. The tree in question, a magnificent old hackberry (*Celtis sinensis*; *K. paengnamu*; *J. enoki*), has ropes tied around it, showing its sacred character (see Figure 1). Evoking feelings of nostalgia and harmony, the tree is instrumental in making the lawyers take on the case. In the end, they manage to preserve the town by listing the guardian tree as a natural monument. Heritage law thus serves to protect this idyllic place from encroaching ‘development’.

Although set in South Korea, viewers familiar with modern Japanese religion, society and heritage will no doubt feel a pang of recognition when watching these episodes. Japan, too, is home to ancient sacred trees marked off by ritual rope (*shimenawa*). As in Korea, many agricultural communities, hybrid nature-cultural landscapes and suburban green spaces in post-war Japan were destroyed in order to make way for concrete and asphalt – a trend that has reversed only recently. Similar to Korea, trees, animals and plants in Japan that are listed as natural monuments (*tennen kinenbutsu*) are subject to special legal protection. The jokes made by the citizens of this fictional rural town about their ageing population also resonate with experiences and debates in rural Japan today, while the ideal of a harmonious, caring rural



**Figure 1: The sacred hackberry tree in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Isanghan byeonhosa uyeongu).** Produced by AStory; directed by Yoo In-shik; distributed by ENA and Netflix. Release date: 29 June 2022.

community is reminiscent of *furusato* nostalgia in Japanese popular culture (Robertson 1988). Even the fact that the real hackberry tree that was used for the TV series—located in a farming village in South Gyeongsang Province—has become a popular tourist destination<sup>2</sup> reminds one of Japan: in both countries, iconic sacred sites that appear in TV shows, films and cartoons often become popular ‘pilgrimage destinations’ for fans (Okamoto 2015). In sum, these episodes could have easily been set in Japan.

How many scholars of Japan are aware of the fact that all these seemingly Japanese phenomena—sacred trees marked off with ropes, natural monument preservation law, the power of the ‘construction state’, fan pilgrimages to fictional sacred sites (*seichi junrei*), *furusato* nostalgia and debates about rural depopulation—are common in South Korea as well? Because of my earlier research, I was vaguely aware of the fact that some Korean communities worship sacred trees (Lee 2011), and I knew that heritage legislation in both countries is similar (Pai 2014), without being familiar with the details. However, my knowledge of these topics in the Korean context is limited, and before watching these episodes, I had never really reflected upon them. Others may be more familiar with the similarities between Japan and Korea than I am. Nevertheless, within Japanese studies, the number of scholars who discuss these and other important contemporary topics with a comparative perspective in their writing, juxtaposing Japan with cases elsewhere in Asia, remains low. Why is this the case? Why do few scholars of Japan venture beyond the borders of the nation-state they have chosen to study? And why is this a problem?

This article addresses these questions. It discusses the problem of lingering methodological nationalism within the academic discipline usually referred to as Japanese studies (or, alternatively, Japanology). I define methodological nationalism as academic practices that take the nation-state for granted as their main unit of analysis, tacitly assume the self-evidence of naturalised national adjectives such as ‘Japanese’ and overlook the historical and contemporary significance of transnational or regional connections. I argue that, within Japanese studies, the adjective ‘Japanese’ continues to be used mostly non-reflexively, as if it were a natural given and we all know what is meant by it. Methodological nationalism thus remains widespread, not only in research but also in university teaching and public dissemination, which affects common perceptions of Japan as a singular, unified entity that is essentially different from both the West *and* from continental Asia.<sup>3</sup>

This methodological nationalism is not so much a deliberate choice on the part of researchers as it is an unfortunate consequence of the ways in which disciplinary structures (study programs, conferences, journals and funding bodies) contribute to the ongoing reification, demarcation and naturalisation of 'Japan' and 'things Japanese' as distinct objects of study in need of their own guild of specialised interpreters. This has led to academic parochialism and, consequently, institutional vulnerability. Today, Japanese studies programs are surviving in many countries primarily by virtue of comparatively high student enrolment, but if student interest were to decline, they could go the same way as other language and culture programs in academia worldwide: down the drain. The key question, therefore, is as follows: if we believe that the study of language, history, culture and politics in the Japanese archipelago matters – which I do – how can we preserve and, indeed, strengthen this field of study in the face of a global attack on the humanities and social sciences?<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Japanese studies is by no means the only academic field that is characterised by methodological nationalism, although I do believe it is more common in area studies disciplines that focus predominantly on a single nation-state (e.g. Chinese studies) than those that have a larger regional focus (e.g. Southeast Asian or Middle Eastern studies). This article primarily discusses Japanese studies, but some of the issues and suggestions also apply to area studies more generally. For instance, other area studies disciplines also struggle with the question of how to define their subject matter and how to navigate their position vis-à-vis other, more thematically or methodologically defined disciplines such as social anthropology or history.<sup>5</sup> In fields like South Asian or Southeast Asian studies, which are confronted with dwindling student numbers and the discontinuation of study programs, such questions are of imminent concern. The fact that Japanese studies programs have been relatively stable economically, at least compared to other area studies subjects, may well have prevented us from taking seriously some lingering epistemological and ideological problems.

However, there is no reason to assume that the global crisis of the humanities will not affect our field of study as well. For the study of Japan to remain viable and relevant, we must engage in debates about our disciplinary *raison d'être*, if only because twentieth-century justifications no longer suffice in this time of global academic, democratic and ecological crisis. What is the need for the academic study of Japan

in the 2020s, now that the popularity of ‘cool Japan’ appears to have waned – or, at least, is increasingly problematised (McLelland 2017; Stanislaus 2022)? Does Japanese studies have a future as a discipline – and, if so, in what shape? Several scholars of Japan have addressed these questions recently. After a period of relative stability – the age of ‘cool Japan’, characterised by high student enrolment and a continuous supply of Japanese funding, which started in the early 2000s and may have ended around 2020 – there is currently a sense of looming crisis within Japanese studies, which has been exacerbated by the country’s closed borders during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> In response to this and other challenges, several scholars have addressed the question of Japanese studies’ present-day significance. Recent initiatives include the provocatively titled AAS conference panel ‘The Death of Japan Studies’ organised by John Treat and Karen Nakamura in 2019, the ‘Rebirth of Japanese Studies’ series of roundtable discussions and digital responses organised by Paula Curtis (2020),<sup>7</sup> and the roundtable discussion on ‘The Future of Japanese Studies’ at the 2021 EAJS conference.

The present article contributes to these ongoing debates by adding some new insights and suggestions. It argues that we have to confront the methodological nationalism that is lingering within Japanese studies departments, publication venues, conferences and funding schemes. One way to do so is by seriously reconsidering our choice of subject matter and by reflecting more actively upon our use of the adjective ‘Japanese’. In particular, I propose three research agendas for the academic study of Japan: 1) study processes of Japan-making (instead of being complicit in them); 2) rethink Japan as a spatio-cultural unit by focusing on diversity within the Japanese isles as well as transnational connections; and 3) develop an intra-Asian comparative perspective focusing on particulars rather than nation-states.

This article is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss methodological nationalism, give some examples of ways in which it can lead to distorted or incomplete knowledge and explain why this is still a problem today. In the second part, I present my three suggestions for today’s research agenda in more detail. Readers familiar with the field will notice that my argument is not particularly new – others made similar diagnoses and proposed similar solutions decades ago (e.g. Harootunian & Miyoshi 2002; Morris-Suzuki 2000), but at the time their words did not lead to the far-reaching transformation of institutional and epistemological structures. The present article constitutes

an attempt to reconsider some of these earlier debates about the relevance (or lack thereof) of Japanese studies in the light of present-day concerns. It argues that methodological nationalism is still a problem, but it also identifies some promising new research trends that deserve more institutional support. By mapping these trends, I hope to contribute to an increased awareness of both the shortcomings and the opportunities of Japanese studies today.

## **The Problem of Methodological Nationalism**

Japan is not pre-given. What counts as Japan today is the outcome of historical processes of territorial conquest, state formation and nation-building—of historical contingencies, in other words, not necessity. The islands that now constitute the territory of the Japanese nation-state were historically characterised by profound cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity, but in modern times, this diversity has been appropriated and subsumed under the banner of a unified and reified national ‘Japanese culture’. Even the cultural traditions of the Ainu and the Ryukyu Islands, which are strikingly different from those of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, have been forcibly incorporated into the Japanese nation-state. Twentieth-century scholarship has played an important part in this process. For instance, influential cultural theorists such as Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) and Umehara Takeshi (1925-2019) appropriated diversity by means of social-evolutionist frameworks, redefining divergent cultural traditions as remnants of an imagined primordial Japanese culture supposedly characterised by social harmony, animism and sustainability (Morris-Suzuki 1998; Rots 2017; Umehara 1995). Western scholars of Japan, likewise, played an important role in the construction of a unified and essentialised ‘Japanese culture’. Orientalist academic narratives portraying Japan as something diametrically opposed to an equally essentialised ‘West’ (e.g. Benedict 1946) and twentieth-century Japanese nationalist imagery (*nihonjinron*) thus mutually reinforced each other (Befu 2001). Japanese studies was one of the main discursive fields where such imagery took shape and gained academic legitimacy.

Few scholars of Japan today subscribe to *nihonjinron*-type narratives of Japanese uniqueness and superiority. Nevertheless, the legacy of this discursive tradition is visible in news media, advertising, fan culture and the entertainment industry, all of which reproduce flat-yet-evocative images of Japan as ‘the quintessential Other, a land of paradox, a land

simultaneously characterised by hidebound tradition and radical futurity' (Thomas 2019: 2). As an academic field, Japanese studies continues to struggle with this legacy and to make sense of diversity that does not fit easily within the parameters of a reified, singular national culture. Certainly, most scholars of Japan are aware of the fact that the country Japan is home to ethnic minorities and migrant communities, and they acknowledge the existence of some hybrid groups such as *nikkeijin* (migrants with Japanese ancestry) and *hāfu* (people with one Japanese parent). However, this awareness has not given rise to widespread critical scrutiny of the underlying category formation. In other words, we realise that what does or does not count as Japanese may be subject to change, but we hardly question the validity of the category itself. In Japanese studies, 'Japan' usually appears as a natural given.

As a discipline, Japanese studies is certainly not committed to promoting orientalist stereotypes. However, it does preserve the underlying classification model that reifies Japan as a distinct entity and 'things Japanese' as a separate category of social or cultural phenomena that must be studied on their own merits, rather than in an explicitly comparative manner. Simply put: by reifying Japan as a unit of analysis that needs its own academic discipline and a distinct group of qualified interpreters ('Japanologists') in order to be understood, the academic construct 'Japanese studies' arguably justifies popular perceptions of Japan as essentially Other, unique and internally coherent. And even when many scholars of Japan reject simplistic binary oppositions and stereotypes in their own work, they are still conditioned by the academic epistemological and institutional structures that contribute to such othering. The question is, of course, how we can overcome this catch-22 situation. How can we preserve the specialised academic study of things taking place in Japan without contributing to the reification of Japan as a distinct unit of analysis?

As mentioned: these questions are not new. Harry Harootunian and Miyoshi Masao (2002) pointed out twenty years ago that few Japanese studies scholars have a significant impact on the disciplines (sociology, literature, religious studies, philosophy or political science) that they supposedly represent, because few of them do theoretically or methodologically innovative work. Likewise, around the same time, Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) argued that area studies unwittingly contributes to popular nationalist notions of uniqueness and superiority. Unfortunately, not much has changed since they wrote their critiques. Of course, as before, excellent research is conducted by Japanese

studies scholars on specific historical or cultural phenomena. Generally speaking, however, the impact of these studies outside the field of Japanese studies has been limited. This is not only because many of us, myself included, are confined to teaching in Japanese studies departments for livelihood reasons. More importantly, it has to do with the fact that 'Japan' continues to be taken for granted in most scholarship within the field. We use the adjective 'Japanese' continuously, for instance to refer to a particular canon of fictional texts (Japanese literature), a mosaic of ritual and doctrinal traditions (Japanese religion), a body of moral and metaphysical texts (Japanese philosophy) or a genre of video games that are produced and consumed transnationally yet purportedly have some unique national features (Japanese games). While we may ask what we mean by literature, religion, philosophy or even games, only rarely do we question the meaning of the adjective 'Japanese' in these compounds. The adjective is as elusive as it is ubiquitous.

### **Japan-making in Practice: Some Examples**

Taking the 'Japanese' in 'Japanese religion' or 'Japanese culture' for granted has unfortunate consequences. The seemingly neutral adjective functions discursively to set apart certain phenomena as *national*, while excluding others. This is essentially an ideological operation, but because the term is so naturalised and so common in everyday speech (like the adjectives of other nation-states), few people recognise it as such. Furthermore, methodological nationalism is problematic because it leads to the compartmentalisation and, at times, distortion of knowledge. It often prevents us from seeing the obvious: Japan is not special.

As the vignette from *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* in the introduction illustrates, many things that are framed as uniquely or typically Japanese in popular discourse and academia are surprisingly common throughout continental Asia. The sacred hackberry tree is a concrete example. As I have demonstrated in my earlier work, *shinboku* (sacred trees) and *chinju no mori* (sacred shrine groves) are central to contemporary imaginations of Shinto as an ancient, indigenous Japanese tradition of nature worship and feature prominently in romantic nationalist imaginations of Japan as a nation of nature lovers (Rots 2017). Journalists, scholars and religious actors repeatedly state that worship of sacred trees is a typically Japanese tradition that goes back to prehistoric times and has survived until today



(e.g. Hosoi 1976; Moore & Atherton 2020). It is certainly true that designated sacred trees are subject to special care, ritual as well as horticultural. However, contrary to what most Western and Japanese authors assert, there is nothing uniquely Japanese about this (see Figure 2). People worship sacred trees and groves throughout Asia and Africa – not just in rural or Indigenous communities, but also in modern metropolises such as Bangkok or Delhi. Tree veneration is *extraordinarily normal* – yet somehow, in popular and academic discourse, it has come to be associated with a presumed Japanese nature aestheticism and ancient environmentalism. Such representations are misleading, because they turn everyday local practices into a reified national culture. They are, in effect, instances of Japan-making. A transnational comparative perspective allows us to see that



**Figure 1. A sacred tree in the old port town of Hội An in central Vietnam.**

*Source:* Photo by Aike Rots, 2023

there is nothing uniquely Japanese about the worship of immanent deities residing in trees, rivers or other natural phenomena (Sahlins 2022).

I use this example not only because it relates to my own research, but also because scholars of religion in Japan have long engaged in discursive Japan-making practices, so it illustrates my point about the difference between academic Japan-making (using the nation as an explanatory or classificatory principle) and the academic *study of* Japan-making (applying a meta-perspective).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the compound term ‘Japanese religion’ constitutes a core category within Japanese studies as well as religious studies. Compared to other Asian countries of more-or-less similar size – such as Korea, Vietnam, Thailand or the Philippines – the academic study of religion in Japan is a well-established and sizeable subdiscipline, with its own specialised journals and sections (or units) at major conferences. Possibly as a result, among scholars of religion, there has long been a tendency to perceive ‘Japanese religion’ as a distinct set of practices within a singular ritual-cosmological-institutional system that transcends denominational diversity. This notion was widespread in both Japanese and Anglophone scholarship until at least the early 2000s.<sup>9</sup>

A prominent example of a work applying this one-national-system approach is the well-known study *Practically Religious* by Ian Reader and George Tanabe (1998), which describes ‘the pursuit of this-worldly practical benefits’ (*genze riyaku*) as ‘the common religion of Japan’. It is a rich and informative study, which rightly challenges earlier academic accounts of religion in Japan that focus too strongly on doctrine or institutional histories. Its problem, however, is that it postulates the existence of a singular, nationwide ‘religious system’ defined by some core features. People in Japan worship in different ways, but they are unified by a commonly shared focus on this-worldly benefits, the authors argue. In effect, they highlighted one aspect of ritual behaviour and turned this into the common denominator of a reified ‘Japanese religion’. National belonging thus becomes a core variable for predicting ritual behaviour.

The problems of such a single-system approach are manifold. First of all, it does not do justice to internal diversity, conflict and change. If one posits the existence of a singular religious system, it is easy to overlook practices that do not fit within the framework and downplay the impact of historical transformations. Second, such approaches not only group together a variety of disparate practices under the rubric

of the nation-state—which, in the case of pre-modern practices, is arguably anachronistic—but also deny the fact that some practices are profoundly different from the purported mainstream, while their practitioners are just as Japanese as others. Obvious examples include the lay Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai and Christianity, which are deeply ingrained into the fabric of modern Japanese politics and economy, but do not adhere to some of the basic features of ‘Japanese religion’ often identified by scholars (e.g. McLaughlin 2018). Third, like Japanese studies in general, the subdiscipline ‘Japanese religion’ has a serious problem with Ainu and Ryukyuan traditions, which do not fit easily within this reified, singular system. As mentioned, during the imperial period, Ainu and Ryukyuan practices were discursively incorporated into the national framework by means of ethnological scholarship describing them as the ‘primitive’ remnants of prehistoric Japanese religion. In academia, such social-evolutionist models are now considered outdated, and most scholars acknowledge the fact these traditions are and were profoundly different from those of mainland Japan. As a result, however, scholars of Japanese religion typically shy away from studying them, thus overlooking diversity within the archipelago. And fourth: reifying certain practices and beliefs as ‘Japanese’ and juxtaposing ‘Japanese religion’ with Western or Abrahamic traditions makes us overlook the multiple similarities that exist between worship practices in the Japanese archipelago and elsewhere in Asia. A single visit to Ciyou Temple in Taipei, Phù Tày Hò in Hanoi or Erawan Shrine in Bangkok is enough to realise that a focus on *genze riyaku* is not ‘the common religion of Japan’, as Reader and Tanabe suggested (1998), but constitutes a core feature of ritual worship throughout East and Southeast Asia, and probably beyond. For most ritual behaviour, *national belonging is not a relevant variable*. Why, then, would academics want to construct a ‘Japanese’ religious system, when the practices they discuss are widespread also *beyond* Japan? Why this national framework?

Today, scholars in the field of Japanese religion are increasingly aware of the fact that worship traditions in Japan have been shaped by transnational influences as much as by local dynamics. In recent years, therefore, it has become less common in scholarly literature to make generalised statements about ‘Japanese religion’ as a whole. Instead, most monographs in the field now zoom in on the histories of particular temples, shrines or devotional movements. However, the categories ‘Japan’ and ‘Japanese’ continue to be used widely, often

escaping critical examination. Interestingly, in the past fifteen years, the academic study of 'Japanese religion' has contributed significantly to a growing awareness of the historical formation, adaptation and diversity of the term 'religion'. Scholars have made significant progress in re-historicising the category religion (*shūkyō*) and investigating its genealogy in relation to nineteenth-century state formation and imperialism (Hoshino 2012; Josephson 2012; Maxey 2014). They have not yet subjected the category 'Japan' to similar scrutiny, however. The noun has received much more critical attention than the adjective.

My suggestion is that scholars of 'Japanese religion' should study not only the historical formation and competing definitions of 'religion', as many have done in the last decade, but also ask how certain practices and worldviews have come to be classified as *Japanese* religion, while others are excluded. Only in the last few years have some of us started asking critical questions about the ways in which the academic study of religion has been complicit not only in *religion*-making, but also in *Japan*-making processes – and not only in the category's foundational period, the late nineteenth century, but also in post-war society and today (e.g. Thomas 2019). This is a promising development. I hope more researchers will follow up on this and investigate ways in which the formation of core modern societal categories (not only religion, but also heritage, art, economy and more) interacts with, affects and is shaped by processes of nation-making – and what is excluded and erased in the process.

## **From Making Japan to Studying Japan-making**

How can we continue to study and analyse cultural practices and texts without using the nation-state as our main interpretive framework? How can Japanese studies become more self-reflexive, acquire a wider academic relevance and overcome the pitfalls of methodological nationalism? In this and the following sections, I make three suggestions for future research directions.

First, as mentioned, instead of taking Japan for granted as a natural category, Japanese studies should study processes of discursive and physical Japan-making – not unlike the ways in which scholars in other disciplines have started investigating processes of heritage-making (Weiss 2007) and religion-making (Dressler & Mandair 2011). Clearly, disposing of 'Japan' as an analytical category altogether is no option. Japan is a reality: it exists as a modern nation, as a state with corresponding

physical territories and not least as an ideal that carries meaning for large numbers of people. That does not mean, however, that it is fixed. What counts as Japanese is a function of discourse, and it is our task as scholars of Japan to investigate the processes by which certain things come to be classified as Japanese—and, at least as importantly, by which they are excluded from that category. We have to examine those processes instead of being complicit in them. That means we should take Japan seriously as an *emic* category that may or may not carry meaning to the people we study and investigate processes of classification and identification on the ground. But it also means that we can no longer take it for granted as a natural given and should stop imposing scholarly abstractions such as ‘Japanese religion’ (and ‘Japanese art’, ‘Japanese philosophy’, etc.) upon a variety of disparate cultural expressions and texts, many of which have been shaped by continental and global influences as much as by local particularities.

Again: this argument is not new. There are several excellent studies of constructions of Japaneseness in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (e.g. Befu 2001; Gluck 1985; Morris-Suzuki 1998). So my point here is not that excellent research on Japan-making does not exist. What I find puzzling, however, is that these books, although widely read, have not had a greater impact on the institutional structures and category boundaries of Japanese studies itself. That is, despite such critical interventions, scholars within the discursive and institutional formation ‘Japanese studies’ continue to operate with mostly implicit understandings of their core category, and study programs continue to set apart ‘Japan’ as a distinct and demarcated entity.

Few Japanese studies scholars today reproduce stereotypes or nationalist ideals. However, my point about methodological nationalism is that it is often implicit and non-reflexive. It is expressed in truisms such as ‘the religious life of Japanese people is characterised by ‘born Shinto, die Buddhist’, which is often repeated in textbooks and classroom settings. Such a statement presents a common feature of popular devotion throughout Asia—ritual complementarity and diversity—as something uniquely Japanese. Another example is a common claim such as ‘Japanese visual popular culture is different from popular culture in the West because Japanese characters are morally ambiguous’, which places cultural products into an essentialist dichotomy and denies the transnational nature of film production and consumption today. Commonplace statements such as these are examples of Japan-making in practice. They reconfirm *national belonging* as the main independent variable that

governs things such as ritual behaviour or storytelling technique. But what if, for most everyday practices or products, nationality does not matter? Identifying a particular phenomenon as a *Japanese thing* turns it into a national defining feature, while obscuring individual agency and diversity. This is exactly what Japan-making entails.

In sum, Japan-making is not merely something that happened in the past. Most university students who take a degree in the humanities these days learn that nations are ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991 [1983]) built on ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012 [1983]). In Japanese studies, too, they learn that much of what counts as traditional culture today was largely the product of Meiji-period myth-making (Gluck 1985). This is correct, of course, but it is equally important to teach them that nation-building, discursive and institutional, is not just something that happened in the nineteenth century; it is an *ongoing* process of reinvention, negotiation and exclusion. As academics, we are involved in this process. Therefore, when writing or teaching about ‘things Japanese’, we should always question our own implicit and explicit notions of Japaneseness. We also need more critical investigation into and reflection upon the ways in which the institutions of Japanese studies – university programs, publication venues, academic gatherings and funding opportunities – take part in, shape and challenge wider Japan-making agendas.

## **Taking Diversity Seriously**

Second, we should start taking diversity much more seriously – not in a unity-in-diversity kind of way, subsuming local differences under the banner of a reified national culture, but by realising that *there may not always be a common denominator*. The islands that constitute Japan today have historically been home to a wide variety of practices and worldviews, some of which have very little in common. Just as there was no unified Italian, French or German culture prior to nineteenth-century nation-building, there was no *Japanese* culture until scholars started inventing it in the late Edo and Meiji periods. Cultural traditions, therefore, do not necessarily respect modern-day national boundaries. In the 1990s, historian Amino Yoshihiko (1928-2004) was one of the first to seriously challenge common nationalist historiography and show how modern understandings of the nation and its culture have been shaped historically (Amino 1991). Focusing on maritime networks in the East China Sea instead of telling the paradigmatic Yamato-centric historical

narrative, Amino's scholarship quite literally re-centred the periphery, showing that Kyushu was in many ways closer to continental Asia than to northern Honshu. In pre-modern times, ritual and aesthetic practices in Kyushu may have been more similar to those of the Ryukyu Islands or the Korean peninsula than those of the Tohoku or Kanto regions. A sea-centric perspective, therefore, can help us overcome implicit notions of Japan as a more or less isolated, naturally bounded and transhistorical entity.

This is not just a matter of historiography; it also applies to the study of contemporary society. Today, too, local practices do not necessarily correspond to normative scholarly or popular accounts of 'national' tradition. The question then becomes: how do local actors relate to such notions, and how do traditions change in response? This interaction (and, possibly, friction) between local, national and transnational actors and ideas *on the ground* is arguably the most fascinating and offers the most promising material for theoretical reflection (cf. Tsing 2005). Yet in order to analyse such interactions, it is essential that we ask ourselves how Japaneseness is produced, negotiated or subverted. In other words: what types of diversity are sanctioned by the state, mass media and academia? And what types of diversity are perceived as problematic, denied or even suppressed, because they challenge particular power structures and dominant ideological constructs?

When saying that our discipline should investigate diversity more, I am not talking about, say, the marketing of rural agricultural commodities or Intangible Cultural Heritage such as *kagura* and tiger dances for tourism purposes. These are legitimate research topics, of course, but such curated and depoliticised diversity is not at odds with common perceptions of Japanese culture as essentially unified and unique. There are other kinds of diversity, social and political, that present more profound challenges to nationalist and orientalist projects of differentiation and reification. This is the kind of diversity related to class—e.g. the growing precariat, who are missing out on the promises of post-war affluence and stability (Allison 2013). It is related to migration and ethnicity—the reality, for instance, that the Japanese economy depends upon the structural exploitation of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers, many of whom are subject to violence and racist abuse (e.g. Tanaka 2020; Trần 2020). It is related to gender and sexuality—e.g. the ongoing discrimination of LGBT+ people and their vulnerability in the face of disaster (Yamashita, Gomez & Dombroski 2017). And it is related to pollution, toxicity and ecological loss—e.g. the structural marginalisation of groups that have fallen

victim to corporate ecocide, in Minamata, Fukushima and elsewhere (Kimura 2016; Kirby 2011; Walker 2010). Japan is not a neatly bounded, internally coherent entity. It is a messy reality, home to structural racism, gendered inequalities and violent boundary-policing. The good news is that scholars of Japan are becoming increasingly aware of this.

Perhaps most importantly: until recently, Japanese studies seemed disturbingly oblivious of the fact that *contemporary Japan is a colonial state*. The standard historical narrative, taught in history textbooks and university courses, is that colonialism ended when Japan lost the war in 1945. This narrative denies the lived reality of Indigenous communities in Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands.<sup>10</sup> Hokkaido is a settler colonial society built upon the displacement and dispossession of Ainu communities. Okinawa is a *de facto* US military colony, managed by Tokyo, where the will of the people is ignored if it does not comply with US military-strategic interests.<sup>11</sup> Considering the fact that two of Japan's prefectures are colonial societies, not just in pre-war times but today, the relative absence of postcolonial and Indigenous theory within the field is puzzling. It is symptomatic, however, for the lack of interest in Indigenous cultures within Japanese studies: until recently, the study of Indigenous communities within Japan was, at best, a peripheral affair. Few university programs in Japanese studies offer courses in Ainu or Okinawan studies. Few textbooks, handbooks and sourcebooks of 'Japanese culture' or 'Japanese religion' contain chapters that discuss Ainu or Ryukyuan experiences. Thus, these experiences have been excluded from higher education about Japan and have not featured in the construction of 'Japan' as an academic category.

Recent years, however, have seen an increase in high-quality scholarship on Indigenous cultures in Japan (e.g. Hudson, Lewallen & Watson 2014; Lewallen 2016). This is a promising trend. It remains to be seen if this also leads to changes in university curricula and editorial choices for handbooks. I can only express my hope that more (early career) researchers choose to study diversity in the Japanese isles in-depth—focusing on Indigenous issues, migration, social and economic inequalities and political ecology—and, by doing so, challenges established conventions and classification models.

## **Transnational Comparison**

Third, I advocate a radical comparative approach that seeks to move beyond the nation-state as an analytical category altogether, focusing



on *practices* and *localities* in different parts of Asia (and beyond). In her aforementioned essay 'Anti-Area Studies', Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) argued that ethnocentrism and nationalism are serious problems within area studies, preventing in-depth interaction between regional (e.g. Japan) specialists and other social science or humanities disciplines. In response to such criticism, some scholars only focus on specific cases and no longer conceptualise practices as *national*, instead emphasising 'the absolute particularity of the data in question' (Smith 2000: 36). However, such localism – only focusing on particulars and avoiding comparative approaches – cannot be the solution, because it ultimately reinforces notions of uniqueness and untranslatability and leads to academic parochialism. On the other hand, as Morris-Suzuki argues, purportedly universalistic theories that impose a single explanatory model upon a variety of cultural and social contexts (e.g. rational choice theory) are not a solution either, because they deny and erase difference. Her suggestion: a radically transnational comparative approach that studies particular cases in different places, with the linguistic and historical expertise characteristic of area studies, but without the disciplinary compartmentalisation into designated geographical 'areas' or nations. In other words: we need a comparative, multi-sited historical anthropology that allows for local particulars while acknowledging the existence and significance of transnational flows. Such an approach allows us to see similarities and connections among, say, Indigenous movements in Ainu Mosir, Sápmi and Aotearoa.

In response to my earlier essay (Rots 2019a) and guest lectures on this topic, some senior colleagues have pointed out that Japanese studies and its various subdisciplines (literature, linguistics, political science, history, anthropology and more) are, and have always been, inherently comparative. According to them, comparison is nothing new. However, the approach I advocate for does not use nations as its main units of comparison. In other words, I do not suggest that we juxtapose Japanese or Korean practices *qua* Japanese or Korean, as if these practices are somehow representative of their respective nation-states. Numerous articles in the quantitative social sciences do exactly this: compare policies or demographics in Japan or Korea (or other states) and explain what they have in common and where they deviate. Such comparison arguably contributes to methodological nationalism, rather than challenge it, because it uses the nation-state as the main category of analysis. By contrast, I suggest that we abolish the

notion of the nation-state as a foundational, *etic* unit of analysis, and that we start to approach it as an *emic* category that may or may not carry meaning to the actors involved. I think we should move towards intra-Asian comparative studies that focus on particular places and practices, and examine the various local, intra-regional, national and transnational forces by which these are shaped. Among other things, this will allow us to study nation-building practices comparatively. Such an approach will help us recognise similar developments in different parts of Asia – the simultaneous reinvention of Shinto and Daoism as national ‘green religions’ by state actors and NGOs (Rots 2017), for instance, or the ways in which the universal category ‘heritage’ functions to re-establish state control over sacred sites across the region (Rots 2019b) – which are otherwise overlooked.

Another scholar who has argued for the importance of non-essentialist, cross-border comparative research in different places in Asia is Peter van der Veer (2014; 2016). As van der Veer makes clear, comparison is not the same as generalisation; like Morris-Suzuki, he states that the growing tendency to perceive generality as the main criterion for good science is problematic for methodological as well as ideological reasons. Rather than explaining difference in terms of large, totalising categories such as national culture, religion or even civilisation, he suggests that we adopt ‘a necessarily fragmentary approach to social life, in which the study of a fragment is used to gain a perspective on a larger whole’ (2016: 9). Laurel Kendall (2021) has recently demonstrated what such an approach can achieve in an ambitious and highly engaging study of sacred objects in Bali, Korea, Myanmar and Vietnam. Inspired by these scholars, my own current research investigates some of the ways in which local actors shape their collective identities in relation to natural environments, gods and spirits and the nation-state, in different parts of the maritime Sinosphere (e.g. Rots & Lu Rots forthcoming).

To be clear: I am *not* arguing for a move away from specialised area knowledge, neither in research nor in teaching. If there is one thing area studies programs should preserve, it is their focus on intensive, multi-year language training. For the time being at least, there is a clear demand for such language education on the part of our students; eliminating language from study programs would be counterproductive. I think area studies is valuable exactly *because* it offers specialised knowledge of local languages, cultural practices and historical contexts. My point is simply that knowledge production within area studies

should contain critical reflection upon category formation (i.e. study Japan-making), that it should illuminate (intrinsically political) processes of inclusion and exclusion and that specialised area knowledge need not be confined within the boundaries of a particular nation-state. This is not only a matter of choosing research topics, but also classroom pedagogy. I am of course aware of the fact that most students in Asian studies – some exceptions notwithstanding – probably do not have the time or capacity to master *two* East Asian languages. However, it is certainly possible to introduce more in-depth comparative elements into general courses on East Asian politics, history, culture or religion.

In some places, such courses already exist. As one reviewer of this article pointed out, various universities offer combined study programs in East Asian studies. According to them, even if study programs contain transnational comparative elements, students do not necessarily appreciate those. While I acknowledge that motivating students can be challenging, I do object to the belief – shared by many Japanese studies professors, but grounded in little more than anecdotal evidence – that ‘our’ students are *a priori* uninterested in studying Japan comparatively. I have made various attempts to introduce comparative and transnational elements into courses on Japanese culture – e.g. comparing heritage-making in Japan to other Asian countries or discussing how Ainu activists interact with Indigenous communities elsewhere – and I have found that, when invited, many students in Japanese studies do express a strong interest in these topics. Furthermore, when I conducted a small survey questionnaire among current and previous students of Japanese and Chinese studies at my university in 2021, a vast majority stated that they appreciated transnational perspectives in courses, and more than half of the 170 respondents wanted to learn *more* about other Asian countries than they do today, not less.<sup>12</sup> While I do not claim this survey to be representative for Japanese studies globally, it does indicate that common claims *à la* ‘students in Japanese studies are not interested in other countries’ are in need of further scrutiny and should not be taken at face value.

In sum, after years of increasing particularism and the fragmentation of knowledge, it is good to see that the pendulum is swinging back, and that an increasing number of scholars are acknowledging the importance of research that transcends boundaries and has a comparative character. Japan is no isolated entity, but an integral part of Asia, not just in terms of international politics and trade but also culturally.

Developments in Japan are shaped by developments elsewhere, and vice versa. By now, the Anthropocene should have made us all aware of the fact that, notwithstanding our diversity, we are all connected; but it also shows us that people in different parts of the world contribute to, interpret and suffer from climate change and ecological loss in profoundly different ways (Hudson 2014). Therefore, there is still a need for specialised place-based knowledge, today as much as ever. The point is that academic knowledge production should *transcend* disciplinary and national boundaries, not enforce them. Scholars of Japan should contribute to such knowledge production not only by interpreting, translating and analysing ‘things Japanese’ to the rest of the world, but also by engaging in explicitly comparative collaborations and conversations.

## Concluding Thoughts

As I have argued in this article, if we want Japanese studies to be relevant, we have to move beyond ‘Japan’ as our main unit of analysis and stop using the adjective ‘Japanese’ as if it were a natural given. However, we cannot simply focus on particular case studies and completely ignore the nation-state either. As scholars of Japan, we have to engage with our discipline’s master category – not by reifying it, but by studying its formation and by investigating the processes (past and present) by which certain phenomena are included in or excluded from this category. A transnational, intra-Asian comparative perspective will help us realise that many of the cultural expressions often identified with Japan can be found elsewhere and will shed new light on those expressions.

Japanese studies has been slow to respond to the epistemological critique of scholars like Harootunian and Miyoshi (2002) and Morris-Suzuki (2000) around the turn of the century. The ‘cool Japan’ wave led to high student enrolment and relative institutional stability in the 2000s and 2010s, and few scholars felt the urgency to take up debates about disciplinary identities, structures and agendas. However, methodological nationalism has not disappeared, even though it is less visible today than twenty years ago. There are still many tacit assumptions about what is and is not part of Japan – and, correspondingly, what does or does not constitute proper research and teaching material for scholars hired in Japanese studies departments. These assumptions constitute the discipline’s *doxa*, but they are not discussed widely.

Questioning the formation and demarcation of our core category remains a risky business, as it may lead to accusations of undermining the discipline as a whole – or, worse, of jeopardising job opportunities. Needless to say: arguing that scholars of Japan should study the formation of their own core category and conduct more transnational comparative research does *not* mean that the discipline as a whole has no *raison d'être*, nor that study programs should be discontinued. It does mean they need some rethinking and, in some places at least, changes in study curricula.

The three suggestions for research agendas outlined in this article are not novel inventions. Much of this is already taking place. The purpose of this article is to identify these trends, explain why they matter and argue for more structural institutional support. The list is not exhaustive: there are several other promising initiatives and new research fields not discussed in this article – environmental humanities and digital humanities, for instance – which likewise deserve institutional support. In any case, now that the humanities are in a highly vulnerable position globally, we cannot shy away from the question of Japanese studies' wider academic and societal relevance. As I am writing these sentences, the world is facing a climate crisis, an energy crisis, high inflation, the rise of anti-democratic parties and even the threat of nuclear war. Like elsewhere, humans and non-humans in the Japanese isles are affected by and respond to these crises in multiple ways. The academic study of Japan matters, because it sheds light on some of these responses and, potentially, can contribute to cross-cultural understanding and the preservation of diversity. But this requires that we break down some boundaries.

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## NOTES

- 1 Jin Yu Young 2022. 'In South Korea, a Hit Show Brings Autism into the Spotlight'. *The New York Times*, 4 September, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/04/world/asia/south-korea-autism-extraordinary-attorney-woo.html> (accessed 6 September 2022).
- 2 KimRahn 2022. 'Hackberry Tree in "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" Draws Visitors to Small Village'. *The Korea Times*, 25 July, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2022/07/688\\_333295.html?utm\\_source=tw](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2022/07/688_333295.html?utm_source=tw) (accessed 6 September 2022).
- 3 Similarly, Akihiro Ogawa and Philip Seaton have observed that 'because of methodological nationalism, Japanese Studies has limited its audience as well as its academic potentiality' (2020b: 12), and argued for a more explicitly transnational approach. The chapters in their edited volume provide examples of such an approach, focusing primarily on the Asia-Pacific region (Ogawa & Seaton 2020a).
- 4 Sadly, cutting funding for the humanities and social sciences and restricting academic freedom are global trends, not only in authoritarian countries but also in so-called liberal democracies. On the US, see Joy Connolly 2021. 'The Assault on the Humanities and Social Sciences'. *Medium*, 6 April, <https://medium.com/acls-in-depth-today/the-assault-on-the-humanities-59af07a362ed> (accessed 21 September 2022). On Japan, see Jack Grove 2015. 'Social Sciences and Humanities Faculties "to Close" in Japan after Ministerial Intervention'. *Times Higher Education*, 14 September, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/social-sciences-and-humanities-faculties-close-japan-after-ministerial-decree> (accessed 21 September 2022). On the UK, see Alex Preston 2015. 'The War against Humanities at Britain's Universities'. *The Observer*, 29 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities> (accessed 21 September 2022). On South-east Asia, see Bryan W. Van Norden 2021. 'The Global Fight for the Humanities: Why a Liberal Arts College in Singapore Matters'. *Medium*, 22 September, <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/the-global-fight-for-the-humanities-5ab58ea8bfff> (accessed 21 September 2022).
- 5 See Ben-Ari 2020 for a more in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences between Japanese studies and social anthropology.
- 6 Kanako Takahara 2022. 'Border Restrictions Causing Shift Away from Japan Studies, Survey Finds'. *The Japan Times*, 30 August, <https://www.japantimes>

- .co.jp/news/2022/08/30/national/japanese-studies-border-restrictions-impact-survey/ (accessed 22 September 2022).
- 7 Paula R. Curtis 2020. 'Embracing the Rebirth of Japanese Studies.' #AsiaNow, 18 May, <https://www.asianstudies.org/embracing-the-rebirth-of-japanese-studies/> (accessed 21 September 2022).
  - 8 In this essay, I use the example of 'Japanese religion'. The same case can be made for similar compounds – e.g. academic constructs of 'Japanese philosophy' as a distinct body of thought defined by some elusive 'Japanese' qualities (cf. Rots 2012).
  - 9 Representative examples include Earhart 1998; Ellwood 2016; Kitagawa 1987. For a more elaborate genealogy of the compound term 'Japanese religion', see Isomae 2005. See also my discussion in Rots 2019a.
  - 10 The Ainu were formally recognised as an Indigenous minority by the Japanese state in 2008. This recognition has not led to the return of land- or fishing rights to Ainu communities or repairs for past atrocities (Morris-Suzuki 2020). Okinawan and other Ryukyuan communities are not recognised as Indigenous minorities, and opinions differ as to whether this is a status worth striving for (see Yokota 2015). In this article, I use the term 'Indigenous' in a broad sense, referring to linguistic and cultural minorities placed under Japanese colonial control in their own lands, i.e. both Ainu and Ryukyuan.
  - 11 I am referring first and foremost to the construction of a large new US military base in Henoko Bay, despite the fact that a large majority of Okinawans opposes it. This is the latest in a long series of events and decisions made by Washington and Tokyo that do not consider Okinawan opinions and concerns. See for instance Hein & Selden 2003; McCormack & Norimatsu 2018 [2012].
  - 12 I conducted this survey together with my colleague Erling Hagen Agøy. It has not been published, but the report was shared internally within my department.

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