

Japanese Studies in Belgium

著者	Gaens Bart
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Bart Gaens

Lecturer, International Research Center for Japanese Studies

1. Current situation of Japanese studies in Belgium

The study of Japanese language and culture in Belgium has enjoyed growing popularity over the past fifteen years and is included in the curricula of several universities and colleges. Yet, only three institutions offer a program in Japanese studies as an undergraduate major. The University of Leuven (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, KUL) in the Dutch-speaking part of the country certainly has the most elaborate curriculum in Japanese studies.

In fact, Oriental studies in general has a long history dating back to the sixteenth century in the area now known as Belgium. The University of Leuven's College of the Three Languages (Collegium Trilingue) was founded in 1517 in order to instruct Latin, Greek and Hebrew to theology students. Although Oriental studies later expanded to include Arabic and Aramaic, interest in Far Eastern studies remained undeveloped, given the lack of colonial interests in the region and the faculty's primary goal of exegesis of the Bible. It was not until 1928 that the study of Japanese language and culture appeared on the curriculum of the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Letters. This was thanks to Tokyo-industrialist Baron Satsuma Jihei, who funded the institution of a chair to study the history of Japanese civilization. The so-called Satsuma Chair led to the establishment of an independent Orientalist Institute of Leuven in 1936, offering a two-year study program leading to the degree of "Licentiate of Oriental Philology and Philosophy". Within the Institute a course in modern Japanese was added in 1963. When Oriental studies developed into a department with a four-year curriculum within the Faculty of Letters at the end of the 1970s, Japanese studies finally received greater attention. At the time Dr. Willy Vande Walle was in charge of the courses on Japanese language, culture and history, and he was furthermore at the basis of the

growth of the program into a fully-fledged four-year program of Japanese Studies in 1986. Students at the University of Leuven enrolled in the Japanese studies program in the academic year 1999-2000 numbered eighty-nine.

Also the University of Liege (CEJUL: Centre d'Études Japonaises de l'Université de Liege) in the French-speaking region of Belgium offers an undergraduate course in the field of Japanese studies since 1991. Furthermore, the University of Gent (Rijksuniversiteit Gent, RUG) has included Japanese language in its curriculum since 1958. The University now presents a four-year program in Japanology as part of a larger program of oriental languages and cultures. Belgian students aiming to work in the business world connected to Japan can now focus on translation and interpretation techniques, and study Japanese business culture, leading to a Master's degree in Japanese studies at the Mercator Hogeschool in Gent. Finally, few other institutions such as the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) offer courses in Japanese language and (business) culture as choice subjects.

Libraries with collections of books in Japanese and works on Japan such as those of the Universities of Gent and Leuven enjoy the support of the Japan Foundation. The former university library possesses an important collection of Buddhism-related works. The latter unfortunately suffered from a division along linguistic lines in 1966, when the unitary Orientalist Institute including the library was split into a French-speaking and a Dutch-speaking part.

Given the limited number of programs in Japanese studies at Belgian universities, the number of scholars specializing in the field is also restricted: an estimated five scholars in full-time positions, and thirty to forty others doing work that requires training in Japanese studies, such as assistants and lecturers. No separate Belgian organization for Japan-specialists exists, but most scholars in the field gather at the four-yearly conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies. Finally, in addition to the before-mentioned Japan Foundation and Satsuma Foundation, several several other organizations promote research on Japan in Belgium, in the form of financial assistance or student exchange. The Honda Foundation offers sponsorship for courses, books and scholarships; the Konishi Foundation provides support to enable universities to invite guest lectur-

ers; and scholarships are offered by the Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) in cooperation with the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO). The University of Leuven moreover has a cooperation agreement on university level with the Osaka, Kansai and Kyushu Universities, and on department level with the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

2. General interest in Japan and Japanese studies

In general it can be said that interest in Japan remains superficial. Japan's economic rise in the 1980s certainly contributed greatly to a growing interest in local business practices and economical organization, and has led to an increased media attention on relations between the EU and Japan. However, the lack of general news and background information on daily life and culture in Japan remains salient. What does catch the media's attention is news from Japan of the spectacular, exotic or weird kind, confirming the image of Japan as "the Other".

This serious lack of information contributes to the fact that a student's interest tends to be aimed at the Far East or oriental studies in general, rather than at Japan and Japanese studies in particular. The student's ultimate choice for either Japan or China for example, is greatly influenced by political or economical happenings and situations in the East. This becomes obvious when we compare the number of freshmen enrolled in the Japanese studies program of the Leuven University since 1986. The growth of the Japanese economy during the so-called Bubble-era and the increased investment of Japanese companies in Belgium at the end of the 1980s caused a steady increase in first-year students. When the 1989 Tien An Men incident and China's tainted international image gave rise to a declining number of students choosing China as a field of study, Japanese studies for the first time took over the leading position within the department, with the number of freshmen even peaking at 60 during the following years. However, the burst of the Japanese economic bubble has recently led to a decline: the total of first-year students has dwindled over the past three years to twenty-seven in the academic year 1999-2000. Not only did interest in Japan's economy weaken, the re-structuring of the Japanese economy has also caused a decline in funding and sponsorship for courses

and scholarships. The balance has now tilted in favor of China once more, the country now being viewed as a highly promising business market and likely a future economic giant.

However, exactly due to the decreased interest in Japan as an economic superpower, students might tend to feel more free in their choice of determining a more specific field of study. A look at the themes of graduate dissertations shows a wider range of topics including daily-life and local history, popular culture such as anime and manga, and art forms beyond the "traditional" sphere, such as Buto.

3. From Japanology to Japanese studies

This tendency to specialize in less traditional fields can be linked to the more general evolution from the classical "Japanology"-oriented area to the more interdisciplinary scope of Japanese studies. The study of Japan in Belgium has long been intrinsically connected to the subject of Buddhism. This trend is still visible at the University of Gent, where research led by Prof. Pol Vanden Broucke mainly focusses on Japanese Buddhism, in particular the philological study of the doctrinal and ritual texts of esoteric Buddhism (mainly Shingon), in addition to heterodox Shingon Buddhism of the Tachikawa School, Buddhist art, and Japanese classical literature influenced by Buddhism. Prof. Willy Vande Walle of the University of Leuven as well started out as a specialist on Buddhist art. Finally, also in the French-speaking part of Belgium most professors concerned with Oriental studies concentrate on Buddhist philosophy and languages.

However, the re-organization of the curriculum at the University of Leuven in 1986 clearly shows the shift from traditional history, art and religion oriented Japanology to the more interdisciplinary Japanese studies. Language does remain the basic element of the program especially during the first two years of study, with fourteen class-hours of Modern Japanese in the first year and twelve in the second-year. However, students now have a choice between a cultural-history major and an economics major. In the newly-created option a theoretical background is provided in fields as diverse as law, economics, international business and management, linguistics, and political and social sciences. This would probably define Japanese studies at the university as a mix between area-studies and a more theory-

oriented approach.

4. Outstanding contributions to Japanese studies by Belgian scholars

First, Belgium has sent a large number of Catholic missionaries to Japan, and quite a few of them have become leading scholars in their field. To give just one example, Father Willem Grootaers was a pioneer in dialectology and linguistic geography in Japan. He led the drafting of a linguistic atlas of the country, a project which was initiated in 1955 and completed in 1974.

Second, Professor Willy Vande Walle of the University of Leuven is engaged in a project studying the history of political, economical and commercial contacts between Belgium and Japan during the Bakumatsu and Meiji periods, focussing on the hitherto neglected role of one of Europe's smaller countries in Japan's modernization process. During the second half of the nineteenth century Belgium was the most industrialized country on the European continent. Contacts between the Belgian government and the Bakufu as well as the Satsuma domain started already in the 1850s, and was followed by the Iwakura Mission's visit to Belgium in 1873. Consequently the Bank of Japan was modelled on the structure of the Belgian National Bank in 1882. The goal of Professor Vande Walle's research project is to show that also smaller countries could form alternative models for development of certain sectors of Japanese modernization.

The widespread use of the internet as a teaching tool might be pointed out as another valuable contribution to the promotion of Japanese studies. Reference material such as visual documents are accessible on the net and students submit term papers on the department's designated web-space. In addition the Kashira-project deserves some interest. Kashira (<http://akira.arts.kuleuven.ac.be/kashira.html>) is the name of a local mailserver, designed to automatically generate vocabulary lists, Japanese characters and character combinations. The project, which started in November 1997, became the first mailgloss-system for Japanese language teaching in Europe. Teachers can access the server in order to assess and prepare texts for classroom use, and generate lists of words and idioms. Students on the other hand can use Kashira as a tool for acquiring and developing language skills. The time-consuming process of looking up

kanji and example-sentences is shortened, leaving more time for students to take on other texts of their own interest and thus promoting active study.

5. Tasks for the future

In contrast to Belgium's French-speaking students of Japanese, their Dutch-speaking counterparts do not have access to a text book for the study of Japanese language. Ideally creation of such a textbook would contribute to the promotion of Japanese studies in Belgium. However, given the minor status of Dutch as a European language and problems related to the commercial viability of such a project, it is likely that students will have to continue to make use of English-language material.

Moreover, another promoting factor could be the introduction of Japanese as a selective foreign language during the latter part of secondary education, prior to the commencement of university studies. The study of language is still to a large extent tied to Japanese studies as a broader field of study. Offering young people the chance to acquire a taste of Japanese, especially in the light of Japan's growing international importance, would greatly increase awareness of Japan's role in the world and contribute to a more balanced view of the country in Belgium.

Finally, while Belgium has produced a superb group of scholars specializing in Buddhist studies related in part to Japan, the need exists to further overcome the traditional Oriental studies paradigm. More scholars have to be trained in order to take a wider and more interdisciplinary approach in the study of Japan and the teaching of subjects related to contemporary Japanese society. It goes without saying that an expansion of the study program is accompanied by rising costs, and conflicts with limited funding. In the near future an increase in financial backing from private companies might become an inevitability.

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University of Gent:

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