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Crossing the Orthographic Wall: Mastering Edo-Period Written Japanese

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Report on Small University Research Grant: Summer 2014

Professor Brian Dowdle

Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

October 22, 2015

To: Dr. Kari Harris, University Research and Creativity Committee Chair

Dear Dr. Harris

I am writing to report on my project *Crossing the Orthographic Wall: Mastering Edo-Period Written Japanese.* The Small University Research Grant ($3500), together with support from the Mansfield Center in the form of a Yamaguchi Opportunity Grant ($500), supported participation in a two-week seminar on reading, decoding, and interpreting original texts from the Edo period (c. 1600-1868). The workshop, held in Emmanuel College at The University of Cambridge August 4th-16th, was a success in several areas. It helped me improve my ability to handle original documents for my teaching and research; introduced me to a range of unfamiliar genres and texts; and connected me to an international network of scholars working on original documents from this time period.

This course of study, most immediately, benefited my research. I am now a faster and more accurate reader and decoder of handwritten texts. Although I work primarily with novels from the nineteenth century, authors often replicated writing styles and formats from a wide range of earlier genres within these novels. Hence, the broad-based study of various formats at the workshop directly improved my ability to interpret the texts I use in my research.

Working with documents from non-literary genres was the most beneficial aspect of the training. These included official letters, poetry collections, and Confucian documents. Each of these genres was written in a different orthographic script, grammar, and idiom, which require specialized training and a period of acclamation. Of particular relevance for the course I teach on Japanese history and culture at the university of Montana, were a series of office letters between regional representatives in Kyushu. These documents detail polices and procedures for assuring that locals no longer were practicing Christianity, after

the religion was banned in Japan in the mid-1600s. I show color copies of these letters to my class and discussing the bureaucratic process needed for implementing state policies of isolation. Students tell me that the discussion of these documents was one of their favorite parts of the class. These documents, which include oaths by villages signed with blood, fostered a better understanding of the history of and mechanisms used in Christian eradication at the time.

Scholars from the US, Europe, and Australia participated in the workshop. I made numerous academic and professional contacts. Together we are now part of a newly founded network entitled J-PATS (Japanese Palaeography and Textual Scholarship). I continue to use this network in my research and as part of my professional development.

Sincerely,

Brian Dowdle
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